

History of  
The First Baptist Church  
Of Ionia  
From  
1833-1967  
by  
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The First Baptist Church in Ionia has the distinction of being the first Protestant organization in this section of our state. On May 28, 1833, a group of sixty-three people came here from Herkimer County, New York. They settled on land purchased from the government the previous year by Samuel Dexter. This was a wilderness where the Indians held undisputed possession. These were a God loving people as was evidenced by the steps taken soon after their arrival to form a religious organization.

Ionia was then called Washington Center, a name given to the settlement by the honorable Samuel Dexter, its founder. On June 24, 1834, a meeting was held in the home of Mr. Erastus Yeomans. Elder Loomis, an agent for the American Home Missionary Society, and Elder Slater, a missionary at Thomas Station, in what is now Grand Rapids, were present. The home of Mr. Yeomans was located on West Main St. in the general area of what is now Yeomans Street.

At this meeting six persons, Samuel Dexter and his wife Anna, along with Erastus Yeomans and his wife, Phoebe and Alfred Cornell and his wife Nancy, united in a conference. On August 23rd of the same year, Elder Loomis again visited here with Caleb Eldred, a member of the church in Comstalk, in Kalamazoo County. After a sermon and discussion, it was voted that this conference should ask recognition as a church. It was at this time that the permanent organization was effected, the Charter Members being the six who united in the conference.

Since this was two years before Michigan had attained statehood it was at a time when wild animals were yet plentiful along Grand River, and Indians dwelled in great numbers. A trip to Detroit, by oxteam, required a mere fourteen days from Ionia. It was in 1833 that Andrew Jackson made the first Presidential trip ever made on a railroad and during this year our Church had its origin. Since then our Church has been in continuous active existence. It was at this meeting that Benjamin B. Barber was received by letter and Dr. William B. Lincoln was our first candidate for baptism. Dr. Lincoln was the first physician to practice in Ionia, as well as its first school-

teacher.. He also built and occupied the first frame house in Ionia.

The following day, on August 24th, a service was conducted with Elder Loomis preaching, and during an intermission the congregation proceeded to the Grand River where the solemn rite of baptism was administered. After Dr. Lincoln was chosen as the first Church Clerk. Church records show the relatives and descendants of the charter members followed in rapid succession in Church membership.

One of the articles of Faith drawn up by the new organization was that "The government of the Church be vested in the hands of the male members."

Our Church is indebted to this same Samuel Dexter for the land upon which the present building stands. It was originally a plot eight rods square, at the corner of Main and Norvell Streets. The deed of the property is still in existence and bears the signatures of Mr. and Mrs. Dexter. It is interesting to note that Samuel Dexter was a direct descendant of Roger Williams, founder of the First Baptist Church of America, at Providence, Rhode Island.

Meetings of our early Church were held in the homes of Mr. Erastus Yeomans and others. They were later held at the schoolhouse, which was in existence at that time on West Main Street. Baptism was solemnized in the waters of Grand River. In February, 1837, Candace Dexter, mother of Samuel Dexter, was received as a member. She was seventy-three, the oldest of the original group from New York.

For nearly three years the Church had no pastor, but under the guidance of Mr. Alfred Cornell it flourished. In late 1837, Reverend A.C. Sangster was engaged as the first pastor at a salary of \$300 per year. He remained for two years.

In August 1840, Mr. H.D. Buttolph preached in the schoolhouse where the Church met and it was voted to ask his home church in Troy, in Oakland County, to ordain him so that he might become pastor of the Ionia Church. He arrived in October of that year and continued his pastorate until 1845. What the salary of the pastor at that time might have been is not recorded, but on August 2, 1845, it was voted to tax each male member 12½¢ and each of the female members 6¢ per month for the support of the Gospel. A committee was appointed to collect the same. During the pastorate of Reverend Buttolph, the

church was represented at the Shiawasse Association, at its meeting in Perry, Michigan. Letters and reports were read. The next year the Grand River Association came into being.

About this time Mr. John VanVleck reported that residents in the vicinity of North Plains were wanting religious services and he asked for a license to preach. This was granted September 17, 1843. On June 1, 1845, he was ordained to the ministry and became the organizer and the first pastor of the Palo Church. Reverend VanVleck was the great-uncle to Mr. Leo VanVleck, now deceased.

Reverend Alfred Cornell, son of the charter member Cornell became pastor here in 1845, and remained for seventeen years. It was during his pastorate that our first Baptist Church building was erected. It was probably in the summer of 1846 and was erected just east of where the present building stands. It was the Defandorf property where the county building now stands.

