

# Beyond the blaze

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## Biscoe Baptists' wide embrace not tempered by challenges



Nancy Ruppert, Dwight Saunders, Rebecca Blake and Larry Wilson discuss rebuilding plans as well as the closeness the congregation has felt since worshipping in the smaller fellowship hall.

BISCOE, N.C. — Typical for many mill towns, Biscoe residents recall the heyday when abundant jobs, recreation and social life sprang from the large, bustling mill. Today, local jobs are fewer and keeping bright young people is harder.

The '50s-style red brick, white-steeple home of the First Baptist Church here looks typical too. Well, it did until an electrical fire in the early morning hours of July 22, 2014 turned the sanctuary into a pile of charred rubble.

Atypical, however, is the congregation. While many churches claim diversity, Biscoe Baptists just live, worship and serve with a comfortable mix of people from a variety of ethnic, economic and social backgrounds.

### **WARM AND WIDE**

Congregants come from various Baptist backgrounds — Southern, National, Independent — as well as other church traditions including AME Zion, Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian, Church of Christ, Quaker and Pentecostal.

There are educators, business professionals, political leaders, potters and painters, chicken farmers and more. You'll also find a beekeeper, a banjo picker, a member of a beach band and two taxidermists in the mix.

These assorted church members are quick to say that the wide, warm embrace of longtime pastor Larry Wilson is most responsible for the atypical First Baptist Church family. And Wilson said he's received a warm embrace in return.

"I love the people here," he said. "It's not big, but one of the most gifted churches."

Neither is it typical for a young pastor to come to a small, mill-town church and stay for 30 years. But that's what Larry did — and although he retired last year, he's still around.

When asked why he didn't move on to bigger things, Larry quickly responded: "I take Jesus' admonition about money seriously; you can't serve God and mammon. And I believe in the local church."

## COMMUNITY

Wilson, however, was never one to hole up within the church walls. His pastoral presence throughout the community — personally and through his writings in the local newspaper — crossed familiar economic and racial divides.

That approach to ministry is now reflected in the congregation.

"The diversity of our people is our greatest strength," said lay leader Dwight Saunders, who grew up, left and then returned to the area.



Florence Cagle (center), with ministers Larry Wilson and Rebecca Blake, says she was attracted to the First Baptist Church because of the congregation's impact on Biscoe and the larger community.

Rebecca Blake, also a local who grew up in a more rural Baptist church, directs the music ministries that members and visitors rave about from the choir to the youth handbell ringers. Her husband, Jimmy, is the town's mayor and advocate for economic development.

"We're held together by love," she said of the church's unusually diverse mix, "and Larry has modeled that."

He's also been a prophetic voice from the pulpit, in print and in person.

"Most Baptist preachers preach like Jesus lived six hours from his birth to crucifixion," he said. "But what Jesus said mattered."

With pastoral sensitivities, he has urged the Biscoe community toward Jesus' calls for justice, grace and unconditional love.

"If you show them what the Bible says, they'll come around," he said. "And there are some really good people here."

While the church has its problems like all others, said Larry, there is a positive, caring approach that prevails. He pointed to longtime member Betsy Crisco as one of the "church moms" who "gets things done without complaining" and shows deep concern for persons in need.

"My dog was sick and she called me," Larry said with an appreciative smile.

## **OPENNESS**

Nancy Ruppert was recruited from Florida to a health care job in Biscoe in 1991. She didn't expect to be there long — and she sure didn't think she'd ever be a Baptist.

But that was before she met Larry, whose pastoral style she called "more open."

"The community grew on me," said Nancy, now a leading beekeeper and key volunteer in carving up firewood that the church makes available to people in need. And she found First Baptist to be "warm and welcoming even to someone like me who was an outsider."

The church's openness, she said, is intentional — not the lack of conviction.

"It's not that we're intentionally ambiguous; we're open to a lot of people," she explained. "We don't try to squeeze people into a mold."

After moving to Biscoe, Nancy said she heard that the pastor at First Baptist was "different." But that wasn't enough for her to visit a Baptist church.

"I'd been there and done that," she said of previous experiences with Baptists. "I'd been told constantly that I was a sinner. I already knew that."

When she finally relented and visited First Baptist, she liked Larry's sermon and the "really good music." She was also impressed by the church's concern for and responses to people in need.

The church has gained that good reputation.

“In this area we’re the go-to church if people need help,” said Dwight Saunders. For example, the church’s youth started a food distribution ministry that is now supported by 14 area congregations.

