

# A Centennial History of East Park Baptist Church

Decatur, IL

1909 - 2009



Researched and written by Sue Skelton, Eleanor Grady,  
Alma Beery, and Pastor Andy Merkle



## *Introduction*

The Scripture reveals God as the only completely faithful Being ever to exist. Solomon blessed the Lord at the dedication of the newly built temple: “There hath not failed one word of all His good promise” (1 Kings 8:56). And Jesus said, “Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled” (Matthew 5:18). So, when our Lord promised, “I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18), His statement rested on a part of His character: perfect faithfulness. Believers’ faith in God’s promises often falters when God delays the fulfillment of His Word and when people misinterpret His statements. Let there be no question about what Jesus meant when He promised to build His church: Christ was giving His guarantee that He would call out every one of His elect from the kingdom of this world into His own eternal kingdom. Throughout the history of Christianity, people have repeatedly questioned God’s building of His church as visible indications of His grace waned in various times and places. But God has been building His invisible kingdom for two millennia . . . faithfully. And we have God’s Word that He will redeem men “out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation” (Revelation 5:9).

As a local church, comprised of members of Christ’s universal church, East Park Baptist Church has been the grateful recipient of God’s grace to operate within this magnificent plan for a century. God has made it obvious that He was building a part of His church by calling many citizens of the Decatur, IL, area to Himself and by maturing them to look like His Son. Many of them have made up the membership of East Park Baptist Church. Any attempt to retrace the progress of this construction and growth is woefully inadequate; the written records of the past one hundred years are mere shadows of the essence of God’s work. Yet, these traces point to the reality, however vaguely, and ultimately to the Builder. Therefore, it is with much gratitude to the Lord and recognition of the great responsibility of our position that we review the work of His gracious hand in our city, Decatur, and in our church.

### *Beginnings: East Park Sunday School*

*1888 – 1908*

East Park began as a mission outreach of First Baptist Church of Decatur, IL, in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Some of its members, led by Mr. J. T. Owens and Mr. J. M. Bower, began holding cottage prayer meetings in the late 1880s in the East Park Boulevards neighborhood for the purpose of asking the Lord to

start a work in the area. They followed the suggestions of First Baptist's pastor, Charles E. Torrey. God answered prayer in May 1890 with the establishment of a Sunday School for all ages in a small house at 1653 E. Main Street with Bower as the first superintendent.<sup>1</sup>

The "Sabbath School" prospered, outgrowing the Main Street home in 1891 and drawing the attention of the Ladies' Aid society of First Baptist Church.<sup>2</sup> Decatur lawyer and real estate owner Josiah M. Clokey<sup>3</sup> was, at that time, developing the East Park Boulevards neighborhood.

"Prompted by a love for the Master and a desire to see His cause advanced,"<sup>4</sup> he donated two lots at the northeast end of the 1800 block on East Prairie Avenue to First Baptist Church, with the condition that they always be used for a church. The property was quickly put to purpose: On



*East Park Chapel, the first building*

October 19, 1891, leaders of the Sunday School laid the cornerstone of a frame-building chapel that would include a platform, choir loft, organ, and primary room.<sup>5</sup> The construction was completed and the new East Park Chapel

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<sup>1</sup> One record indicates that a Mr. Daton was the first superintendent.

<sup>2</sup> The society was known as "The Order of the King's Daughters" at this time and was organized by Mrs. Vesta Torrey (wife of First Baptist's Pastor Torrey). Often meeting for entire days at a time, "all the meetings [were] to sew, making clothing for the poor or whatever [their] hands [found] to do." Dues were two cents per week.

<sup>3</sup> Josiah M. Clokey owned the Jenney Electric Light Company from 1884 to 1886 and lived at 247 E. Wood Street, the first home in the city with electric lights.

<sup>4</sup> Richmond, Mabel E., *Centennial History of Decatur and Macon County* (Decatur: The Review Publishing Company, 1930), 278.

<sup>5</sup> This first building was erected on the back half of the lots with the intention of putting up a church building on the front part at a later date.

dedicated on March 1, 1892.<sup>6</sup> The \$2,100 building was completely paid for through the generous giving of the King's Daughters.<sup>7</sup> J. Edward Saxton, a deacon of First Baptist Church, became the superintendent in 1892 and continued to serve in that role for 16 years. The records from that time period indicate the faithfulness of many attendees, such as "Mrs. Agnes Stivers, [who] never missed a Sunday for four years and most of the time her two boys were with her."<sup>8</sup> Throughout the next one-and-a-half decades the Sunday School received the beneficial ministry of the various pastors of First Baptist as they preached, taught, and held revivals. After Pastor Torrey died unexpectedly on May 9, 1894, Rev. Jordan helped the Sunday School, followed by the much-loved Rev. H. S. Boyer in 1898. He preached a revival meeting at the chapel soon after taking the First Baptist pastorate, and he oversaw the ministry closely throughout his first six years in Decatur before initiating a plan to provide the ministry with a dedicated overseer. The spirit of the church toward him is recorded in a 1931 East Park history: "All he did for us we can never repay."<sup>9</sup> In 1906, due to continued growth of the Sunday School, the original chapel building was enlarged to double the capacity.

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<sup>6</sup> The address of this building was 1763 East Prairie Avenue. However, it was on the corner of what was then 3<sup>rd</sup> street in the East Park Boulevards Addition, the streets being renamed later. The building was called East Park Baptist *Chapel*, not *Church*, because it was just a Sunday School under the auspices of First Baptist. At the dedication service Mrs. Seruggs, president of the First Baptist Ladies' Aid Society, read an address which included a history of the Sunday School, followed by an address from J. H. Saxton, superintendent of the East Park Sunday School. The sermon was given by Dr. H. A. Delano of Evanston, the ordaining pastor of Rev. Charles E. Torrey.

<sup>7</sup> Among frequent financial donations, this group also purchased a bell for East Park Chapel sometime before 1931 at a cost of \$50. The Sunday School also gave funds back to First Baptist as the Lord blessed them.

<sup>8</sup> Smalley, Jennie E., "A History of East Park Baptist Church," 1931, as quoted in the "Anniversary Book of the East Park Baptist Church, 1909 – 1939" by Mrs. E. D. Adams and her daughter, Annie.

<sup>9</sup> Smalley.

# A Church Takes Form

1908 – 1909

The city of Decatur witnessed a powerful influence in February 1908, when Billy Sunday preached a five-week city-wide revival. Such meetings were common and often resulted in significant growth of a city's churches. "Frequently they



*Billy Sunday preaching in Decatur on February 16, 1908*

were referred to as protracted meetings for some of them lasted several weeks. Sometimes the nightly preaching was done by local pastors, but often guest evangelists and singers furnished the leadership."<sup>10</sup> Held in a temporary 5,500-seat tabernacle erected at the corner of Union and West Eldorado Streets, Billy Sunday's 1908 Decatur meeting was "one of the most notable meetings of this kind. . . . He was one of the most noted revivalists of his time and gained fame for his all-out, fiery attack against sin, [especially alcohol] and his acrobatic, rapid-fire method of preaching."<sup>11</sup> The number of conversions (6,209) and amount of the offering (\$10,000) broke all previous revival records in Illinois.

The effect of the 1908 Billy Sunday meeting on East Park is undisputed: the Sunday School quickly grew and moved toward existence as an autonomous church. First Baptist Pastor H. S. Boyer led the group in a mutual desire for independence, preaching for three weeks in March 1909 on church organization. From the end of the month through early April, Rev. Reisner of the Northern Baptist Convention preached for three weeks and assisted the future pastor of East Park, Prescott S. Heald,<sup>12</sup> in organizing the budding church. At a

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<sup>10</sup> Banton, O. T., ed., *History of Macon County*, (Decatur: Macon County Historical Society, 1976), 144.

