

The First Baptist Church of Mansfield



Figure 1 First Baptist Church of Mansfield

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Who We Are



Figure 2 Pastor Ron Baker Retirement

The First Baptist Church of Mansfield (FBCM) is a small-town church with a long history. Founded in 1807, we are located in Mansfield, Connecticut, home to the University of Connecticut. About half of our church family lives within five miles of our worship center, while others travel farther to participate in worship and church activities. Our congregation includes people from diverse cultural backgrounds, educational levels, and political beliefs, and we are united by our shared love of God.

Our current active membership is mostly older, with half of our members being retired and 40% of our members having a yearly income of over \$100,000. Our church has a wide variety of talents, with approximately half our members involved in teaching or office work. In contrast, others include engineers, therapists, human resource officers, and IT folk (to name a few). Since COVID restrictions were lifted, we average about 20 people in church on Sunday, with several others watching online. We rent our building to the Storrs Chinese Christian Church (SCCC), and our two church families have cultivated a relationship in which we meet once a month to discuss plans and share events.

History

Our long history continues to shape our sense of call today, reminding us that FBCM has repeatedly adapted to new circumstances while remaining committed to worship, fellowship, and service.

FBCM's history reaches back to the 1770s, when Baptists first gathered in Mansfield homes, and by 1780 a small Baptist church was recorded in the town. The Mansfield Baptist Society, formed in the late 1790s to manage the church's practical and financial affairs, built the first worship house in 1808, and the Hartford Baptist Association officially recognized the Baptist Church in Mansfield in 1809. Over the next two centuries, FBCM grew through pastoral leadership, property acquisitions, cemetery and parsonage development, the construction of its present Gothic Revival sanctuary in 1875, incorporation in 1905, and later additions for education, fellowship, and meeting space. The church also endured challenges, including a near dissolution in 1863 that members ultimately resolved, while continuing to serve the community through youth ministry, public suppers, mission work, partnerships, and outreach efforts such as WAIM. In recent decades, FBCM marked its 200th anniversary, shared facilities with the Storrs Chinese Christian Church, adapted worship through livestreaming during and after the COVID pandemic, and entered a season of transition following the 2023 retirement of its longest-serving pastor, Rev. Ron Baker.

Our Beliefs

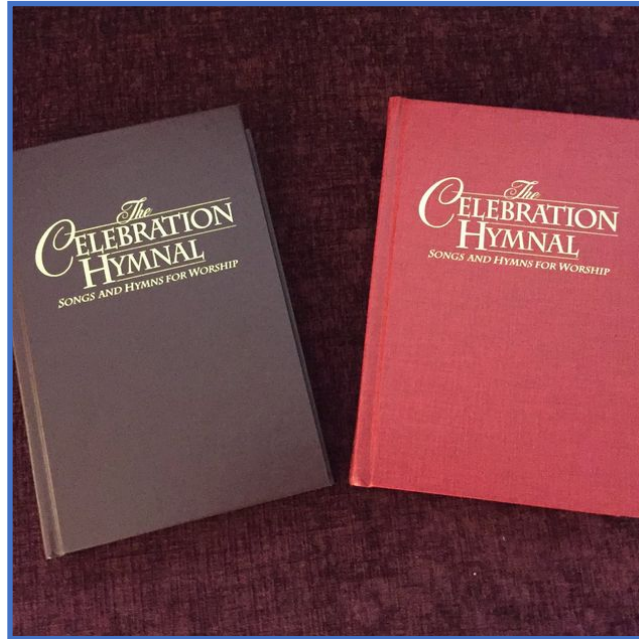


Figure 3 Church Hymnals

FBCM is an American Baptist Church, and we agree with basic Baptist principles of soul freedom, believer's baptism, and priesthood of believers. We read our Church Covenant (see appendix) (written in the 1800s) in unison each communion Sunday, reaffirming our dedication to God, our church, and each other. We believe God continues to speak to us through the Bible, our Pastors, church family, and friends, and prayer and meditation. We strongly support those in need, knowing we are asked: "in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you" (Matthew 7:12).

Worship



Figure 4 Church Choir

Our worship service at FBCM is primarily traditional, with congregational singing, responsive reading, scripture, and sermon. Congregational singing is mostly hymns or sometimes more modern music, accompanied by piano or sometimes organ. We have a small choir that sings three times a month and soloists or groups who sing the other Sunday. A congregation member leads a responsive reading, and children walk up to the front of the church for a children's message. We recite the Lord's Prayer during the service, and there are two singing responses for the congregation. We take the offering by our ushers passing the offering plate. We have many prayer times during the service, where members may bring prayer praises and concerns to the congregation. There are Old and New Testament scripture readings at different points during the service and a sermon the Pastor preaches.