Nancy added that the church’s generosity sometimes gives the false appearance of a larger, wealthier congregation — but that much is done through partnerships throughout the community, thanks to “Larry’s ability to get along with so many different people.”

## **SPIRITUAL HOME**

Florence Cagle is one of several African-American members who’ve found a spiritual home and a place of service in First Baptist Church. She is a deacon and serves on the committee charged with finding a new pastor.

“Larry has touched lives all over this community,” she said of her friend and pastor. “Larry is everybody’s Larry.”

She and her family visited the church for a while before becoming members 13 years ago.

“I liked what I saw,” said Florence. “The church cares about so many people, not just the membership. I was satisfied that this was where God was leading me... I’m proud to be a member of First Baptist Church.”

The local newspaper, Montgomery Herald, recently carried a full-page feature on Florence in which she talked about growing up in a family of hardworking sharecroppers. She attended a school with “no heat, no running water, no cafeteria, no bathrooms and no gym” through the eighth grade.

She recalled her mother cutting pencils in half so each child in the family would have one. But conditions improved when she moved to high school. She excelled in all areas, including being honored as homecoming queen.

As a young adult she broke ground by moving into positions in the mill never held by a black person. She put in 30 years there.

When the First Baptist sanctuary burned last summer, Florence said it “tore my heart out.” It brought back a childhood experience of watching the small wooden Olive Grove Baptist Church, next to her home, burn to the ground after being struck by lightning.

The more recent fire brought members together — embracing one another amid tears, she said. The tragedy also brought a new perspective, she added.

“Maybe it’s a good thing that this fire happened,” she said reflectively. “We’re closer now; it’s more meaningful to be a part of this church.”

## **FIRE ALARM**

“Ruins” is a common word for the charred remains after a roaring fire has run its destructive course. However, the inclusive spirit, generosity and warmth of Biscoe Baptists were not ruined by last summer’s fire.

They are better, not bitter after the blaze, church members said.



Rubble, but not ruins — An electrical fire brought down the sanctuary but not the inclusive, generous spirit of First Baptist Church in the mill town of Biscoe, N.C.

The pulpit Bible and the brass cross with a flame-marked base were rescued and placed in the fellowship hall where Sunday worship now occurs. The close proximity required by the smaller room has its benefits.

“We’re closer now,” said Rebecca Blake. “And we wanted to go about the business of being church.”

Any temptation toward self-pity was thwarted. Church members took meals to the fire department in appreciation for the quick response — and the firewood cutting crew got back to work quickly.

The retirement of a longtime pastor followed by a devastating fire were a lot for the church to handle at one time, lay leaders admit.

“Those kinds of things either make or break a church,” said Nancy, adding that the unsettling situation helped the congregation refocus on its true mission.

Dwight agreed: “Little things we bickered about — like which faucets to put in the women’s restroom — weren’t important anymore. The fire gave us insight into what’s really important.”

## THE FUTURE

Church member and mayor Jimmy Blake said new industries, including a foundry and a yogurt plant, have brought jobs to Biscoe with hopes of drawing or keeping residents in the “small and friendly” town. He runs a popular local restaurant and cooks up a big monthly church breakfast that draws members out of their beds.

The church is looking to rebuild from the fire and find new pastoral leadership. Jack Causey of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina is guiding them through a process of conversations and worship to focus on the congregation’s core values, vision and pastoral needs.

He has discovered unique qualities in the Biscoe church, he said: ethnic diversity, great music and deep care for the community.

These marks of the congregation weren’t the result of a strategic plan, but the natural outcome of consistent prophetic, pastoral leadership and a community willing to embrace the changes and challenges of faithful living.

Larry said he focused his ministry on three areas: fellowship, service and worship — with a strong conviction that all persons deserve to be loved and served.

“Jesus never let people be reduced,” he said. “And I can’t do that.”

It is a message that has resonated with church members and is now reflected in the ways they worship, fellowship and serve, said Rebecca.

“We’ve heard the message of love, grace, forgiveness and inclusion — and to live as Jesus truly showed us how to live.” BT

*Story and photos by John Pierce*

*Top, left to right: Nancy Ruppert, Dwight Saunders, Rebecca Blake and Larry Wilson discuss rebuilding plans as well as the closeness the congregation has felt since worshipping in the smaller fellowship hall. Above: Rubble, but not ruins — An electrical fire brought down the sanctuary but not the inclusive, generous spirit of First Baptist Church in the mill town of Biscoe, N.C.*

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