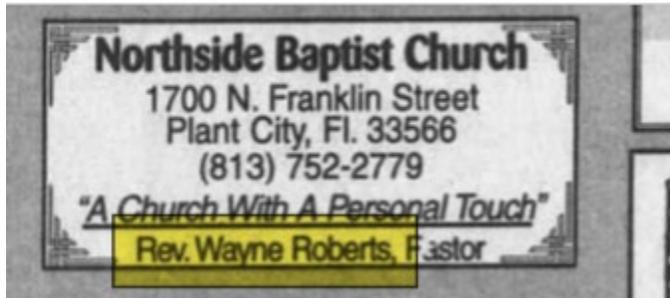
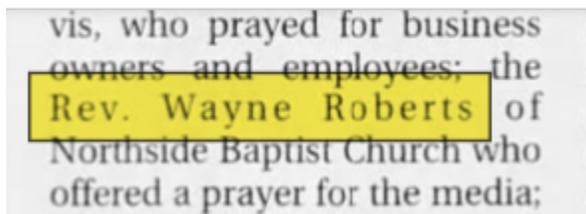


Wayne Roberts (1963-2021) served as pastor of Northside Baptist Church, Plant City, Bethel Baptist Church, Socrum and Calvary Baptist Church, Winter Haven.

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### Pastor Wayne Roberts

Lakeland - Pastor Wayne Roberts, 58, passed away Aug. 4, 2021. Visitation will be Sun. Aug. 8th from 2-3 pm, with services to follow at 3 pm at Bethel Baptist Church Lakeland.

<https://www.theledger.com/obituaries/plkl0046598>

# FAITHFUL HERITAGE

Bethel Baptist Church in Socrum Celebrates 150 Years

By GARY WHITE | THE LEDGER

**T**he red-brick edifice, occupying a high point beside the carrot-shaped Indian Lake at a bend in West Socrum Loop Road, stands as one of the most distinctive landmarks in Polk County.

"It's like the lighthouse of our community," Gracia Krug says of Bethel Baptist Church, the North Lakeland congregation she joined in 1973. "You can say you're from Socrum, and there are very few people who do not know where Bethel Baptist Church is."

The area around Bethel Baptist Church has changed drastically in recent decades as citrus groves have been replaced by subdivisions with such names as Pebblebrooke Estates and Winchester Estates. Yet for a century and a half, Bethel Baptist Church has abided.

The congregation will mark the 150th anniversary of the church's founding Sunday at 10 a.m. with a "homecoming celebration" heavy on food, hymns and reminiscences.

Bethel Baptist is generally considered the second-oldest continuing church in Polk County. Records from the American Baptist Historical Society show a first reference to the church in minutes from an association meeting in October 1863, when the church had 19 members.

Its location, the Socrum community, is one of Polk County's oldest white settlements, and records show religious services were held at the site as early as 1845, according to a history compiled by church members in 1987.

Peace Creek Baptist Church near Bartow lists its founding date as Sept. 3, 1854. The South Florida Baptist Association, though, lists Bethel Baptist first in its "table of places." Historian Canter Brown also describes Bethel Baptist as "Polk's first organized religious congregation" in his book, "In the Midst of All That Makes Life Worth



**THE NEW SANCTUARY**, opened in 2006, holds 1,250 people. The old sanctuary, which hasn't been used for Bethel Baptist's main services since the new one was built, was regarded as the state's biggest sanctuary when it opened 1929.

Living: Polk County, Florida, to 1940."

The old sanctuary, actually the congregation's third, was regarded as possibly Florida's biggest when it opened in 1929. Though the red-brick structure with stained-glass windows is a prominent symbol of the Socrum area, Bethel Baptist hasn't used it for its main services since building a new sanctuary in 2006.

The old sanctuary is still used by youth ministry.

#### YEAR OF PLANNING

Bethel Baptist's historical importance is enhanced by the cemetery that stretches to the north and west of the old sanctuary, part of the 50-acre campus. The oldest grave belongs to J.T. Rushing, who died in 1856, and the church history says the cemetery contains an unmarked grave for a slave named Jim.

The new sanctuary holds 1,250 people, making it about four times larger than the old one. It was built to allow for ample church growth, and typical Sunday services draw 300 to 350 people, Krug said.

Since Krug and other church members began planning the homecoming a year ago, their goal has been to attract 1,000 people for Sunday's services. Wanda Booth, a church member since 1969 and one of the homecoming planners, said former pastors, music leaders and congregants have been invited to attend.

Booth said she knows of a former minister of music who plans to travel from Texas for the homecoming. She has heard of other living across Florida and out of state who plan to be there.

David Burton, director of evangelism for the Florida Baptist Convention, is

[ PLEASE SEE **BETHEL BAPTIST, B6** ]



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historic markers in this North Lakeland community.

## Bethel Baptist

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scheduled to present the message during services. Rev. Wayne Roberts, Bethel's pastor since 2010, said former pastors and city dignitaries have also been invited.

