

# Life and Religion

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## Celebrating 140 Years

First Baptist Church -West's "Generations of Generosity 1867-2007"

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by Ryanne Persinger



First Baptist Church West will celebrate its 140th anniversary with "Generations of Generosity 1867-2007," at 9:30 a.m. Dec. 2 at the church, 1801 Oaklawn Ave.

One of the oldest black churches in Charlotte will celebrate 140 years of service this weekend.

First Baptist Church West will commemorate 14 decades of worship dating back to 1867.

"We know that it's at the minimum among the oldest black churches in Charlotte," church member Patsy Burkins said. "It really does have a strong legacy."

The church was founded by a group of freed slaves who sat in the balcony of the predominately white First Baptist Church.

"It was very common for slaves to attend white services in the balcony," Burkins said. "For years after the Civil War (blacks) decided they didn't want to sit in the balcony anymore so they decided to form their own church."

In 1870, the congregation purchased land at 1020 South Church St. Construction of the church started in 1901 and was finally completed by 1911. The original church was torn down in the 1970s as part of urban renewal. Bank of America Stadium is close to the site of the original church.

"Churches were downtown and they were moved out," Burkins said. "Now there's a small building and a parking lot there."

The church was resurrected at its present location, 1801 Oaklawn Ave. and added "West" to its title. Since the church's founding, it has had 13 pastors with Ricky A. Woods the current senior minister. Nearly 500 people attend Sunday services.

At the dedication service, "Generations of Generosity 1867-2007" on Dec. 2, Woods expects nearly 700 people in attendance.

"We expect not only people who belong to this church, but people whose ancestors attended this church," Woods said. "We're very proud of our legacy and our history."

Sunday's guest speakers include Cleophus LaRue of Princeton University and organist James Abbington of Emory University.

“Dr. LaRue has been to our church on a number of occasions and he is one of the leading national experts in leadership and worship,” Woods said. “And Dr. Abbington understands all music, not just the gospel but the spiritual aspect.”

A 100-voice choir will also sing music that will take people on a journey from 1987 to 2007, Woods added.

On Nov. 17 the church celebrated a joint service with Johnson C. Smith University, to symbolize the school’s 140th anniversary.