

# First Baptist was first organized of Ionia churches

The First Baptist Church building is 117 years old: it was dedicated Jan. 7, 1872.

But the First Baptist family has flourished in Ionia much longer. In a few weeks, the church will observe its 155th anniversary. The

church was organized June 24, 1834, by Samuel Dexter, a little more than year after he led the first band of permanent settlers to Ionia from Herkimer County, New York.

The church is generally regarded as the oldest Baptist Church in wes-

tern Michigan. The present church stands on land donated by Samuel Dexter to Ionia County for churches and public buildings. The first permanent home First Baptist Church occupied part of the site occupied by the church dedicated in 1872 and part of the site occupied by what is now the Court House Annex.

The members of First Baptist Church have been careful during the years to maintain their house of worship:

—In 1981-82, a Sunday school wing was added to the rear (north) of the church and changes were made in the the basement social and classroom facilities;

—In 1983, the exterior of the church was cleaned and treated, and repairs made to the masonry and elsewhere in the building;

—In June of 1984, the church held its Sesquicentennial celebration and homecoming.

—Last year, the church underwent complete redecoration, upholstering of the pews, and major changes to kitchen facilities, heating facilities, sound system, and other services, in all a total of \$120,000.

"We're very pleased with the results," member Bruce Boroff said. "We thing the redecorating turned out especially well."

The church is Gothic Revival in style, and apparently was designed, as well as built, by Ora Waterbury, an antecedent of the late Stanley Powell who was, at the time of his death in August 1988, the senior member of the church. Waterbury was a contractor for many years in Ionia — and also built St. John's Episcopal Church, factories in Belding, the Winter Inn in

Greenville, and many buildings and houses in Ionia.

The church is built of Vanderheyden brick, except for the 1980's north addition. The stained glass in the church was installed somewhat later than the church was built and appears to date to the early years of this century.

The ground level of the steeple, which has been struck by lightning several times and caught fire at least once in the 1960s, provided the main entrance to the sanctuary for the first 20-odd years after construction. The present entrance was added circa 1895.

The sanctuary walls are now decorated in cream and muted green, set off by a gold leaf stripe. The pews are upholstered in a muted rose color. When the church was redecorated, two fine old chandeliers were also restored.

The church family has every reason to be pleased with the redecoration of its house of worship.

First Baptist Church has a special glory in its tracker organ — one of three tracker organs in Ionia city — which dominates the north end of the sanctuary.

Tracker organs — the other two are at First Christian Church and SS. Peter and Paul Church — are now being built again, but between the advent of electricity and recent years many tracker organs were electrified with generally poor results. John Potter, an organist and dean of Faith United Methodist Church in Grand Rapids, has said Ionia has "one of the finest collections of 19th century pipe organs in the state."

A tracker organ is one in which the keys are directly connected to the mechanism that opens the pipe to the wind. During the late 19th century, the "desire to make organs louder and bigger led to such high wind pressure that the organist's fingers could not manipulate the keys unaided.

"And electric action was developed to do the work for the organist; the key was pressed and something, somewhere, transmitted an electrical impulse that opened the pipe to the wind."

That change did not please all organists. The music tended to drag on after the player's fingers, for one thing. And the relationship between the organist and the music was altered, even destroyed. The "drag" also tended to confuse congregations and choral groups attempting to sing to organ accompaniment.

