**A Short History**

**LAKE AVENUE BAPTIST CHURCH HISTORY Beginnings: 1854 – 1889**

​“My brother, I have made a good many paying investments in my lifetime but none that paid off like this.”

 These words were spoken by Deacon Oren Sage, a loyal member of Rochester's First Baptist Church, who purchased the plot of ground at the junction of Jones Avenue and Ambrose Street at Lake Avenue, dedicating it to the service of God. He contributed substantially to the first building to be erected there a small mission chapel opened in 1866 as a memorial to peace.

 It was in this building that Lake Avenue Memorial Baptist Church and Society had its beginning five years later on February 10, 1871. Memorial was retained in the title in gratitude for the return of peace after the Civil War, and also in gratitude that not one life had been lost to the Great Flood of 1865.

 Almost immediately, the need for enlargement was recognized, as membership steadily increased during the pastorate of Dr. Ebenezer Nesbit and Dr. Amos Judson Barrett. A much larger facility of dark red sandstone was begun. Upon completion of the first unit in 1884, the chapel was dismantled brick by brick and reassembled on Cameron Street, where with sixty from Lake Avenue as charter members, the Lyell Avenue Baptist Church as established in 1890. This building has since become home for the Cameron Community Ministries.

**A Time of Great Growth: 1890 – 1928**

 Lake Avenue continued in phenomenal growth under Dr. Clarence Barbour and after the arrival of Dr. Albert Beaven in 1909.  By the year 1928, Lake Avenue Baptist Church had a membership exceeding 2,800, the largest in the city.

Further expansion was considered as early as 1912 and two adjoining pieces of property were purchased. In 1918, the church, with its interior completely rebuilt and a departmentalized Sunday School building added, was again rededicated as a memorial to peace, the exterior now faced in gray limestone.

Under Dr. Beaven’s inspiring leadership, Lake Avenue was gaining country-wide recognition as a pioneering church, Innovations in educational programs, new forms of worship, and extended fields of foreign mission and community service marked this chapter in our history.

The Americanization program was a response to the influx of Italian immigrants into the neighborhood during the 1920s to the 1930s. Included were language instruction and a broad range of activities to personally assist families to adapt to their new environment.

An Italian-speaking congregation met in the Lake Avenue building, their minister receiving financial support from our church. This group became the nucleus for an Italian Baptist Church. Similar sharing of our facilities has occurred during the 1970′s to the 1990′s with Spanish-speaking congregations.

In the early days of radio, Lake Avenue realized the potential for new forms of ministry through the media. The church received a license and operated a radio station. Rochester’s current television station WHEC traces its origin back to Lake Avenue’s station.

Mention should be made of Helen Barrett Montgomery, daughter of Dr. Barrett, who was much revered nationwide for her outstanding contributions during the early 1900‘s. She became the first woman to be an elected public official when she joined the Rochester School Board in 1899, (20 years before women gained the right to vote) instituting much needed reform in education. She helped organize the Woman’s Educational and Industrial Union to achieve better working conditions for women. She was the first woman President (1922) of the Northern Baptist Convention, now the American Baptist Churches, USA. Her translation of the New Testament is a highly valued interpretation of the Bible.

**Depression, War, and Turmoil: 1929 – 1971**

When Dr. Beaven was called to the presidency of Colgate Rochester Divinity School in 1929, Dr. Whitney S. K. Yeaple was asked to become pastor, a position he held for 11 years. Following him, Dr. .Gerald Watkins assumed the pastorate and guided the church through the tumultuous period of World War II and the post-war era.

In 1954, George W. Hill accepted the call to serve. Dr. Hill’s ministry was characterized by bold, innovative thrusts in urban mission. When Rochester was torn by race riots in 1963, George Hill spearheaded efforts to organize the black community, a very controversial action, but a courageous attempt to bring about racial equality.

Lake Avenue’s commitment to the neighborhood also marked the years from 1965- 1970. A focus by the denomination, the seminary, and the church on a 5-year experiment for neighborhood renewal was led by staff persons William Nelson and William Lincoln. The Edgerton Area Neighborhood Association, which emphasized an ecumenical approach to community renewal, was formed early in this project. In response to this group, which was primarily represented by churches and property owners, WEDGE was formed. WEDGE, a grassroots group consisting of the neighborhood residents themselves, received LABC endorsement and, in turn, Lake Avenue accepted the support and direction of this secular group. It was centered in the Lyell Avenue/Jay Street area near the headquarters of Eastman Kodak Company.