FBCM celebrates communion on the first Sunday of the month and is open to all believers. The Pastor presides with assistance from the Deacons. Assigned Deacons receive the Communion elements from the Pastor and serve them to the congregation in the pews, and then we all partake of the elements together. We receive a Communion Fellowship collection the Pastor uses for church, family, and community needs. During each communion service, we read our church covenant (see appendix) in unison and end our service by making a circle, holding hands, and singing "Blest Be the Tie That Binds."

FBCM holds three special services during the year: Maundy Thursday, Easter Sunrise, and Christmas Eve. Members look forward to these extraordinary days in the Christian calendar, and the services utilize many of our members as readers and musicians. Maundy Thursday services have included many components, such as foot washing, dimming the candles on a large wooden cross, and sharing a simple meal.

Traditionally held in conjunction with the Mansfield Congregational Church down the road, the Easter Sunrise service takes place on the front lawn of our church grounds, from which we can see the actual rising of the sun. In the years before COVID, we shared an early morning breakfast, alternating between holding it at that church and FBCM. Our Christmas Eve candlelight service is at 7 pm to make it easier for families and seniors to attend. The Board of Deacons assists the Pastor with the planning of these services.

Church Life



Figure 5 Advent Event

Our church life is how we stay connected to each other. Including worship, we have many activities, both monthly and special events, which keep our family close.

We have an all-church coffee hour monthly after the communion service and additional coffee hours for special events such as the Christmas program or visiting speakers. We have many excellent cooks and bakers in our church family, which makes the food and fellowship enjoyed by all.

A monthly Breakfast is a meal shared by our men's group, and the church's group – “Friends of First Baptist Church of Mansfield” meet regularly to share a meal and fellowship while discussing ways to support the needs of the church. We have a Bible study group that meets once a week to study God's word and enjoy fellowship with each other.

Music is an essential part of our church life. Our music ministries program includes an adult choir led by our choir director, Dustin Schuler, and many gifted singers and musicians. The choir and other musicians share their talents during our Sunday worship service. We have special music presentations at Easter and Christmas during the worship service. After the Christmas program, a church group goes Christmas caroling to our members and friends who cannot attend worship and ends with a holiday party.

Family Fun Night is another time our church family shares its talents. This is a yearly event that usually takes place in March. The evening starts with a potluck supper, followed by members

and friends "doing something." We enjoyed dancers, singers, musicians, joke tellers, puppets, and many other talents.

The event always has a theme: the country of mission focus for American Baptist Women for the year. People bring food from that country, and we have mission moments during the program to learn about Baptist missions in the focus country. It is a beautiful time of fun and fellowship, which occurs at just the right time of the year for a pick-me-up.

Spring and fall are times for social gatherings. Sometimes we hold picnics at the church or the local park, and everyone brings something to share, and we celebrate the Sunday school year and baptisms. We invite our extended church family from the Storrs Chinese Christian Church to help us.

Christmastime at FBCM means Advent Event! Held on the first Sunday of Advent, it is a beautiful way to start the Christmas season. After church, we have a light lunch, decorate the sanctuary and tree, participate in crafts, and frost Christmas cookies. We have participants of all ages helping each other, and it has become a favorite event for everyone.

These events help keep us connected as a family.

Mission and Outreach



Figure 6 Church Blessing Box

FBCM is proud of our history of mission and outreach. From the days of Mansfield's Poor House, acclaimed as the model of its time for supportive care for people in need, to the current day, FBCM digs deep to do as much as we can to provide tangible and intangible assistance to those who need assistance.

Our church promotes and includes in our budget the major American Baptist offerings each year: America for Christ, M&M, and World Mission Offering.

Through our monthly Fellowship offering, we contribute to a fund with which our Pastor can provide tangible support to anyone who has come to the church for assistance, as well as contributing to local groups or situations such as WAIM (Windham Area Interfaith Ministry), Project Hope in Willimantic, the Holy Family Home and Shelter, the rebuilding of the church in Eastford, CT that burned, ABCONN's Camp Wightman, and others.