<sup>11</sup> Banton, 145.

<sup>12</sup> Heald came from from the Old Stonington Church, about 20 miles south-west of Decatur.

formal organizational meeting on April 18, 1909, 83 members signed a charter<sup>13</sup> to officially incorporate East Park Baptist Church. “First Baptist Church granted 67 letters to the new group, now known as East Park Baptist Church.”<sup>14</sup> J. T. Owens, the leader of the East Park Boulevards cottage prayer meetings, along with J. H. Cheney, withdrew from First Baptist Church joining with East Park.

## *Growth Pains*

*1909 – 1927*

The next two decades were years of obligatory dependence on the Lord, as He demonstrated His faithfulness during years of shaky finances and frequent changes in church leadership. East Park had financial assistance from the Northern Baptist Convention for several years. On September 1, 1909, after less than five months as pastor, Rev. Heald resigned, to be followed by J. M. Wood on November 1. Pastor Wood was the first pastor actually called by East Park since its independence from First Baptist Church. Under his leadership membership grew from 86 to 150.

After Wood resigned in 1911, the church called J. H. Cozad. Within the next year East Park saw 41 conversions and 38 additions to the church. During this time, the First Baptist Ladies’ Aid Society continued to lend a financial hand, occasionally paying part of the pastor’s salary.<sup>15</sup> On January 31, 1913, Rev. Cozad resigned the pastorate to be quickly followed by R. T. Gasaway, who

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<sup>13</sup> The charter was notarized on May 7 by Jesse L. Deck, Notary Public for Macon County. The original text of the charter reads as follows: “I, Prescott S. Heald, do solemnly swear that at a meeting of the constituency of the East Park Chapel of the First Baptist Church of Decatur Illinois in said Macon County held at said Chapel in the county of Macon and State of Illinois on the 18<sup>th</sup> day of April A.D. 1909 for that purpose of the persons present organized what had theretofore been known as the East Park Chapel of the First Baptist Church of Decatur Illinois into a Baptist church and at said meeting the following named persons were elected according to the usages and rules of such churches H. E. Walsh, George Roff, E. F. Smalley, J. M. Horton, and John Glatfelter, and said church adopted as its corporate name, ‘East Park Baptist Church of Decatur Illinois.’ And at said meeting this affiant acted as chairman or moderator.”

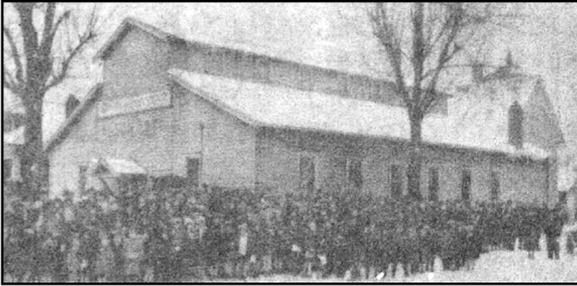
<sup>14</sup> Anonymous 1978 hand-written history paper.

<sup>15</sup> Such was the case on April 24 and December 18, 1912.

preached his first sermon on March 9. A year later Gasaway resigned and Cozad returned. He “launched a very successful work of evangelization, sending out gospel teams of two men or women who consecrated their lives to the Master and led many people to Christ.”<sup>16</sup> In the month of March 1914, Pastor Cozad and H. C. Albright led the church to dig and concrete a basement for Sunday School rooms. The city continued to feel Billy Sunday’s influence, voting “dry” in 1914.

A revival in 1915 resulted in 54 additions to the church. That year 48 were baptized and 36 more waited as candidates. A 1917 revival saw 49 conversions and 35 additions to the membership. Rev. Cozad resigned the pastorate in August to take a church in Moweaqua, and the church shortly called Rev. R. R. Ray. Under Pastor Ray’s leadership, the church cooperated with churches from other denominations in a city-wide canvassing effort. He left on October 1, 1918, and the church called G. W. Stoddard on December 1. Stoddard was “the best of financiers” and helped the church pay off a \$3,000 debt in early 1919. The mortgage and notes were burned on January 16 of that year.

At the end of 1921 Pastor Stoddard resigned and Russell A. Rapson took the pastorate on March 12, 1922 to stay until the fall of 1925. A record from 1925 indicates that “our church was much in need of a revival among its members. In November, Rev. Kirkland held a very successful meeting, molding the



*The tabernacle in 1926 with the original chapel at the rear of the building*

membership into a more congenial group, and adding new members, and bringing about a great spiritual awakening to the responsibility of Christian life.” In January 1926, Loyd P. Bloodworth accepted the pastorate. By the middle of January he recognized the need for a larger building and

led the church in raising nearly \$5,000 pledged toward a new tabernacle building which would adjoin the original chapel. Following a ground-breaking service on February 23, the new structure was erected within weeks, and the people soon enjoyed some elbow room, albeit they now sat on long wooden

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<sup>16</sup> 1939 Anniversary Book. All subsequent unattributed quotations are from this source.

benches on a sawdust floor.<sup>17</sup> “This temporary building filled a great need. Many souls were led to Christ and it will always be remembered by those souls and the workers of the church at that time. Rev. Bloodworth having accomplished that which he had promised when he came, again returned to the evangelistic field, promising to send us a man better than he was.”

That man came in May from Longview, Texas: Pastor John B. Bell. “During his stay one hundred members of another denomination” met with East Park for a short time before establishing West Grand Baptist Church, led by H. R. Applegate. The membership of East Park reached 650 during Pastor Bell’s tenure; but, once again, the church experienced the quick departure of its leader as Pastor Bell was called back to Texas in June of 1927. The apparent challenges of these early years serve as the backdrop for a poignant illustration of God’s faithfulness. He clearly led the founders to establish the work; and He sustained it, even nourished it, through frequent trial.

## *Gradual Stability: Pastors Oglesby and Hansen* 1927 – 1947

In the later months of 1927 East Park was blessed with the arrival of its first pastor of longer duration: Verne F. Oglesby.<sup>18</sup> Under his leadership “the platform was changed from the north end of the tabernacle to the south end, and the adjoining wall of the old frame [chapel] building was torn out to open the auditorium of the old church to help accomidate (*sic*) the crowds.”<sup>19</sup> In 1930,

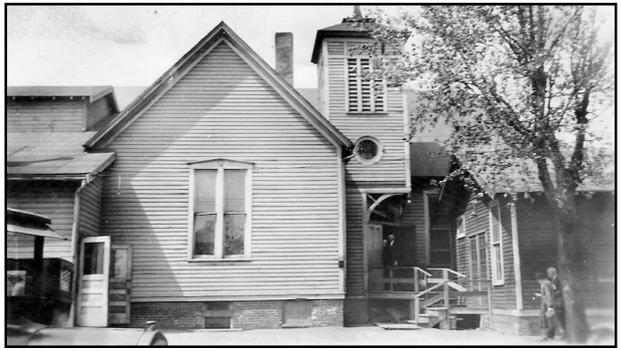
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<sup>17</sup> Alma Beery thinks she might recall the sawdust floor. Having begun attending the church at 6 years old with her brother, she remembers dropping her special Christmas Sunday School chocolates and can picture them rolling out on a sawdust floor. Her unsaved father worked at Staleys and dropped the siblings off at the Tabernacle each Sunday morning on his way to work.

<sup>18</sup> Pastor Oglesby was licensed to preach by First Baptist Church in Decatur. He owned a small sweet shop on Wood St. (near the current Krekels) that sold ice cream, hamburgers, and soft drinks. This was probably the beginning of Krekels, as Oglesby later entrusted his son-in-law, Bill Krekel, with the management of the shop. He is remembered as a “good-lookin’ fellow.”

