

# First Baptist Church of Liberty: Our story as of 2021 (revised 7-5-21)

## History

The Liberty Baptist Church, now called First Baptist Church, was organized by Rev. T. H. Feagin and eight charter members on February 20, 1898, at 3 p.m. in the old Liberty County Courthouse. The charter members were Dr. and Mrs. Thomas G. Lawson, Miss Becky Lawson, Mr. W. S. Jones, Mr. and Mrs. Chester McClave, Mr. and Mrs. Roy Ranson and Rev. T. H. Feagin, Organizer.



Rev. Feagin, Rev. P. N. Bentley, and Rev. J.F. Dobbs were missionaries of the Southern Baptist Convention who were largely responsible for the entire organization of the Southeast Association and the establishment of most of the churches belonging to that association. The circuit-riding character of their ministry can be seen in the Association records. The Southeast Texas Baptist Association was organized in 1888. Liberty Baptist Church was a member of the Southeast Texas (Missionary) Baptist Association from the time of the organization in 1898 until some time in the 1940's when it became a member of Trinity River Baptist Association.

Church members met in the Courthouse for several months. Liberty Vindicator, May 13, 1898, stated that, "Our Baptist brethren will hold services next Sunday at the Methodist Church. Rev. T.H. Feagin will preach." For several years the members had no building in which to worship. During this time they were invited to share the Methodist Church building, the Methodists sharing it with the Baptists on alternate Sundays. By the end of 1898 there were 13 church members.

Liberty Vindicator, March 3, 1899 stated, "Our Baptist brethren propose building a church this summer. We wish them success." January 26, 1900: "Baptists are soon to begin the foundation work for the building of their church." The first building was begun in April 1900. It was a small frame structure on Cos Avenue, one lot east of Main Street. August 23, 1900: "The Baptists have been holding a meeting in their new church all week, conducted by Rev. Childress. Rev. D. Lambkin was unable to attend on account of sickness."

Rev. Feagin continued to preach from the time of organization until October 20, 1905, but not continuously. He commuted to Liberty from Orange and later from Beaumont. During this time other ministers supplied the pulpit too.

In 1899 the total church membership was 18. Mr. S.B. Scott was Sunday School Supt., Ollie Robertson was Sunday School Secretary, Miss Lou King was Church Clerk. Sunday School enrollment was 28. Delegates to the Association in 1899 were Rev. Feagin, Dr. Lawson, and Mr. S. F. Feagin.

Miss Laura Jones (later Mrs. J.L. Ellis) was baptized the same day as Miss Kaleta Smith (later Mrs. Allen Wheat) in August 1898 at Lund's Lake by Rev. Feagin. Mrs. Hattie Ellen DeVore and Mrs. Louis Kochan were baptized a few months later by Rev. Feagin. By 1900, the church membership was 23.

Rev. L.C. Kellis of Fate (near Dallas) filled the pulpit beginning in October 1902 until sometime in 1904. He was preaching one Sunday each month at Liberty, Dayton, and Johnson Bayou.

The total church membership was up to 32 in 1903 and 37 in 1904.

During the summer of 1904 the Ladies Aid Society was organized by Mrs. Louis Kochan who served as president for several years. It was a very active organization from the beginning and was responsible for much of the church's finances. (Some years later the name was changed to Women's Missionary

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Society). These Baptist ladies served dinners on the Courthouse square under the trees for many years, usually when the court was in session.

Also, during 1904 Mrs. Kochan was appointed to organize the Sunbeam Band and served as its leader for several years. Miss Millie Kochan was a charter member of the Sunbeam Band.

At a church conference held January 15, 1907 in the home of Pastor J.F. Dobbs, the church organization was further perfected and Articles of Faith were adopted. Church membership was 38 and the Sunday School enrollment was 68. Mr. John A. Jett was Sunday School Supt., and Mr. Ira B. Simmons was Church Clerk. Both were very active deacons.

The first six pastors were circuit-riding ministers and they were in order of service here: Rev. Feagin, Rev. L.C. Kellis, Rev. J.F. Dobbs, Rev. W. Lucius Robertson, Rev. Theo Heisig, and Rev. R.J. McGinty. Rev. S.H. Cain became pastor in late 1916. Rev. R.W. Lindsey came next as pastor, followed by Rev. C.R. Newton, Rev. C. Seman, Rev. J.W. McCall, and Rev. H.O. Hearne. Other early pastors or part-time pastors were Rev. D.L. Griffith, Rev. J.A. Smart, Rev. A.T. Coleman, and Rev. Marvin Pharr.

