

UNIQUE BEAUTY AND DESIGN

Have you ever wondered why the building of First Baptist Church is designed the way it is? There is a wonderful meaning behind the design of our church that was built in the 1960's.

A SANCTUARY DESIGNED FOR WORSHIP

The architectural design of the sanctuary presents numerous theological affirmations. The unusual shape of the building – expanding outward from the pulpit to the outer doors – and the seven arches of the roof suggest its central purpose.

PURPOSEFUL SYMBOLISM

This is a place for the proclamation of the good news of God in Christ Jesus to all the world. The seven bays of the roofline symbolize the seven trumpets of God that herald the final advent of Christ in the book of Revelation. The number seven in the Bible represents completeness or perfection. Seven outer doors under the mosaic across the front of the building denote the invitation to all people to enter into the worship of God.

AROUND THE SANCTUARY

Inside the Sanctuary, the arrangement of the pulpit, communion table, baptistry, and the stained glass windows communicate the focus of worship. The pulpit is in the center of the nave,

signifying the central purpose of proclaiming the word of God. On the front of the pulpit is a cross, a reminder that the cross of Christ is the heart of the message to be preached. The stained glass window in the baptistry depicts the cross of Christ, lifted up to draw all people to himself. Behind and above the pulpit is the baptistry. Here, believers confess their faith and follow Christ as a result of the proclamation of his redeeming gospel. Their baptism takes place at the foot of the cross. In front of and below the pulpit is the communion table.

Faithful response to the word of God unites us in the community of believers. As we break the Bread of Life, the word of God, we are invited to share the bread and the cup in the Lord's Supper, symbolizing our participation in the living body of Christ, the church, and our fellowship in the new covenant initiated in the blood of Christ. The Casavant pipe organ is renowned as one of the finest instruments in the American Southeast. It is named in loving honor of Mrs. Frank Ware, organist of First Baptist Church from 1901–61. The organ, built by Casavant Freres, Limited, of St. Hyacinthe, Quebec, Canada, was installed in the new Sanctuary prior to opening day services, February 20, 1966. The magnificence of the organ calls worshipers to lift their voices together in exuberant praise of God.

STAINED GLASS WINDOWS

The Sanctuary at First Baptist Church contains large stained glass windows that were designed to influence, to inspire, and to stimulate the worshiper . This is possible not only because of the sheer magnitude of the windows, but also because their designs tend to draw the viewer inexorably into the swirling colors and shape that express the Christian message.

The windows may be experienced on several levels. Upon entering the church, the viewer may initially be struck by the movement of the windows. The flow is toward the pulpit. The intersecting parabolas of the designs open forward, thus directing the viewer's attention to the focal point of the sanctuary.

Though reflecting a similar overall feeling, the windows possess individual character and significance. The south window is surcharged with excitement and a sense of urgency, bursting upon the viewer's consciousness with an impression of change, of turmoil, of "becoming". Here is the shattering glory and beauty – even the pain – of creation and of the creative process. The radiance near the center suggests the brilliant, intense light of God. Around it, like a river of fire, flows the creative flux. Distant bursts of light suggest the creation of galaxies in the far reaches of space. Unknown planets and stars emerge. A strong suggestion lingers of order evolving out of disorder as the will of God is imposed upon the matter

of the universe.

The faceted stained glass windows in the sanctuary were replaced with nearly exact duplicates of the original windows during the renovation of the Sanctuary in 1997. Deterioration of the epoxy filler encasing the pieces of glass made their replacement necessary. The hand-crafting of the reproductions was done by Statesville Stained Glass Company of Statesville, North Carolina.

The stained glass window in the baptistry, depicts the cross of Christ and was added in the recent renovation. It unites the original windows aesthetically and theologically. The great wonder of God's creative power and the glory of his eternal presence are joined in the cross of Christ. The redemptive work, the new creation God wrought in the cross of Christ, is the centerpiece of history. Bridging the space between the windows on either side of the sanctuary, raised high for all to see, and backlit to ensure its radiance, the baptistry window is a visual reminder of the centrality of Christ in our worship and in our pilgrimage of faith

THE STEEPLE

A Huntsville landmark and part of the city skyline, First Baptist's 48-bell carillon (Verdin) is housed in a free-standing tower. The carillon is playable from a mechanical console in the tower directly below the bells. Two-octaves of the carillon are playable from a small electronic keyboard in the music office and also from the organ console. The Carillon chime marks the hour and the bells are pealed for special occasions.