<sup>19</sup> Anonymous 1978 hand-written history paper.

the people of East Park “had been traveling the sawdust trail for four years. As quick as the tabernacle was paid off [they] started a building fund.” Remarkably, during the Great Depression, the church raised enough money to begin building within one year. On April 19, 1931, exactly forty years



*The original chapel building in 1931, surrounded by the adjoining tabernacle and an additional meeting room.*

after the chapel was built, the church met for the last time in the Tabernacle before demolishing both early buildings. A replacement brick structure, the intended basement of a future building, was erected during the summer months. Church members helped to reduce costs by completing the majority of the work themselves. During the project all meetings were held at Johns Hill Junior High School. On December 20 an attendance of 1,242 was recorded for Sunday School, the largest crowd East Park has ever hosted. In addition to the new tabernacle building, they were renting a two-story house on the south side of the 1800 block of East Prairie St. as Sunday School space. During February 1935, Evangelist Garrison preached a month-long meeting, resulting in 120 professions of faith. Early in the month on February 7, 1935, the church received word from Pastor Oglesby that he was resigning, effective in March, to take up the pastorate of the First Baptist Church in Sikeston, Missouri.<sup>20</sup> According to a newspaper article, “a dynamic, brilliant speaker, he built the East Park membership from 250 to 1,465.” The Lord had blessed East Park with Pastor Oglesby for seven years, and he had diligently fulfilled his pastoral office.

Later in 1935 John H. Hansen became the church’s next pastor, leading it through significant challenges for over a decade.<sup>21</sup> Under his leadership East Park gradually reduced the principal of the debt on the basement church

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<sup>20</sup> Two-and-a-half years later Oglesby took up evangelism throughout the Midwest. Oglesby kept his residence at 1638 East Wood street, about two-and-a-half blocks from the church, and resumed residence there in September 1937.

<sup>21</sup> Pastor Hansen came from Springfield. He had a “lovely wife, with gracious ways” (Alma Beery poem, 1984) and two boys. The church rented the brick house just west of the church as a parsonage, until Rev. Hansen purchased a house on the corner of 16<sup>th</sup>



*Sunday School attendees in front of the basement church on Easter Sunday, April 12, 1936*

building. Three years after he came, in January 1938, a group of about 130 dissenting East Park members broke off to start their own church, Missionary Baptist Church, accepting former pastor Oglesby as their pastor. It appears that he reluctantly accepted their call, wisely and consistently turning church members back to Pastor

Hansen when they came to him.<sup>22</sup> The church membership remained nearly 1,400, and a fall revival meeting held by Rev. O. G. Lewis added many more new members. April 13 through 18, 1939, was designated a special week of remembrance as the church celebrated its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary.<sup>23</sup> These years have



*Pastor Hansen*

every mark of a maturing, stabilizing body of believers. There were close-knit, named Sunday school classes, such as the Amadeus class. These groups held rummage sales, had a lot of contests, enjoyed many picnics at the park, and sold cards, ice cream, and cake. In 1946,<sup>24</sup> East Park helped start Camp Assurance, a regional church camp near Georgetown that thrives to this day. On February 2, 1947, the church had its last service with Pastor Hansen, who left to enter evangelism.

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and Prairie. Alma Beery remembers the Hansens always having cookies for the teens at their home.

<sup>22</sup> At first the group of dissenters met in West Grand Avenue Baptist church, but withdrew after they brought criticism on the church. Later they met in the Modern Woodman Hall. While various individuals gave various reasons for the division, Pastor Hansen maintained, "There's no trouble in our church. . . . It seems we have just been too peaceful for the last three years. The dissenting group has been complaining and trying to stir up something for a long time, but the rest of us tried to keep peace. The church membership is approximately 1400."

<sup>23</sup> Various themes were emphasized each evening: Thursday was Sunday School night, Friday was Church History night, Monday was Missionary Night. Tuesday night they closed the celebration with a banquet.

<sup>24</sup> On June 1, 1946, the church purchased robes for the choir at \$225.

# *Building, Visible and Invisible: Pastors Larson and Peek*

## *1947 – 1965*

On April 12, 1947, Edward L. Larson accepted the pastorate.<sup>25</sup> During the short interim the Wedding Ring Sunday School class (which later became the Berean class) was established.<sup>26</sup> Within Pastor Larson's first few months at East Park, he led the church in withdrawing from the American Baptist Convention.<sup>27</sup> They affiliated with the Conservative Baptist Association of America on June 7, 1948. The church also purchased its first parsonage in 1947, located at 1821 East Main Street, for \$10,500. In September 1948 the ladies of the church began a missionary fellowship.



*Pastor Larson*

In 1950 the church embarked on its most ambitious financial undertaking to date: the completion of its church building begun as a basement nearly 20 years earlier. Adopting the slogan "Out of the basement in '50," they began intense fund-raising efforts.<sup>28</sup> "In the early part of 1951, a building committee was

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<sup>25</sup> Pastor Larson came from Winslow, Arizona, with his wife Phillis and two sons. The church agreed to pay him \$50 per week with church furnishing a parsonage or \$65 per week if he decided to own his own home. He would also receive four weeks of paid vacation each year.

<sup>26</sup> Enrolled couples were required to have at least one person 30-years-old or younger. Church records from the 1980s indicate that at that time they had their own constitution but always operated within and under the church. They met once a month for a meal, a devotional, and a business meeting. Their records indicate an extraordinary level of dedication to evangelization and service to individuals in the church, the Academy, and missionaries, often including financial support.

<sup>27</sup> Church records are difficult to reconcile on the date of the withdrawal from the American Baptist Convention. In conflict with a note from 1947, the deacons' minutes from March 14, 1951, indicate a recommendation to the church that they sever relations with the American Baptist Convention, the Springfield Baptist Convention, and the Illinois State Convention. It seems likely that this date is wrong, since the Conservative Baptist Association clearly notes East Park's joining on June 7, 1948.

<sup>28</sup> According to an undated newspaper article, "members of the East Park Baptist church voted Wednesday night to go ahead with an extensive fund raising campaign to complete their church building. Total cost of the building will be about \$100,000. Rev.

appointed and the sale of \$150,000 worth of church bonds started. With the sale of these bonds, construction began during the summer of 1951.”<sup>29</sup> In late June, with \$56,000 in Government Bonds (purchased during WWII) on hand, the remodeling work began,<sup>30</sup> turning the “basement auditorium” into a new two-story church building with a three-story wing behind the platform. On January 30, 1952, the chairman of the board of trustees, R. H. Hupp, wrote to the congregation regarding the inception of a new fund-raising program, “The eyes of our city are upon our church as never before, we must carry through to victory. We know you will want to have a part in this great program for the glory of God.”<sup>31</sup> In March, he wrote, “The East Park Baptist Church building will be a real testimony to the faith and sacrifice of many who have prayed earnestly and given sacrificially to make this beautiful church possible. . . . More than \$40,000 in bonds have been sold. This has been sufficient to pay our bills to date. The building work has reached the place where things are happening fast. On

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Edward L. Larson, pastor, said that construction will begin in the early fall. The campaign and planning is under the direction of a building committee composed of R. H. Hupp, chairman; Dell Hoffman and C. E. Richison. ‘The church now has more than \$26,000 in cash and bonds, and has established a goal of \$50,000 in Fifty,’ Rev. Mr. Larson said. The fund raising campaign is being launched today. Services have been held in the church basement, built in 1931, when Rev. Verne Oglesby was pastor, but the new construction is necessary to meet the needs of the church and Bible school, Rev. Mr. Larson said. He said the congregation now has 580 members. Two floors will be added at the back of the building to provide Sunday school rooms, and the plans also include an auditorium seating 600. Rev. Mr. Larson said he will continue to conduct services in the church basement during construction.”

