A TALE OF TWO CITIES AND TWO CHURCHES

The story of our church is a story of connections, past, present and future. Some years after I served FBC of Lynchburg, VA, I discovered that one of our former pastors, Dr. W.W. Hamilton, later President of New Orleans Seminary, had been pastor there. It was Dr. Hamilton who was largely responsible for the early growth of our church and for the building of this sanctuary at a cost of about $175,000. Can you believe it? But after I returned here about a dozen years ago, I learned that the pastor who succeeded Dr. Hamilton at Lynchburg, Dr. Carter Helm Jones, followed him here. Dr. Hamilton was, from all accounts, a warm, loving pastor of the people and had served the SBC as evangelism secretary. Dr. Jones was apparently a fabulous preacher but of an aristocratic demeanor. Reports are that he had himself driven to the church on Sunday mornings, dressed up in his formal morning suit, entered by the Audubon door, preached and went home immediately after the service. Fit right into our “plantation” mentality that I sometimes joke about. Dr. Jones didn’t last long, just two years, and was requested by letter from the deacons to resign, and that while he was out of town. Never fear, he did very well for himself serving such other churches as First Baptist Philadelphia, First Baptist Elizabeth City, NJ, First Baptist Knoxville, TN, First Baptist Oklahoma City, First Baptist Seattle, and the Baptist Church of Williamsburg, VA.

But the Virginia and Virginia Baptist connections go on and on. By the mid-40s our church had grown to a membership of over 1,500 though records of attendance are sketchy and it is doubtful that steady attendance ever reached that level. In fact, on two separate occasions we removed 500 and 300 members because we couldn’t locate them! But by the time the 50s rolled around, our church was served throughout that decade by two pastors who had served as Associate Pastor at FBC of Richmond, VA: Dr. Lyn Elder followed by our beloved Dr. Myron Madden. The 50s were a time of peace and explosive growth following WWII with Presidents Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy elected just at the end of the decade. It was also a time of peaceful connections at our church with many members from the academic community, strong relations even at the national leadership level in various SBC institutions. It was a time when our church, although consistently more inclusive, liturgical, and ecumenical than the typical SBC church, exerted great influence on Baptists in Louisiana, New Orleans, and throughout the SBC.

But wait, we aren’t through with the Virginia connections just yet. There have been other Virginia connections including Dr. Kirby Godsey, former President of Mercer University who was Dean at Averitt College in Danville, VA, before going to Mercer and Dr. William Powell Tuck who was a member here for some of the time he was pursuing the doctorate at New Orleans Seminary and later affiliated with the River Road Church, Baptist, in Richmond. No doubt there are others.
Following Dr. Avery Lee’s twenty-year pastorate, the church called Dr. David Farmer who was then living in Richmond after teaching at the International Baptist Seminary in Ruschlikon, Switzerland, for one semester and he in fact was waiting for the call to a full-time position there when we extended the call to him to serve as our pastor. It was Dr. Farmer who led us to affiliate with the Alliance of Baptists at its founding and not long after with the American Baptist Churches. CBF had not yet come into existence. So, for several years we were dually-aligned with the two major Baptist denominations in America. All the while, we were already ordaining women to the diaconate and to the ministry much to the dismay of many within the Southern Baptist Convention. We were the first predominately white Baptist church in Louisiana to break the glass ceiling and ordain women to these two top levels of ministry. Although Anne Earnest was not ordained to the ministry, she did in reality serve as our Associate Pastor and therefore Interim Pastor, and later Rev. Amy Butler served as an Associate Pastor before being called to be Senior Pastor of Calvary Baptist in Washington, DC.

However, it would be a while before we got around to breaking the glass ceiling at the Senior Pastor level, and guess where we found her? You got it—Richmond, VA.

Elizabeth, as you come to this pulpit to preach your first sermon as our Senior Pastor, you follow in a long line of pastors and members with Virginia roots and connections. It is only fitting that you the first Senior Pastor of an historically white Baptist church in Louisiana have such strong connections to Baptists in Virginia. On our part, we say thank you to them for sending you our way and we look forward to your pulpit and pastoral leadership of a church with a great past and a great future under God’s leadership.

WELCOME!