

## **The Early Years**

The history of our church begins in the heart of God and the desire of His people at the First Baptist Church of Winter Park to establish mission churches. In 1968, Central Florida was experiencing a tremendous boon of new business growth. Accompanied by an influx of families in need of housing, Realtor and developer, E. Everette Huskey purchased, approximately 2,000 acres of prime land in Orange and Seminole Counties adjacent to the Wekiva State Forest. He envisioned a community unparalleled to anything in Central Florida. His "village" concept included schools, parks, shopping, and a church. To that end, he set aside approximately four acres at the highest point in Sweetwater Oaks for development of a church.

Mr. Huskey and Rev. Tom Draper, Director of Missions for the Wekiwa Baptist Association (forerunner of the Greater Orlando Baptist Association), rode horseback over the land and through the beautiful forest surrounding the property. The First Baptist Church of Winter Park, with financial assistance from the Association and the Florida Baptist Convention, agreed to purchase the land for \$50,000 and develop a new Southern Baptist mission.

Our mother church attempted several church starts in the Sweetwater area. For a while, six or seven families from First Baptist Winter Park met on Sunday evenings in an old, two-story farm house (originally located across from the present entrance to Wekiva Springs State Park). Although this early effort did not flourish, a fervent spirit for the work persisted.

In the summer of 1974, a tent revival and Vacation Bible School were sponsored by our mother church to generate renewed interest in the mission. The outgrowth of that was three or four couples who formed a Bible study group meeting in homes. This group grew to seven or eight couples.

"We specifically prayed for a pastor. We were open to God's leadership but thought that a mature, spirited leader would be ideal to give us direction. At that time, there were no such prospects"--Patricia Smith [Patricia and Michael Smith were the first to hold Bible study in their home.]

At the New Year's Eve service in 1974, newly retired pastor, Dr. Arthur Stainback and his wife, Jean, went forward to commit themselves to service in their new church home. They put retirement aside and agreed to work in establishing the new mission at Sweetwater.

## **We Become a Church**

On Sunday morning, February 2, 1975, fifty-four members of the mother church were commissioned to the new work at Sweetwater leaving behind friendships and fellowship to boldly proclaim the name of Jesus. The mission first met the next Sunday at Sabal Point Elementary School with 119 in attendance. A Jewish man professed to accept Christ, and six united with the mission (three by letter and three by baptism). The offering was \$593.52. Praise God from whom all blessings flow!

Our mission was constituted as a Southern Baptist church on Sunday morning, September 12, 1976. One hundred and seven members signed the Charter which is now displayed in our church's library.

Our first pastor was Dr. Joe L. Vernon who was called in the fall of 1976 and served this congregation until September, 1984. During his ministry, the church assumed the existing mortgage on the property and hired architect, Edward Thomas, to design our first sanctuary and education building. Aagaard-Juergensen was the low bidder at \$436,289. On January 22, 1978, we had a glorious groundbreaking ceremony under the soft whisper of the forest that surrounded us. That small congregation lifted their voices in praise and unashamedly let tears of joy express their unspoken words of how God had worked in the life of First Baptist Sweetwater.

The first worship in the new church was Wednesday night prayer service, and on Sunday, September 17, 1978, we dedicated the new church to the Glory of God. Dr. Harold Bennett delivered the dedication message. Our church continued growing: soon Sunday School classes were meeting in cars, on the porch, and in the baptismal rooms. A

"Together We Build" program provided funding to build our education wing, known as the "McClelland Building," dedicated in February, 1982.

### **We Grow Again!**

God provided His leadership to our church in Rev. T. Howard Taylor (1985-1989). The Upper Room Prayer Ministry blossomed under his watchcare with thirty-seven Prayer Warriors committing to daily prayer in March of 1991. Bro. Howard served as Pastor Emeritus until his homegoing in December, 1996. Rev. Bill Haynes was called as our pastor in 1991.

In October, 1994, we added a third worship service. The need for space was obvious. God again made provision by making available for purchase 12.06 acres of wooded land across from our present location. On Sunday, December 16, 1990, the congregation voted to authorize our church trustees to purchase the land for \$1,000,000, taking out a loan for \$825,000. A land dedication service was held on February 17, 1991. Led by the Banner Ministry, our church body marched across Wekiva Springs Road to claim God's gift to this congregation. Receipts from the "Building on Faith" program were applied to the land purchase, and the land was totally paid in December, 1993.

Delton Haynes agreed to serve as chairman of the Building Committee. In a business session on October 9, 1994, the architectural firm of Schweizer, Inc. was hired to present its design for our new facilities. Mr. Schweizer gave his personal testimony. [He has since been called home by the Lord.] Roger Stitt agreed on call of the church to serve as Construction Manager. The groundbreaking ceremony was held on November 17, 1996, in a tent service.

The church entered into a "Completing the Vision" program. Advance commitments presented at the banquet on Sunday evening, May 5, 1996, at the Orlando North Hilton exceeded \$4,000,000, from just 290 families. However, commitments following that brought the total to \$6.5 million, enough to build the new church and facilities debt free!

### **A New Century**

Rev. Haynes left in 2001 and the church called Dr. Mark Stephens as her Interim Pastor. Dr. Stephens was known for strong preaching and a winsome personality. By 2004, First Baptist Sweetwater called Dr. Larry Michael as pastor. Dr. Michael's tenure was built on evangelism. The church experienced seasons of both numerical and spiritual growth.

After Dr. Michael's departure in the Summer of 2007, the church called Dr. Jimmy Dukes as her Interim Pulpit Supply. Dr. Dukes brought a keen sense of experience, leadership, and teaching ability. In October 2008, First Baptist Sweetwater called Dr. Joel Breidenbaugh as next senior pastor. Dr. Joel helped lead the church to adopt a new mission statement which declared "Love Jesus, Love Others, Lead Others to Love Jesus."

After Dr. Breidenbaugh's departure in August, 2017 to begin a new church in nearby Apopka, the search team led the congregation to call Dr. Buddy Parrish as the next lead pastor for First Baptist Church of Sweetwater. Dr. Parrish began his ministry in March, 2018, and was quickly embraced by a loving church family. He and his wife Kathy are the parents of a single adult son and a married daughter who has given them two grandsons. Both offspring live in the Atlanta vicinity, short drives from where their parents served long term pastorates in two different bedroom communities.

### **Continuing the Vision**

First Baptist Sweetwater has responded to the mission call by providing laborers for projects in Pennsylvania, Montana, West Virginia, Florida, and several foreign countries. An added blessing has been to see many of our members called into full-time Christian service as pastors, education and youth ministers, and missionaries.

With faith, we step into tomorrow knowing that God has a plan for our church and its people. With love, we reach out to our community and to our world. With joy, we worship our Risen Savior and Lord Jesus Christ!