<sup>29</sup> Anonymous 1978 hand-written history paper. At this time R. H. Hupp was president of the board of Trustees and Lester Ashe was secretary.

<sup>30</sup> Anton F. Krall Construction Company oversaw the work.

<sup>31</sup> After spending \$70,000, the church took out \$150,000 in bonds as part of a finance plan for the new church building, following “The Broadway Plan of Church Finance.” Pastor Larson gave the primary reason for the plan: it is “easily taken care of and the best way to meet building needs for now” (January 1952 Decatur newspaper clipping). Trustee board meeting notes from November 30 (after the church had moved into the new building) indicate that they were still selling bonds. At that time each member of the board agreed to sell two \$250 bonds.

Monday, March 10, the operation of lowering the ceiling begins—and will be completed during the week. The roof is being finished. The new heating equipment is being installed. The new electrical hookups are being put in. In the immediate future there are large bills to be paid. Now is the time we must BUY and SELL the rest of the bonds. A goal of \$30,000 in bond sales has been set for March. We must do it now.”



*New building exterior, September 1952*

Amazingly, the building was completed by the end of September 1952. The bulletin from September 21 read, “We welcome you for the last time to our basement auditorium. This has been a good basement. It has served us well for twenty years. Many of us were saved here. This is where many of us were baptized. Perhaps we were married in this sacred spot. This has been a place of prayer and

proclamation of the gospel. This is where we planned and worked toward our new building. As we enter our new sanctuary next Sunday, may there be no unfinished business that should be cared for down here today. Make that

decision for Christ today; accept Him as your Savior; yield yourself anew to Him.” September 28 was “Dedication Day.” There were special services, followed by a week-long missionary conference, concluding on the following Sunday. The total cost of new building was \$210,172, and it seated approximately 500 people. Remarkably, the church continued to support 9 missionary efforts totalling \$3,000 through the building project.<sup>32</sup>



*New building interior, September 1952*

<sup>32</sup> Missionary circle minutes indicate that the church supported the Benny Benson family (China), Esther Blowers (Brazil), the Glenn Lawrence family (Africa), the Robert Johnson family (Alaska), Patricia Major (India), the Rolf Parelus family (Africa), the William Simons family (China), the Navajo Orphanage (Arizona), and the Conservative Baptist Seminary (Denver).

Also in March 1952, at the height of the project eighteen new members were added. The church also transferred its parsonage from 1821 E. Main to 1860 E. Prairie in September.<sup>33</sup> Understandably, in 1953 and '54, the church weathered some financial difficulties. In the latter part of 1953 or early 1954, Pastor Larson resigned. He had led the church in the fulfillment of a long-term vision, and the resulting structure would be not only a Prairie Street landmark, but also a beacon of gospel proclamation, for years to come.



*Pastor Peek*

On March 14, 1954, the church called Dr. George S. Peek as its next pastor.<sup>34</sup> During his tenure “the basement of the building was redecorated, Sunday School classrooms [were] finished, and additional furnishings [were] added.”<sup>35</sup> On January 11, 1956, the church added the Corley’s to the regular missionary budget.<sup>36</sup> On January 18, they hired Mrs. Robert Whiteside as secretarial help.<sup>37</sup> In the month of March the church choir was featured on a half-hour afternoon spot on local TV. Attendance was 235 in the month of May. The church showed its zeal for world evangelization by more than doubling the missions budget within two years to \$9,820.65. On June 15, 1958, the church hired Mr. Elmo Parish as choir director and janitor, hiring his wife later in the year as

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<sup>33</sup> The price of the new parsonage was \$17,000. The original parsonage was sold for the purchase price, \$10,500, in 1954.

<sup>34</sup> Pastor Peek was from Saginaw, Michigan. The church voted to pay him a salary of \$4,800 per year in addition to the benefits of the parsonage and four weeks paid vacation.

<sup>35</sup> “Anniversary Book of the East Park Baptist Church, 1909 – 1959.”

<sup>36</sup> During the year 1956, the church supported the following mission works from a budget of \$4520: the Bensons (Japan), the Blowers (Brazil), Central Seminary (Minneapolis, MN), the Cooks (India), the Corleys (Iran), Denver Seminary (of the Conservative Baptist Association), the Johnsons (Alaska), the Lawrences (Africa), the Loviks (Illinois State Missionary), the Martins (Decatur-Child Evangelism), the Majors (India), the Navajho Orphanage (Cottonwood, AZ), the Pareliuses (Africa), the Petersons, and the Simons (Philippines).

<sup>37</sup> Mrs. Whiteside served for \$1 per hour.

secretarial replacement for Mrs. Whiteside.<sup>38</sup> On August 27 the board of trustees recommended that the church purchase the property at 1748 E. Prairie for \$13,000.<sup>39</sup> The six-room brick house directly west of the church, subsequently referred to as “the annex,” would become a place of much ministry, initially as additional Sunday School space and later as the beginning location for a Christian school.

The year 1959 was East Park’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Leaders designated each Sunday of the month of April for various emphases, including an Old Timer’s Day,<sup>40</sup> a Missionary Day,<sup>41</sup> an Anniversary Day,<sup>42</sup> and a Neighborhood Day.<sup>43</sup> On May 12, the church received the gift of a school bus from Benton Motors. The slogan for the year, “Enter to Worship – Leave to Serve,”



*Five surviving charter members at East Park’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration*

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<sup>38</sup> Mr. Parish received \$300 per month and his wife \$1 per hour, not to exceed \$300 per year.

<sup>39</sup> The Lord enabled the church to put down payment of \$3,100 on the house with a loan payable at \$75 per month (6% interest).

<sup>40</sup> Former pastor G. W. Stoddard gave the invocation and former pastor John Hansen, then in Springfield, preached the message. A special service at 2:30 p.m. featured former singing organizations.

<sup>41</sup> Rev. Glenn Lawrence, missionary to Africa, was the special guest speaker. At this point East Park supported seventeen mission works: the Bensons, the Conservative Baptist Seminary in Denver, the Cooks, the Corleys, the Johnsons, the Lawrences, the Loviks, the Martins, the Navajo Orphanage, the Pareliuses, the Pecks, Pillsbury College, the Ranneys, the Shrouts, the Simonses, the Taylors, the Wallaces.

<sup>42</sup> On the anniversary celebration Sunday, April 19, East Park was privileged to host Dr. Myron Cedarholm, the General Director of the Conservative Baptist Association of America, as speaker for both morning and evening services.

<sup>43</sup> Pastor Peek closed the month of celebration by speaking in the “Neighborhood Day” morning service on the topic, “Who Is The Greatest?”

summed up Pastor Peek's ministry burden, and the 811 members gave every indication of a full-hearted response, especially in their giving.<sup>44</sup>

As the church entered its 51<sup>st</sup> year, it bore many indications of God's gracious hand. On January 13, 1960, the deacons recommended that Elmo Parish be licensed to preach in preparation for ministry elsewhere.<sup>45</sup> (At his family's departure in June, Mrs. Virginia Redmon took on the role of the choir director.<sup>46</sup>) Throughout the fall months, plans were made for a church plant near the South Shores area of Decatur.<sup>47</sup> In the wake of aggressive church-wide visitation in South Shores, the new Faith Baptist Church, comprised of several families from East Park among others, began meeting in the Enterprise School on March 5, 1961, under the leadership of Pastor Harry Reed.<sup>48</sup> On December 14, 1960, East Park began to remodel the basement, a second phase of the major early 1950s building project.<sup>49</sup> That year the Sunday School averaged 388 attendees. In December all the ladies' missionary circles sent Christmas boxes to their missionaries. The church gave \$50 toward a pool at Camp Assurance that

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<sup>44</sup> The church supported an annual budget of \$42,000, \$8,100 of which was for missions. These funds were sent to 24 missionaries in seven countries, 2 children's homes in Arizona and Alaska, and 3 schools.