The steeple contains the cast bronze bell carillon, a carillonneur's room located below the bells, and a 90 foot elevator to reach the room. The steeple is covered with a zinc alloy that provides its unique patina. The 229' steeple is the largest prefabricated steeple in the world as recognized by the 1990 Guinness Book of World Records. It was fabricated by Campbellsville Industries, Inc.

THE MOSAIC OF CHRIST

The mosaic which adorns the facade of the sanctuary was created by artist Gordon Smith, of Smith Stained Glass Studios, Fort Worth, Texas. This art work began in 1966 and was finished in 1973.

The mosaic was designed to express the Biblical theme, "Creation and Redemption." Revelation 1:12-20 serves as the primary biblical text inspiring the design. The artist makes use

of many references to the person of Christ expressed in the great Christological passages in Colossians, Ephesians, Philippians 2, 11 Corinthians 4:6; 11 Corinthians 5:16–21, Romans—Chapters 1, 2, and 8, John 1:1–16, and Hebrews—Chapters 1, 11, and 12. They supply important ideas and combinations of ideas basic to the symbolism of the mosaic. The huge symbol of the cross laid over the Christ figure is an example.

The artist exhibits the central position of Christ in relationship to creation and man in the use of contrasting colors which are deep and fiery at the center, but surrounded by cool blue shades with their sweeping effects on the circumference. The distinct traces of pure white sweep like ribbons of mercy around the center portion. The sinless character of Christ is mingled freely with the whole creation. He is the source of all moral perfection and holiness.

In the midst of the seven churches, symbolized by lampstands, Christ stands. He is ever present to encourage them as they battle with opposing forces. This is the scene of the most striking colors in the design. The Christ figure occupies the center panel. This is the focus of the confluence and movement of the mosaic as a whole. Nothing less could represent the scriptural references to "the Cosmic Christ." The Greek letters, Alpha and Omega, are superimposed on the bosom. The kingly crown is suspended above the head ready for that final coronation "Day of the Lord" (I Thessalonians 2:2–3). Redemption is complete when He shall be crowned Lord of all

creation in the consummation of the ages to come (I Cor. 15:24, 25).

Various components heighten the interest of the Christ figure pictured in the center panel. He holds the seven stars in His right hand. A beam of light representing Revelation's two-edged sword, God's Word, spreads from His mouth. The Alpha and Omega are superimposed across His breast as is the cross.

In each of the other panels there is a lampstand. These represent the churches which orbit around the Christ figure.

The churches are luminaries in a dark world (Phil. 2:15).

While the primary emphasis is on Christ, the seven churches as mentioned in Rev. 1:4 are represented by lampstands in each panel or bay. they function as a visible part of the glorious destiny over which Christ Himself presides and Who is the center. Both the becomingness of the lampstands and their orbital movement seem to illustrate the same truth. Inherent in the design is an impression of the process of creation, of order evolving out of disorder. No doubt is left about the ultimate destiny of all things in Christ whether past, present, or future (Colossians). In the background of the upper part of the Christ figure is an expanding dimension of depth where the colors and lines flow together, forming a horizon of mystery lying behind the head and shoulders.

Furthermore, the art may be viewed as a symbol of the expanding work of the church in all the centuries since Jesus first sent forth His disciples. The viewer can see and feel the

centrifugal force of the mosaic. Jesus of Nazareth is the Lord of Creation. He initiates the movement of all redemptive forces. the centrifugal viewpoint appears obvious, as all things appear to move outward from Christ as Source. The grandeur and the mystery of His power are represented by radiations which project and mingle in the whole design.

On the other hand, if the idea of movement is reversed, the design as a whole further suggests a centripetal movement – a pulling toward the center of all the galaxies orbiting around Christ. Christ is the center of the universe. He is the Lord of life and the Lord of history. No element of the historical process – past, present, or future escapes His judgment or obstructs the manifestation of His love.

The Christ figure stands 43 feet high. The head is more than 5 feet high, and each eye in the Christ figure is about 8 inches in diameter.