Roberts, a hulking former college football player, said preparations for the homecoming have brought excitement tinged with nervousness. The anxiety mainly involves wondering if there will be enough food for everybody.

The Sunday service will be followed by a "dinner on the ground," a Baptist tradition. Planners say a large tent will be erected outside the sanctuary, and a feast of fried chicken and other home cooking will be provided.

"Baptists are big on having something to eat all the time," said Kenneth Sherrouse, a life-long church member.

Keepsake history booklets will be provided to those who attend, Booth said, and the service will include a slide show of historical images.

### FAMILY TRADITIONS

Congregants say the church's rich history intensifies its sense of sacredness. Sherrouse, whose ancestors were among the first settlers in Socrum, said his great-grandfather, Israel Sherrouse, was a church deacon. Sherrouse, 66, said he was born less than a mile from the church, accepted Jesus Christ

as his savior during a service there in 1959 and was married in the old sanctuary in 1984.

"A lot of families are deep-rooted families that stayed in the community, raised their kids there and never left," Sherrouse said. "I think that's what's sustained that church over 150 years."

Though Roberts has been pastor for only three years, he said he appreciates the church's deep legacy.

"We've been, Bethel Church has been a stable part of the north side of town when there's been so much change going on," Roberts said. "Our change has been numerical growth, spiritual growth, adding buildings and space."

Pride may be considered a sin, but Becky Bryant, who has attended Bethel Baptist for 42 years, said it's impossible not to be proud of her church. She said her husband's family has been involved in the church going back to his great grandparents.

"I like to brag about it because there are not a lot of churches that have been around 150 years in a community and have an active ongoing ministry," she said. "I guess if you don't go to church here it's not a big deal, but to me it's a very big deal."

[ Gary White can be reached at [gary.white@thelledger.com](mailto:gary.white@thelledger.com) or 863-802-7518. Join his discussion of books at <http://ledgerlit.blogspot.com>, [thelledger.com](http://thelledger.com) or [facebook.com/ledgerlit](http://facebook.com/ledgerlit). ]



*"Bethel Church has been a stable part of the north side of town when there's been so much change going on."*

**THE REV. WAYNE ROBERTS**

PASTOR OF BETHEL BAPTIST CHURCH, SOCRUM

## Remembering Faithful Servants

JOSIAS JOCELYN, pastor, Sanctification Haitian Baptist Church, St. Petersburg  
ANTHONY JOHNSON, pastor, Union Springs Missionary Baptist Church, DeFuniak Springs  
PETER LORD, retired pastor, Park Avenue Baptist Church, Titusville  
MATTHEW MEADOWS, pastor, New Berlin Baptist Church, Jacksonville  
RAFAEL MELIAN, retired, Florida Baptist Convention  
MARCEL METAYER, pastor, Renaissance Evangelical Baptist Tabernacle  
RONNIE MCKENZIE, retired pastor, Kernan Boulevard Baptist Church, Jacksonville  
JERRY MOORE, retired pastor, Northside Baptist Church, Panama City  
TOM MYERS, pastor, First Baptist Church, Mims  
ISRAEL OLIVEIRA, Brazilian pastor, Palm Springs Baptist Church, West Palm Beach  
HUGH PATTERSON, worship pastor, Jacksonville Heights Baptist Church, Jacksonville  
HENRY PEEPLES, pastor, Bible Baptist Church, Miami  
ERNESTO PERRAZA, retired pastor, Homestead  
GUY PIERRE, assistant pastor, Eglise Evangelique Baptiste Philadelphie, Miami  
JUAN PINEDO, pastor, Iglesia Bautista Pasos de Fe, Homestead  
DAVID POLO, pastor, Iglesia Bautista Boca Glades  
BUDDY POPE, former pastor, First Baptist Church, Ellenton  
CHARLES PRIESTER, pastor, First Baptist Church, Titusville  
WAYNE ROBERTS, pastor, Calvary Baptist Church, Winter Haven  
TONY SALMERON, pastor, Iglesia Bautista Central, Ocala  
PAUL SAMSON, pastor, Brooker Baptist Church  
RICHARD SNODGRASS, associate pastor, Oceanside Community Fellowship  
CARLOS SUAREZ, pastor, Iglesia Bautista Nueva Vida, Melbourne  
AUGUSTO VALVERDE, pastor, Iglesia Bautista Un Nuevo Amanecer, Miami  
LARRY WADE, retired pastor, Panama City  
JEROME WATTS, minister of worship, Unity Baptist Church, Jacksonville  
RICHARD WHITWORTH, associate pastor, First Baptist Church, Malabar  
JAMES WILLIS, pastor, Pine Forest, Pensacola

*...He would give you—a land with large and beautiful cities that you did not build, houses full of every good thing that you did not fill them with, wells dug that you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant...*

Deuteronomy 6:10-11

This list of names reflects individuals that the Florida Baptist Convention has been made aware of