Wake Forest Baptist Church
Final Service—November 5, 2022
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Reflecting on the origins of Providence, Rhode Island, 1636, and with it the First Baptist Church in America, 1639, founder Roger Williams wrote: “I desired it might be for a shelter of persons distressed of conscience. I then communicated my said purchase unto loving friends, who desired to take shelter here with me.”

On this day of the final service of the Wake Forest Baptist Church in Winston-Salem, let us acknowledge that it is a congregation that at its best has sought to provide “a shelter for persons distressed of conscience,” while describing itself as a congregation that “believes in and dedicates itself to preserving and practicing historic Baptist principles, freedoms, and traditions,”

In that sense, across multiple eras, the church has remained witness for freedom of religion and conscience, justice, and reconciliation. In doing that, the church often found itself at odds, not only with the larger Baptist world, especially in the American South, but also with the university that gave it shelter. Theirs has long been what I might call a progressive, cantankerous gospel witness, a witness that took many forms in biblical interpretation, theological reflection, sense of mission, the meaning and practice of baptism, Holy Communion, the nature of worship, the care of souls and bodies, the struggle against racism, the role of men and women in church and community, the meaning of sexual identity, and the importance of Christian praxis and ministry for clergy and laity alike. Through all that, the church’s location offered opportunity, a calling, if you will, to nurture, encourage, and challenge new generations of university students here at Wake Forest, a gift to which many graduates of the university attest. Over the years as I’ve met Wake Forest graduates, I’ve often heard them declare: “I grew up in a Baptist church, but I never experienced a Baptist church like that until I went to Wake Forest.”

The list of community engagements is considerable, highlighted on the 50th anniversary:

March 1956 Wake Forest Baptist Church was organized in a meeting on the campus of Wake Forest College, Wake Forest, NC. Harold Tribble, president of Wake Forest College, presided. Glenn Blackburn, pastor of Wake Forest Baptist Church, Wake Forest, NC, and chaplain at Wake Forest College, was called as pastor.

July 1956 The first worship service was held in Wait Chapel.

1958 After an extended and sometimes stormy "trial" period, Wake Forest Baptist Church was accepted into the Pilot Mountain Baptist Association. Some local churches were concerned about Wake Forest's membership policies.

1962 Opened membership to all persons regardless of race.

1962 Working jointly with Baptist Hospital, Wake Forest Baptist Church started Meals on Wheels. Meals were prepared at Baptist Hospital and delivered by volunteers from Wake Forest Baptist Church.

1970 With five other congregations, Wake Forest Baptist Church started the Association for the Benefit of Child Development (ABCD).
1972-3 Along with 11 other congregations, Wake Forest Baptist Church was asked by the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina to bring its membership policies in line with policies of other churches in the state. Wake Forest and ten of the other congregations refused.

1975 With the Section of Neuropsychology at Bowman Gray School of Medicine, Wake Forest Baptist Church started a kindergarten class for children with learning disabilities.

1989 Wake Forest Baptist Church affiliated with the Alliance of Baptists, an organization of dissenting Southern Baptist congregations.

1989 Strong support for the establishment of a Divinity school at WFU

1993 A partnership with First Baptist Church East Winston began with shared worship and the building of a Habitat for Humanity House. Youth basketball team

1993 Church voted to affiliate with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, an organization of moderate Baptist congregations.

1994 Church honored by Winston-Salem Urban League (Whitney M. Young, Jr. Award for Bridging the Gaps in Race Relations) and the United Way of Winston-Salem (Community Problem Solving Award)

1998 Wake Forest Baptist Church removed from membership in the Pilot Mountain Baptist Association and the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina.

1999 The congregation voted to leave the Southern Baptist Convention.

2000 Same-gender ceremony for Susan Parker and Wendy Scott. Events related to the ceremony were the subject of an award-winning documentary, "Union in Wait."

2004 WFBC voted to join the North Carolina Council of Churches.

2005 WFBC voted to join the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists.

2005 WFBC was given the Kaleidoscope Faith Community Award by Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG).

The WF Baptist church is closing, but its legacy and witness lingers among Baptists, in this community, and within this University, a shelter for persons distressed of conscience living out a blessed, cantankerous gospel. Thank God.