

The Oklahoma Baptist Chronicle



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25 years ago: Sharing the balm Of God's grace in New York City

by Bob Nigh, Oklahoma Baptists' Historical Secretary

(Editor's Note: This edited account of the response by Oklahoma Southern Baptist Disaster Relief volunteers to the terrorist attacks on the United States—specifically in New York City—on Sept. 11, 2001 originally was published in the August 2026 issue of the Baptist Messenger).

Many times, God uses the effects of a disaster to soften the hearts of those who minister in His name to later share a message of hope with those who are suffering from their own tragedy. Such was the case 25 years ago on Sept. 11, 2001, as the Lord used the heartbreak of the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah bombing on April 19, 1995 to prepare hundreds of Oklahoma Southern Baptist disaster relief volunteers to bring solace to residents of the shocked city reeling from the destruction of the World Trade Center.

On that fateful day, two commercial jetliners were flown intentionally into the North and South Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, collapsing both 110-story twin towers in



Chaplains near the Ground Zero temporary morgue in New York get organized.

less than two hours. A third jetliner was crashed into the west side of the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and a fourth plane was hijacked with the intent to fly it into the U.S. Capitol, but that attack was averted when passengers joined together in a heroic attempt to regain control of the plane, which crashed into rural Pennsylvania.

Nearly 3,000 people died in the attacks, including all 227 civilians and the 19 terrorists aboard the four planes. Hundreds of thousands of tons of toxic debris containing more than 2,500 contaminants and known carcinogens were spread across the 16-acre site in Lower Manhattan when the towers collapsed.

The attacks resulted in 36,000 units of blood donated to the New York Blood Center. Jobs lost in New York City totaled 146,100; 23,000 apartments in lower Manhattan were eligible for asbestos clean-up, and 422,000 residents of the city were estimated to be



Recovery workers used heavy cranes to remove debris left behind when the twin 110-story WTC towers collapsed.

suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

The first people North American Mission Board (NAMB) disaster relief (DR) coordinator Mickey Caison thought of when he heard the news of the attacks were Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma (BGCO) DR Director Sam Porter and FBI chaplain Joe Williams, a specialist in trauma response.

Caison knew Oklahoma DR volunteers—who had ministered in the aftermath of the Murrah Building bombing—would be able to relate on a personal level to their Big Apple counterparts.

Porter hustled to assemble a response team from Oklahoma to help get the job done. Also packing their bags for New York were Leslie Sias, BGCO chaplaincy specialist; Paul Bettis, BGCO prison chaplaincy consultant and Jack Poe, chaplain with the Oklahoma City Police Department. Accompanying the group was *Baptist Messenger* managing editor Bob Nigh, who later became the third North American Mission Board (NAMB)-endorsed disaster relief chaplain in the U.S. and the first in Oklahoma.

Porter's group of five chaplains got to New York three days after the towers fell and manned the temporary morgue at Ground Zero for almost two weeks. The ministry at Ground Zero generally involved caring for and praying with first responders and serving food in partnership with The Salvation Army.

One of their main ministries was connecting with first responders and simply asking them to tell them their story. Often, a connection was made when volunteers said they were from Oklahoma and were acquainted with some of the trauma that can result from terrorist attacks.



Firefighters waiting to search the debris pile at Ground Zero display their patriotism with American flags on their helmets.

Porter said the work included many difficult things, such as praying over the remains of every person who was uncovered from the wreckage before the remains were moved on for attempted identification. Still, the team was grateful for the opportunity.

"We knew God had us there for a reason to make an impact. It was a great honor for us to be there and tell people about the hope of Christ Jesus," Porter said. "I've never prayed as much or cried as much in my whole life, but God made a big difference."

One of those "differences" was that the Lord—as He always does—opened a door for the Oklahomans to begin their ministry. A New York City police lieutenant on duty inside the perimeter gate came up to them as they peered through the chain link fence which cordoned off the street and greeted them after seeing their "chaplain" hard hats.

"Are you tired? Do you need to get some rest?" the officer asked.

After doing double takes at each other, Porter finally said, "No sir. We're just now getting here and hope to be able to minister to first responders and others at the site."

"You're not hearing me," the lieutenant said firmly. "You guys look like you can use some rest. I've got some cots inside a nearby school where you can take a break."

The officer's message finally connected with the group, and after motioning for the chaplains to follow him through the checkpoint, the officer led them inside the school building, pointed out the cots in a room, and said, "OK. Now that you're inside the perimeter, head south and go do God's work."

BGCO Executive Director-Treasurer Anthony Jordan announced Sept. 14 that the state convention had sent \$20,000 to the New York convention to help after the attacks.

And, while the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) ministry response officially ended 319 days later, Southern Baptists' legacy of love continued to change lives as the first anniversary of the event approached. Southern Baptists volunteered in amazing number—3,800 in all from 32 conventions—to pray with and comfort survivors, serve a meal to recovery workers, clean apartments and distribute teddy bears and other stuffed animals to children who had lost a parent or to weary police officers and firefighters to take home and give to their own children.

Southern Baptists efforts weren't restricted to the Big Apple either. They also included cooking/feeding operations near the Pentagon in Washington, D.C.

Working with the American Red Cross (ARC) and the Salvation Army, Southern Baptist meal preparation teams dished up a total of 1,286,513 meals, serving 20,852 total volunteer days. In New York, volunteers cleaned 643 apartments, provided 11,552 showers for recovery workers, day care for 850 children, washed 782 loads of laundry and handed out 21,011 teddy bears or other stuffed animals.

In addition to those hands-on efforts, Southern Baptists across the nation contributed \$1.9 million for disaster relief and benevolence for victims' families through the efforts of NAMB working hand-in-hand with the Metropolitan New York Association and the Baptist Convention of New York.

Oklahoma's Southern Baptists proved once again they had caring and giving hearts, with \$237,526.85 (As of Oct. 31, 2001) donated to help meet the needs of victims of the terrorist attacks. Baptists attending the annual single adult conference at Falls Creek, Sept. 15-17, contributed an additional \$12,000 through a love offering.

Eventually, Oklahoma Baptists donated \$383,577.62 in wake of the attacks, all of which went directly to provide for the needs of survivors and families of victims. In addition to those funds, Oklahoma Baptists quickly responded to the terrorist attacks by putting their feet to the task.

