

The History of  
JUDSON BAPTIST CHURCH  
OAK PARK, ILL.



Condensed Form

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## HISTORY OF JUDSON BAPTIST CHURCH OAK PARK, ILLINOIS

Judson Baptist Church was started by a small group of folk who lived in the north part of Austin and Oak Park, but who were members of the First Baptist Church of Austin.

The first public meeting was held on Sunday afternoon, July 11, 1920, at 5814 Division St., when about one hundred people gathered to pledge their support toward the beginning of a new Baptist Church.

Dr. Judson B. Thomas, then pastor of the First Baptist Church of Austin, presided over the meeting, at which the location of the new church was decided. Later, three lots, where the church is now located, were purchased at a cost of \$3800.

In April, 1921, the Baptist Executive Council placed a portable chapel upon the newly purchased site. This building was dedicated on June 12, 1921, the dedication sermon being preached by Dr. Benjamin Otto, superintendent of the council.

On June 19, 1921, Rev. Albert H. Gage, D.D., director of Religious Education of the Chicago Baptist Association, became acting pastor, and built up a temporary organization under the name of "THE NORTH AUSTIN BOULEVARD CHAPEL." Rev. Gage continued his services for six months.

Judson Baptist Church was organized on November 2, 1921, with 56 members, and on April 26, 1922, Rev. Joseph Croft Dent was called to be the first pastor, and began his pastorate on May 14, 1922.

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What a difference between the Judson Baptist Church of today and the little church over which Rev. Dent became pastor.

The small building containing but one room, served all purposes. The platform at the front elevated the speakers and choir so that they could be seen, and also served as meeting places for several of the Sunday-school classes. Perhaps some may recall an unfortunate class member slipping off the edge of the platform and onto the main floor eighteen inches below.

Many will remember the large stove by which our church was heated. Often the term heated was imaginary for the single stove had little effect on the cold air on a winter day when the temperature was near zero.

On Thursday evening, October 12, 1922, a public recognition service was held, at which time the church was formally recognized by the Chicago Baptist Association, as an independent and regular Baptist Church. Dr. Otto represented the association at this meeting, while neighboring churches were represented by their pastors.

From the beginning, our church encouraged organizations for all ages and groups of people within its membership. Most of the present organizations can be dated from the beginning of the church.

Judson immediately experienced such a rapid growth, that the Sunday-school had difficulty in caring for its classes. In anticipation of the time when the portable building would be outgrown, a building committee was appointed and began preparation of building plans. Mr. H. H. Brady was the first chairman with Mr. George Manzelmann later succeeding him.

The building committee recommended to the church and received its approval to appoint Mr. E. E. Roberts as architect with instructions to draw up preliminary sketches. At a subsequent meeting the committee was instructed to proceed with a financial campaign to secure pledges for the erection of the first building unit.

The services of Dr. Otto were secured for Sunday April 15, 1923, to lead the campaign for raising a building fund. He preached two inspiring and appropriate sermons and led in securing pledges for approximately \$30,000.

The portable building was used for the last time on Sunday October 14, 1923. Later in the month the building was taken apart and moved to Norwood Park to be used by the Baptists of that community.

During the time that the new building was under construction, services were held in the Hatch school building, corner of Harvey Ave., and Berkshire St., Oak Park, where comfortable temporary quarters were provided.

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An impressive ground breaking service was held October 28, 1923, Rev. Albert Gage, giving the main address, on the subject, "*The Sure Foundation of God.*" Other speakers were Rev. L. T. Foreman, Rev. C. H. Snashall and Rev. S. Nelson. Pastor Dent then dug the first spadeful of soil, and dedicated the ground with appropriate words.

At the time of the ground breaking service, the membership of the church had reached the total number of 153.

The next important historical event in the life of Judson Baptist Church, was the laying of the corner stone on Sunday afternoon December 2, 1923. The subject of Dr. Otto's message on this occasion was "*What Our Church Stands For.*" Others taking part in this service were, Rev. S. Nelson, Rev. J. A. Carstens and Rev. C. B. Snashall. Music was furnished by Mr. Judson S. Tyley and a mixed quartette from the church. As Mr. Manzelmann and Mr. Arnold lowered the corner stone into its place, Dr. Otto dedicated it to the glory and the service of the Lord.

At the time Judson Church was opened for use, the entire shell of the first unit was completed. This unit consisted of the narrow portion of the present building extending from Austin Blvd., to the present two side entrances.

All of the rooms on the ground floor were finished, including a large hall seating about 350 persons, pastor's study, kitchen, furnace room, foyer and two toilet rooms. A baptistry made of concrete was built into the platform at the front of the large hall.

Temporarily, the second floor was left unfinished. The plans for this floor provided for an auditorium with a seating capacity of about 400, including the choir space and a balcony.

The dedication of the new building took place during the week of May 18 to 25, 1924, which was designated as "DEDICATION WEEK." The program began with a special sermon by Pastor Dent on Sunday May 18, and ended with the dedication sermon by Dr. Otto on Sunday morning May 25, and a sermon by Rev. G. W. Taft in the evening. Other special services were held on Wednesday and Friday evenings of that week.