In October 1864, it was decided to rent the pews in the new building, the income of which was to be applied to the finishing of the interior. Rentals ranged from \$1.00 to \$5.00 per year. Each person who had taken a pew was to give their note, payable in grain or its equivalent. It was also voted at this time to raise money by a committee whose duty it was to "Search the Tax Rolls" and levy a tax upon each member residing near enough to enjoy the priveleges of church meetings, according to the amount of property assessed to each one said tax roll.

Covenant meetings were held on the Saturday afternoons preceding the first meeting of each month. The clerk kept a record of all absentees from Church services and at each Covenant meeting the clerk informed those present of all absentees and they were required to "render satisfactory excuse or be admonished for neglect of religious duty." The church was to investigate all absentees after a second offence.

Reverend E.H. Morrison, a graduate of Colgate University, came to our church as its pastor in 1863, remaining for two years at a salary of \$600 per annum. In 1865, Reverend Alfred Cornell returned for an additional two years, making nineteen years that he served our Church.

Reverend Levi Parmely filled the pulpit for us from 1868 until

1872. Early in his pastorate, on June 22, 1868, it was voted to construct a new edifice as the old frame building was found to be inadequate for the work of the Church. It was badly in need of repairs, and the membership had increased.

Mr. Orry Waterbury Sr., father of Miss Della Waterbury and the grandfather of our own Stanley Powell, was requested to submit an estimate, at no less than \$10,000. After the considerable discussion and numerous meetings of the Church membership, it was voted to commission Mr. Waterbury to build the new Church. It was like the present structure except for a small tower on the southeast corner and the entrance, which was added later. The old frame building which had served the Church congregation as a meeting place since 1845, was moved to a lot at the corner of West Main Street, and Jackson Street, and subsequently put to use as a workshop by Mr. Waterbury. It was later destroyed by fire. Reverend Parmely preached the dedication sermon on January 7, 1872.

Pastor from 1873 until 1874 was Jonathan Rowley, and he was followed by Reverend E.O. Taylor, who was with us for two years.

Another graduate from Colgate University, Reverend John Donnelly, came to our Church in 1877 and remained for five years. He preceded the Reverend D. VanAlstyne, whose pastorate began in 1882 and lasted for four years.

Reverend T.S. McCall became the pastor in 1886, and remained for two years. He was followed by Reverend J.J. Phelps in 1889, who stayed for four years also. In 1893, Reverend F.O. Dickey served at the lectern, leaving after three years of service.

A pipe organ was installed in 1892, and in June 1895, it was voted to hire an organ pumper at a salary of 50¢ a Sunday.

Reverend E.M. Jeffers was the pastor from 1896 until 1899, and in 1900 Reverend D.L. Martin occupied the pulpit.

Beginning in 1905, Reverend E.E. Branch entered a pastorate here which was to continue for seventeen years. During this time many alterations were made to the structure of our Church. The balcony was installed in the auditorium in 1906; there were some improvements made in the basement at the same time. In 1913, hardwood floors were laid in the auditorium. In September of 1917, new stained glass windows were placed, a gift of the Emma Arnold estate. The windows

grace our auditorium and foyer yet today.

January 1919 brought partial destruction to the Church foyer and considerable water damage to the auditorium. The Board of Trustees with John C. Beattie as the chairman, had all damages repaired and the building put into better condition than before the fire, with the money received from the insurance benefits. The painted murals on each side of the organ were given by the construction firm who repaired the damaged portions of the Church. During the interim, Church services were held in the Courthouse.

In 1919, too, a motor was purchased for the pipe organ. Reverend Branch left us and on March 3, 1948, he passed away at the Masonic Home in Alma.

Reverend W.T. Wodehouse assumed his place in the pulpit on August 6, 1922. A year later, in 1923, the Brotherhood Room was added, a modern kitchen installed, the basement remodelled and the parsonage on East Main Street was purchased. The pastorate of Reverend Wodehouse was a happy one, but due to illness it was severed in two years. His resignation was regretfully accepted by the Church. Reverend and Mrs. Wodehouse celebrated their golden anniversary on November 16, 1937, at their home in Corruna, and three months later, on February 18, 1938, the Reverend Wodehouse passed away.

Reverend Alfred Trenary was our pastor four years, having come here in 1924. During this period it became necessary to put a new roof on the Church building. Several donations were accepted towards this, and later a mortgage was placed on the parsonage to pay for the balance of indebtedness.

Successor to Reverend Trenary was Reverend F.J. Fitch, another Colgate graduate who came to us in March of 1929. It was while he was pastor that we celebrated the one hundredth anniversary of our Church, in June of 1934. This was a most outstanding event in the annals of our Church. Four different observances were included in the Centennial occasion. A banquet on June 29th, Historical Night on June 22nd, an appropriate service in the morning and another in the evening on Centennial Sunday, June 26th.