<sup>45</sup> The Parishes left to minister in several churches in Colorado before they went to Australia 31 years later. East Park continues to support the Parishes' ministry in Utah today.

<sup>46</sup> Mrs. Redmon was paid \$20 per week for her ministry to the choir.

<sup>47</sup> The first indication of any formal action toward this new church plant occurs in the minutes from a trustees' meeting on August 2, 1960. The Board of Trustees closely oversaw the development of this ministry throughout the next year.

<sup>48</sup> Faith Baptist Church paid \$200 per month to East Park, which handled all the finances of the new church, including the school rental and pastoral salary, until May 8, 1962, when Faith Baptist began managing its own building fund. In June 1961, East Park purchased a chord-organ for use at Faith Baptist Church for \$70. Pastor Reed came from River Grove Bible Church in River Grove, Illinois (a suburb of Chicago). He was an assistant pastor there serving under his father, Harry J. Reed.

<sup>49</sup> The church voted to borrow no more than \$12,000 dollars for this project.

summer and also began employing Mrs. Mildred Crystal as secretary.<sup>50</sup> Attendance figures for the middle of July were 417 in the morning service and 273 in the evening service. In the fall months, the church voted to build bunk beds in the nursery and to purchase some equipment for youth recreation. They hired a full-time janitor, Mr. Robert Sober, in December.<sup>51</sup> The church also added two mission entities for the year, bringing the total to 26.<sup>52</sup>

In 1963 Pastor Peek invited Dr. Jack Hyles and Dr. Bob Jones as guest speakers. In late November the church hosted the Annual Conference on Bible Prophecy with speakers Harry F. McGee, C. M. Ward, and Bruce W. Dunn. At this time four ladies' missionary circles were meeting regularly: Co-Workers, Dorcas, Trans-World, and Worldwide. On January 8, 1964, the church hired Dave Montague as youth director.<sup>53</sup> Later that month two new adult Bible classes began, one for men and one for women. On March 31 the church decided that all future teachers and church officers would not be permitted to smoke. On December 23, East Park's youth pastor, David P. Montague, submitted his resignation to take the position of Club Director of Youth For Christ.<sup>54</sup> The Board of Trustees

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<sup>50</sup> Mrs. Crystal worked 15 hours a week for \$10.

<sup>51</sup> Mr. Sober was paid \$325 per month.

<sup>52</sup> For the year 1961 the church supported the following missionaries: the Bensons (Japan), Camp Assurance (Georgetown, IL), Central Seminary, the Conservative Baptist Association, the CBFMS (Wheaton), the Cooks (Ceylon), the Corleys (Iran), Denver Seminary (Denver), Faith Baptist Church (Decatur), the Greenmans (Argentina), the Hunters (Decatur Negro Work), the Johnsons (Maranatha Home – Alaska), the Loviks (Oak Lawn), the Martins (Decatur Child Evangelism), the National Association of Evangelicals (Chicago), the Pareliuses (Africa), the Pecks (India), Mr. Page (Literature), Pillsbury Bible College (Owatonna, MN), the Ranneys (Chicago Negro Work), the Shrouts (Peru Youth For Christ), the Simons (Philippines), the Taylors (New York Jewish Work), the Youngs (Canada Eskimoes), and Youth For Christ (Decatur).

<sup>53</sup> The church paid Pastor Montague \$50 per week.

<sup>54</sup> Pastor Montague was replacing Rev. Jim Stoutenborough who had vacated the position a few weeks earlier, following the Lord's leading to youth ministry at First Baptist Church in Clinton. The Stoutenboroughs were servants in a variety of church ministries. Rev. Stoutenborough was a leader among the deacons, on the Christian

shortly recommended Paul Harris to the church as the new assistant to the pastor and youth director. The church reached an important milestone on March 10, 1965, when it paid its bonds completely, subsequently celebrating in a special evening “Bond-Burning” service on April 18, Easter Sunday.<sup>55</sup> In May, the church took a benevolence offering to go toward mattresses for Camp Assurance. Attendance figures for the second quarter of the year were 277 (Sunday School), 278 (Sunday A.M.), and 120 (Sunday P.M.). On July 18<sup>th</sup>, after serving the church for over a decade, Pastor Peek resigned, accepting a call to be the pastor of Bethany Baptist Church in Boulder City, Nevada.

## *New Frontiers: Pastors Potter and Loser* 1965 – 1989

Rev. Wesley Potter accepted the church’s call to be the next pastor of East Park on November 17, arriving for his first Sunday on January 2, 1966.<sup>56</sup> Church

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education committee, and in the Sunday School. Mrs. Stoutenborough was also a Sunday School teacher and the choir director.

<sup>55</sup> The church burned Broadway Bond #1150. Special guests for the service included Ellis Arnold, mayor of Decatur; Dr. Henry Lovik, General Director of the Illinois Conservative Baptist Association; and Dr. Myron Cedarholm, General Director of the Conservative Baptist Association of America. Dr. Cedarholm preached from Philippians 3:10, John 14:12, and Matthew 16:18. His wife, Thelma, provided special music. Attendance at the service was 219. An article in the Conservative Baptist Messenger read, “It has been a heavy load to carry over the past 15 years, but the church has at no time defaulted in its payments.” The church also used the occasion to celebrate Pastor Peek’s 11<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Sunday School superintendent Forrest Marmor presented a cash gift to the pastor.

<sup>56</sup> Dr. Potter came with his wife, Cecile, and children, David, Grace, and Faith, directly from a seven-year pastorate of Bethel Baptist Church in Georgetown, IL. Originally hailing from Western New York State, the Lord saved him when he was only ten years old. He earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from Houghton College and a Bachelor of Divinity degree from Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, and he was honored by Maranatha Baptist Bible College with a Doctor of Divinity degree. In 1948, he became the assistant pastor at First Baptist Church in Danville, IL, where he started a mission

records point to Pastor Potter as a strong, diligent leader.<sup>57</sup> Within three months, twenty-six new members joined the church, a weekly calling program was instituted, and the Jr. and Sr. Youth groups were reactivated with a combined choir of about twenty young people singing each Sunday night. Soon after Pastor Potter's arrival, East Park began to purchase the property surrounding the building for a future parking lot<sup>58</sup> and to make plans for supplying air conditioning to the auditorium and offices. They made many other physical repairs during the year. During a summer evangelistic meeting with Paul Dixon, over 100 individuals came forward. By mid-summer attendance had risen to 327 (Sunday School), 339 (Sunday A.M.), 171 (Sunday P.M.), and 77 (Wednesday prayer meeting). The summer VBS saw 250 children attend. By the end of the year East Park had been blessed with seventy-two new additions to the membership.



*Pastor Potter*

During the year of 1967, the church found and hired a youth and music pastor, Boyd West, having begun the search the previous summer. East Park supported twenty-two mission works that year for a total of \$7,800.<sup>59</sup> In early summer, air

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church, Fowler Avenue (now Edgewood) Baptist Church. Pastor Potter also served as the president of the Illinois Conservative Baptist Association.

