

CENTRAL BAPTIST CHURCH HISTORY

Baptist history in Texas began in the 1820's when two ardent Baptist evangelists, Freeman Smalley and Joseph Bays, entered Texas in defiance of the Mexican Government's ban on Protestantism. With few priests and a multitude of settlers, the Mexican Government was unable to enforce the ban, so it was lifted in 1834. Prior to Texas Independence, only isolated individual preachers came from the United States to Texas. The first Baptist church was founded in 1834 near Bastrop.

Foremost in the Baptist movement was the evangelization of Texas. The missionary movement began in the 1840's when James Huckins was appointed as the first official Baptist missionary. Z. N. Morrell, the most active and widely known of all the pioneer Baptist preachers of this period, wrote, "In the fall of 1846 the old Union Association received into her bounds a valuable addition of ministers. No ship that ever ploughed the waves between New Orleans and Galveston, I suppose, ever brought at one time a more valuable cargo for Texas than the one that landed Elders J. W. D. Creath, P. B. Chandler, Henry L. Graves and Noah Hill". Elder Graves had been appointed as president of Baylor University, and the others came under the appointment of the Domestic Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. Elder Creath was elected as one of the vice-presidents of the newly organized Baptist State Convention in 1848 and was instrumental in the founding of the Baptist church in Livingston.

In 1846, Polk County was one of twenty-three counties formed by the first state legislature. The period of 1836 to 1860 saw American settlers rapidly fill the county.

Baptist work progressed slowly in Texas until the mid-1840's. In 1849, under the leadership of the Reverend Joseph Warner Dossey Creath, then headquartered at Huntsville, the Bethel Baptist Church at Colita became the first formally organized Baptist church in Polk County.

In 1846, Moses Choate offered 100 acres in Springfield if the town would be named as the County Seat and re-named Livingston. The voters approved. Livingston was a small community, as most of the county population lived in the agricultural areas. In 1880, the population of Livingston was 135, and by the turn of the nineteenth century, it was about 1000. Currently, the population is over 6,000.

The Methodists built the first church building in Livingston, sometime between its organization in 1849 and October 27, 1859 when the deed was recorded. Polk County conveyed the property to the trustees of the church Block No. 40 as a gift to be used as a Sunday school and church. The building was constructed on the southeast corner of the block now occupied by the Old City Cemetery.

The Methodists shared their building with the Baptists and the Presbyterians. Worship services were led alternately by the different congregations, thus bringing the community together every Sunday. The Baptists conducted Sabbath School on Sunday afternoons. The early church was segregated, with the men on one side and the women and children on the other. Baptisms were held in nearby Choates Creek.

The first written record of the Baptist church in Livingston is the new minute book started in 1900 "owing to the fact that the Old Book was lost sight of." The history of the first forty-eight years had to be gathered from associational and state records and a few newspaper clippings. Consequently, the history omits many names of the Christians who were responsible for Baptist work in Livingston. (from *Central Baptist Church, The First 125 Years*)

"As closely as can be determined, Ariel Baptist Church, Livingston, was organized about 1852. The actual formation may have been conducted by the previously mentioned J. W. D. Creath, of Virginia, or R. A. Clifton, of Tennessee, or another prominent minister in the association, Elder E. Vining, of Georgia. Any of these capable men could have initiated the work in Livingston, but the most likely is J. W. D. Creath. This dedicated missionary hardly would have overlooked the seat of government in his zeal to start new churches in Polk County. It is believed that Rev. Creath served as pastor the first few years prior to the coming of E. Vining about 1854." (from *Central Baptist Church, The First 125 Years*) The significance of the name "Ariel" is unknown.

In 1855, Ariel Church petitioned the Bethlehem Association, formed in 1852 in Woodville, for membership. Its territory was composed of nine Texas Counties, including Polk, and extended from San Augustine to the Gulf of Mexico. Other Polk County Churches that petitioned for membership were Bethel (1852), Greenville, Moscow (1853), and Antioch (1856). Elder E Vining was the first moderator and remained as such until his death in 1856. Elder Vining became one of the first pastors of the Livingston church.

No pastor was reported for Ariel Church in 1856, but the church sent delegates H. F. Haynes, J. Galloway, A. Foster, and E. J. Smith with a report to the annual associational meeting. Ariel Church had a membership of 18. In 1857, Reuben E. Brown, who had been a missionary for the Bethlehem Association, became pastor. He represented Ariel Church at the State Baptist Convention in 1858. In 1861, Reuben Brown volunteered his services as Chaplain to the Confederate troops, and he died in Galveston during the war. In 1864, Thomas R. McCrorey, a then future pastor of the Livingston Baptist Church, was detailed to bring his body back to Polk County for burial.