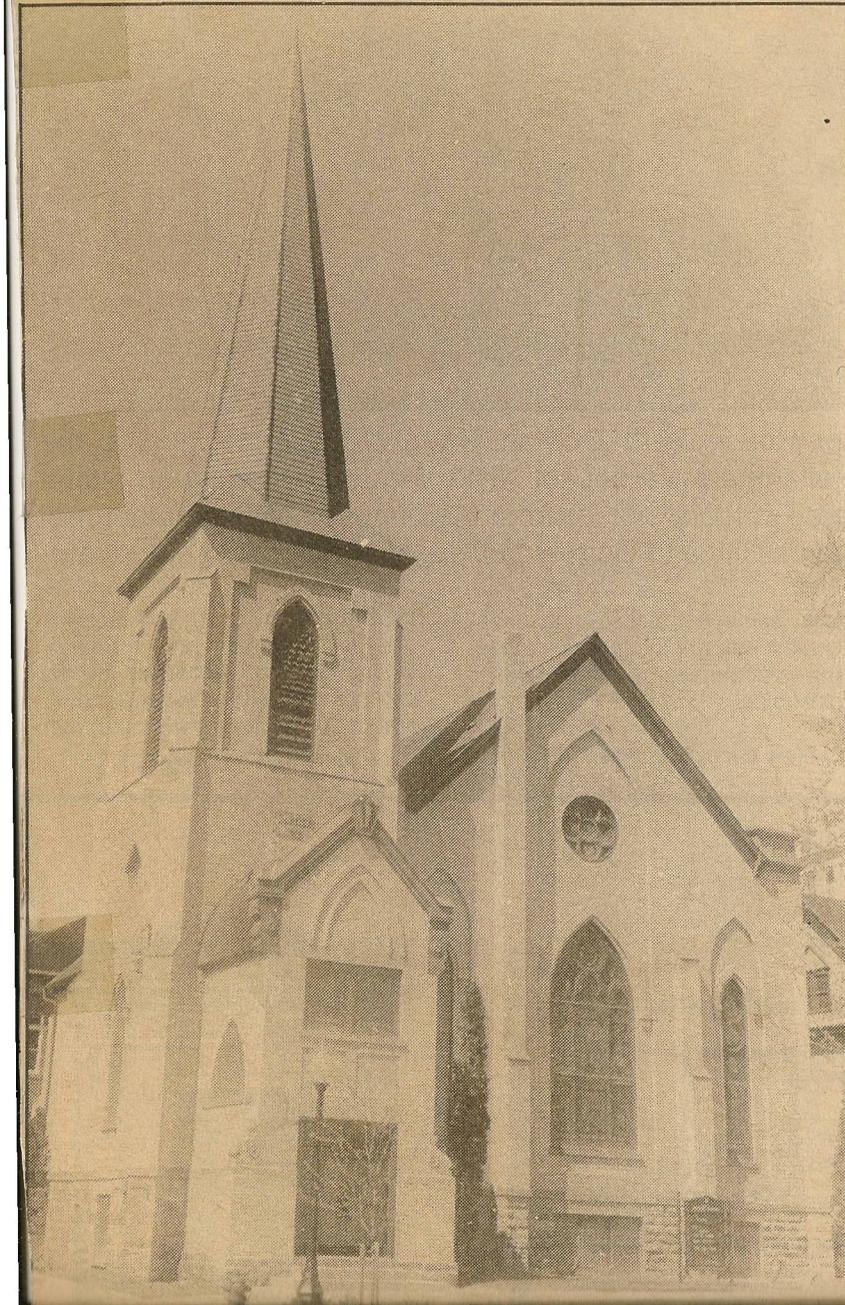
The air supply for the organ, but not the musical action, is now supplied for electricity at First Baptist as it is at First Christian and SS. Peter and Paul. Generations of little boys who once had the task of pumping the bellows that supplied the air for the organ, must now sit still.

Dorothy Horrocks, First Baptist organist, likes the organ "very much. I like its nice tone," she said. "And the gilded front pipes, the ones you can see, work. Sometimes the pipes you can see on organs don't work — but these do."

As a special event for house tour visitors, Horrocks will play a concert on Sunday (May 21) of the house tour, from 1 to 2:30 p.m.

She said her concert will provide a mix of pieces — classical selections, hymns, and offertories.

—RCG



# Ionia Music Teacher Organist at Church Here For 48 Years

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A sincere love of music has guided the career of Miss Ethel Crispin, dean of Ionia's church organists, who played her first church service at the First Baptist church in 1902 and is still delighting churchgoers with the stately, majestic music she loves so well in this 48th year of her career.