However, FBCM members do more than financially support missions. We have a Little Free Pantry (Blessing Box) in our parking lot where those with much share with those without. Church members and friends keep it filled so that community members may take whatever they need. We have supported mission individuals and groups from within our FBCM family as they went to W. Virginia, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Pennsylvania, and Hartford, CT – to name a few.

Fifth Thursdays are when our church provides dinner for the Community Suppers project in Willimantic. Helpers gather in our church kitchen to make meals and deliver them to Willimantic for distribution.

Our church participates in Windham Area Interfaith Ministries, sorting clothes and organizing donated items. We take to the streets in the Walk for Warmth, which raises money for heating support during the winter. Collecting warm clothing, water bottles, food, and other items is ongoing for our church to support homeless shelters and food pantries.

Our church has participated in many mission trips. Youth mission trips to West Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Maine have inspired many of our young people. Adults have visited Haiti, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and more. Locally, we helped rebuild a floor in a Hartford church.

Church Organization

FBCM participates in ABCONN (American Baptist Churches of CT), ABC-USA, ABC Women's Ministries, the Storrs Area Religious Community, and the Northeast Association.

The organizational structure of our Church is based on our desire to carry out the mission of Jesus Christ through the fair and efficient distribution of roles and tasks. Our structure provides ways for FBCM members and non-members to belong to groups within the church body that perform particular duties, as well as providing opportunities to change and grow in the roles they choose to undertake.

Our Church organizes itself into Boards and several committees. Boards make the day-to-day decisions of the Church, but a church meeting is required for all significant decisions affecting the Church as a whole. Each January, FBCM holds an annual meeting at which a slate of officers, board members, and committee members for that calendar year is presented for approval.

Besides the annual meeting, FBCM has two planned quarterly meetings, one in the spring and one in the fall. Each of these three meetings starts with a shared lunch and social time. Each Church officer presents a report to the church body. Each Board and Committee also offers a report of activity since the last meeting and a written report of the year's activities at the annual meeting. Members can bring up concerns or new ideas to the body, and the members may vote on motions or changes. Additionally, the calling of special meetings may occur any time during the year by following the church by-laws.

Church Officers include Our Pastor, Moderator, Clerk, Treasurer, and Financial Secretary.

The Church Boards are Deacons, Christian Education, Trustees, and Executive. Terms of service are for three years, with a second term possible before the member must take at least a year off from that Board. Only an official member of FBCM may hold an Officer or Board position.

- The Board of Deacons assists the Pastor in the care and nurture of our fellowship, assists with communion, and helps with worship.
- The Board of Christian Education helps provide a supportive environment that allows personal struggle, values questioning, and respect for differences while delivering programs and activities to equip people of all ages to learn God's Word and live to be disciples.
- The Board of Trustees manages the Church's property and finances in a manner that supports the Church's mission today and for the future.
- The Executive Board includes the Chairs of each Board plus the Moderator and Pastor. This Board serves as a communication forum between the boards and the committees of the Church and identifies and addresses the needs of the Church.

FBCM has several committees that help carry out the ministry of our Church by being responsible for particular functions. Some examples of our committees are music, stewardship, nominating, social, missions, flowers, and ushering. Terms are for one year and extended indefinitely per the member's desire to serve that way. FBCM members and non-members may serve on committees.

Who Is Our Neighbor?



Figure 7 Mission Trip Departure Prayer Circle

When thinking about our neighbors and those we want to serve through mission, FBCM's location is somewhat unique. Our Church building sits on a hill along the main road between the University of Connecticut and Eastern Connecticut State University.

To our south is the town of Windham/Willimantic, which has many ethnic communities and 30% of its population living below the poverty level. The town of Mansfield is home to UCONN, and 62% of the residents work in the field of education, yet many farms still exist in the area. Unsurprisingly, the highest age group in Mansfield is youth, with 62% of the population between 18 and 24 years old. Seniors make up 9% of the Mansfield population and 9% of the Windham/Willimantic population, with 42% of those seniors living alone.

When friends and members of FBCM recently completed a survey on their priorities in outreach to our neighbors, the local residents of Mansfield were the top priority, with friends and members who slipped away from regular worship during COVID being a close second. The survey also showed our church is highly committed to Sunday school and Bible study as both needed components of a Christian's life and avenues to bring more people to our church family. The survey results showed a solid commitment to helping our neighbors through Community suppliers and other local missions and having a reliable and vibrant music program.