The 1860's were bleak times for East Texans. Famine, drought, adverse financial conditions, and an uncertain political future prevailed. The records of the Bethlehem Association reflect discouragement, and there was much concern over the enormous size of the Association. It was decided to divide the area into more practical territories.

In October, 1860, the New Bethel Association was formed. Polk County was part of this association until the turn of the nineteenth century when Unity Association was formed.

R. A. Clifton was the pastor during these crucial years of war and reconstruction, 1851-1867. Many able-bodied ministers gave their services to the Confederate Army along with Reuben Brown, including J. W. D. Creath, Thomas R. McCrorey, and L. R. Capers. L. R. Capers was the pastor in 1867 and 1868.

Sometime after the Civil War, the name of the church was changed from "Ariel" to "Livingston".

Thomas R. McCrorey was pastor in the 1870's. He was listed as the only Baptist preacher in Polk County in the 1874 State Baptist Convention minutes. He also pastored several other churches in Polk County, as did most of the early pastors.

In August of 1887, after more than thirty years of sharing a building with other denominations, Livingston Baptist Church purchased city block #41 from Mrs. Patience Watts and Mrs. Susan Hunt, with the owners contributing \$25 of the \$75 purchase price. B. J. Martin, A. C. Watts, and Pony Bean erected a wooden structure. The Baptists met in the Presbyterian Church until the building was completed early in 1888. D. W. Jackson, former missionary in Tryon Association, was pastor, and other church leaders were M. B. Stone, S. J. Andress, Andrew Peters, T. F. Meece, Joe Peters, and E. V. Doyle.

Patrick Henry Bilbro, a resident of Colita, became the minister following Jackson. P. H. Bilbro also pastored churches at Jones Prairie and Colita. In 1890, Livingston Baptist Church had 60 members. T. F. Meece was the church clerk, and J. F. Peters and M. B. Stone were deacons. In that year, there had been seven baptisms and fourteen additions by letter. . *The East Texas Pinery, July 2, 1891*, announced services at the Baptist Church every third Sunday and conference on the Thursday before.

J. H. Ellis, T. R. McCrorey, and F. J. Browning served as pastors until the end of the 1890's. In 1898, the church had 76 members. T. R. McCrorey later became a missionary for New Bethel Association and continued to work in Polk County.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, John T. Mare was pastor. In 1900, the church purchased 25 hymnals with words and 6 with both words and music, as well as a 500-700 candle-power gas light. The members voted to have services every Sunday.

P. H. Bilbro served as interim pastor in the fall of 1901 and continued to help the Livingston Church whenever he was needed for a number of years, often representing the church at associational and state meetings. The New Bethel Association proceedings

in 1901 reflect the emergence of an influential church in Livingston. The church reported 83 members. Long King Creek was used for baptisms.

W. B. Everitt, M.D. accepted the position of pastor in 1901 on a half-time basis. He also had a medical practice in Livingston. He represented the New Bethel Association at the State Convention in Waco. H. B. Davis, Ed McCrorey, J. C. Marshall, and J. L. Manry were ordained as deacons in 1903.

"Dissension within the church concerning cooperation with the Baptist General Convention of Texas and the opposing Baptist Missionary Association began in 1901 and is reflected in the minutes for several years. In 1904, after months of deliberation, some of the members of the Livingston Baptist Church withdrew to form another Baptist church. In 1906 this group petitioned and was granted a fraternal relationship with the parent church. The new group referred to themselves as the Second Baptist Church. In June 1906, the Livingston Baptist church informally took the name First Baptist, but there was confusion and when the dissenting group incorporated under the name First Baptist Church, so there was a return to the name Livingston Baptist Church. The original church remained a part of the Baptist General Convention of Texas and the Southern Baptist Convention." (from *Central Baptist Church, The First 125 Years*). Two years later, the Livingston Baptist Church invited the new church to return, but after prayers and meditations, they declined the invitation.

In 1906, a new church building of red brick was constructed at a cost of \$3,500. It soon became commonly known as "The Brick Baptist Church." It was the first church with a baptistery inside the building. The Ladies Aid Society contributed \$600 to pay for the pews and the stained glass windows. In 1907, W. J. David, a former missionary to Africa, became pastor.

In September 1908, the church felt there was a need for an association for Polk County and withdrew from the New Bethel Association and organized the Unity Baptist Association. The first meeting was held in Moscow, October 1909.

The Membership Roll of the Livingston Baptist Church, as is recorded in the first available minute books dated 1899-1910, contains 233 names. Many named on this list remained as life-long members. Many of their descendants are members today.