Our Church was incorporated on October 5, 1936, and on March 1, 1936, Reverend Fitch accepted a call to another church. Reverend Charles Morse supplied the pulpit for the next three months, adding several by baptism to the membership roster

June 1, 1936, Reverend George Woolcock became our pastor. He was here for nine years, and while he was our spiritual leader there were more accomplishments. An outside bulletin board was presented by the Dorcas Society and dedicated on March 7, 1934. Redecorating took place in the auditorium, and the floors were refinished. A new ceiling was applied and the pipe organ was completely overhauled. The final payment was made on the mortgage and at the Adjourned Annual meeting a historical account of the mortgage was rendered by Mr. Herbert Powell. There was a service of thanksgiving after which Mrs Flora Freeman was given the honor of burning the mortgage.

The above mentioned improvements involved an amount approximately \$3600, and when finished, were paid for entirely by members and friends of the Church. Much of the credit for the success of the project accrues to Mrs. Margaret Darling, Chairman of the Finance Committee, whose tireless efforts ensured the completion of the plan. At this time also the electric cross over the organ, the offering plates and settees as well as other gifts were made, many of them in memory of deceased members.

During the alterations services were conducted in the basement of the Church.

Reverend Woolcock passed away on September 9, 1951 at Gregory, Michigan. Mrs Woolcock has since returned to Ionia, making it her home.

Reverend W.L. Cruthers led the Church from August 1945 until October 1947. In these two years repairs were made at the parsonage, including a completely remodelled bathroom with all new fixtures and floor coverings.

Dr. J. Lee Lewis filled the pulpit from October 1947 to August 1950. On June 24, 1949, the Church celebrated the 115th year of its existence. A banquet and program on June 24th marked the occasion and the following Sunday Dr. R.T. Andem was guest speaker.

This brings us to the pastorate of W.W. Pixley, who came to be the pastor in October, 1950. During the years he occupied the pulpit two modern rest rooms, a Sunday School class room and a newly remodeled kitchen were given to the Church by Mr. and Mrs. Hiram Darling as a "living memorial"

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An incinerator and two new gas ranges were given by the CCW class and in 1953, gas heat was installed in the Church.

The Communion Table from which is served the sacred Communion to our congregation, was presented by the family of Francis Whitesides, in his memory. The cross and electric<sup>VII</sup> candle sticks which add so much to the dignity of the services were placed by the sister and many friends of Nina Underwood who was a member of our choir for so many years. New cushions for the pews were selected and put on, new tables for the dining room and dividing screens for the various Sunday School classes were purchased in 1956.

A thoughtful gift in the nature of the pedestal and a guest register to occupy it were provided by Mr. and Mrs. Ernest Wheeler.

In 1956, on December 1st, Reverend Alfred Miller came to our Church as its pastor, Reverend Pixley having accepted a call to another Church in 1956.

In 1957 an automatic oil furnace, which was later converted to gas heat, was installed in the parsonage. It was decided to change hymnals in 1958, and they were purchased and put into use.

During the summer and fall of 1958, walls and ceiling of the auditorium, foyer, hall and entrance were painted. The floors were varnished, new carpeting was laid in the foyer, church pulpit, dias, and the choir loft. New commercial linoleum was applied in the hall and entryway stairs.

New chairs were placed into the choir loft by the Crispin Family in honor of Miss Ethel Crispin, Church organist for fifty-six years. New chairs and desk graced the foyer, both given by the sons of Mrs. Bessie Craft and Mrs. Mary Fate in their memory. New heavy oak doors also purchased from a memorial bequest, were hung and the old carpeting was laid in the balcony. The pew cushions were also recovered.

Re-dedication services were held on Sunday, November 2, 1958, with Dr. R.W. Waigen as the principal speaker. Dr. Waigen was the Missionary Field Counselor of the Michigan Baptist Convention.

On Sunday June 29, 1959, we observed the 125th anniversary of our existence as a Church. Dr. Arthur Farrell spoke at the morning services and in the afternoon, Reverend Ralph Karney was the speaker. In the afternoon our own Stanley Powell presided. Special music was provided at both services by the choir.

Reverend Pixley extended the greetings in behalf of former pastors. Miss Della Waterbury and Mrs Clara Yeomans were singularly honored in

that they were our two oldest living members. Miss Waterbury was ninety five and had been a member for seventy eight years, twenty of which had been spent as our Church clerk. Mrs. Yeomans was ninety seven and had also been a member for seventy eight years. A brief four months later on October 2nd, Miss Waterbury passed away and was followed in death by Mrs. Yeomans a scant two months later, on December 4th.

On the evening of September 21, 1959, during an electrical storm, the church steeple was struck by lightning, causing a large hole on the north side. One Sunday School room under the tower was damaged by water, but fortunately the remainder of the building was left intact. When it was repaired, metal strips were applied and the steeple was grounded in such a manner that a recurrence of the same nature has been highly minimized.