In December 2001, the first of four teams of Oklahoma Baptists volunteered to serve food to recovery personnel at the Salvation Army-run kitchen at Ground Zero in New York. Eventually, more than 70 Sooner State Baptists dished up food to weary police officers, firefighters, Port Authority officers, National Guard personnel and construction crews who were given the huge job of clearing the site. The final Oklahoma crew served in May 2002 at the Fresh Kills Landfill on Staten Island, where the debris of the twin 110-story towers was hauled.

NYC 9/11 Memorial Museum to feature Stories of Oklahoma Baptist responders

by Bob Nigh, Oklahoma Baptists' Historical Secretary

(Editor's Note: This edited reflection of the response by Oklahoma Southern Baptist Disaster Relief volunteers to the terrorist attacks on the United States—specifically in New York City—on Sept. 11, 2001 originally was published in the September 2026 issue of the Baptist Messenger).

Amy Weinstein is Senior Curator of Oral History & Vice President of Collections with the 9/11 Memorial & Museum in New York City, which houses more than 2,500 oral history and StoryCorps recordings. Recordings which document the stories of the victims, survivors, first responders and others



From left, Anthony Jordan, Jason Yarbrough, Amy Weinstein, Sam Porter and Bob Nigh.

whose lives were changed forever by the terrorist attacks on the United States on Sept. 11, 2001, and by the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center.

StoryCorps is an American non-profit organization which records,

preserves, and shares the stories of Americans from all backgrounds and beliefs. Its mission statement is “to help us believe in each other by illuminating the humanity and possibility in us all—one story at a time.” StoryCorps grew out of Sound Portraits Productions as a project founded in 2003 by radio producer David Isay headquartered in Brooklyn, N.Y.

“Back in 2006, when I learned that it would be our goal to record a remembrance for each person killed on 9/11 and in the 1993 bombing, I had no real understanding of what it would take to accomplish that goal, even if we could get there, or how it would affect me and how I looked at the world,” Weinstein said.

Now as the 25th anniversary of 9/11 approaches, Weinstein traveled to Oklahoma City to meet and interview several men

who played a crucial role in the response to the 9/11 attacks.

Gathering at the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma (BGCO) headquarters at the WatersEdge Building in Bricktown July 27-28 were Sam Porter, Bob Nigh, Paul Bettis and Dean Kiser—all of whom were among the hundreds of Oklahoma Baptist Disaster Relief volunteers who ministered to the citizens of the Big Apple in the months following the attacks.

Also participating were Anthony Jordan, BGCO executive director-treasurer at the time of the attacks, who provided perspective of the Convention's support of the response by Oklahoma Baptists in 2001, and current Oklahoma Baptists disaster relief director Jason Yarbrough, who shared with Weinstein details about Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and Oklahoma disaster relief.

Recording of the interviews/videos, which averaged 90 minutes each, were captured in the Convention's audio/visual studio in the WatersEdge Building by Oklahoma Baptists' multimedia designer Amelia Staggs.

Weinstein's trip to Oklahoma City was partially funded by a gift from the Eli Lily Foundation.

"The gift was designed to help us look at faith-based objects and faith-based themes and materials to be included in the museum's collection," Weinstein explained. "They have supported other museums such as the World War II Museum in New Orleans and the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York."

The purpose of Weinstein's recordings of Oklahoma Baptists is to include them in an exhibition about pastoral care at what became known as "Ground Zero" following the terrorist attacks. The date of the opening of that exhibit is yet to be determined.

The 9/11 Museum also features a display case that features items from agencies and individuals who responded and ministered at the site—agencies whose volunteers made a distinct impact during the aftermath of the attacks—but whose efforts have not yet been acknowledged.

To help fill such a display featuring the BGCO response, Porter and Nigh have donated personal items such as the white hard hat Nigh wore as he, Porter and Bettis ministered as chaplains in the temporary morgue in Ground Zero, their credentials, iconic SBC yellow shirts, hats and windbreakers and other items such as photographs, commemorative pins and New York City police and fire department patches.

"We also will take photographs of the items you gave us and put them on the collections portal our website," Weinstein said. "That will include descriptive verbiage about the items and Southern Baptist disaster relief."

"There are several possibilities," Weinstein said. "For example, we have a section of the museum where there is a wall with different hard hats displayed, and we rotate those in and out. My supervisor has been a champion of making sure we get your story documented in the museum and she is very eager to make sure you are represented in our permanent collection. She and I formed a relationship with one of the families from Battery Park who developed a friendship with several Southern Baptists—amazing people who cleaned their apartment after the attacks," Weinstein said.

Porter, Nigh, Yarbrough and Alan Quigley, Oklahoma Baptists' associate executive director, attended several events being held in conjunction with the 25th anniversary.

Those included 9/11 Memorial & Museum Community Day, Thurs., Sept. 10; a special concert on Fri., Sept. 11 presented by The New York Philharmonic, and the U.S. Army Field Band Soldiers' Chorus in commemorating the 25th anniversary of the attacks.

Every year, the Sept. 11, 2001 commemoration ceremony has observed six moments of silence, acknowledging the exact times when each of the World Trade Center towers was struck and fell, the Pentagon was attacked, and Flight 93 crashed in Shanksville, Pa. This year's ceremony, and future ceremonies, included a seventh moment of silence to honor those who lost their lives to 9/11-related illness and injury in the years since the attacks.

The Oklahoma Baptist contingent also participated in the seventh moment of silence on the Memorial grounds immediately following the reading of the names on the 25th anniversary of 9/11.

Jordan, Porter and Yarbrough hope the story of Oklahoma Baptists' response to the 9/11 attacks brings glory to God and provides perspective on how He works through dedicated servants to minister to people during tragic circumstances.

"We are very encouraged to know that the Curator of the 9/11 museum in NYC was curious to know who asked us to go in response to the 9-11 terrorist attack, and how were we able to fly so quickly when all flights and normal air space was closed for many hours/days," Porter commented. "We are

thankful that the unusual story of what we believe is confirmation that the Lord intervened by His Holy Spirit to open doors across the U.S. following the Attack. This will be preserved 'until Jesus comes' to tell this important part of Oklahoma Baptist disaster response history."

"Oklahoma SBDR has such a rich history of serving during the difficult times, so being recognized as a key, important part of the 9/11 response will help preserve the story and the mission of our volunteers to bring help, hope, and healing in times of disaster," Yarbrough said.