Alonzo Finch was pastor from 1911 to 1915. During his pastorate, the church adopted a number of innovations. In the fall of 1911, a church newspaper, *The Livingston Baptist Helper*, was begun, edited by Miss Addelle Green. A project of the Baracas and Philatheas classes, the paper was financed by fourteen of the town's businesses. Pledge cards were used to promote giving. A parsonage was constructed on the same block as the church and was wired with electricity. Even though the church auditorium had electricity, it continued to be heated by wood stoves for many years.

J. G. Looper became pastor in April 1915. The church voted to change the name of the church from "Livingston Baptist" to "Central Baptist Church" on March 13, 1917. *The Baptist Standard* was sent to every family in the church. The first recorded Laymen's Sunday was held on March 24, 1917. During this period, Central Baptist Church purchased a house at the Baptist Encampment at Palacios. Many of the members enjoyed services at this retreat each summer. In 1921, L. S. Cole became pastor, followed by Earnest Baldwin in 1923.

The church voted to build a large wooden building with a dirt floor for Sunday school needs. The estimated cost was \$1,700. Later the building was floored and was used for over twenty years. It was referred to as the "Tabernacle."

A former missionary to Brazil, R. A. Clifton (a son, or grandson of the first R. A. Clifton) became pastor in 1924. In the early 1920's, the congregation began making plans for a new church auditorium. Completed in 1926, the new church auditorium was English-style architecture. The total cost was \$32,000. The auditorium was used until 2009, when the new worship center was completed.

After being pastor to Central Baptist Church for seven years, R. A. Clifton resigned to take another pastorate, and Arnold E. Rieman was called as pastor. After seven years, he was succeeded by James W. Read in 1940.

In March, 1941, a brick parsonage was constructed next to the church. The old parsonage was moved a short distance away and is still being used as a residence. The church auditorium, the wooden annex, and the parsonage are shown on the 1927 and 1935 Sanborn Maps of Livingston.

During World War II, many men of Central Baptist served in the armed forces. An honor roll was placed on the auditorium wall, and the church also found other ways to contribute to the war effort. In January of 1943, Brooks Sasse became pastor. The total church budget was \$6,700 in 1943, and the official newspaper for the church was the *Informer*, a name used until recent years.

Ben H. Welmaker served as pastor from 1946 to 1950. By 1950, the membership was 949, with 729 resident members. The first electric organ was installed.

Two brick educational buildings were completed in 1949, located behind the auditorium where the wooden building had been, followed later by a third building. The church property was valued at \$300,000. Total Membership was 1072.

Vester E. Wolber came to Livingston as pastor in May, 1951 and served until January, 1955. Wade Hopkin became pastor in March 1955. He was followed by James T. Garrett in March 1959, who served until his resignation in May, 1967.

In November, 1967, David Michael was called as pastor, and W. William Kennedy became pastor in 1973 and served until his death in 1989. ..

The income in 1967 was \$63,027, 45% of which went to missions. In 1968, the church purchased two acres of land east of the original block for future expansion

A new parsonage was completed in 1974, located in the Briar Bend Subdivision of Livingston. The Unity Baptist Association purchased a home next to the parsonage for a residence for missionaries on furlough, enabling the church to be host to missionaries. The old parsonage remained for several years, used for various purposes. It was torn down about 2007 to make room for the new sanctuary. In 1974, the large attendance at morning worship caused the church to schedule two services on Sunday mornings.

The Family Center, located across North East Avenue was completed in 1977. The cost was \$350,000. It contains a kitchen, a large room for gatherings, and classrooms. A playground is behind the building.

During the 1980's Central Baptist began its radio and television ministries.

By 1989, the total membership of the church had grown to 1,245, with resident members of 913. The total receipts were over \$400,000.

Central Baptist continued to grow in its educational programs, community outreach, and missions. Worship service attendance reached over 400, with annual receipts of over \$500,000 by 1992. In 1992, the church voted to build a new educational building on the block north of the sanctuary. It is named for Ben H and Janice Welmaker.

William Skaar was called as pastor in 1989 and served until 1999. Central Baptist entered the twenty- first century with church property valued at \$6,000,000 and was debt free by the end of 2001. David Roberts served as pastor from 1999 to 2001. Barry Jeffries became pastor in 2004.

In 2004 and after 30 years of two worship services, it became apparent that more room was needed for growth, and a building committee for a new sanctuary was formed. The construction on the 900-seat worship center was completed in early 2009.