Baptisms during these early church years were held at the Trinity River or in Abbott's Creek by the fairgrounds. Many mentions of revivals and other meetings occurred during this time. Humorously, the Easter musical in 1937 was cancelled due to illness but was finally performed in May of that year. The church had a cabin and held camp at the Palacious Baptist Encampment.

Pharr was an interesting character in that he was quite young, 24 years old when assuming the pastorate here in November of 1928. A jazz orchestra conductor in prior years, Pharr was an admirer of evangelistic crusades as attested by the Liberty Vindicator article in July of 1929 of Pharr declaring an interest in returning to Alabama or Georgia for an evangelistic crusade. He began evening services, probably not coincidentally; the City of Liberty established natural gas connections in March of 1929. A Liberty Vindicator advertisement in late 1929 states that Pharr's telephone number was 150. But by the end of June, the church was looking for another minister. After a 9 day revival in July of 1929, Rev. Verner E. Stokes was called as pastor.

The church became a full-time church in the late twenties, soon after the South Liberty Oilfield boom in 1925. The parsonage was built in that year on the lot now occupied by the sanctuary. The church met briefly in a tent erected next to the Hayes Feed store across from the Courthouse due to "the erecting of a handsome new church". So in 1930, while Rev. V.E. Stokes was pastor, the brick building that was used until 1953 as the entire church plant was built. It is at the northeast corner of Cos and Main Street. That year also saw the Methodists planning a new building, the Catholics, a new rectory, the current Liberty County Courthouse built, and a new modern bridge over the Trinity River completed.

Although attendance has varied over the years, 1957 saw the largest number of people attending Sunday school each week. The sixties decade was a tough battle for attendance beginning with 444 and ending with half that number.

Successive pastors after Rev. Stokes retired in 1940 were: Rev. Mark H. Richards, Rev. A.L. McDaniel, Rev. L.L. Richardson, Rev. J.R. Breland, Rev. Roland Jones, Rev. Jimmy L. Burks, Rev. C.O. Overstreet, Rev. Bonner C. Magness, Rev. Jerry D. Johnson, Rev. Steve Bean and Glenn Leatherman.

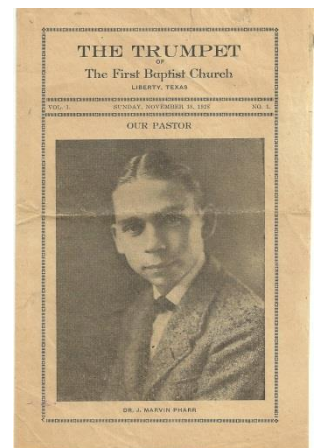


Figure 1 Rev. Marvin Pharr

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Since early records of the church were lost in a fire, it is difficult to reconstruct a list of the full-time staff members who have served. Those who have been identified from the 1940's are as follows: Dan Sharpley (Education Director), Josephine Galloway (Education Director), Ed Farmer (Music-Education), Leon Maxwell (Music-Education), Wallace Clayton (Music-Education), Charles Wilkins (Music-Education), John McClung (Music-Education), James Hackney (Music-Education), John McClung (returned to the church to serve as Music Director), Tommy Morris (Music-Activities), Horace Hise (Music-Education), Ron Davis, Michael Waites (interim) and Larry Pittman, part-time Minister of Music. It should be noted that E.L. Hardin, D.L. Hardin and Coyle Harrison spent considerable time directing the music of the church from 1939-1980.

Youth Directors since 1982 are Gary Post, Rickie Witt, Steve Bean, Jeff Loomis, Travis Cardwell, Keith Strahan, Clay Porterfield, Turner Roberts, Derek Brown\* and Jonathon Dula. (\* Added to our staff in December of 2011, Derek Brown served as our first Minister of Children and Students until his departure in 2016. Zach Smith was hired in 2018 but left a year later.

A partial list of church secretaries will also be of interest: Sue (Ball) Nail, Blanche Albrecht, Alice Vinson, Ann Gilliland, Kathleen Waldrop, Leslie Shivers, Penny Odell, Sarah Reeves, and Gabie Forames.

