

History of First Baptist Church

First Baptist Church of McGehee was founded in 1903, when a small group of believers came together with a vision to establish a place of worship and ministry in the growing community of McGehee, Arkansas. From those early days, the church has remained committed to worship, discipleship, and service.

Bro. Holley served as Minister of Education from June 1956 until May 1959. He later became Director of Discipleship and Family Ministry for the Arkansas Baptist State Convention. Bro. Fred Helms served as Minister of Music and Youth from October 9, 1966, until January 1970. Bro. Ron Marcum served in the same capacity from May 9, 1973, until August 1975.

Long-range planning enabled the church to purchase adjoining property as it became available. In June 1976, construction began on the present sanctuary and fellowship hall. The first service in the new sanctuary was held on December 18, 1977, with Bro. Donald J. Hilton, Minister of Music and Youth, presenting a program of Christmas music.

The dedication service for both buildings and their furnishings was held on August 6, 1978. The cost of the sanctuary and fellowship hall was approximately \$800,000, with half of the amount raised prior to construction. Final payment was made on February 8, 1988, only eight years and ten months after the buildings were completed. The first Summer Youth Director, Bro. Duane Chapel, came in June of 1981.

Rev. Craig retired at the end of 1987 after serving twenty-eight years and eight months. His retirement closed a very important time in the history of First Baptist Church of McGehee. After his retirement, Rev. D. C. McAtee was called as interim pastor in April 1988. That same month, a note-burning service celebrated the paying off of the building indebtedness.

Dr. Kerry Powell became pastor on June 16, 1988. In September of that year, the church called Bro. Gregg Watson to serve as full-time Minister of Youth. Bro. Gregg was ordained to the Gospel Ministry in April of 1989 before returning to seminary. In July of 1989, Bro. Carl Fondren began serving as Minister of Youth and Education.

In August 1990, a very significant commitment was made by the members of First Baptist Church. The church voted to build a Christian family life center. Mr. Frank D. Hickingbotham, a native of McGehee and former member of the church, committed a gift of \$250,000 to aid in the construction. The church matched these funds, and groundbreaking was started on March 3, 1991. The building was named the Hickingbotham Christian Family Life Center and was dedicated on February 16, 1992, with an open house.

Bro. Robbie Isom became the Minister of Education and Youth in January 1995 after Bro. Fondren moved to serve another church. Dr. Powell, who received his doctorate degree while in McGehee, announced his decision to retire from the pastorate and enter the field of evangelism effective March 1, 1997.

A pulpit committee was elected and began working immediately so that by March of 1997 the name of Dr. Tommy Cunningham was presented to the church. On March 17, following the morning worship service, the church extended a call to Dr. Cunningham to become pastor. He accepted and began his ministry on Easter Sunday, March 30, 1997.

A Music Director search committee was established in 2000. After an extensive search, Rev. Rick Miller accepted the call to become the Minister of Music in January 2001. Over the years, Rev. Miller faithfully served in a combination of Music, Education, and Youth ministry roles.

After a very successful ministry, Dr. Cunningham resigned his position in April 2007. A search committee was established, and in September 2007, Dr. Ed Balducci was called to be the pastor of FBC. During the early part of 2009, the church decided to separate the Music and Youth responsibilities. After a search, Chris Bass was appointed the Minister of Youth.

Chris Bass built a strong youth program and left his position in 2014. In 2015, Michael Decker was called to be the next youth pastor. Dr. Ed resigned from his role as pastor in October 2018 after serving for 11 years. A search team was formed, and in August 2019, God led Rev. David Brown to be the pastor. Rev. David had previously been part of a church plant in Nevada.

In 2020, First Baptist—like everyone else—experienced a difficult season as COVID-19 caused church gatherings to pause. Worship was streamed from members' homes through their phones. After several months, the staff decided it was time for everyone to come together again for worship.

In October 2022, Rev. Rick Miller resigned from his role as Associate Pastor of Music. Since that time, Colby Linn and Tabor McGraw have faithfully stepped up to lead worship each Sunday and for any other service that the church holds, carrying on the vital ministry of music within the church.

In February 2023, Michael Decker resigned after eight years of youth ministry, marking one of the longest tenures for a youth pastor at FBC. A committee was formed, and God brought Bro. Mike Ratledge to serve as Youth Pastor.

In August 2025, Rev. David Brown resigned from his role as pastor after 45 years of full-time ministry, six of which were faithfully spent at First Baptist Church of McGehee.

Through every season, God has shown His faithfulness to First Baptist Church of McGehee. From its founding in 1903 until today, the church's story has been one of commitment, faith, and God's blessings. Truly, *"God holds the future of First Baptist Church of McGehee in His hands and only He knows what is ahead. He will enable us to meet any need and will bless us according to our faith."*