In 2009, the church property, consisting of the new worship center, the original sanctuary, office building, two educational buildings, and a family center is valued at \$7,842,000. The church membership in 2008 was 1,626 members, which included 953 are resident members. Worship attendance averaged 421 weekly. Many are involved in Bible study, music, missions, discipleship training, and community outreach.

Along with its primary purpose of worship, the Baptist church at Livingston has emphasized education in the scriptures, for both children and adults, and missions. Sunday school, or "Sabbath School" as it was first called, began with the organized congregation in 1849. By 1913, in addition to Sunday school, the church was sponsoring the Baptist Young People's Union (later named "Training Union), the Cradle Roll, and the Home Department. Vacation Bible School has been popular with children from all over the community for many years.

Central Baptist Church is the direct result of mission efforts, and a concerted effort for missions have been emphasized throughout its history

In September 1904, the Ladies' Aid Society was organized, and Mrs. H. Beamon Davis was its first president. Misses Nannie and Justa David of the Ladies' Aid Society organized the Sunbeam Band for small children in 1910. The ladies sponsored mission organizations for older children by 1925. Over the years, this organization, later known as the Women's Missionary Union and now known as Women on Mission, has inspired a love for missions within the church and has led to giving to home and foreign missions. A men's organization, The Brotherhood, was active for many years.

Several pastors of the Livingston church had been missionaries or became missionaries after their pastorates: J. W. D. Creath, E. Vining, Reuben H. Brown, D. W. Jackson, T. R. McCrorey, W. J. Davis, R. A. Clifton, Ben H. Welmaker, Lynn Sasser, and Ted Savage. Dr. Ben H. Welmaker resigned as pastor in 1950 to fill an appointment by the Southern Baptist's Foreign Mission Board in Cali, Columbia. He was the head of the seminary in Cali for several years, and after his return, he served as interim pastor and as the seniors' pastor.

As was previously planned by R. A. Clifton, the church contributed toward the Unity Association's purchase of the Piney Woods Baptist Encampment at Woodlake in 1945. The camp has been modernized and has been used ever since. Central Baptist contributes toward its support.

Since 1947, Central Baptist has sponsored several missions, most eventually becoming self-sustaining churches. Over the years, several young men of Central Baptist have been called to the ministry, and others have been called into other service.

Other than Polk County and nearby counties, Central Baptist has impacted several states and foreign nations, either through mission trips, financial aid or by those from Central Baptist serving as missionaries: Rio Grande Valley, Wisconsin, Montana, Mexico, Japan, Indonesia, Korea, Guatemala, and the Ukraine.

In 2008, \$185,237 of the church's receipts was used for mission purposes.

Central Baptist has a strong music program, consisting of a full-time Music Minister, choirs, orchestra, youth band, and programs for the children. Since 2002, the church has sponsored for the community the School of the Arts for the purpose of offering instruction and personal development in music and the arts.

Over the years, the church has sponsored outreach to the community and has participated with other churches in community events. Examples are ministries to the prison, nursing homes, and the homebound. The church has supported Manifest, Habitat for Humanity, fall festivals, health fairs, blood drives, evangelistic crusades, local missions, community services, and participated in local events. Notable is the disaster relief provided by the church following the recent hurricanes, providing shelter, meals, and clean-up crews. Members also go out to other areas to provide disaster relief.

The Ministerial Staff is composed of the Senior Minister, Associate Minister, Youth Minister, Children's Minister, and Seniors Minister.

Central Baptist Church is affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention and the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

Following the morning worship service on May 2, 2010, the church's Texas Historical Marker was dedicated.

Central Baptist Church has played a very large part in the life of Livingston for all its many years. Beginning with a membership of less than twenty and no church building, it has become a growing, dynamic church with facilities for a thousand people. Its Christian influence on the community cannot be estimated. The church has provided a place of worship and prayer, comfort and joy, Bible study, training, fellowship, and community support. One of the largest churches in Livingston, it has had a significant impact on the community. In addition, its impact has been felt in many places in the world. All this would not have been possible without the first few devoted Christians in the nineteenth century, followed by many other like-minded Christians in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries who are dedicated to the church's mission as outlined in its Vision and Mission Statement:

"Our Vision is to Make GOD Known in Livingston and Polk County by striving to become a caring, culturally and economically diverse community that seeks to connect lives to Christ through a clear witness for Christ, quality ministries, and the lifestyle of each believer."

Central Baptist is one of the three large churches in downtown Livingston, and its new tall steeple can be seen from almost anywhere from town, silently witnessing its presence and welcoming all. To God be the Glory!

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~~~~~History compiled by Joanne McKee Westmoreland

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