"Potentially having some of our Oklahoma DR apparel and other pieces on display in the museum will allow folks to realize how invested we were in the recovery efforts. Who would have ever thought this preacher boy from Skiatook, pastoring in Atoka when 9/11 happened, would now be leading the ministry that made and continues to make such an impact during disasters? As I reflect over the past 25 years, I am grateful for the faithfulness of God and His presence in the calm seasons as well as the storms of life."

"Ann's visit on behalf of the museum underscores the tremendous impact of the work of Oklahoma Baptists during the tragic days following 9/11," Jordan added. "The world will have the opportunity to hear first-hand accounts of the caring and servant hearts of Oklahoma Baptist Disaster Relief chaplains and the generosity of Oklahoma Baptists. Most of all, during our interviews we were able to share the Gospel of Christ for all to hear for years to come."

"The Murrah bombing was the second-greatest terrorist attack in U.S. history, second only to the terrorist attacks against America on Sept. 11, 2001. For this reason, we, as Oklahomans, felt the impact of this evil on a level few others could. I remember walking over the crater left from the explosion of the truck parked in front of the Murrah building, trying to minister to first responders and the families forever touched by the bombing. Our team experienced the same."

"When 9/11 happened our Oklahoma team had a unique perspective. We also walked down that path. We knew the exhaustion, pain, and loss that such a tragedy brings. I think that is why our involvement meant so much to the New Yorkers. They knew we understood their heartache. And we could offer comfort and hope because of faith in the resurrected Lord."

God opened way for Oklahoma chaplains to quickly reach Ground Zero after 9/11

by Bob Nigh, Oklahoma Baptists' Historical Secretary

Within hours of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, Oklahoma Baptist Disaster Relief was preparing to send chaplains to New York City, where grief was deepest and spiritual care was urgently needed.

The mission required more than willing chaplains. It required access to airspace that had gone silent after the Federal Aviation Administration grounded flights nationwide. God opened a door through Northwest Aero Services in Enid, owned by Elaine Johns.

Johns said the day began with a call from a friend who had seen a news report that a plane had flown into the World Trade Center. "I immediately joined her in prayer," Johns said. "Kneeling beside my chair, I prayed for our country, our lead-

ers and the families affected by this act of terrorism."

Like millions of Americans, Johns watched as the second plane struck the towers, the Pentagon was attacked and another plane crashed in Pennsylvania. She prayed that people would find hope in Jesus Christ, not knowing her aviation compa-



Elaine Johns makes connections to coordinate the emergency flight to deliver blood and state chaplains to NYC.

ny soon would help carry that hope into one of the nation's darkest places.

Oklahoma Baptist Disaster Relief's response grew from experience gained after the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. That painful history helped prepare Oklahoma chaplains to minister after the attacks in New York.

Sam Porter, then serving as Oklahoma Baptists' disaster relief director, began assembling a team. The need was im-

mediate. Airports were closed, schedules were shattered and the country remained on edge. Yet the request was clear: Get chaplains to New York as soon as possible.

At the same time, Angel Flight had received clearance to move blood supplies toward New York. Blood was urgently needed near Ground Zero, where rescue and recovery workers faced devastation few could imagine. The effort offered a powerful picture of a greater truth: Just as blood had to be carried to a place of death so wounded people might live, the blood of Jesus Christ was given once for all so sinners could be forgiven and find the way to salvation.

Johns said she received a call from Gene Downing, an Angel Flight member, and member of Oklahoma City, Southern Hills, asking whether she could send a flight of chaplains from Oklahoma City to New York within the hour.

Johns contacted her chief flight instructor, Raymond LaPlante, who began preparing for the mission while mechanic Mike Wrenn and corporate pilot Dewayne Harvey readied the aircraft.

"I was honored to provide the transportation, personnel and aircraft for chaplains who would bring comfort and healing to a city desperate for hope," Johns said.

Another providential detail unfolded. A Jewish businessman from New Jersey, in Enid for work and desperate to return home, also was an experienced pilot. After clearance was granted, he joined the flight in the right seat. The plane left Enid, picked up the remaining passengers in Oklahoma City and headed toward New York.

Among those connected with the Oklahoma response were Porter and Joe Williams, who had served as Johns' interim



Mechanic Mike Wrenn, left, and Dewayne Harvey, corporate pilot and FAA Flight Examiner, right, assist Raymond LaPlante in preparing the flight plans for the trip to New York City.

pastor at Enid, Calvary. During the flight, the businessman heard the Gospel as chaplains spoke with him. Johns' company covered remaining fuel, the pilot's salary, maintenance, parking and other costs.

Looking back, Johns said she can see how God prepared her for that moment. "God carried me through each challenge and helped the business continue forward," she said. "Through that season, I learned to think strategically—and that preparation mattered."

The Oklahoma Disaster Relief mission was part of a larger Southern Baptist ministry that served in New York for months after the attacks. Chaplains prayed with first responders, ministered near the temporary morgue and stood with people as they confronted grief beyond words.

They could not remove the rubble or undo the violence of Sept. 11. But they could enter the suffering with Scripture, prayer, presence and compassion. The flight from Oklahoma became a mercy mission carrying messengers of the Gospel into a place that needed immediate comfort and eternal hope.

"By God's grace, all of those steps prepared me to play a small role in a special service of grace to people in another state, at a time when millions were searching for comfort and hope," Johns said.

At the anniversary of Sept. 11, Oklahoma Baptist Disaster Relief remembers not only the horror of that day, but also the faithfulness of God in opening doors. The same Lord who made a way through closed skies made a way for chaplains to stand among the hurting. And the same Savior whose blood makes the way to salvation continues to send His people with help, hope and healing wherever disaster strikes.

(Editor's Note: This article was written with source material from *The Baptist Messenger* and Elaine Johns, who is a member of Enid, First. Computer assistance was utilized for editing and assistance. For more information about Oklahoma Baptist Disaster Relief, visit www.okdisasterhelp.org.)

A Prayer for New York

by Anthony L. Jordan

Father, as we reflected on our own tragedy of the bombing of the Murrah Building five years earlier here in Oklahoma City, it was very easy for us to immediately grasp what the New York City people were going through when the towers fell in Manhattan, and we cared about them.

And we still do. Many volunteers from New York—and across the United States, for that matter—raced to help us during our time of need, and our response to Sept. 11, 2001 was simply because they had loved us so much and showed us compassion of love and peace during our own storm.

