

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

History: First Baptist Church dedicated

2 decades before MLK, this group had a dream

Tracy Conrad Special to Palm Springs Desert Sun
USA TODAY NETWORK

In a celebratory booklet printed in 1965 for the solemn dedication of the First Baptist Church in Palm Springs, George Hearst, the son of one of the wealthiest men in the country and resident of Palm Springs, submitted a donation. As with many such efforts, businesses, churches and well-wishers contributed to the cause and printed a little message in the publication. There were inspirational notes from Baptist churches all over the country. Every type of business in town sent their regards and support. George Hearst wrote simply, "My most sincere congratulations on your distinguished achievement."

The booklet was titled "A Dream Realized."

Two decades before Martin Luther King, Jr. poignantly spoke on the mall in Washington, D.C., First Baptist Church in Palm Springs had its own dream, diligently pursued. The booklet would mark its fulfillment. First Baptist Church persists today and is integral to the life of the community.

Pastor Rodney Croom leads the church these days and recalled its history, "The original congregation in the 1940's were a group... who migrated from Texas. Upon arrival, they settled on what is known as 'Section 14.'" The group first held services in a borrowed hall and then, in a tent, but they dreamt of building their own church and doing good work.

Croom continues, "In the 1960's when the Cahuilla tribe their sovereignty and asked the residents of Section 14 to re-locate, they packed up and landed at their current location in Palm Springs. Right away the congregation began efforts to create a sophisticated childcare program for the communities of Palm Springs. Under the leadership of Cora Crawford, the program grew... (and) effectively supported several church ministries and outreach, and eventually became a model for other programs..."

It anticipated the Head Start program inaugurated in the country in 1969 by President Lyndon Johnson to "meet the emotional, social, health, nutritional, and psychological needs of preschool-aged children from low-income families." Today, First Baptist Church of Palm Springs is rightly proud of its ingenious childcare program initiated by Mrs. Crawford, and the foresight of the congregation to serve all children.

First Baptist Church is located in Palm Springs at 588 Rosa Parks Road and was designed by Howard Lapham in the mid-century style then blossoming in town. The congregation purchased four lots in the Desert Highland Neighborhood in 1959 and another in



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COURTESY OF THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

1962 for a parsonage.

A groundbreaking ceremony was held on September 1, 1963. The event was photographed and later published for the booklet memorializing its completion. The caption read, "the long-awaited historic day when action really began on the building for First Baptist Church...participating in the event as Pastor Rollins turns the initial shovel of dirt are ...Elder L.K. Griggs, Mayor F. Bogert, and Dr. James H. Blackstone, Jr.... An enthusiastic and thankful crowd of members and well-wishers was on hand for the event."

Varied building materials accumulated on the construction site after the ground-breaking to the delight of the neighborhood. A rendering by Howard Lapham appeared in *The Desert Sun* causing great anticipation. The newspaper reported on the building's progress.

Less than a year after the start of construction, the first service in the new building was conducted on July 5, 1964. That same year, under the leadership of Pastor Jeff Rollins, caring for the community's children was

prioritized as a church offering. The program grew and needed its own space. Breaking ground in 1967 and completed in 1968 the congregation built a home for the Palm Springs Child Care and Development Center. (Melba Bennett founder of the Palm Springs Historical Society was a major benefactor.)

The booklet expounded on the efforts of the entire community to create the building and the services it offered. "Dedicated—that is the word that best describes the courageous, profound leader of First Baptist Church. Long ago against great odds and with rare determination which is one of his outstanding character traits, Rev. Rollins vowed to dedicate himself and anything with which he was associated to the upgrading of people—spiritually, morally, and economically."

Indeed, the church was uplifting for the entire neighborhood. There was a Sunday school, Deacon board, Baptist Training Union, "The Brotherhood" men's group, the "The Mission Society" ladies' group, and most importantly the Gospel Choir.

The Gospel Choir was nothing short of miraculous. Mrs. Billie Woods was a self-described "songstress" at First Baptist starting 1955. She had given concerts in notable churches in Los Angeles. She sang with the national gospel singer B.F. Gipson and was encouraged as a soloist by Rubia Haynes, but a highlight of her career occurred in 1957 when she had the privilege of meeting renowned gospel singer Mahalia Jackson upon her appearance at the Plaza Theater.

George Hearst summed it up perfectly. First Baptist Church was indeed a distinguished accomplishment.

Lacey Kendall and her students at California State University, San Bernardino in Palm Desert began working with Pastor Croom and First Baptist this past summer. Kendall says, helping the church "appealed to our team because they do and have offered so many services to their communities (free food, counseling, senior assistance, grief counseling, mentoring, and ministry to anyone of any color, faith, or lack of faith). This year, they have endured more than most." The pandemic has deeply affected the community served by First Baptist Church.

Whatever the challenge, First Baptist Church continues to uplift, dedicated to service. Croom and Kendall are part of a new initiative to support historic houses of worship. The Black Church Media Project aims to provide streaming services and therefore connection to community during these precarious times. Kendall says, "This project is so dear to our team of students, administrators, and teachers. It means everything to us to see this project to completion." Those interested in learning more may contact her at lacey@csusb.edu.

Tracy Conrad is president of the Palm Springs Historical Society. The Thanks for the Memories column appears Sundays in The Desert Sun. Write to her at pshstracy@gmail.com.