Miss Crispin started her music lessons under the tutelage of Eugene Smith, early Ionia music teacher, in his studio on Lafayette street. Smith, who at one time played the organ for the Methodist church, also gave her the first lesson on the pipe organ. Her career as a church musician started while she was taking piano lessons from him and learning how to play hymns. As soon as she had mastered a hymn the junior society would press her into service as pianist for their meetings.

### Recalls First Hymn

"I recall that the first hymn I learned to play was 'The Lord Will Provide' because as soon as I could play it fast enough for singing my older brothers would gather around the piano to sing it," Miss Crispin said. The secret of her success, she said, was the encouragement she received from her family. At every opportunity her father would take her to Grand Rapids to hear the great musicians such as Paderewski and Joseph Hoffman and the symphony orchestra.

In Grand Rapids she continued her music education taking instruction from Professor Colwell on the pipe organ and piano at the Park Street Congregational church. Other instructors in Grand Rapids were William Harris and Carl Andersch. Particularly enjoyable, Miss Crispin relates, was the teaching of Andersch who went to Europe every other year for study under the masters on the continent.

### Many Pastors

In her work at the First Baptist church she has associated with approximately eight different pastors. These included the Reverends Trenerry, Martin, Fitch, Branch, Woodhouse, Woolcock, Cruthers and the present pastor, Dr. J. Lee Lewis. She also has charge of the choir. It was a pleasure working with them, she says, because the majority of them had a taste for the best in music.

Her favorite music? All the old hymns, she says, because they have a quality unmatched by any of the newer religious music. For preludes and postludes and special numbers, Miss Crispin likes to play from the works of the masters

— Bach, Mendelssohn, Liszt, Schumann, Mozart and Beethoven. The "War March of the Priests" and the "Spring Song" by Mendelssohn are two of her favorite numbers. Bach's chorals also rate very high with this veteran of church music.

### Hit Tunes From Past

In selecting the music to play at church, Miss Crispin keeps in mind popular melodies from Tin Pan Alley are based on themes lifted from



MISS ETHEL CRISPIN AT THE CHURCH ORGAN

(Daily Sentinel-Standard Photo)

the works of the masters. This was brought home to her one Sunday when she was complimented after church by a playing for the lady her favorite piece, "Moonlight and Roses" when she had actually played LaMarr's "Andantino."

"You never know what kind of words may have been put to a theme of a great composition to make it a hit on the popular music lists, so you have to be a little careful that you aren't playing a classic which the younger people may know only as the latest love song," she remarked.

Miss Crispin likes to recall the many fine vocalists she has accompanied on numerous occasions. These include Miss Lucy Cull, Herbert Cooper, Chandler Haight, sr., and William Whitesides.

### Don't Sing as Heartily

Congregations of today don't sing as heartily as the congregations of yesterday, according to Miss Crispin, because they aren't as well acquainted with the words of the hymns. When she first started playing for church services, she recalls, the young people knew the words and music of all the hymns, but now they don't know them unless they are choir members.

In addition to her work as church organist, Miss Crispin has been teaching piano since before the start of World War I. While her classes were always large, she has tried to keep the enrollment down to about 50 pupils the last few years.

"I like children and young people and I like to see the pleasure they derive from good music," says Miss Crispin. At Christmas time cards

come in from her former pupils from every state in the union and she has a pleasant time recalling them and hearing from them.

### Never Too Late

Seven is the ideal age for a youngster to start music lessons, she says, although her pupils have ranged in age from 3 to 70. "It's never too late to learn how to enjoy music and how to play the piano," according to Miss Crispin. A difference between today's classes and earlier ones is noted in the fact that more boys are taking piano lessons now than ever before, she added.

Although many of her pupils ask her for modern jazz and popular melodies, Miss Crispin says she is not especially impressed with a lot of modern music.

The three major aids to a child's musical education are listed by this veteran teacher as: 1. Parents should be interested in a child's progress; 2. perseverance and 3. appreciation of good music.

In looking back on 42 years as a church organist and her many years as a music teacher, Miss Crispin happily notes that "people enjoy good music now as much as ever."

*March.*  
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