

STORY AND PHOTOS BY TONY CARTLEDGE, *Contributing Editor*

'Two buildings, one heart'

Together Raleigh's First Baptist churches celebrate 200 years



Cast members framed by North Carolina's state capitol building describe a time of transition for the two churches.

RALEIGH, N.C. — They sit diagonally on opposite corners of Capitol Square, with North Carolina's state capitol building between them. One might think they are worlds apart, but Raleigh's two First Baptist churches are determined to remember their common birth and work together toward common missions, whether serving the poor or promoting civil rights.

To avoid confusion, locals refer to the predominantly Anglo congregation as First Baptist Salisbury Street, and to the largely African-American church as First Baptist Wilmington Street.

The two congregations celebrated their 200th anniversary March 8, capping a year of festivities with a theatrical production March 2-4 and a joint birthday party at the State Capitol on March 8.

Celebrating through theater came naturally for the two churches: both have innovative pastors who incorporate the arts into worship, Chris Chapman at Salisbury Street and Dumas Harshaw at Wilmington Street.

As committees planned the anniversary festivities, Salisbury Street member Anne Bullard suggested that the local Burning Coal Theater Company, which Bullard serves as a board member, be commissioned to produce a play commemorating the event as part of the non-profit company's "Our History" productions.

Ian Fleming, the company's resident playwright, took on the project, researching and writing the script with artistic director Jerome Davis and intern Rebecca Wyrick, who also served as stage manager for the production.

Director Robby Lufy was faced with the challenge of staging the portable play, which began in one of the churches and moved to Capitol Square for three scenes, taking the audience with it, before concluding in the other church.

"It was really important that we use both buildings," Lufy said. "The name of the play is 'Two Buildings/One Heart.'" Not wanting to show preference for one church over the other, the company began at First Baptist Salisbury Street for the first two performances, moving across the square to First Baptist Wilmington Street. For the last two performances, the order was reversed.

While Burning Coal actors performed the primary roles, a choir composed of members

from both churches accompanied the performers at each venue. Coordinating schedules and finding adequate rehearsal time was a challenge, Lufty and Wyrick agreed — as was working with representatives from two churches who aren't accustomed to the way theater runs.

The effort was worth it, as far as Katrellia Montague-Moorman was concerned. A Raleigh native who spent most of her life in New York City and is now a member of the Wilmington Street church, Montague-Moorman said: "I really enjoyed the creative use of staging. I had never seen a play that started in one place and moved to another."

Noting that she sees Raleigh as part of the New South that is less racist and more diverse, Montague-Moorman said she was pleased that the play "encompassed not only church history but also the social history of Raleigh."

Much of that social history was played out in churches. As Baptist work spread across the South in the late 1700s and early 1800s, it was common for both white landowners and their slaves to be members of the same church, though whites were clearly in control and slaves were often relegated to the balcony. In some cases, slaves were allowed to hold separate services under the leadership of black preachers.

Such was the case in Raleigh. When 23 members gathered in the old state meeting house to organize what was then called "Raleigh Baptist Church," 14 of the members were black, and nine were white. By 1826, when the church had 224 members, 67 were white and 137 were black.

The church grew fairly quickly, and in 1816 constructed a building on South Person Street, spending \$600. The building was later moved to a wooded area that came to be known as "Baptist Grove" (now Moore Square).

Internal strife during the 1830s led to a split and the church struggled for some years, but persevered, and in 1840 constructed a new building on the corner of Wilmington and Morgan Streets — the site now occupied by the predominantly black church.

Pastor Thomas E. Skinner led a time of rapid growth during the 1850s and the church constructed a larger building on the opposite corner in 1859, which First Baptist Salisbury Street now calls home.

As with most southern churches, emancipation and the period of Reconstruction following the Civil War led to a separation of white and black members. In Raleigh, the division occurred in 1868, when Henry Jett led a delegation of about 200 black members who asked for letters of dismissal to form what was



Members of a local "Red Hat Club" enjoyed each other as much as the performance of "Two Buildings/One Heart."

then called First Colored Baptist Church. The separation, by all accounts, was amiable.

Through the years, the churches have cooperated in a variety of ways, and during the tumultuous 1960s, both were led by strong proponents of civil rights who spoke openly of the need for an end to segregation. Charles W. Ward of the Wilmington Street church served as executive director of the Raleigh NAACP, and John M. Lewis urged members on Salisbury Street to embrace a more integrated society.

Vignettes in the play captured many of the strategic moments in the churches' shared history, but also incorporated moments of humor. Tom McCleister, playing the role of a man known as Major Vass, spoke of how "strict decorumists" controlled the church in the 1820s and 1830s, when he was called to account and in danger of being drummed out of the church for

having attended a circus.

Vass confessed to having seen the circus, but insisted that his purpose was to learn more about God's creation by observing the elephants, tigers, monkeys and other animals in the show. His answer was sufficiently convincing, and he was not dismissed.

Near the end of the play, Carly Jones and Tierra McMickle portrayed two unnamed African-American women bantering with each other as they awaited the arrival of Martin Luther King, trading humorous comments while wondering if the civil rights leader would really show.

King did not disappoint, and neither did "Two Buildings/One Heart," an apt reminder that Raleigh's two First Baptist churches are committed to continued cooperation as they enter their third century. **BT**

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