The hands of Jesus are extended and appear to be engaged or involved in the motion and process of everything depicted in the mosaic. The art work is a strong reminder of the presence of Christ, Whose work of redemption is not only past but always present and continues toward the future. The facade has been designed not only to capture the attention of the eye, but to issue a strong invitation to come inside the church.

WHY WE REPLACED THE MOSAIC?

Not long after the mosaic installation was completed, tiles began to fall off. A couple of attempts were made to glue back pieces of the mosaic and to seal the mosaic, but these attempts did not work. There were multiple points of failure regarding our mosaic – materials, preparation and installation. The material used was pressed glass tiles (machine made) which do not have enough surface area for proper bonding of the cements, therefore the tiles were not “locked” in place. The preparation of the glass tiles with some sort of netting, bonded by epoxy, resulted in another point of failure. The epoxy did not bond well to the cements used for installation because the surface was so smooth. Additionally, the glass tiles were placed too closely together; therefore, there was not enough room for cement to bond between the sides of the tiles. Another area of failure in the preparation was in regards to the substrate wall. This wall needs to have some “tooth” to allow the mounting cement a chemical as well as a mechanical bond. It is very questionable as to the type/types of cement that was used.

WHO DID THE WORK?

The trustees consulted with Mr. Jim Piercy of J. Piercy Studios out of Orlando Florida. Mr. Piercy and his crew made the measurements necessary to reproduce the

artwork – using drones to photograph the existing mosaic – and remove the previous mosaic and prepare the surface for the new mosaic. Mr. Piercey acted as General Contractor for the Barsanti Marble Bronze Mosaic, a firm out of Pietrasanta, Italy. Mr. Barsanati's firm is fourth generation, originating in the year 1882. This firm contracted for the manufacture of the glass tile and assembly of the new mosaic. They made multiple trips to the United States and were assisted by Manrico Bertellotti who was their most experienced mosaicist. Manrico and his father own Ferrari & Bacci Mosaics, also in Pietrasanta.

HOW LONG DID THE WHOLE PROCESS TAKE?

Glass called smalti was manufactured in Italy. These are hand cut pieces of glass measuring about 1/4" X 5/8" X 1/4" thickness. They had to cut approximately 6 million pieces of glass to replace our previous mosaic which had about 1.4 million pieces. We completed one bay at a time, working toward completion of the project in five years... Spring of 2022. It was necessary to take this much time to allow the manufacture of the glass and the fabrication of the mosaic. They had to make a "cartoon" drawing of the actual size of each bay. This "cartoon" was laid out on a floor and the smalti was glued to the paper. It was then divided into much smaller sections, numbered, and packaged for shipment.

Mr. Piercey came with his crew to take down one bay of the mosaic at a time, and scrape off the remaining cement/mastic. They then pressure washed the surface, removed any remaining cement. A scratch coat, similar to thinset, was then applied over the concrete wall. Mr. Barsanti and crew then came to install the mosaic. All of this work was done from scaffolding and took about one month per bay to complete.

THE LOOK

The Trustees were very cautious about making any changes to the original design. We wanted to replicate as closely as possible the original intent of the artists that created the work. We have all heard that "beauty is in the eye of the beholder" and this certainly holds true for any work of art including our mosaic. We know and have heard people refer to our mosaic as "Jesus in an egg beater". We wanted to insure that we did not make design changes that create some new unbecoming reference in the future. Our first and foremost mission was preservation.

WHAT WAS THE COST?

The cost was \$1.6 million which included upgrades to the lighting of the mosaic. The Trustees allocated \$250,000 to the project, taken from

existing estate gifts. We also had a commitment of commitment of \$500,000 in matching memorial gifts – for each dollar given, another dollar was matched up to the maximum of \$500,000. Additional gifts were given to fully fund the project.

WHY SPEND ALL OF THIS MONEY TO SAVE THE MOSAIC?

Could we have done something else that is more cost effective or more mission minded? The trustees are charged to preserve and maintain our facility. Unfortunately, the fabrication and installation of our current mosaic was done by a firm who did not have tried and true techniques – resulting in the deterioration we see today. Since the previous mosaic could not be restored, the trustees recommended that we maintain the architectural and artistic integrity of our facility by replacing the mosaic. While we weighed the cost, we also weighed the historical, missional, artistic, and iconic significance of what was created when the church elected to commission such a work of art. This mosaic tells our story as a church, it tells our story as a community, and it glorifies and honors our God with its spiritual significance.