<sup>57</sup> During Pastor Potter's first three months, he made 179 hospital calls and 108 home visitations. This was his style: his year-end report shows 1200 hospital and home visits, including a visit to over three-fourths of the church members' homes. In that year he and his wife entertained over 600 church-related people in their home and served nearly 100 meals for church guests. Pastor Potter led the revived youth choir and Mrs. Potter played the piano. He preached 16 funerals and seven weddings, taught a weekly Sunday School class, gave instruction to new members, wrote a monthly "Life Line" newsletter, directed family camp at Camp Assurance, and chaired a committee to plan a Sunday School conference in the spring of 1967.

<sup>58</sup> On December 13, 1966, the board recommended that the properties at 1732 and 1740 E. Prairie be demolished and leveled.

<sup>59</sup> Mission works supported in 1967 included the Bensons (Japan), Camp Assurance, Central Seminary, the Cooks (Hawaii), the Corleys (Iran), the Fullmers (Child Evangelism in Decatur), the Greenmans (Argentina), the Hunters (Decatur Negro Work), the Lawrences (Africa), the Levins (Bible Tracts, Inc.), the Loviks (C. B. State Office), Dorothy

conditioning was installed in the auditorium; the houses next to the annex building were removed and property was leveled as work began on the parking lot.<sup>60</sup> In the fall, the church sponsored a Sunday School conference for area fundamental churches, emphasizing high standards for teachers. By the end of the year the Lord had added seventy-one new members to the church to total 402 active members.

In early April 1968, Evangelist Bill Hall preached a ten-day revival, and the church helped sponsor a summer Jack Van Impe meeting along with other fundamental churches. That summer it was a special blessing for East Park to be the first to give financial support to Maranatha Baptist Bible College as it opened. The church further helped the new school by transporting bedding, cooking utensils, and other necessities. By the end of the year the Lord had added thirty-one to East Park, bringing the active membership to 423. The following year, 1969, saw thirty-nine new members as the church membership grew to number 440. In July the church hired Wayne White as youth pastor,<sup>61</sup> and in November Glenn Schunk preached a revival week. In January 1970, the church began a bus ministry purchasing a bus for \$1,000. On March 17 Betty Warren, who had joined the church in 1956, was hired as part-time secretary to help Mildred Crystal, also a part-time secretary. Soon thereafter Mrs. Crystal resigned and Betty moved into a full-time secretary role. That spring the church benefitted from a Sunday School and soul-winning conference with Dr. Lee Roberson.

On July 8, 1970, the church voted to begin what would become one of its most ambitious undertakings and broadest spheres of ministry, a Christian day school. Though no one could foresee the magnitude of its future expansion, in September the church followed the Lord's leading, launching East Park Christian

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Myer (Rantoul Christian Service Men's Center), the Onleys (C. B. State Office), the Pareliuses (Africa), the Pecks (India), Pillsbury Bible College, the Ranneys (Chicago), the Simons (Philippines), the Slobodians (Chicago), the Taylors (New York), the Turnbulls (Haiti), the Youngs (Honduras).

<sup>60</sup> On September 27 the board recommended that the church purchase the property at 1720 E. Prairie for \$8,500 to complete the parking lot. On November 22 they recommended that the house at 1720 E. Prairie be demolished and the lot, along with the adjoining lot, be graded.

<sup>61</sup> Pastor White and his wife, Beverley, were Bob Jones University graduates.



*East Park Baptist Church, 1970*

Kindergarten in the annex with Mrs. Potter as the teacher for six students. The Fundamentalist Christian School movement was blossoming in the 1960s and 70s after the Supreme Court banned public prayer and Bible reading in the public schools. Over the next nineteen years, the school grew into East Park Baptist Academy as the members of East Park and many others from Decatur and the surrounding area desired a better education for their children.

In 1970, Youth Pastor Wayne White moved on to take a senior pastorate elsewhere. That year the church purchased a new grand piano for the auditorium,<sup>62</sup> and, in a continued effort to offer more parking space, they purchased the property at 1763 E. William Street for \$2,000 and subsequently demolished it. They also built and furnished a private office for the youth and choir director. Sunday School attendance rose, due in part to the bus ministry. On April 8, 1972, the church hired David Leslie as the youth and music director. That summer they also installed a bell tower in the church. On December 24, after seven years of active ministry, Pastor Potter resigned, following the call to First Baptist Church in Palos Hills, IL.

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<sup>62</sup> The new piano cost \$2335 with the trade-in of the old piano.



*Pastor Loser*

The church was without a pastor for ten months. On October 24, 1973, they celebrated the arrival of Pastor Richard (Dick) G. Loser, as he began his first official ministry.<sup>63</sup> The following May (1974), the church voted to call John Davis as assistant pastor for youth and music.<sup>64</sup> On April 21, 1975, the church withdrew from the Conservative Baptist Association. In 1977, the church hired Wayne Coker as music director to work with the adult choir, form a junior high choir, and organize special groups. During the Christmas season he led the church in an original old-fashioned Christmas celebration, "As In Days of Old." In 1979, the church was blessed to witness 39 baptisms. In the early 1980s, Pastor Loser worked on a soul-winning program for the church. During this time he also led the church through some challenging financial times in both the church and school. Attendance was between 400 and 450 in the early 80s. In September 1983, the church purchased its first computer as an aid for the bookkeeping duties of the secretary. On July 10, 1985, the church made a major change in leadership structure when it combined the deacon and trustee boards.

In the late 1980s the congregation began talking about the possibility of relocating to a new building sometime in the future. The neighborhood surrounding the church was deteriorating, elderly church members were obligated to climb stairs with difficulty, and the church had more than \$50,000 in annual costs to operate duplicate facilities for the church and the school. On April 13, 1988, the Board of Deacons recommended that a committee composed of some deacons and some laymen be appointed to search out property for a future building site and to investigate the salability of the current properties (both in Decatur and Boody) with the goal of constructing one facility that would house both the church and the school. On February 1, 1989, Pastor Loser resigned, following God's call to a ministry near Houston, TX. The pulpit

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<sup>63</sup> Pastor Loser came from Chattanooga, TN, with his wife and one son. The Lord blessed him with two more children during his pastorate at East Park. He received a bachelor's degree in Bible from Tennessee Temple College and a master's degree in religious education from Temple Baptist Theological Seminary.

<sup>64</sup> Pastor Davis came with his wife, Gayle, from Grace Baptist Church in Morris, IL, where he served as associate pastor. He holds a B.A. degree from Maranatha Baptist Bible College.

committee quickly arranged for Rev. Gordon Edgington to serve as interim pastor. East Park Baptist Academy closed in May 1989 after nineteen years of ministry.

## *Relocation and Rededication: Pastors Komis and Banman 1990 – 2009*



*Pastor Komis*

On February 7, 1990, the church was blessed with the arrival of its new pastor, Dennis Komis.<sup>65</sup> The church held a missionary conference in October 1991 with Ron Brooks as special speaker along with three visiting missionary families. The month of March 1992, was set aside for special celebration of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Sunday School. Each week was designated for a specific emphasis, including a Kick-off Sunday, an Alumni Sunday, a Day of “Language of Music” seminars from Frank and Flora Jean Garlock, a Happy Birthday celebration, and an Old-Fashioned Sunday. On May 31, 1992, the church gave toward a special building fund offering. Ideas for relocation became a much greater reality when the church purchased 40 acres on Baltimore Avenue near the Mt. Zion community east of Decatur. On May 15, 1994, the church met on the new property for a dedication service for the future building.<sup>66</sup> Pastor Komis launched the “Forward in Faith” building program,<sup>67</sup> and the church broke ground on October 13, 1996, at 1919 S. Baltimore Ave. In an amazing display of God’s confirmation on the church relocation, another church had become interested in purchasing the Prairie Ave. property in the summer of 1996, formally buying it in November,

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<sup>65</sup> Pastor Komis was a native of Milwaukee, WI, and a graduate of Bob Jones University and Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Minneapolis. He pastored for six years in Kenosha, WI, before coming to East Park. He arrived with his wife, Christine, and three children, Caleb, Hannah, and Grace. Their fourth child was due in April.