We wanted to return that same love to the people in New York, and it was an honor to get to do that. We saw it as a privilege. It allowed us to walk by their side, put an arm around New York City and love on it a little bit. I'm so thankful that God let us do that. With that in mind at the 25th Anniversary of the attacks, I would like to pray for the residents of New York.

Father, we come to you in the name of our Lord Jesus. The people of New York City, a great number of them—even these many years later—are going to have reflections of that horrendous tragedy come back to them in very intense ways. They are going to think about family members and friends that they lost during that time.

And so, I pray during this anniversary—which will be a time of reflection—that all of us will be reminded of how life can be taken in just a moment; how evil can rise and do such terrible things. But I also hope in our reflection that overriding all of that will be a remembrance of those who ran into the middle of the chaos, who selflessly and tirelessly worked in the midst of the pain, the hurt, and their own emotional trauma trying to rescue victims or recover the bodies of those who perished.

They loved and encouraged one another; they reached out to the families crushed by the turn of events. I pray that the reflection will be a remembrance that might overcome the darkness and the pain and suffering. And, Lord, because when You came in the Person of our Lord Jesus, Who died on a cross for our sins, and gave us the hope of eternal life in Your resurrection, I pray that people will look to the better day, look through the darkness of the days that's surrounded the tragedy, and know that there is hope for eternity in Christ.

I pray you will bless the people of New York City as they reflect and remember. Thank you, Father, for the 9-11 Memorial and Museum that is a testimony of the love that was poured out on New York City amid the most heinous and evil thing that was ever done. But love overcame. I pray that there's a reflection of that in the memory of those days. And I ask this in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

From ashes to beauty

by Bob Nigh, Oklahoma Baptists' Historical Secretary

"To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he might be glorified."

Isaiah 61:3

NEW YORK—In the middle of the 9/11 Memorial plaza stands a Callery pear tree that survived the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. The plaza features two nearly one-acre-sized reflecting pools situated in the original World Trade Center's 110-story Twin Towers' footprints. It occupies about half of the 16-acre site. It opened on Sept. 11, 2011, and is inscribed with the names of 2,977 victims of 9/11 and the six people killed in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing.

Approximately 400 swamp white oak trees fill the Memorial plaza around the pools. These trees are native to the areas of all three 9/11 crash sites: New York City; Arlington, Va.; and Somerset County, Pa.

In October 2001, recovery workers discovered the severely damaged tree at Ground Zero. Members of the New York City Parks and Recreation Department removed it from the site and nursed it back to health. Having survived the events of 9/11, the tree became known as the "Survivor Tree." It was returned to the World Trade Center site in 2010 and now stands on the plaza as a symbol of resilience and perseverance.

It is eerily similar to downtown Oklahoma City's own "Survivor Tree," an American Elm which survived the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building on April 19, 1995.

Both of these trees symbolize the innate ability of people to survive the worst that humanity can throw at them and thrive in the midst of shattered lives dusted by the ashes of fire fueled by hate. They have been symbolically "watered" by the tears of those who lost family members in Oklahoma City, New York City, Arlington and Shanksville, Pa.

Attending the 25th Anniversary of the 9/11 attacks this year was a bittersweet experience. Having volunteered as a chap-



lain in the immediate aftermath of 9/11—and several times afterward—the anniversary trip brought back memories of the awful sights, sounds and smells of Ground Zero. As the fires continued to rage and smoke continued to rise in 2001, I thanked the Lord for those courageous first responders who gave the last full measure of devotion to their fellow human beings.

A quarter-century later, I was humbled again by the solemnity of the occasion, which was accompanied by the mournful strains of bagpipers playing “Amazing Grace.”

However, the glorious sight of the 9/11 Survivor Tree flourishing amid what was once a desolate landscape brought balm to my heart. As reverence reigned for the most part on the memorial plaza as the names of the victims were read aloud by family members, God reminded me that *“the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness”* comes from Him alone.

The “Survivor Trees” are evidence that life goes on. That light will drive away the darkness of fear and rage left behind. New York and Oklahoma City are sister cities in that their citizens have prospered in spite of the evildoers who planned their destruction. Evil will not triumph; God’s grace prevails! All glory to Him who brings water to the desert of our souls!

Oklahoma Baptist Hall of Fame

Jesse Marvin Gaskin

1931—2019
Inducted 2026

(This article was written when Gaskin received the Oklahoma Baptist Statesman Award 2004, and summarizes his amazing career in service to Oklahoma Baptists.)

Jesse Marvin Gaskin was born Aug. 30, 1917 to Franklin Raymond and Lola Richardson Gaskin on a farm three miles south and west of Flower Hill in LeFlore County.

In his autobiography, *Cartersville, Route 1*, Gaskin writes, “Even during the good times of the '20s, folks at the Gaskin house were admittedly poor. So were our neighbors . . . We had biscuits for breakfast, but it was cornbread at noon and supper. When hard times came, it was cornbread three times a day.”

On Jan. 6, 1932 Gaskin's father died of Tuberculosis (TB). At age 14, Gaskin was the oldest of the five children and he became a sixth-grade dropout so he could help his mother with the farming. He used their mules, Jack and Pearl, to pull the plows. According to Gaskin, Jack was lazy and quite often required the whip to “encourage” him to do his share of pulling the plow.

His folks were Methodist, so when he was saved in 1934, he asked the Methodist preacher to baptize him by immersion, which he did. Almost simultaneously Gaskin felt the call to preach. At age 10 he conducted many funerals for birds and other little animals that died. He seemed to see himself behind a pulpit preaching the Word of God. He surrendered to the ministry and began preaching in the Methodist church.

To be licensed by the Methodists he was given a seven-book course to study along with the Bible. When he came forward for the review by the Methodist board for that purpose, they told him since he was only a freshman in high school and still young, he should wait another year.

In the meantime, he decided he did not agree with infant baptism or sprinkling. Someone also told him that he could become a Baptist preacher without meeting any requirements. Therefore, he joined the Keota Baptist Church in 1935 because he knew the pastor there and wanted to be baptized by him. Gaskin then joined the Old Bokoshe church by letter. He was called as part-time pastor at Cartersville in



J.M. Gaskin

1936 and was ordained to the ministry by Old Bokoshe on Aug. 30, 1936. His ordination certificate is on display in the Gaskin Archives which is located in the library at Oklahoma Baptist University (OBU) in Shawnee.

