

HISTORY: FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH OF DALLAS

First Baptist Church has been a landmark in downtown Dallas since its founding in 1868.

In July of that year, eight women and three men banded together to form a fledgling fellowship following a two-week revival led by evangelist W.W. Harris in the Masonic Lodge at Lamar Street and Ross Avenue. Harris served as the church's first pastor on a part-time basis while continuing to work as an evangelist.

At the time, Dallas was a booming frontier town of approximately 3,000 with a sordid reputation for gambling, violence and crime. Two or three earlier Baptist churches had struggled and failed, and another moved out of downtown. But First Baptist grew.

Over the next quarter century, First Baptist had seven more pastors. Early members of First Baptist included the Rev. and Mrs. R.C. Buckner, founders of Buckner Baptist Children's Home, and Mary Hill Davis, a longtime leader of the Texas Women's Missionary Union, in whose honor the Mary Hill Davis Offering for state missions was named.

In 1872, the small congregation paid \$6,000 for its first building on Akard Street. And in 1891, workers laid the cornerstone for its historic sanctuary, which cost \$90,000.

In September 1897, Dr. George Washington "G.W." Truett became First Baptist's ninth pastor, ushering in an era of unprecedented stability. Under Truett, the church grew from 700-some members to more than 7,000, making it the largest church in the Southern Baptist Convention.

As the congregation grew, some members expressed interest in moving to the suburbs. "We will build up rather than out," Truett responded.

Truett served as pastor for 47 years. He was one of the most influential religious leaders in the country, drawing a crowd of 15,000 in 1920 to a speech he gave about religious freedom on the steps of the U.S. Capitol. He also helped found Texas Baptist Memorial Hospital, now known as Baylor University Medical Center.

At Truett's funeral in 1944, 6,000 people filled the sanctuary to overflowing.

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Later that year, after a short transition, Dr. Wallie Amos “W.A.” Criswell took over as pastor and, like Truett, began to put his own, unique stamp on the church. He started programs to minister to every age level and challenged the church to expand its facilities, which resulted in the construction or purchase of seven major buildings on six city blocks.

Early in Criswell’s ministry, he began to preach through the Bible, taking 18 years to complete the series. He championed the inerrancy of scripture and wrote 54 books, including “Why I Believe the Bible is Literally True.”

The Rev. Rick Warren, author of “The Purpose Driven Life,” called Criswell the “greatest American pastor of the 20th century.” Jimmy Draper, former associate pastor under Criswell, said, “He was one of the easiest men to love I’ve ever been around.”

After 46 years in the pulpit, Criswell turned the full-time pastorate over to Dr. Joel Gregory in November 1990 and took on the title of senior pastor and later pastor emeritus. Following Dr. Gregory, Dr. O. S. Hawkins became the 12th pastor in 1993, followed by Dr. Mac Brunson in 1999.

After God called them on to other ministries, the church named Dr. Robert Jeffress, senior pastor of First Baptist Church of Wichita Falls, Texas, pastor in 2007. Jeffress, who grew up at First Baptist Dallas, celebrated his 10th anniversary as pastor last year.

Under his leadership, the church has grown to a 13,000-member congregation. First Dallas is focused on reaching the city, nation and world with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As part of this mission, Jeffress led the church in a \$135 million recreation of the campus, the largest church building project in modern history.



The church continues to focus on transforming the world with God’s Word one life at a time through its ministries, including its international broadcast of Pathway to Victory and its iCampus, which reaches millions of listeners and viewers worldwide.

First Baptist Church of Dallas will celebrate 150 years of ministry on July 29, 2018.