<sup>66</sup> This open-air dedication service included music and preaching, followed by a fried chicken meal from Hardees.

<sup>67</sup> The building committee included Tim Busey, Don Caudle, Gary Deckard (chair), Larry Jones, Pastor Komis, Joe Lehman, John Lehman, Charles Ragle, Raymond Thompson, David Rosenthal, and Larry Whitten.

giving East Park the use of the building until its new home was complete. On April 13, 1997, in one of the most significant events of its eighty-eight years of existence, East Park left its long-term location behind and met in the new church building on S. Baltimore Ave. for a dedication service.<sup>68</sup> Pastor Komis



*Baltimore Ave. Building*

wrote in the dedication booklet, "We dedicate this building to His glory, the salvation of souls and the edification of believers. Our desire is that we will reach out with the message of the gospel not only to our community . . . but also to the ends of the earth." During the service Pastor Komis led the people of the church in several vows of dedication. Several features of the building were yet to be completed,

including installation of the pews and sound booth, but the Lord's hand was on the construction and the move.<sup>69</sup> On January 24, 1999, the missionary fellowship started a missionary closet, involving the whole church in collecting useful items. During Pastor Komis's tenure, the church welcomed the following special speakers: Dr. Monroe Parker, Dr. David Cummins, Evangelist Gary Gillmore, Evangelist Bill Hall, Evangelist Bud Bierman, David Ledgerwood, and Dr. Ron Brooks. On September 6, 2000, the Lord blessed East Park when Chuck Bumgardner<sup>70</sup> accepted their call to be assistant pastor for youth and music. In

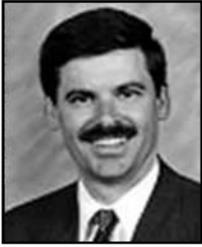
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<sup>68</sup> The guest speakers for the building dedication included Dr. Mark Simmons, pastor of Marquette Manor Baptist Church, Downers Grove, IL; Dr. Gordon Edgington, Missions Director of AIBCI; and former youth pastor John Davis from Faith Baptist Church, in Danville, IL. Former pastor Wesley Potter gave the benediction.

<sup>69</sup> Many church members worked hard to reduce building costs by painting, cleaning, and supplying woodwork. An unexpected challenge interrupted the construction progress when high winds toppled many freshly set roof trusses. Resourcefully, men of the church reused the salvageable wood for the auditorium platform.

<sup>70</sup> Pastor Bumgardner came with his wife, Megan, and three children, Katelyn, Christopher, and Kyle. He received a B.A. in Pastoral Studies from Northland Baptist Bible College and a Master of Divinity degree from Central Baptist Theological Seminary.

2001 the church supported thirty-two mission works for a total of \$40,095.<sup>71</sup> Pastor Komis was active in discipling several men by taking them on overseas mission trips. In the summer of 2002, Pastor Komis resigned to join the faculty of Maranatha Baptist College.



*Pastor Banman*

After a year of interim, during which Pastor Bumgardner filled the pulpit, the church welcomed Rev. Ryan K. Banman as its next senior pastor on May 4, 2003.<sup>72</sup> A year after his arrival, he wrote:

God has given us the responsibility to try to reach Decatur (our Jerusalem) with the gospel. It is hypocritical for any church to claim a great burden for missions abroad, but to neglect the very neighbors and people that God has placed around them. God's desire is that the people of Decatur should see and know that He is the Lord, and that they should taste of His saving grace. With this purpose and injunction motivating us, we will be reaching out extensively this summer to our neighbors in the community of Decatur, seeking to enter their lives and bring them the gospel.<sup>73</sup>

Pastor Banman continued to fill the pulpit with strong expository preaching and to lead the church in special evangelistic efforts, including musical programs for

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<sup>71</sup> East Park supported the following mission works: the Archibalds, Bible Tracts, Bob Jones University, the Brunners, Camp Assurance, Calvary Church Ministries, Central Baptist Seminary, the Central Illinois Baptist Pastors' Fellowship, the Darlins, the Fitzsimmons, the Harrises, the Holmeses, the Hydens, the Kamibayashiyamas, Maranatha Baptist Bible College, the Mulvaines, the Mukenshnabls, the Mumfords, the Nasons, Northland Baptist Bible College, the Nulphs, the Owenses, the Potters, the Ostensons, the Parishes, the Pattons, the Perezes, the Phillips, the Robertsons, the Trumbulls, the Vanderhoofs, and the Williamses.

<sup>72</sup> Pastor Banman came with his wife, Jamieson, and two sons, Rhett and Reese. He served as assistant pastor at Upper Cross Roads Baptist Church in Bel Air, MD, prior to their relocation. He holds a B.A. in Bible and a M.A. in Pastoral Studies from Bob Jones University.

<sup>73</sup> Letter from Pastor Banman to the church family, April 27, 2004.

Christmas and Easter, summer neighborhood festivals, an annual Vacation Bible School, and a booth at the August Decatur Celebration. He also took overseas mission trips, accompanied by church members and gave special emphasis to discipleship of the men of East Park, helping them to soberly fulfill their responsibilities to God and their families. The church hosted a state-wide ladies retreat, "A Light For His Glory," on April 2-3, 2004. On June 17, 2005, Pastor Bumgardner resigned to pursue further education at Central Baptist Seminary. East Park had the privilege of ordaining him to the ministry during his tenure; and they had benefitted greatly from leadership of the music and the youth group. The role of assistant pastor for youth and music was subsequently filled by Ray Paez,<sup>74</sup> who served from late 2006 to early 2008, then by Andy Merkle<sup>75</sup> in August 2008.

A review of the history of East Park should draw any reader's attention to God's faithfulness to His promise to build His church and should motivate believers to praise God publically for always keeping His Word. Such a response would be in keeping with the theme for the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary, "Rejoicing in God's Faithfulness." After Solomon blessed the Lord for his faithfulness in the years preceding his dedication of the temple, he prayed, "The LORD our God be with us, as He was with our fathers: let Him not leave us, nor forsake us: that He may incline our hearts unto Him, to walk in all His ways, and to keep His commandments, and His statutes, and His judgments, which He commanded our fathers. And let these my words, wherewith I have made supplication before the LORD, be nigh unto the LORD our God day and night, that He maintain the cause of His servant, and the cause of His people Israel at all times, as the matter shall require: that all the people of the earth may know that the LORD is God, and that there is none else. Let your heart therefore be perfect with the LORD our God, to walk in His statutes, and to keep His commandments, as at this day." (1 Kings 8:57-60).

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<sup>74</sup> Pastor Paez came with his wife, Amy, and daughter, Caris, from Maranatha Baptist Bible College, where he had earned a B.A. and a M.A. in Biblical Studies.

<sup>75</sup> Pastor Merkle came with his wife, Erika, and daughters, Emmalein and Celia, from Bob Jones University, where he had served on the staff for three years. He earned a B.A. in Bible, a M.A. in Bible, and a M.Mus. in Church Music from BJU.

# A Brief History of East Park Baptist Academy

When East Park Baptist Church followed the Lord's direction to start a Christian kindergarten under Pastor Wesley Potter's leadership on July 8, 1970, no one could know just what plans God had for the school's development over the next nineteen years. In 1962 the United States Federal Supreme Court had banned public prayer and Bible reading in the public schools. The Court unknowingly catalyzed the launch of hundreds of schools across the nation as the Fundamentalist Christian School movement blossomed throughout the next two decades. While the Roman Catholics and Lutherans had operated private parochial schools in Decatur for decades, no alternative to public education existed for fundamentalist families. East Park Baptist Academy (EPBA) filled that need as it developed during the two decades of its existence.