The new baptistry was first used on the two Sundays of dedication week. Sixteen persons were baptised and 12 new members received by letter from other churches. This brought the membership to the number of 168.

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During the years following the dedication of the first unit Judson with its various organizations continued to grow both in membership and in spiritual leadership. The rapid growth of the church congregation and of the Sunday-school was beginning to exert a pressure which soon needed relief. Therefore by 1927 the agitation for expansion was sufficient to cause the building committee to consider ways and means for

enlarging the church. Several plans were considered before reaching a decision based upon the present purchasing power of the church and what was felt to be its present and future needs.

Since Dr. Otto had already given much helpful advice in the planning and erection of the first unit, he was invited to give further help at a joint meeting of the advisory board and the building committee held on October 2, 1927. At this meeting Dr. Otto stated that the rapid growth of the church had far exceeded the expectation of the executive council.

At the request of the advisory board, the building committee proceeded with the preparation of building plans and the formulation of a financing program. The recommended plan which was accepted by the church was to build a second unit, extending to the alley and in so doing, to enlarge the auditorium as well as to provide larger quarters for the Sunday-school. It was decided however, to defer this step for a time on account of lack of funds and the fact that the second mortgage had not been paid.

In February 1928 with Dr. H. M. Sheaff as chairman, the building committee submitted plans and also plans for financing the entire project. The remainder of the year was occupied in adding the details to these plans, in paying as much as possible on the second mortgage and in creating interest and enthusiasm for the building program. In February 1929, a financial campaign of two weeks duration resulted in pledges of \$65,000.

Another ground breaking service was held on Sunday June 30, 1929, this being for the second unit of the church building. At the close of the morning service, the congregation moved in a procession to the property west of the first building unit, where the pastor Dr. J. C. Dent had charge of the ceremony. Dr. Dent gave the address, followed by prayer by Rev. L. T. Foreman and singing by the congregation. The first spadeful of soil was then turned by the pastor who was followed by representatives of the various departments of the church.

Work on the new building was then started under the direction of the new architect Wm. C. Jones, the general contractor, Robert J. Kruger, and Milton W. Pillenger the mason contractor. There was much to be done during this step in Judson's growth. In addition to the entire construction of the second unit, the completion of the auditorium was included. This in turn involved the installation of a pipe organ and many other finishing touches to make the church plant complete.

The recreation room was finished first so that services could be held there while work was carried on in the old Sunday-school room.

Dedication was held during the week of March 2 to 9, 1930, just eight years and four months after the organization of the church. The church membership had now reached 408, a growth of 352 members.

The program began on Sunday March 2, with the Dedication to Worship, Ordinances and Evangelism, with sermons by Pastor Dent, Dr. Otto, and Rev. H. W. Virgin, pastor of the North Shore Baptist Church. Also, addresses were given by Rev. F. P. Langhorne, president of the Chicago Baptist Sunday-school Union, and Rev. L. P. Jensen, director of Religious Education of the Executive Council.

Monday evening was devoted to the Dedication to Baptist Causes and Missions. Greetings were brought by Miss Alice W. S. Brimson, president of the Baptist Missionary Training School, Rev. G. W. Taft president of the Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, Dr. Benjamin Otto superintendent of the Chicago Baptist Executive Council, Rev. A. E. Petersen General Superintendent of the Illinois State Convention and by Alton L. Miller president of the Northern Baptist Convention. Scripture was read by Rev. H. S. Stewart and prayer by Rev. York A. King.

The Dedication of the Organ and a Recital occupied the evening of March 4. After a prayer by Rev. Swaney Nelson, pastor of the Austin Swedish Baptist Church, the dedicational recital was given by Prof. Edwin Stanley Seder, organist of the first Congregational church of Oak Park, and violin selections by Mr. Herbert Kirschner.

Wednesday evening was given over to the Dedication to Christian Education, with prayer by Rev. J. B. McKendry and an address by Rev. Albert H. Gage of the first Baptist church of Wakefield, Mass.

The Dedication of the Community took place on Thursday evening. The service opened with prayer by Rev. T. W. Dons, pastor of the German Baptist church of Oak Park, and followed by the presentation of the flag by the Daughters of Union Veterans in memory of Rev. Charles G. Dixon. Greetings were brought by Rev. J. H. Creighton, pastor of the Fair Oaks Presbyterian church of Oak Park, Dr. T. M. Nelson, chairman of the Safety Commission of Oak Park, Mr. R. D. O'Brien, general Secretary of the Y. M. C. A. of Oak Park and Rev. W. J. Schuerman, pastor of the North Austin M. E. church. The address of the evening was given by Rev. F. E.