Reverend Miller's resignation became effective on September 7, 1960 and he was replaced by Reverend John Tennyson who assumed his duties on January 1, 1961. On March 26th of the same year Reverend Tennyson baptised thirty three, the largest number to receive this sacrament in the history of our Church on a single date. During his first year, too, in Lansing on October 14th, there were seven of our members who had belonged to the Michigan Baptist Convention for fifty years or more, who were honored at the 125th Michigan Baptist Convention.

A cement and tile floor was laid in the north room of the basement and Fellowship hall. Masonite panelling were applied to the walls and a new flush type ceiling fixtures installed. Much of this work was done by the men of the Church (Summer of 1962).

Memorial bequests left to the Church by Mrs. Florence Patterson and Mrs. Hazel Hoag were invested in folding chairs for the Fellowship Hall. A new pulpit was given in memory of Carolyn Signs by her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Harold Signs, and later on they added a pulpit light. Two chairs to match the pulpit were presented by the CCW class to honor Miss Ethel Crispin, their faithful leader for so many years. Another chair was donated by Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Harp. Collection plates to match the Cross and electric candle sticks were added to the pulpit area by Mrs. Ferne Johnson in memory of her husband, Purl. Another gift by Mr. and Mrs. Ernest Wheeler was a loud speaker.

Reverend Tennyson left us on December 1, 1965 and on May 1, 1966 our present minister, Reverend Lowell Youngs, arrived to take over the spiritual responsibilities of the church.

On Sunday July 17, 1966, he was installed in an impressive ceremony as minister of our Church. The Chairman of the Michigan Baptist Convention, Dr. Aurther Farrell, acted as installing chairman. Ionia's Mayor, C. Anthony Balice, extended the welcome on behalf of the city of Ionia. Representatives of the Ionia Ministerial Association were present, as well as pastors from other cities and towns in Michigan.

We cannot conclude this history without mention of many who have meant so much in the past history and life of our Church, who have gone to their reward. Emma Arnold was a Church clerk and Sunday school teacher. She left a home to the Church which was then used as a parsonage. This was later sold and under the Trusteeship of Reverend Henry Powell, the funds were used, in 1914, for new windows in the Church and the balance placed in the Emma Arnold Endowment Fund, an interest bearing security.

Orry Waterbury Sr., a member of the Board of Trustees for many years and contractor of our present Church building, Reverend Henry Powell, a retired minister of the Gospel and brother of Herbert Powell, who was greatly interested in the welfare of the Church. He held offices of Deacon, and Trustee, and left to the Church the Powell Endowment and also the Henry Powell Trust Fund. At his request the income from the endowment fund was to be used to keep his name as a perpetual giver and contributor towards the current expense of the Church.

The Hersey's, Cornells, Allurds, Crispins (Mr. Crispin, father of Ethel Crispin, was a former Deacon), Bloomers, (Stella and Ella) Miss Kate Benedict, Mrs. W.C. Steere, Mrs. C.A. Ireland, the Beatties (Mr. J.C. Beattie, long a Chairman of the Trustee Board), Lee, Ella, and Jessie Hutchins, (Miss Ella, in whose honor the Ella Hutchins Circle is named). On January 12, 1912, Miss Ella Hutchins was requested to act as custodian of records of the Church. This office she held until March 1927 when she moved to Ann Arbor and then turned that responsibility over to the writer. The Markles, (Mr. Markle was a former Deacon and father of Mrs. Edith Seeley), Mr. Claude Brockway, father of Mrs. Leo Edwards, long a member of the Trustee Board, for years as Chairman. Mrs. Clara Scheuer, Mr. and Mrs. E.W. Briggs, active in Sunday School work and Trustee Board, Lucy A. Cull, a devout Church and Sunday School worker, loved by all, and

for many years a member of the Church choir. Mrs. Flora Freeman, teacher of the "Friendly Workers" Class, Mrs. Cora Rinker, teacher of the Ella Hutchins Circle, and R.F. Whitesides, a Deacon and Trustee and Sunday School worker.

There are many others whose names we have not mentioned and who deserve much credit. We would not choose to omit one name.

During the 134 years our Church has had 26 pastors, including Reverend Lowell Young. Six of these are still living: Reverend F.J. Fitch, Reverend W.L. Cruthers, Reverend W.W. Pixley, Reverend A.P. Miller, Reverend John Tennyson, and our present pastor, Reverend Lowell Youngs.

Our Church stands as a memorial to the zeal and devotion of those who sought to secure for themselves and their descendents the right to worship God according to their own convictions. We enjoy a modern building in all of its beauty, free from debt because of the many devoted members who have toiled and sacrificed during the many years that have passed as well as the present. Ours is indeed a priceless heritage.