### **Missions**

Not only are Baptists interested in building their own church, they are a mission-minded group that has an extensive history of missions work and establishing new churches over the years. West Liberty Baptist Church, now Heights Baptist Church was organized in October of 1948. The Fregia Community Mission was started in 1950. In 1951, the Raywood Mission was organized and L.F. Fulmer was chosen as their pastor. November of 1955 saw the establishment of the Oilfield Mission (possibly the South Liberty Baptist Chapel which later is given to Lily of the Valley Baptist Church in South Liberty Oilfield in 1971.) In 1960, the East Liberty Baptist Mission was given the responsibility of their own finances and later becomes Community Baptist Church.

In the late 1970's, a ministry for Spanish-speaking people was sponsored by this church. Bro. Louis Lowry, a bi-lingual minister from Beaumont, came each Sunday afternoon and held services in the Activities Building. Then in 1983, a cooperative effort was begun with the First Baptist Church of Anahuac, with the help of the Baptist General Convention of Texas. Bro. Jaime Gonzales was called to pastor the mission work in both locales. The Liberty mission met in the Education Building of First Baptist Church until 1985. Then, a property on Confederate Street was purchased from Dogwood Baptist Church.

Bro. Manuel Lazo became pastor of "El Principe de Paz Iglesia Bautista," the name of the mission in 1988. Bro. Lazo remained pastor of the mission until November of 1997 when he died suddenly of a heart attack. "El Principe de Paz" continued for some years led by Angel Montero. In 2008, Nestor Guevara became the Hispanic Pastor. In 2010, Wylie and Georgie Jenkins, missionaries to Columbia came to FBC as Associate Pastor of Hispanic Ministry and Children's Minister respectively. That year, the mission was incorporated back into the Main Street campus. Upon the Jenkins' return to the mission field, Brazil this time, Freddie Villareal assumed leadership in this area.

In 2016, four deacon's families from FBC began a new work in Raywood. This one called the Line Camp Cowboy Church. LCCC quickly became self-supporting and that group called Harland Strother on Feb. 28, 2016 to be their pastor. The group built a new church on Highway 90 in Devers and Sept. 2, 2018 was their first service in that facility.

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### **Ministries**

In 1965, the church sponsored a Cub Scout pack with 43 boys attending.

In 1985, because of the large percentage of women in our church who worked outside the home, it was determined that a meal would be furnished at a nominal fee on Wednesday nights for anyone desiring to participate. The meal would be followed by prayer meeting for adults, and appropriate age-group activities for others. The Family Night Supper and the other meetings on Wednesday evenings flourished for years. In fact, the success of the ministry called for expansion and renovation of the kitchen in the Activities Building. The project was completed in 1991.

A special service called Children's Church was begun by Kay Lanier that reached out to the children of the church.

Projects of ministry have also been undertaken in places other than Liberty. Mission teams from this church began going to conduct backyard Bible Clubs and Vacation Bible Schools as early as 1985, when a team went to Tempe, Arizona. In 1987 another group went to Urichsville, Ohio.

In 1990 a work crew finished the sanctuary for Peniel Iglesia Bautista in Eagle Pass, Texas. The youth held a Vacation Bible School and did puppet ministry in the city park. The next summer, FBC mission teams partially built an education building for Ven a El Iglesia Bautista in a subdivision of Eagle Pass. Again, the youth conducted a Vacation Bible School and used the puppets to tell children about Jesus.

Then in 1993 a group of nineteen adults went to conduct one of the first Vacation Bible Schools in Eastern Europe. They worked with the leadership and children at the Second Baptist Church of Oradea, Romania, a Romanian Speaking congregation, and the First Baptist Church of Oradea, an Hungarian speaking congregation. Approximately 1250 boys and girls were involved in the two Vacation Bible Schools. An additional 20 members of this church went that same summer to Hillside Baptist church of Greeley, Colorado to teach Vacation Bible School and to do construction and repair work on their educational facilities. In 1994 a team of 5 went back to Oradea, Romania to again help the two churches mentioned above with V.B.S., while another group of 29 traveled to Horeb Baptist Church in Del Rio, Texas, to do a Vacation Bible School and construction work. The next year a team of 40 went to the same church in Del Rio for another V.B.S. and to help finish work on the church's sanctuary. Crestone Baptist Church in Crestone, Colorado, hosted a group of 30 youth and adults from First Baptist Church of Liberty in 1997 as the parsonage there was repaired and refurbished, as well as a Backyard Bible Club conducted in the city park.