**Fire and Rebuilding: 1972 - 1992**

In the fall of 1971, Dr. Hill left LABC to become pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Washington,D.C. Associate Pastors Roger Francis and Claude Pullis continued serving the church in a team ministry. Under their leadership the Edgerton Day Care Center was established the same year.

In the early morning hours of Saturday, January 15, 1972, a devastating fire destroyed what man had built, but it could not destroy the spirit of the Lake Avenue people.  Shocked, saddened and unbelieving, yet somehow drawn closer together, the congregation worshipped on the following day, packing to capacity the sanctuary in the Church of the Master, which Lake Avenue had helped establish in 1928. On the billboard that remained standing on the Lake Avenue triangle there appeared the proclamation: “Building Destroyed Church Intact.”

A Building Committee was formed to preside over the design and construction of a new church structure. Completed in 1975, it is the building we worship in today, the fourth to have been built on this site. The new church building was dedicated on November 2, 1975. Once again, the building was dedicated as a memorial to peace.

In 1973, John W. (Jack) Wilkes was called to provide leadership during the difficult post-fire era when the congregation met in leased sanctuaries while the new building was under construction. John Wilkes provided inspired leadership during the first four years in the new building until he died of cancer in 1979.

Lake Avenue’s long tradition of outstanding ministerial leadership continued with the arrival in 1980 of James C. Miller. Rev. Miller’s pastorate covered a 10-year span marked by a continued dedication to peace, as demonstrated by a congregational vote to become a Sanctuary Church in 1985. Strong ecumenical ties continued with Jim Miller’s role as chair of the Genesee Ecumenical Ministries (now the Greater Rochester Community of Churches).

In the 1980′s, Lake Avenue went through several staffing patterns in which our neighborhood received the deliberate attention of professional staff persons. During the late 1980′s, this included a cluster program for families, a Listening Ear program with School #5, holiday basket distribution, and an education and support ministry for street prostitutes. Many of these programs were initiated by Associate Pastor Patricia Pickett, ending with her departure from LABC in 1991. Other of her initiatives continue today in the form of congregational small groups.

In 1991 Rev. Miller left the church to head the Rhode Island State Council of Churches. He was followed first by Rev. George Earnshaw and then Rev. Andrew Davison as interim ministers while a search was begun for a new senior pastor.

**A Fresh Start: 1992 – present**

In November, 1992 the Rev. Peter Carman was called as pastor. With his encouragement and support, the Edgerton Area Neighborhood Association and the Maplewood Edgerton Ministers Association have become active again, a weekday boys’ club and girls’ club were started to serve neighborhood children, small group meetings of church members have increased, and the church, after a period of study and dialog, voted to become a Welcoming and Affirming Church.

In 1994 a planning process culminated in adoption of a “Call to Prayer and Action. It continues to provide the framework for development of the congregation and its mission to serve the needs of the neighboring area.

In 1995, LABC became a member church in the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists, affirming the inclusion in church life, membership, and leadership of all people, whatever their sexual orientation.

In 1996, the church called Anthony G. Majors as our Associate Pastor. Rev. Majors concluded his ministry in November 2002 when he was called to a church in California. During his tenure, the congregation grew and became a more racially and culturally diverse church, as well as more deliberate in neighborhood ministry and outreach.

In December 2002, Rev. Pamula Royal, a former Navy Chaplain and Hospice Chaplain, became our Interim Associate Pastor. Rev. Bill Taber, a member of Lake Avenue Baptist Church, was called as our Interim Associate Pastor in January of 2004 and ended his position in July of 2004. Jane Grant our Minister of Education retired in July of 2004 after 24 years of service to this church and in September of 2004 Rev. Debbie Bennett Reynolds was called as our Children’s Minister. From July of 2004 through October of 2005, Rev. James Ketcham served as our Minister of Community Life. Following Rev. Ketcham’s departure, Rev. Debbie Bennett Reynolds was named our Acting Associate Pastor. On March 22, 2009 she was installed as our Associate Pastor.

After 16 years of dedicated service as pastor to our congregation, Peter J. B. Carman was called to lead the Olin Binckley American Baptist Church of Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Rev. Carman’s final day at our church was April 30, 2009. In September of 2009 we welcomed our Interim Pastor, Gordon V. Webster who served with us until 2011. In May 2012 Rev. Dr. Michael Ford became our current Senior Pastor.

As we enter the 21st century, Lake Avenue Baptist Church has faced many challenges as our congregation grows in size and diversity. From 2006 through today, our church has become not only a multi-cultural church but also a multi-lingual church as we receive and welcome more refugee families from Burma, the Congo, and other countries. Over the last few years, we have also experienced the joy and vitality of having many children attending and Sunday School classes filled to capacity! We are truly an open and joyful community of faith for all people.