

Central Baptist was one of city's big churches

In 1924, there were four Greenville churches with more than 1,000 members: Christ Episcopal, Buncombe Street Methodist, First Baptist, and (surprise!) Central Baptist.

The first three have continued to flourish. Central Baptist, whose membership peaked at more than 1,300 in 1950, slowly, painfully, declined until it closed in 2002 and its last 35 members transferred to Earle Street Baptist Church.

Today the bulky edifice at the corner of Lloyd and Pinckney streets is once more alive, although it serves new neighbors with new needs. The story of its birth, maturity, decline, and rebirth is intriguing.

The seeds for the congregation were planted in 1887, when Greenville was expanding modestly. New families were moving into homes "in the rapidly

growing northwest part of town." W.J. Randolph, who owned a store at the corner of Echols and Buncombe Streets, began a mission -- a prayer meeting and a Sunday School -- in a dilapidated building that he rented for \$4 a month.

He urged his customers to attend the prayer meetings, gave pennies and candy to children who came to Sunday School, and scheduled the 80-year-old Rev. James Clement Furman to preach monthly.

The mission wasn't particularly successful (Furman quit after a few months because so few people attended), so in 1891 First Baptist and Pendleton Street Baptist churches appointed a joint committee to assist the congregation.

The committee bought a lot on Rutherford Street



JUDITH BRAINBRIDGE

just north of Stone Avenue and purchased lumber from church member W.W. Shumate, who also served as contractor. He completed a "comfortable and humble house of God" in May 1893. The older churches donated the total cost of \$750, so the 89 members of the new Rutherford Street Baptist Church moved into a church without a mortgage.

Just a few years later, its members helped form

congregations at the new cotton mills-- Poe Manufacturing and American Spinning just a few blocks away, Brandon, Monaghan and Mills Mill across town--that were bringing prosperity to the city. And a decade after its founding, the congregation, swollen to nearly 500 people, voted to build a decidedly less humble church in a location "more central" to its members.

That decision coincided nicely with the decision of four of Vardry McBee's grandchildren to extend Pinckney Street from Echols Street to Butler Avenue and to develop 28 lots on the extension. They had inherited the land when their mother, Harriet Butler (Mrs. Pinkney) McBee, died in 1901. In July 1902, her daughters Loula McBee Briggs and Melinda McBee Landrum donated three lots on the

south side of the new street to the Baptist congregation.

In the same week, church leaders asked city government to extend Lloyd Street from Hampton Avenue to Buncombe Street. Just a few years earlier, the land between Lloyd and Echols Streets had been a baseball field with wooden plank benches for spectators. According to team member Frank Barnes, home plate was about where the pulpit of the new church would be.

W.A. Edwards, the architect for Poe Mill Baptist Church, designed a 500-seat eclectic brick church, costing \$7,000, dedicated in May 1904. It had entrances on both Lloyd and Pinckney Streets and a tall central bell tower. When those bells pealed, they were heard by the entire congregation, since everyone

lived within walking distance.

The neighborhood (now Hampton-Pinckney) and the church grew. Membership doubled by 1920, and even after the congregation sent 83 members to start Earle Street Baptist Church in 1922, services were overcrowded.

Church officials decided to rebuild. They hired architect H. Olin Jones who designed a remarkably un-Baptist Gothic Revival edifice with a 700-seat auditorium that cost \$85,000. And in October 1927, they completed an adjacent Sunday School building.

The following month, a disastrous fire destroyed much of the new church. Rebuilding, completed a year later, cost \$35,000. The fire and the new construction meant assuming

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Central Baptist was once a flourishing city church

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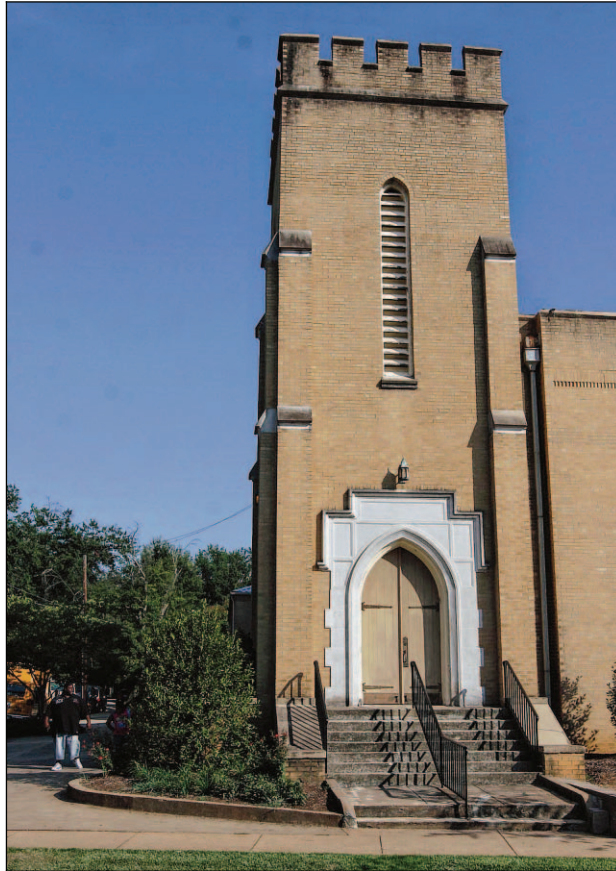
a large mortgage. But even during the hard times of the 1930s, when Buncombe Street was becoming commercial, West Washington was no longer fashionable, and new subdivisions across town beckoned local church families, the congregation was stable.

In 1947, the congregation finally paid off the mortgage, extended the educational building, and bought a lot for parking on Lloyd Street. Central Baptist wasn't growing, but in 1960 membership was nearly 1,200.

Then it began dwindling. The congregation aged. Nearby homes, now dilapidated, were divided into apartments. Public housing projects were constructed nearby. By 1970, the streets west of the church were among Greenville's poorest.

The church built a gymnasium. It didn't help. It added parking spaces: ditto.

In 1972, after the congregation had begun a mission on Pelham Road, members faced a crisis: Should they move to the Eastside and close the Pinckney Street complex? By that time, only 10 percent of the members lived within a mile of the church. Central Baptist



The old Central Baptist Church at the corner of Pinckney and Lloyd streets is now home to the Frazee Dream Center.

OWEN RILEY JR./STAFF

was no longer central. Nevertheless, members voted to stay.

The decision might have been a mistake. Families continued to drift away. Even Hampton-Pinckney's increasing luster as a historic neighborhood didn't help the

church. By 1986, only 431 members lived locally; a decade later, when it was put up for sale, 271 remained. In 2002, it closed.

And it stayed closed until 2006, when Matt and Jenny Sprague, teachers with a vision, purchased the 55,000 square foot

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complex and began converting it to the Frazee Dream Center. This non-profit, non-governmental, preschool and after-school program is designed to help low-income neighborhood children. Their laughter now echoes from the gymnasium. Tutoring sessions are held in the old Sunday School building. The cavernous auditorium, currently used by Radius, a community church, also serves as a performance space.

It's a remarkable program. Funded by contributions, assisted by volunteers and interns, working with a defined group of youngsters, the Spragues are responding to neighborhood needs in a new, direct, and personal way, but one, surely, in keeping with the purposes of the old "central" church that once claimed this space.