In 2008, a long-term mission partnership was developed with Brinkley Heights Urban Academy and Street Reach Ministries in Memphis, TN, that continues today. Beginning in 2016, FBC partnered with Bethany Ministries in Zambia.

Of course, the regular means for Christian growth and education have also been utilized. Mission Friends, R.A.s, G.A.s, Acteens and Women on Mission met and taught about missions. Sunday School and Discipleship Training continue to be the means to learn more of God's Word and to enable each individual Christian to be part of the church - the Body of Christ.

## **Physical Improvements and Property**

Many efforts have been made to upgrade our facilities and to secure property adjacent to that owned by the early church. The original brick structure was erected in 1930 (currently called the South Education Bldg.) The facilities of the church were upgraded again in 1954, with the completion of the existing sanctuary and the renovation and conversion of the old sanctuary into educational space. The Activities Building was added in 1973. The sanctuary was renovated in 1975 and again in 2017.

In 1983, the third floor was totally gutted, restructured and rebuilt. This was followed in 1984 by a landscaping project, renovation of the first floor of the South Education Building by the men of the church, and the design and furnishing of a church parlor.

Property adjacent to the church sanctuary fronting Main Street was purchased in 1986 from Tom Odell. The two buildings on this site were torn down, and a concrete parking area prepared, so that some 34 cars might be accommodated.

Early in 1991 a special committee was elected by the church and charged with the responsibility of charting a course for F.B.C. of Liberty for the next two decades. This group, called the Long-Range Planning Committee began by developing a Mission Statement, which is as follows:

The Mission of the First Baptist Church of Liberty, a fellowship of baptized believers in Jesus Christ, is to:

1. Celebrate God's presence through corporate worship
2. Proclaim the Good News of salvation through Jesus Christ
3. Promote personal spiritual growth by teaching God's Word
4. Minister to others as we demonstrate God's love by caring for those entrusted to us through Him

The Planning Committee realized that, if the church was going to grow, additional property had to be secured in close proximity to existing facilities. Failure to do so would mean decline or relocation. The only property available was a house and garage apartment (the DeBlanc estate) which faces Cos St.. That property was purchased for \$39,000 in 1991. Then in 1992 Mary Helen (Miles) Campbell, along with her brother-in-law Ellison Miles, gave the church the property and structures at 515 San Jacinto Street. The house was completely renovated in the same year and was used as the main church parsonage until its sale in 2009.

In 1994, the Church voted to purchase an option on the Fisher property (Main at Webster) and the Deacons recommended purchasing the Robbins property (Fannin at Webster) for \$30,000.

Further research, prayer, and negotiation finally paid off when in 1996 a portion of the Robbins Estate was made available for the church to purchase. Another plot (approx. where the playground is today) was bought for just over \$30,000. A further development enabled us to trade the house on the DeBlanc property for an area of land just behind our present sanctuary and a 20 foot strip running the length of the back of the church to Cos Street. In that same year the Activities Building was renovated at a cost of \$50,000. The latest property procurement came in 1997 when the one-half block just across Webster St. from the Activities Building was purchased from the Fisher family for just over \$200,000. The purchase was made possible by a generous gift from the Roy and Myra Slover Estate.

In November of 1996 a capital stewardship campaign was conducted under the guidance of Resource Services, Inc., Jeff Campbell, consultant. The program realized almost \$750,000 in cash and three-year pledges toward a \$1.6 million program of building and renovation, approved by the church earlier in 1996.

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The exterior of the main facilities was restored, beautifying and strengthening the buildings, at a cost of \$200,000. This work was completed in late 1997. A parking lot has now been constructed on the Fisher property and a two-story education building adjacent to the present sanctuary, now called the North Education Building, has been completed. The interior of the existing educational building was also renovated while the new building was being built. New roofs on the South Education Building and the sanctuary were completed in 2006.

### **The Last Few Years (2006-2020)**

In 2006, after 26 years of service to the Liberty church, Jerry Johnson retired as pastor. Johnson was called to the pastorate in Liberty in October of 1981 and showed great leadership in shepherding the body after a period of unrest in the church. With the aid of Rev. Johnson, the church created a transition team tasked with finding an Interim Pastor, which they did in late 2006. Rev. Lynn Ashcraft filled the pulpit until the pastor search committee completed its work bringing Pastor Steve Bean to Liberty in January of 2008.

