



By Mary Kantor

During First Baptist Church's 150th anniversary celebration in 1983, a play about early Baptist leader, Roger Williams, was performed. The play "Roger Williams and Mary" by Albert Johnson concludes with these lines: "The story is not ended, for the story is yours and mine, and the telling continues. And each one, each day, tells a part..." This telling of the story continues as First Baptist Church of Lexington now celebrates its 175th anniversary.

### Remembering the Past



First Baptist Church Early 1900's. Photo courtesy of the Lexington Historical Society

A December worship service and fellowship time marked the "looking back over the years" with history and photos shared over a special birthday cake. Long-term members of sixty to eighty years were recognized and honored. The gathering and telling of their stories is a part of this anniversary year. Helen Brown, member of seventy-five years, was brought to the church as a young child by her Irish immigrant parents. "I was brought up in the church. I'm eighty-seven years old.

I've been there. I was baptized there. I've been an active member as much as I could... I was married there. My children were baptized there. I've just stayed, it's been my spiritual home... all these years." The youth of First Baptist, under the leadership and guidance of Jane and Len Long, are doing video interviews of these long-term members in order to document their experiences and memories of the church. A montage of these interviews is being prepared for the church's anniversary banquet on May 9.

Helen Brown was brought up on a farm on the outskirts of Lexington. When asked how the town has changed in all of these years, Helen laughed and replied: "Oh, my goodness!! Where to start... you wouldn't believe!" When she was growing up, the outskirts of Lexington were all farms. There were only

a handful of churches and no synagogues. She went back and forth to school on the train from Lexington into Boston. "I've seen many, many changes...." she says.

The train, which no longer runs through Lexington, was preceded centuries earlier by "a rough path wide enough for a horse [and] hewn out of the wilderness from the northern boundary of Newtowne to what we know today as Concord. By this act the General Court of Boston authorized

# First Baptist Church Celebrating 175 years!

an eight-mile new frontier.... This northwesterly area of wilderness was considered a precinct of Newtowne (renamed Cambridge in 1638)." The small volume, *This Way We Came: A History of The First Baptist Church of Lexington, Massachusetts, 1833- 1983*, traces the early developments of this "northwesterly area of wilderness" wherein lies the beginnings of Lexington and of First Baptist Church. "The horse path was gradually widened to

but I think from our standpoint, what's important is: definitely stop, look at the building, but come in... You realize that there's so much there that you can partake of that's inside the building," Fay says. Joe describes their first Sunday: "It was a quiet Sunday morning, sunny. We walked up and everybody was really, really nice. We got the great big hello at the door and people were very friendly... We went back the following Sunday.... People remem-



First Baptist Sanctuary Choir, Rev. Dr. Mark Jackson far left, Dr. Robert Eaton, Minister of Music far right.

accommodate an oxcart, but it was often unusable in the winter because of deep snow, and in the spring because of mud." But, notes author Anne Doris MacDougall, "there were no parking problems!"

bered us, "Welcome back," it was just nice, it was small, it was intimate, it just felt right.... It was kind of idyllic for us. So we started to attend."

### We Care For Each Other

Located in the center of Lexington on the busy thoroughfare of Massachusetts Avenue, First Baptist Church is a downtown church with high visibility. Fay and Joe Backert, newer members at First Baptist, spoke of passing by it on a Sunday morning as they searched for a new church community. "It's a beautiful historic building. I definitely think people pass by and look at the building,

New and long-term members consistently noted this welcome and hospitable warmth. A member of fifteen years recalls: "I came here and immediately felt good. And I just made up my mind right then and there, this is where I want to be. It's a family church. It's a warm, comfortable church.... We celebrate the good times but we support everyone when they need it." "We find it a very warm com-



Teddy Bear Sunday (Youth help collect stuffed animals for local charity)

munity to be involved with, it's a very supportive group. If people are in trouble, they are very willing to help through prayers, through support, through whatever might be needed. You can count on the community. It is a very, very supportive, warm family group," says Jane Long, who with her husband Len has been a member for seventeen years. Helen Brown confirms this support: "The community has always been very welcoming and friendly and looks out for its members... took care of their older members. They remembered them. That has gone on through all the years that I have been there..." First Baptist's Church Purpose states: "We celebrate occasions of joy and happiness, and we care for each other in times of illness and sorrow." This care is not just between individual members but is also seen in specific outreach ministries: prayer fellowship ministries, TV ministry, health ministries and faith-based wellness groups, for "keeping balance between body, mind and spirit" say one mem-



Maria Haynes, Giving Teacher Workshop in Zambia



Students in Zambia, in classroom building funded by FBC

ber, prayer shawl ministry (knitters creating shawls to comfort people in time of need).