Gaskin describes his education in *Cartersville Route 1* in this way, "Most of my education in life has not been obtained in formal institutions. My most practical and helpful education has come by way of the School of Experience and the University of Hard Knocks. Frequently, I pause to thank God for the small amount of book learning I had at Cartersville and Old Bokoshe. But more significantly, I am thankful for the kind of teachers I had, and for the things they taught me—because they taught me the things I needed to know."

Gaskin attended his first three years in high school at Bokoshe and his senior year at Crowder where he had become pastor of the Baptist church. He graduated as valedictorian of his class. The Baptist and Methodist preachers alternated in preaching the baccalaureate sermon and because it was the Baptist preacher's turn, Gaskin preached his own baccalaureate, but not without some consternation from some. Finally, the class was asked to vote about the issue and they unanimously voted for Gaskin to do the sermon.

A young lady named Helen Isom was salutatorian and also the pianist for the Crowder church. While Gaskin paid little attention to her at first, he did take note that she was an excellent pianist. He would sit on the platform and think about every preacher needing a good pianist . . . and Helen was a good one! J. M. and Helen were married on Aug. 14, 1938 in the home of Helen's parents, Roy and Carrie Isom.

Gaskin graduated from OBU with a Bachelor of Arts degree in May 1944. In 1945, Andrew Potter came to Tonkawa to speak at the 50th anniversary of the Tonkawa church where Gaskin was pastor. Potter, answering Gaskin's inquiry, advised Gaskin against attempting to complete seminary work. He had a wife and baby, he would incur a large debt, and by then his age might make finding a good pastorate difficult. Gaskin accepted his advice.

In the years 1937 to 1939 Gaskin had short pastorates at Tuskahoma, Crowder, Indianola and Choate Prairie. He pastored Fairview, Earlsboro, Route 1, 1939 to 1942 and was called to pastor Coalgate, First on July 5, 1942. During his less than 2-year pastorate, Coalgate had 105 additions of which 42 were by baptism. Since that time Gaskin has enjoyed two additional significant events at this church. On June 26, 1994, the church observed "Gaskin Day" and named him "Pastor Emeritus."

On Aug. 29, 2004, Gaskin celebrated 70 years in the ministry. He received a certificate from the Oklahoma Baptist Historical Commission and Society, followed by an all-church luncheon, which included testimonials from friends and church members.

Gaskin became pastor of Tonkawa, First on April 2, 1944, and served there until Oct. 25, 1953. During this pastorate there were 588 additions and many other high points. But without doubt, the most significant one was on Dec. 10, 1944, when his son, Franklin Ray Gaskin was born.

On Nov. 1, 1953, Gaskin preached his first sermon as pastor of Heavener, First and closed out his ministry there on Sept. 16, 1962. Some of the high lights of this pastorate included broadcasting the services over KLCO radio station for nine years; implementing the Forward Program of Church Finance in 1956; observing "Gaskin Day" on May 14, 1955, when an offering was taken to help finance a six-week tour of Europe, Egypt, Jordan, Israel, the British Isles, and Scotland; and the calling of Helen Gaskin as music director in 1955, a position she held for the final seven years of their Heavener pastorate.

Gaskin began his 14-year pastorate of Durant, First on September 23, 1962. He guided the building of a new auditorium which was moved into on May 3, 1964, and formally dedicated on June 14. Two of his "crown jewels" were the stained-glass windows, which were made in Germany and shipped to Durant for installation, and the Hillgreen Lane Pipe Organ containing 1481 pipes ranging in length from one-half inch to 16 feet.

Other accomplishments included adopting a church constitution, establishing an integration policy, and building both a new parsonage and a new Falls Creek cabin. Gaskin's final day as pastor of Durant, First was Aug. 30, 1976, and on Sept. 1, he became Director of History for the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma (BGCO), changing vocations for the rest of his life. He held this position until 1991.

In 1952, Gaskin went to Ridgecrest Conference Center in Black Mountain, N.C. for Bible Week. The Southern Baptist Historical Commission was having their annual church history conference emphasizing writing church history. He came back and told Bert Lackey, BGCO Executive Director-Treasurer, about it and together they decided to ask the convention to establish a Historical Commission made up of nine members rotating on alternating three-year terms. The 1952 Convention, meeting on Nov. 11, 1952, at Oklahoma City, Capitol Hill, approved this action.

Gaskin was elected as the first chairman of the Historical Commission and the following year, 1953, as Historical Secretary. He held this post until his retirement in 1998, a total of 45 years.

Gaskin received many awards and attained many significant achievements, including Distinguished Service Award from SBC Historical Commission; also from the SBC Historical Commission the Award for Outstanding Contributions to Baptist History recognizing Gaskin for having started from scratch and building one of the best state history programs in the nation; Distinguished Service

Award from Oklahoma Baptist Historical Commission and Society; Outstanding Alumni Award from Oklahoma Baptist University; founder and editor of *The Oklahoma Baptist Chronicle*, 1958-1998.

Gaskin has been awarded the following degrees: Bachelor of Theology, Conroe College; Doctor of Divinity from both Oklahoma Baptist University and Oklahoma School of Religion; Doctor of Literature, Conroe College; and Doctor of Laws, University of Central America. Gaskin has written 21 books including such favorites as *Trail Blazers of Sooner Baptists*; *Baptist Milestones in Oklahoma*; *The Falls Creek Story*; *Baptist Women in Oklahoma*; *Black Baptists in Oklahoma*; biographies of two former BGCO executives, Joe L. Ingram and William G. Tanner; and his own story in his last book *Cartersville, Route 1, History, Autobiography, Legend and Lore*.

On April 3, 2005, Durant, First named Gaskin "Pastor Emeritus." Gaskin served 15 interim pastorates since he began work at OBU in 1976. In 1954, the late Lee Bowen Spencer, longtime OBU librarian, started calling Gaskin "Mr. Oklahoma Baptist History." This unofficial title stuck, and remains.

Since a person has to be deceased 15 (Now seven) years to be considered for the Oklahoma Baptist Hall of Fame, the Commission began to look for ways we could honor Gaskin while he was still living. We came up with the Oklahoma Baptist Statesman Award to "honor living individuals who, by their calling, dedication, and sacrifice have given Oklahoma Baptists their cherished heritage; by their long years of service have made significant contributions to denominational work; by going well above and beyond the call of duty have promoted and supported Oklahoma Baptist programs and ministries; by exhibiting exemplary devotion, have adhered to the highest purposes and beliefs of Oklahoma Baptists; and are by definition of statesman as one who is able to know the thinking of the people in a denomination and has the ability to speak the mind and heart of a convention in a way that is conciliatory and not in a divisive way, is without question worthy of this recognition."