2007 was a year of great accomplishment and great loss. FBC became debt free due to the generous stewardship of its people. Purchase of the 3 remaining properties on the block immediately behind the church bordered by Main, Fannin, Webster, and Cos Streets was completed. 2007 also saw the adoption of a new Constitution and Bylaws. Sadly, it was also the year when former pastor Jerry D. Johnson passed away.

In 2008, Steve Bean, former Minister to Students, returned to the church as Pastor. Ron Davis celebrated his 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary as Minister of Music and Education. Later that year, Hurricane Ike ravaged the city as well as the surrounding counties. FBC partnered with Virginia Baptist Convention Disaster Relief and the Red Cross to provide assistance to those affected by the storm. From the parking lot and Activities Building, approximately 100,000 meals were served, and work crews went throughout the city assisting people with tree removal and clean up. This relief effort continued into 2009.

2009 was the year FBC started looking toward the future in new ways. A 20/20 Vision Team completed a master plan to point the church toward the year 2020.

The years following were years of great ministry as the church committed to being the “best church *for* the community.” Efforts to accomplish this included ministry at the Liberty Jubilee, Liberty Relay for Life, KSHN Radio’s community-wide Easter Egg Hunt, providing breakfast for LISD teachers, administrators, and support staff before the start of the school year, and a backpack/school supply give-away.

Clay Porterfield, student minister, was ordained into the gospel ministry in 2010. Porterfield resigned as student minister later that year.

In 2012, Ron Davis resigned after 24 years of serving FBC and the community. Michael Waites served as an Interim Music Minister until the church called Larry Pittman.

A Facilities Planning Committee made its initial report to the church in 2013 recommending a long-term plan to update, renovate, remove, and construct new facilities. This report was approved by the church. This work continues.

In 2014, three deacons, Danny Danek, John Forames, and Alfonso Moreno, were ordained. Our mission efforts took a step forward when our Hispanic Ministry traveled to the interior of Mexico for a short-term mission project.

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2015 was a year of great change. The church transitioned from a monthly church conference model to a quarterly church conference model. Derek Brown became Associate Pastor of Children's and Student Ministries, Kaitlyn Short served as the Summer Student Ministry Intern, Gabie Forames served as Summer Children's Ministry Intern, Jonathon Dula became year-round Student Ministry Intern and Becca Howard became year-round Children's Ministry Intern. As part of the long term facility plan, a modular building was purchased and became the home of the Student Ministry.

2017 was a year that will be remembered for years to come as a total remodeling of the Sanctuary was finished. The project was aided greatly by church members John and Rebecca Forames leading the construction effort and saving the church a significant amount of money in the process. It was also the year that the area was affected by Hurricane Harvey which caused wide-spread destruction to Southeast Texas. The church responded by being a shelter for displaced families as well as leading the recovery efforts. With the help of volunteers from 13 states led by the Baptist General Association of Virginia, over 200 families received help restoring their homes. It was also the year that the church conducted a strategic planning process to assess the health of the church. As a result of that assessment, areas which were identified as priorities included communication, structures and systems, ministry to young families with children and our Hispanic ministry.

2018 saw the recovery from Hurricane Harvey continue. Three new deacons: Rick Vinson, Israel Guia, and Jason Mobley were ordained as deacons. In December, Zach Smith, from Lubbock, was hired as the new Family Pastor, a new position combining youth, children and young families duties. In mid-2018, In July, Pastor Steve Bean announced his intention to retire effective June 2019. A search committee was chosen and began their work in October to find a new Pastor.

In 2019, Wednesday night meals was resurrected as an attempt to draw people to the church supporting Wednesday activities. The church renovated the kitchen facilities in the summer. Steve Bean announced at his retirement reception May 19<sup>th</sup> the creation of *Everybody's Hope* a non-profit dedicated to starting new churches and training leadership in Africa. And after 21 yrs. of service, Penny Odell, Ministry Assistant, retired.

In January 2020, the church hired Glenn Leatherman, from Baltimore, Md., as the new pastor of FBC Liberty. After a resignation by Zach Smith, Gabie Forames filled in as the new Interim Ministry Assistant replacing Sarah Reeves. In March, a global pandemic forced the closing of the church until May when it reopened with a revamped schedule to accommodate social-distancing recommended by health authorities. The church was forced to go to virtual meetings which continue today.

Lindsey Vera was hired as a new church secretary. Gabie Forames moved to Part-time Youth ministerial position and served until July of 2021 before leaving to pursue a career in the military.