Davison, pastor of the Austin Blvd. Christian church, on the subject, "*The Church in the Community.*"

Friday evening was devoted to the Dedication to Social Activities with a fellowship supper. The address, "*Don't Forget the Best,*" was given by Rev. Robert Van Meigs, president of the Chicago Baptist Ministers' Conference. Short talks were given by Dr. H. M. Sheaff for the building committee, Mr. H. C. Bollman for the board of trustees, Rev. L. T. Foreman for the board of deacons, Mr. Judson S. Tyley for the Sunday-school, and Mrs. H. C. Johnson for the Women's Society.

Sunday, March 9, climaxed the week, the theme being, Dedication Wholly to the Glory and Service of God. The subject of the morning sermon was "*The Indispensible Church,*" given by Rev. J. R. Mantey professor at Northern Baptist Seminary. Rev. T. F. Harvey, pastor of Belden Avenue Baptist Church gave the evening sermon, "*The Glory of the Lord in His House.*"

During the next few years under the loyal and untiring leadership of Dr. Dent, Judson's membership continued to grow as did the various organizations within the church. Special evangelistic meetings and mission study classes were conducted each year. Numerous social affairs were sponsored by the various organizations within the church. Judson continued to be a strong influence upon those worshiping and gathering within the church, and upon the community as well.

On June 15, 1937, on account of ill health, and upon the advice of his physician, Dr. Dent found it necessary to resign as pastor of Judson Baptist church. For nearly 15 years he had labored faithfully and earnestly at Judson, seeing it grow from its small beginning to a large institution with well over 500 members. It was therefore, with a feeling of regret that the active relationship between pastor and church was severed. The church immediately conferred upon Dr. Dent the title of "PASTOR EMERITUS."

During the period that Judson was without a regular pastor, there were some rays of sunshine in the church life. One was the gift by Mr. and Mrs. Nuveen, of a set of organ chimes and harp stops in honor of the long, beautiful and fruitful ministry of Dr. Dent for 15 years our pastor. The gift was dedicated at the morning service Sunday October 10, 1937.

The next bit of good fortune was in being able to secure as our interim pastor, Dr. J. S. Ebersole of Champaign, Ill. His friendly and lovable

disposition, his interesting and helpful sermons, his wise counsel and deep interest in matters pertaining to every department of the church made his short pastorate of three months an important one in a period which otherwise, without a guiding hand, could have been disastrous.

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At a meeting of the church members held on September 29, 1937, it was voted to extend a call to Rev. Paul C. Allen to become pastor of Judson Baptist church.

This call was accepted and our new pastor began his services on November 1, 1937, coming with a spirit of enthusiasm that saw no limit to the future possibilities of Judson.

Since Rev. and Mrs. Allen were young people, it was natural that they should take a great interest in the various phases of young peoples work. Likewise, the young people received them with enthusiasm and eagerness.

Many new activities were begun, others changed and soon Judson once again began the cry for more room for the comfort of those attending the Sunday morning and evening services.

When the auditorium was completed, provisions were made for seating larger crowds by opening large folding doors at the rear and making use of the Sunday-school room. Altho this space was designed for overflow crowds it soon became necessary to make use of it for all preaching services. The spirit of the service for those who were forced to sit there however, was often spoiled due to the squeaking chairs and other distractions.

In July, 1938, the board of trustees approved plans for the enlargement of the church auditorium. These plans involved the removal of the folding doors, the raising of the rear floor, installation of pews, carpeting of aisles and the installation of a fine public address system. This work was completed by fall and again we felt that another problem had been solved.

The enlarged auditorium did provide relief for a time for our growing church congregations, but soon we were receiving requests for more and larger meeting places for Sunday-school classes and new youth organizations. Some of these needs were met by making use of various parts of the building which heretofore had remained idle, and by rearrangements which resulted in a more efficient use of our entire equipment.

Early in 1940, there was again evidence that the growth of our church

congregations was being stifled, a condition which would undoubtedly become more acute when the fall activities were started. Therefore, in October another forward step was taken, namely, the introduction of two morning worship services, with the Sunday-school session between. Many other changes which at first may have seemed almost revolutionary were necessary to perfect a well organized and smoothly running Sunday program.

From the first Sunday, the new plan was looked upon as a success and it was felt that benefits would increase from week to week as various minor problems were met and solved. Now after six months, the two services continue to accommodate far more people than could have been cared for with one service. Also, the Sunday-school attendance in all departments has increased at a tremendous rate, which in turn is creating still another problem.

Indeed the problem of growth at Judson and the necessary remedial measures seem to operate as an endless chain. Growth makes it necessary to introduce new ideas for relief. These ideas are received so enthusiastically that greater and more rapid growths result, which in turn demand further relief, and thus begins another circuit in the program of growth and relief.

Twenty years have elapsed since Judson Baptist church was organized, and during that period we have had an almost phenomenal growth. Surely God's blessing is upon us and upon His work which we are carrying on. It would be difficult to predict what another twenty or twice twenty years will bring, but with God's help and our continued faith in Him, many good and great things should come from Judson in its work of helping to spread the gospel thruout the community and the whole world.