Oklahoma Baptist Hall of Fame

Laddie Ray Adams

1931—2019

Inducted 2026

by Jack Gallemore, Member OBHC

Laddie Ray Adams, son of Duane Kingsford Adams and Bessie Beatrice Burton, was born in Beaver City, Okla., on June 14, 1931. He died on Feb. 10, 2019, at the home of his daughter and son-in-law, Jana and David Kuehler, in Frisco, Texas. He attended the public schools of Guymon, Okla., where both his parents taught, and in 1953 graduated from Oklahoma Baptist University (OBU). While at OBU, he sang in the Bison Glee Club and lettered as a member of OBU's first golf team.

Three particularly important events changed Laddie's life forever while he was a student at OBU. He accepted Christ as his Savior in 1950; was called into the gospel ministry; and met Anita Reah Owens, whose birthday, coincidentally, was also June 14, 1932. It was inevitable that they should marry on that date in 1954. Their marriage of 64-plus years was a lifelong love story.

Laddie graduated from Southwestern Seminary in July of 1956 and began his pastoral ministry serving Oklahoma churches in Keyes, Cheyenne and Enid. While at Enid, he accepted a position with the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma (BGCO) in the Department of Language Missions and he and Nita were commissioned by the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) Home Mission Board in October of 1966.

Some of the richest memories of his family came from attending worship services in Native American Baptist churches throughout Oklahoma and spending summers at Falls Creek Baptist Conference Center in Davis, where Laddie managed the Recreation (Rec) Hut and all sporting events for the campers.

In 1970, he returned to the pastorate serving Cordell, First until 1973 when he accepted the position as Director of the Brotherhood Department at the BGCO, a position he held until his retirement in 1996. His greatest accomplishment during those years, and the one most dear to his heart, was leading the establishment of the Baptist Disaster Relief Program for Oklahoma. He and his counterpart in Texas, Bob Dixon, worked together to found Disaster Relief Programs for the entire Southern Baptist Convention and it was Laddie who wrote the manuals of operation for the teams. These teams are now recognized throughout Oklahoma, the U.S. and world-wide, as they serve disaster riddled communities in their yellow jackets and caps.

The first impact Oklahoma's Baptist Disaster Relief Program had was in December of 1973 when, as the convention director, 91 families in north central Oklahoma received a portion of love offerings totaling \$18,000 taken in Oklahoma churches following devastating flooding in the Enid area.

In just the program's second year under Laddie's leadership, the scope became much wider with 10 men sent to the Honduras to aid the Foreign Mission Board (now the International Mission Board) in hurricane recovery efforts.

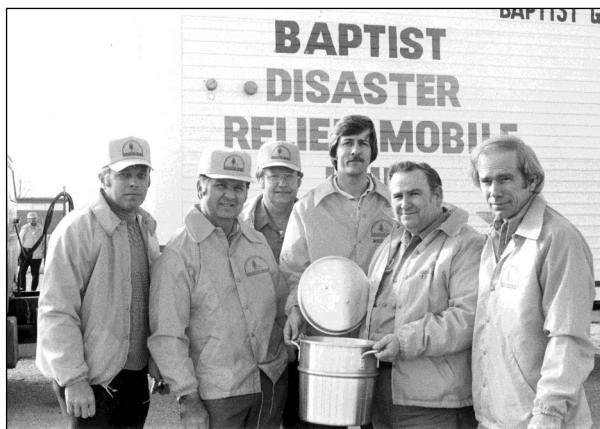
By the time Laddie retired in the spring of 1996, there were more than 300

statewide volunteers trained and assisting in disaster response, including hot meals, temporary emergency childcare and repair and rebuilding crews. Beginning in 1974, the program had responded to 39 incidents, both in the state and as far away as Alaska, Guatemala, Mexico, Antigua, California, Louisiana and Texas under Laddie's leadership and direction. In his last year alone, 231 volunteers worked on 14 projects in seven states and four foreign countries, contributing almost \$120,000 while furnishing their own expenses to participate.

In 1997, the BGCO honored Laddie by naming the Oklahoma Baptist Disaster Relief equipment building located at Boys Ranch in Edmond after him for his many years of tireless work.

As a pastor, Laddie served on the OBU Board of Trustees and the BGCO Board of Directors. He was elected BGCO first vice president in 1971.

Even after retirement, Laddie continued serving the Lord he loved. He taught a weekly Senior Adult Bible study for more than 10 years in his home church, Bethany, Council Road, and served as interim pastor for Lake Placid Baptist Church in New York.



Laddie Adams, second from left, is shown with early Oklahoma Baptist disaster relief volunteers.

Oklahoma Baptist Hall of Fame

Bailey Eugene Smith

1939—2019

Inducted 2026

By Joe Sherrer, Member OBHC

Bailey Eugene Smith (1939–2019) was one of the most influential Southern Baptist pastors and evangelists of the late 20th Century. A gifted communicator, passionate soul-winner, and prominent denominational leader, Smith became nationally known for his strong commitment to evangelism and his role in the early years of the Southern Baptist Convention's (SBC) Conservative Resurgence. For more than six decades he served as pastor, conference speaker, crusade evangelist, author, and denominational statesman, leaving a significant imprint on Southern Baptist life.

Born on Jan. 30, 1939, in Dallas, Texas, Smith was the son of Baptist minister Bailey E. Smith and his wife, Frances Smith. Raised in a Christian home, he developed an early commitment to ministry and preaching. Throughout his life he often credited his family background and his father's pastoral influence with shaping his understanding of the Gospel and the importance of evangelism.



Bailey Smith

Smith married Sandy Smith, and together they shared more than 55 years of marriage. Their family included three sons—Scott, Steven, and Josh—each of whom became active in Christian ministry. Smith died at his home in Duluth, Ga., on Jan. 14, 2019, following a battle with pancreatic cancer. He was 79 years old.

Smith pursued higher education with a clear sense of ministerial calling. He graduated from Ouachita Baptist University in 1961 and later earned his theological degree from Southwestern Seminary in 1966. These institutions played an important role in shaping his theological convictions and evangelistic passion. During his ministry he was also awarded multiple honorary doctorates in recognition of his leadership, preaching ministry, and contributions to evangelical Christianity.