When FBCM survey respondents stated their priorities in supporting specific groups within our congregation, the highest concern of our church community was taking care of our youth. Our community also mentioned particular concern for seniors, non-attending members, and supporting our Pastor and family.

Who is God Calling Us to Be?

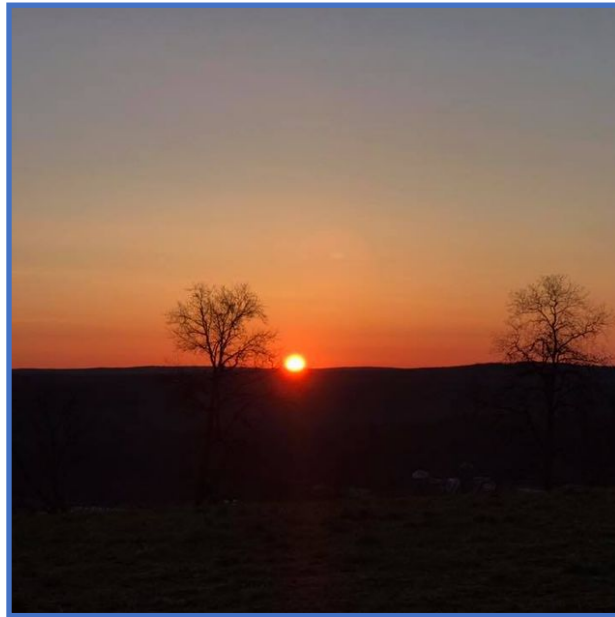


Figure 8 Sunrise Service from Church Lawn

FBCM is a small but committed body of Christ. According to the results of our congregational survey, we want to continue learning about the Bible and God's plan for us through Worship, Sunday school, and Bible Study. The survey also showed that we want to be involved in local missions supporting our neighbors through the Covenant Soup Kitchen, Community Suppers, the Salvation Army, WAIM, and our free food pantry.

Our church is interested in outreach to Mansfield residents, young families, seniors, and university students. We hope to grow through Christian Education, Worship, and Missions to witness to these and other groups, demonstrating God's love and enriching all of our lives.

Our New Pastor

Our church is excited about the future and moving forward with our Lord. We seek a Pastor who can lead us in our journey to become better Christians and help us develop a deeper relationship with Christ. We need spiritual feeding and want a Pastor who will preach and teach the bible, feeding His sheep. We need someone compassionate who will join us in our deep concern for each other. We are ready to serve and step out in faith. We seek someone enthusiastic about spreading the gospel and doing God's work.

Our church is offering a competitive compensation package. We also offer mileage and hospitality reimbursement, conference allowance, and a sabbatical fund.

Appendix

Appendix 1: FBCM Church Covenant

As we trust we have been brought by divine grace to receive the Lord Jesus Christ, and to give up ourselves to him, so we do now, relying upon his gracious aid, solemnly covenant with each other, and promise that we will walk together in brotherly love, as becomes the members of a Christian Church.

That we will exercise an affectionate care and watchfulness over one another, and faithfully admonish and entreat one another as occasion may require.

That we will not forsake the assembling of ourselves together, nor neglect to pray for ourselves and others.

That we will endeavor to bring up such as may at any time be under our care, in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, and by a pure and holy example to win our kindred and acquaintances to the Savior, to holiness, and to eternal life.

That we will rejoice at each other's happiness, and endeavor with tenderness and sympathy to bear each other's burdens and sorrows.

That we will not bring forward to the Church a complaint against any member for any personal trespass against us until we have taken the first and second steps pointed out by Christ in the eighteenth chapter of Matthew, and that all private offenses which can be privately settled, we will never make public.

That we will live circumspectly in the world, "denying ungodliness and worldly lusts," setting a worthy example, and remembering that as we have voluntarily given our lives to God to be used by Him in the furtherance of his kingdom in this world, so there is on us a special obligation to lead a new and holy life.

That we will strive together for the support of a faithful evangelical ministry among us.

That according to our ability and opportunities we will, as faithful servants of the Lord, do good to all men, especially in helping to extend the gospel in its purity and power to the whole human family.

And that through life, amidst evil report and good report, we will humbly and earnestly seek to live to the glory of Him who hath called us out of darkness into his marvelous light.

We moreover engage that when we remove from this place we will as soon as possible unite with some other church where we can carry out the spirit of this Covenant and the principles of God's word.