## ***We Gather for Worship, Fellowship and Christian Education***

Seeing growth in faith as a lifelong process, First Baptist's Purpose states: "We provide young and old alike with education and training in Christian discipleship." Dave Ehlke, who joined the church with his family in 1990, was "very taken by the

children's program for young kids.... The Sunday School and the learning center for young kids was one of the things" that first attracted him to First Baptist. Since joining, Dave has served the church in many capacities, including teaching adult Sunday School and overseeing the Christian Learning Center, a Wednesday night Bible-study program open to the community, with reading, interactive study and discussion for adults and teens: "I've gone from a person who never read the Bible to the point where I teach Sunday School... My faith is very important to me and it gives me a foundation. I think you can practice your faith on your own, as far as the way you live and reading the Bible, but what I find is we come together on Sunday and then you have a community of believers that strengthens your faith."

The community that gathers on Sunday for worship and fellowship is "an inclusive group", says Len Long. "That's what I like about it the best... we like to include everybody in our worship service." Dave



Ehlke notes, "People from most Protestant denominations would feel at home.... We have people come from a lot of neighboring communities... from at least a dozen towns bordering Lexington." First Baptist is also known for the excellence of their music ministry. "We have a tremendous choir, a good organ... It's really become a major part of the service," a member states. The Minister of Music, Dr. Robert Eaton, directs the Sanctuary Choir on Sunday mornings as well as the First Baptist Concert Series, and is one of the conductors of the Annual Lexington Interfaith Choral Fest. Dr. Eaton, with a long career in church music and music education,

First Baptist Church, continued on page 49

## *Meet Rev. Dr. Mark C. Jackson*

With the installation of their new pastor, First Baptist welcomed one of their newest members: Rev. Dr. Mark C. Jackson. Pastor Jackson and his wife Laura, both originally from Mississippi, come to Lexington with their daughter Alyssa, via Nashua, New Hampshire. I asked Pastor Jackson to speak of his ministry in our current culture:



As a spiritual leader in this day and time, we are having to find creative ways to do ministry... Our culture is changing and church is no longer the center of a community as it once was... The church is a community of faith, and as we gather for worship, prayer, education and service, we discover the unique place of the church in our society. At church, grace, forgiveness, tolerance, encouragement, connection, restoration, refreshment, support, and reverence all can be experienced – no other organization can provide this kind of atmosphere.

### **Q A In these times, what does faith have to offer?**

Our current culture is one of increasing isolation.... In difficult times when all human resources are used up or no longer work, people tend to move more toward their faith or begin to seek God for the first time. The church is in a unique position to provide something that people are seeking in these days.... The church as a community of faith is also a place of support, encouragement and help for its members during difficult days. We share in each other's joys and troubles.

There is a trend now that more and more people are wanting community because of what's going on in the world. Things are a lot more unsettled. They're reevaluating their purpose in life. The things that we put our faith and trust in, the economy and so-forth... there's greater sense of being unsettled, uncertainty, anxiousness. I think the church right now is in a very good position to reach out to the community and to provide opportunities for people to come and find some places to gather together, maybe around some common interests and themes... and also just for the spiritual. Because sometimes people just need the community...

### **Q A What do you want Lexington to know about First Baptist Church?**

First Baptist is a church that is celebrating a rich heritage while positioning for ministry in the future. We are a church that welcomes all people.... We have programs for people of all ages... The size of our congregation allows for people to easily get to know one another and promotes a "family" atmosphere.

First Baptist is a long-standing and vital part of the Lexington community. We seek to work with other churches, business and organizations to support our town and enhance the positive aspects of Lexington. We welcome people to come and visit us and want to be present in our community. First Baptist is known for its excellence in ministry and programs, quality worship that involves people of all ages, fine music ministry, great food and a love for people and the Lexington community.

oversees the First Baptist Music Programs that “enrich and enhance the worship experience” and “provide a musical outreach and mission to the greater Lexington community.”