Before achieving national prominence, Smith served several churches in Texas, Arkansas, and New Mexico. His greatest pastoral success came when he accepted the call to pastor Del City, First Southern in 1973 at the age of 34. At the time, the congregation was already one of the larger churches in the SBC. Under Smith's leadership the church experienced remarkable growth. Dur-

ing his 12-year pastorate, membership reportedly increased from approximately 6,600 to more than 20,000. The congregation became widely known for its emphasis on evangelism and baptisms. In 1980, the church recorded approximately 2,000 baptisms in a single year, a milestone frequently cited as unprecedented within Southern Baptist life. Smith's ministry in Del City established his reputation as one of the denomination's foremost evangelistic pastors.

Smith's influence extended far beyond the local church through his service in denominational leadership. He was elected president of the Baptist General Convention of Convention (BGCO), and also served as president of the SBC Pastors' Conference. In 1980, he was elected president of the SBC, becoming one of the youngest men ever to hold that office. His election came during a pivotal period in Southern Baptist history, immediately following the election of Adrian Rogers in 1979. Together, these leaders became identified with the movement that sought to reaffirm biblical inerrancy and conservative theological commitments within the denomination. Smith served two terms as SBC president and became one of the most recognizable denominational leaders of his era.

Though very busy with denominational responsibilities, Smith placed a priority on this local congregation at First Southern. Alan Quigley, now an Oklahoma Baptists' associate executive director, recalls, "I was 17 when my mother passed away. Brother Bailey called and asked me to come to his office for a visit. He met me at the door, embraced me, and expressed his sympathy for my loss. He explained that he had lost his mother around the same age as me and wanted to encourage me.

"One of the memorable things he shared with me is something that I think of often. He said, 'Alan, remember that quality remains long after the price is paid.' He explained that anything worth doing may be difficult but in the end, you only remember the outcome, not the hours spent in the process. This truth has helped me in many areas of my life to this very day."

Darin Mechling, now the associate pastor at Del City, Sunnyslane, explained that "When you were one of Brother Bailey's 'preacher boys,' you were not simply a member of his group, you were family."

Mechling remembers eating many meals with the Smith family. One especially fond memory is when his pastor sat with him to explain what it means to be called to vocational ministry.

Throughout his career Smith received numerous honors and recognitions. His remarkable record of evangelistic growth at Del City earned widespread attention among Southern Baptists. Observers often pointed to his ability to mobilize congregations for outreach and personal witnessing. He was elected to leadership positions in multiple Baptist organizations and later served as president of the Conference of Southern Baptist Evangelists. Publications such as *TIME* magazine and *Christianity Today* took note of his promi-

nence, describing him as a dynamic and influential figure within conservative evangelicalism. In 2008 he was inducted into the Hall of Faith of the Conference of Southern Baptist Evangelists, recognizing decades of service and evangelistic effectiveness.

In 1985, despite leading one of the largest churches in the denomination, Smith sensed a call to leave the pastorate and devote himself to full-time evangelism. This decision surprised many observers because of the size and success of his congregation. Through Bailey Smith Ministries and his "Pointing the Way" crusades, he conducted citywide evangelistic campaigns, church revivals, Bible conferences, pastors' gatherings, women's retreats, and overseas ministries.

He became the first former Southern Baptist Convention president to enter full-time crusade evangelism. Over the next three decades, he preached across the United States and internationally, emphasizing personal conversion, evangelistic urgency, and commitment to the Great Commission. His annual Real Evangelism Conferences became especially influential among pastors and church leaders seeking renewed passion for evangelistic ministry.

Smith's preaching style reflected the revivalist tradition of Southern Baptist evangelism. He was known for direct appeals, vivid illustrations, and a strong emphasis on repentance and faith in Christ. Among his most frequently requested messages were sermons centered on evangelism, revival, spiritual commitment, and the urgency of salvation. While he preached thousands of sermons during his ministry, several themes consistently appeared in his messages: the necessity of personal conversion, the authority of Scripture, the reality of eternity, and the responsibility of believers to share the Gospel.

His conference messages on "real evangelism" became especially well known and were widely distributed through recordings and printed outlines. A frequently cited address, later reported in Baptist publications, challenged churches to return to biblical preaching and evangelistic priorities if they wished to remain spiritually healthy and effective.

In addition to preaching, Smith contributed to evangelical literature through numerous books and ministry resources. His best-known work was *Real Evangelism*, a volume that reflected his lifelong conviction that effective outreach flows from a genuine burden for lost people and dependence upon the Holy Spirit. He authored several additional books focused on soul-winning, revival, Christian commitment, and practical ministry. These writings reinforced the themes that characterized his preaching ministry and helped extend his influence beyond the audiences who heard him in person. His books were widely used by pastors, church leaders, and laypersons seeking encouragement in evangelistic ministry.

Bailey Eugene Smith occupies an important place in the history of modern Southern Baptist life. As a pastor, he demonstrated ex-

ceptional effectiveness in church growth and evangelistic outreach. As a denominational leader, he helped shape a crucial period in the Southern Baptist Convention's history. As an evangelist, he spent more than three decades calling individuals and churches to renewed commitment to Christ and the Great Commission. Though remembered at times for controversy and strong convictions, he is most widely recognized for his unwavering passion for evangelism and his belief that every believer bears responsibility for sharing the Gospel. His legacy continues through his sermons, writings, conferences, and the many lives influenced by his ministry.

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Gary Lillie

2026 DISTINGUISHED SERVICE AWARD

Gary Lillie, long-time pastor of Nash, Bethel Hawley, has been selected by the Oklahoma Baptist Historical Secretary to receive the 2026 Oklahoma Baptists' Distinguished Service Award

Lillie has been the pastor of Bethel Hawley for more than 47 years. He began his ministry in 1978, leading the congregation through decades of worship, outreach, and community service.

"The town dried up in the 1940s. Now, it consists of the church and two houses, one of which is the parsonage, and one that is vacant. The church is still here because there is a strong sense of community that extends far beyond Hawley," Lillie said during the church's 125th Anniversary celebration on Jan. 5, 2020.

While the church averaged about 30 members when Lillie came in 1978, it now averages around 100 every Sunday. As a testament to the church's ministry and legacy, more than 250 people attended the Anniversary celebration.