Throughout the years East Park had the opportunity to educate students from Decatur, Macon, Mt. Zion, Lake City, Lovington, Harristown, Moweaqua, Assumption, Taylorville, and as far away as Springfield. Parents would send their kids to EPBA for a variety of reasons: the Christian educational philosophy, special needs, academic excellence, classroom discipline, sports, musical groups, drama, and the prestige of a private school. In the early years there were piano-concert fund raisers with Marge Anderson and LaVerne Smith. A fluteaphone choir played regularly. In an unusual tradition during homecoming week, the high school students would spend a few days teaching the lower grades some basketball and cheerleading for a small tournament. Chapel met twice a week for 45 minutes with preaching and special music. The program at EPBA was well-rounded.

One of the subtle strengths of the school was the faculty—their qualifications, loyalty, and longevity. While all teachers from first grade up had to have a college degree, it did not necessarily need to be in their teaching area. In hiring teachers, agreement with the principles of the school was sometimes a higher priority than academic qualification. Unlike many Christian school teachers in the 70s and 80s, EPBC faculty were paid regularly. They also received health insurance and free tuition for their children. Mrs. Potter began by teaching a small kindergarten class in the annex next door to the church. In 1971, Mrs. Beverly White, the youth pastor's wife, and Mrs. Larry Billiter joined the faculty as first and second grades were added. Marge Anderson arrived in 1972 to oversee administration of the school and to teach the first, second, and fourth grade classes. (There were no third graders that year, and Diane Hadley taught

the fourth graders in the afternoon.) Miss Anderson stayed until the school's close in 1989. In 1973, Mrs. Kay Learned, the pastor's wife at Fellowship Baptist Church, Mt. Zion, joined to teach the fourth through sixth grades. Mrs. Sharon Hayes taught kindergarten in 1973. As the school expanded to include K through eighth grade in 1974, Miss Jan Gaffey, Mrs. Pat Purviance, and Mrs. Susan Ray joined the faculty. Faculty members who taught from 1975 to 1989 include Debbie Ames, Alberta Brown, Gary Burns, Marty Burns, Della Cofer, John Cofer, Diane Coker, Pastor Wayne Coker, Bill Cunningham, Devon Reety Cunningham, Gayle Davis, Pastor John Davis, Charles (Chuck) Elliott, Joanne Elliott, Vickie Ferguson, Jan Gaffey, Jewel Grady, Pam Green, Diane Hadley, Nelson Hadley, Sue Heffington, Bob Henderson, Barb Johnson, Janet Johnson, Jim LaCrone, Sue LaCrone, Pastor Dick Loser, Carol Moore, Linda Moore, Jack Moore, Sally Olsen, Linda Pauley, Connie Pontious, Pat Proviance, Sue Ray, Kathy Warren Hoover, Roberta Warren, David Wetterlund, Greg Wood, and Sherral Wood. Several secretaries served at the school: Carol Bailey, Erma Schafer, Eleanor Deverick, and Cindi Brehm, in addition to Betty Warren, the church secretary who served as the school treasurer for many years.

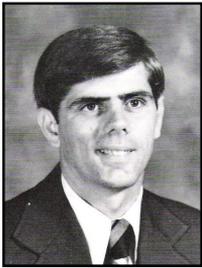
EPBA used a blend of textbooks including some from the public school early on, some *A Beka*, some *Bob Jones* (especially math), some *Basic Facts*, and some *Rod and Staff* (a Mennonite curriculum). The school was a member of the Illinois Association of Christian Schools, fellowshipping with the other sixty to seventy state schools in athletic and academic competitions and earning their respect as the elite school of the state. For several years teachers traveled to the October Midwest Association of Christian Schools convention in Chicago with three to five thousand in attendance. Teachers also had the opportunity to attend week-long seminars in the summer at Pensacola Christian College to learn how to teach their curriculum better.

Enrollment grew rapidly through the first decade from the initial six kindergarteners. There were forty-seven students in 1972. In the fall of 1973, when Grace Baptist Church opened Decatur Christian School, students whose families attended that church naturally transferred. Another record from 1973 expands on East Park's enrollment situation: "There is a lack of enrollment from our own membership. . . . lack of a full time administration." In 1974, the church purchased the Old Union School building in Harristown for \$35,000, enrolling seventy-two students through the eighth grade. The kindergarten class met in the church basement. When 112 students enrolled in grades K-9 for the fall of 1975, the church sensed the urgent need for yet more room and better facilities. The Lord provided for the purchase of the 1950s-era Boody Grade School building on September 18, 1975, for \$115,000. The new site was larger

and better equipped than the old Union School. It had an auditorium (with a stage), large classrooms, multiple restrooms, and even a gymnasium! The Old Union School building was sold on Oct 2, 1975 for \$38,000 to Bethel Tabernacle. For the 1975 school year, Debbie Ames taught third and fourth grades.



*East Park Baptist Academy, Boody School Building, 1981*



*Jack Moore*

That year the Lord also provided a dedicated and capable full-time administrator, Mr. Jack Moore, who remained at the school until 1988. Marge Anderson gladly relinquished the administrator responsibilities to teach full time. In August 1976, EPBA opened its program through grade 12 for about 150 students and held its first high school graduation ceremony on May 28, 1977. Dr. Don Camp of Anderson, IN, gave the commencement address; Howard Bailey was the first valedictorian. In the fall of 1977, EPBA had an enrollment of 246, K-12. Enrollment peaked in the early 1980s at 356 students; there were waiting lists for certain grades. The high school had individual classes for Math, Science, English, Social Studies, Spanish, and German.

Although no one seemed to understand exactly why or how, the Lord ended this worthy ministry of East Park as clearly as He had begun it. The school began operating in a deficit during the 1985-86 school year, and it never recovered. As enrollment declined to 115 in the late 1980s, school officials were forced to make many difficult decisions. In August 1988, with only 10 teachers, there was one kindergarten class instead of two, a combined first and second grade class, and a combined fifth and sixth grade class. On May 26, 1989, the school held its final high school graduation ceremony and closed its doors. Several factors appear to have led to the closure. In the midst of substantial nation-wide economic problems, the Caterpillar Corporation, a major Decatur employer, had

laid off many workers. As families moved elsewhere for employment, the church mirrored the school, with membership declining from about 450 in the early 1980s to about 200 in 1989. Since the church augmented tuition funds significantly, the church membership reduction had a marked effect on the school's finances. It would have been helpful if other area churches whose members sent their children to the school had added EPBA to their budget. Furthermore, it was also difficult for the school to keep tuition costs competitive, since it had to operate facilities apart from the church and transport 80% of its students to the remote location daily. The Academy might have been able to continue if there were some way to house it at the church saving an estimated \$50,000 annually; but the facilities were inadequate and didn't meet code for a school. At over \$100 per month, the tuition costs were higher than the perceived value for some families. Priorities were changing among Christians, in large part due to the significant increase of TV watching. Over time it seemed that parents lost sight of challenge of running the low-budget operation and began to wish for broader offerings without increased costs. These factors together make it obvious that it was God's time for the school to close.

East Park Baptist Academy had provided a high-quality Christian education for hundreds of young people and graduated 160 students in its 19 years of existence. The Lord had planned for the school's establishment, and he had also planned for the church and the community to continue without it after its closure.

*The preceding history of East Park Baptist Academy is taken in large part from information contained in Linda Moore's two-volume East Park Baptist Academy Memoir, a collection of five interviews conducted and transcribed in the year following EPBA's closure.*