### *We Look to the World*

The ministries of First Baptist are not just to their own membership but also to the greater community, of Lexington and beyond. As stated in First Baptist’s Purpose: “We look to the world... We reach out to meet spiritual needs and physical needs among those in our community and beyond.” Outreach and support extends to over fifty local, national and foreign programs and missions. The youth of the church sponsor the Souper Bowl Sunday, held on football Super Bowl Sunday, serving soup to raise funds for area charities Rosie’s Place, My Brother’s Table, and Sandra’s Lodge. Teddy Bear Sunday gathers stuffed animals for children in a local shelter. A special mission project of the church, a partnering with Community Without Borders, assists children in Africa who have lost their parents to the AIDS epidemic. A school in Zambia is supported through collections of clothing, school supplies and funds to help pay needed school fees for these children. In 2005, the church helped purchase a new building with classrooms, and meeting space. Maria Haynes, member of First Baptist and educator in the Lexington Schools, is currently planning her fourth summer trip with CWB, to teach children, and adult educators in Zambia.

And closer to home, First Baptist serves the local Lexington community in their annual Pancake Breakfast on Patriots Day, also providing a food booth for parade-goers throughout the day. First Baptist has a rich heritage around food, from one of their earliest customs (1890s) of having a monthly social and supper in the church, publishing church cookbooks, planting a Hunger Garden, to the current pie auctions, pancakes, hot dogs, and church dinners. Dave Ehlke remembers, “The second week we were at the church, they had a church picnic on the lawn...I guess maybe a lot of churches say it, but we have really good food...!” “It has some of the best cooks in town. Church suppers are great,” another member notes. Every Sunday during the fellowship time after worship, coffee and food is served. (And if you can’t wait until after the service... Rev. Dr. Jackson, regarding the church’s location, says: “One of the most important things is that we’re almost across the street from the Dunkin Donuts! You can

meet many of our parishioners there on Sunday morning before church...”)

Whether in worship, music, outreach or gatherings over good food, the First Baptist Church continues its long heritage, continues the telling of its ongoing story in Lexington. And as one member states: “It has lots of heart, it is friendly and welcoming, and open to everyone.”

## American Baptist Churches, USA

As early as 1817, Baptists in Lexington were meeting in private homes, and in 1833 Massachusetts established the equality of religious sects ending state authority over churches. With this state act, the twenty-one Baptists in Lexington met to form a Baptist church, thus constituting the first “free” church in Lexington. The building of a house of worship began soon after. First Baptist’s current church building was dedicated in 1893, with additions added in later years.

First Baptist Church of Lexington is part of the Baptist denomination known as American Baptists, one of over seventy Baptist denominations or independent churches in the United States. (First Baptist is not affiliated with Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, Kansas, an organization not affiliated with any known Baptist conventions or associations. The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), an international non-profit legal organization working in tolerance education programs, has classified Westboro Baptist as a hate group.) The American Baptist Churches, USA (ABCUSA) is one of the mainline protestant churches in America, descending from a loosely structured foreign missions organization of the 1800s. Today, the ABCUSA has approximately 1.5 million members in 5,800 churches.

The many different Baptist denominations have various theological and social positions. As noted on First Baptists’ website: American Baptists “celebrate unity in diversity... various ethnic groups, worship styles, theological understandings, and churches with both large and small congregations. American Baptists affirm the autonomy of the local church, follow a congregational model of church government, and have no hierarchical governing body.” First Baptist is a long-time member of the Lexington Interfaith Clergy Association.

Rev. Dr. Mark Jackson, speaking of American Baptists: “One of the things I think we do well is not only allow people to think, but help teach them to think about their faith... rather than an indoctrination approach that everyone has to believe exactly this way to be a part of this church. Baptists have always believed in religious freedom and intellectual freedom, and that’s how we started.... One of the great things we have to offer is great diversity of thinking. We’re not disjunct, it’s very loving and caring and we focus on those things that are common to us... We allow people the space to think through their faith, and to work it out and provide them opportunities to live out their faith through mission work, doing things in the community and volunteering and serving and we encourage people to do that.”