In 1895, Dan and Catherine Russell, an African-American couple who lived in Nash, but attended a church in Anthony, Kan., wanted to have a church in their hometown, so they donated land to establish the congregation of Bethel Baptist Church. The emergence of another church named Bethel nearby led to local residents referring to Bethel Baptist Church as Bethel at Hawley.

The new church was incorporated in the 1980s, and members voted to retain the name as Bethel Hawley, even though the other Bethel church had long become defunct.

In 1996, the Nash Fire Department invited Lillie to serve as their Fire Chaplain following serious incidents. He accepted, with the condition of joining the Fire Department as a firefighter. He completed Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM), Advanced CISM, and Peer CISM training, earned FF 1 certification, and became an EMT-B. He also helped establish the Northwest Oklahoma CISM Team, further expanding his role in crisis support.

Beyond the church, Lillie has been active in community leadership. In 2012, he assumed leadership of Golden Oaks Village (GOV) in Enid, viewing it as a ministry to residents rather than just a business. He partnered with Baptist Village Communities (BVC) to



Gary Lillie



Nash, Bethel Hawley Pastor Gary Lillie, left, accepts a certificate recognizing the church's 125th Anniversary from Bob Nigh, Oklahoma Baptists' Historical Secretary on Jan. 5, 2020. (Photo by Richard Rapp).

enhance services for seniors, reflecting his Christian mission and commitment to serving the local population.

BVC and GOV announced their plan in June 2023 for BVC to acquire the Enid campus. BVC is Oklahoma's largest not-for-profit provider of senior adult housing and services and currently operates 11 communities and home health across the state. Golden Oaks Village, a Christ-focused 501(c)3 organization, was founded in Enid in 1988 and is one of the largest providers of senior adult housing in Northwest Oklahoma.

"We are so grateful to God for the opportunity presented to us by the Golden Oaks Board of Directors to include this much-needed Enid campus in the ministry of BVC," said Bill Pierce, BVC President. "Serving hundreds of families through Golden Oaks has been a labor of love for the Wesley Kroeker, Bryan and Lavonne Kroeker and Gary and Annette Lillie families for decades. We look forward to carrying forward that ministry responsibility."

Offering a continuing care lifestyle community for senior adults in Northwest Oklahoma, Golden Oaks has 189 Independent Living apartments, cottages, and townhomes, as well as a 33-apartment Assisted Living Neighborhood and 90-bed Long-Term Care, Skilled Nursing, and Physical Rehabilitation Neighborhood on approximately 97 acres. BVC will continue offering physical, occupational and

speech therapy services in the specially designated rehabilitation neighborhood.

"Golden Oaks Village's passion for maintaining a faith-based, active Christian lifestyle for our senior community is well known," said Gary and Annette Lillie, GOV Board Members. Annette's father, Wesley Kroeker, acquired the operation in the early 1990s and began enlarging the campus services that continue today.

"Baptist Village Communities will continue this mission to honor God through a loving environment, excellent services and compassionate care to residents while providing a nurturing workplace for employees. We could not be more pleased with the direction God is leading Golden Oaks Village."

"We are very excited to work together," said Wendell Short, BVC vice president—planning and project management. "We believe the strengths of our organizations can continue to build opportunities for Oklahoma seniors in northwest Oklahoma. Both organizations have a rich Christian heritage, combined with a desire to serve individuals who choose to be a part of our communities. It is exciting to see where God will lead our efforts to provide senior services in the days ahead."

Pierce agrees. "Management consulting can be a win-win for both Golden Oaks and BVC. We are very pleased to be serving together," he said.



Golden Oaks Village General Manager Gary Lillie announces a partnership with Baptist Village Communities during a monthly residents meeting.

Stigler, Main Street Earns 2025 Church History Award

The 125th history publication by Stigler, Main Street has been awarded the 2025 Church History Award by the Oklahoma Baptist Historical Commission.

Stigler, Main Street actually began on Jan. 13, 1950 when 17 like-minded members of Stigler, First met in the home of Thurman and Lorraine Burks and felt led by divine direction to separate from the mother church. On the following Sunday, Jan. 22 they attended Stigler, First and formally requested to withdraw their memberships.

Breaking fellowship was a difficult step for those individuals who had been faithful members of FBC for many years.

Several worship services and planning meetings were held in various homes in those early days, and on Feb. 26, 1950, the new church was officially constituted under the name of Calvary Baptist Church. The church also called its first pastor, S.W. Bagdgett, that day.

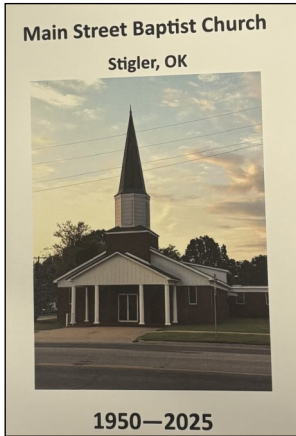
The church met originally in the Presbyterian Church building which the Main Street members agreed to purchase. An

expanding membership necessitated plans to find a new home at 103 NE 6th Street. On June 29, 1955, a building fund began to construct a new building on Main Street in Stigler, resulting in a name change for the church.

In June 1960, the members of Bethel Baptist Church in the Martin Box community north of Stigler, disbanded their church and joined Main Street. The new building was completed and dedicated on Jan. 22, 1961. On June 8, 1961, Mrs. A.H. Farrar gave the church \$12,650 to build a parsonage. In return the church agreed to pay her the sum of \$55 per month throughout the rest of her life.

Several events have highlighted the life of the church, including buying a bus in 1972; the calling of the first youth director—Janice Hayes in 19172; completion and dedication of an education building in 1974; the calling of Ken Dale in 1976 as director of education and music; extensive repairs and redecoration of the sanctuary and pastor's study.

The church has had 13 pastors in its 125-year history, including present pastor Jerry Highfill, who was called in 2023.



PUBLICATION POLICY

Digital issues of the *Oklahoma Baptist Chronicle* have been posted to the Oklahoma Baptists' web site. The *Oklahoma Baptist Chronicle* has been published twice annually since it began in 1958. It is the official historical journal of the Oklahoma Baptist Historical Commission. Correspondence concerning all articles, book reviews and editorial matters should be addressed to the Editor, 300 Johnny Bench Dr., Suite 300, Oklahoma City, OK 73104. The *Oklahoma Baptist Chronicle* and its parent organization, the Oklahoma Baptist Historical Commission, do not assume any responsibility for factual dates or other statements made by authors whose articles appear in its pages.