

First Baptist to dedicate its bell tower

By DALE JAMES
Times Religion Editor

"People accused us of uglying up the Huntsville skyline," recalled the Rev. Dr. Ralph Langley. "One architect called it the second ugliest building in Huntsville."

Few structures in recent memory have stirred as much controversy in the Rocket City as First Baptist Church's bell tower. A report published in *The Huntsville Times* quoted anonymous "experts" who ranked the bell tower as being among the worst of an uninspired lot in a city rife with boring architecture.

Sunday, First Baptist will dedicate the 229-foot aluminum-clad tower — once dubbed the "beer can in the sky" — in a ceremony beginning at 1 p.m.

When plans for the bell tower began to take final shape, Langley, pastor at First Baptist, was prepared to face some opposition — support for the project within the congregation itself had, after all, been far from unanimous at first.

Nothing, however, could have prepared him for the vituperative nature of that opposition.

"We've had some mean letters ... taking us to task for building a bell tower of all things," said Langley. "They said the idea of a bell tower was just so much noise pollution. Called it a phallic symbol. Said the mural on the

sanctuary was done in colors by Crayola. Mean letters."

Harsh words indeed for what was intended as "a contribution, with love, to Huntsville, Alabama, in the name of God." Ironically, however, the criticism has had a unifying effect upon the congregation at First Baptist.

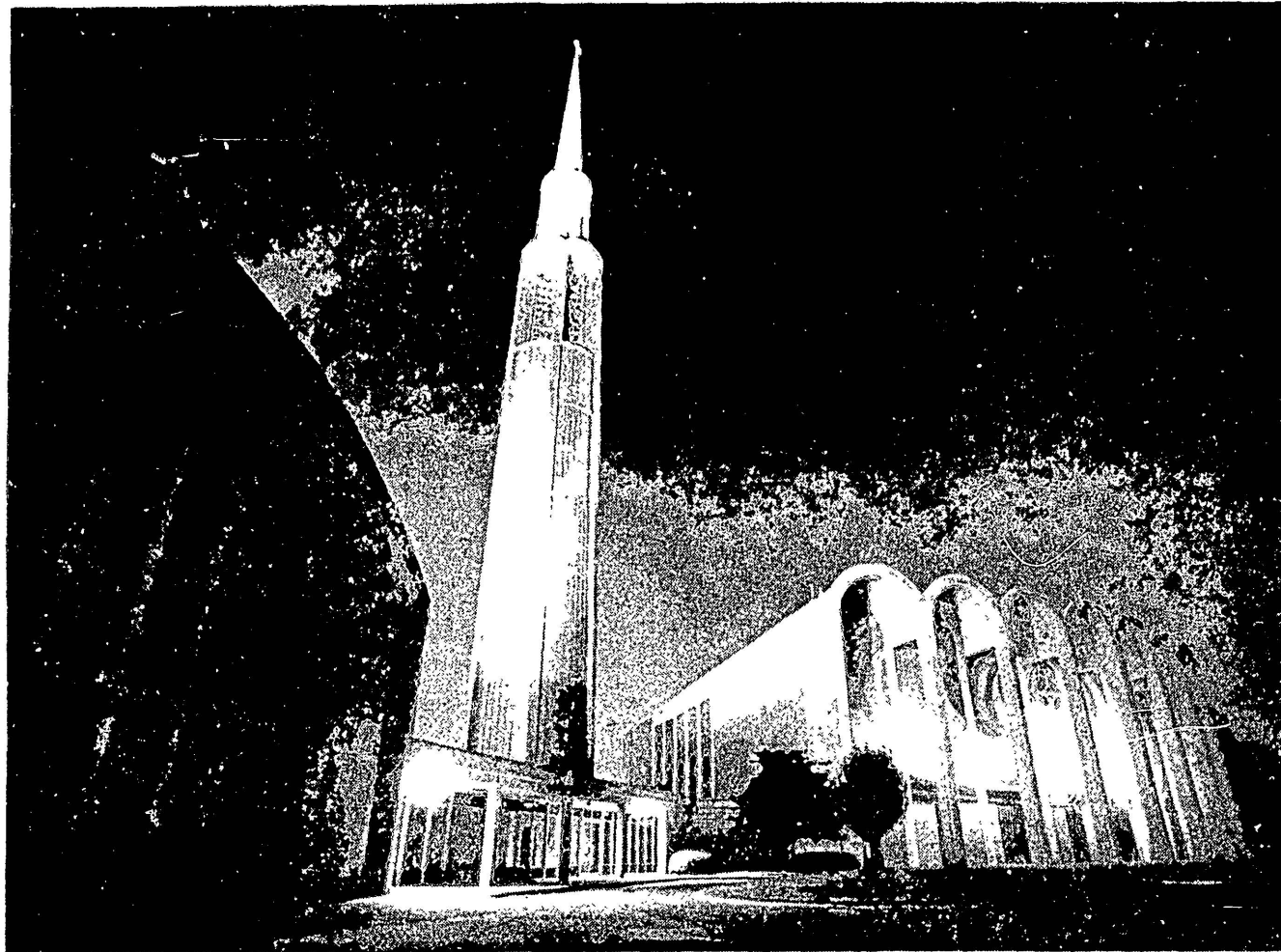
"All those little stabs were a help to us. It's just like family: If we want to criticize each other, that's one thing. But when somebody from the outside starts criticizing, that's something else all together. That tends to pull a family together," Langley said.

Besides differing opinions as to the aesthetic appeal of the bell tower, another common criticism centered around the cost, expected to total just under \$1.1 million — a figure that met with howls of righteous indignation from those who pointed out that there are people in the world today who are starving.

"When we announced the tower, a man began picketing our church saying this church should be closed," Langley said. "Some of our people wanted to kill him — and I think some of them would have. But I told them no, he might have been sent from God to show where we need to change.

"The Bible clearly tells us to be willing to accept valid criticism."

Rather than having the hapless protestor thrown into a den of angry Baptists, Langley seized the opportunity to build support for the tower among the congregation. He was invited to present his point



Glenn Baeske/Huntsville Times

Floodlights illuminate the bell tower at First Baptist Church. The upper third of the 229-foot, aluminum-clad tower is lit to 15

candlepower, meeting FAA safety standards for visibility by aircraft pilots.

of view before Langley's Sunday School class.

"He was scared — wanted me to guarantee his safety," Langley said. "I told him I was too old to fight, but if they rushed the front they'd have to go through me to get to him. I'd die with him."

It was, not unexpectedly, the largest Sunday School turnout in

months — the ranks swelled by both the curious and the angry.

"He said, 'You ought to give that money to the poor and hungry, not build a bell tower with it,'" Langley said. Referring to Judas' criticism of Christ for allowing his feet to be anointed with costly perfume, Langley added:

"I call that the Judas syndrome — and it's a terrific argument. But if you follow that logic to its natural conclusion we would never buy any property, we would never build any churches. Those things are legitimate means to an end."

The initial storm of protest over the construction of the tower has subsided and been largely replaced

by a steady trickle of people who, in the words of one humble lady, confess, "I likes it!"

The entire episode has served as a catalyst at First Baptist to build not only support for the tower but for missions, as well.

"Even with the added expense of the bell tower we have increased

See TOWER, page 7A

Tower

Continued from page 6A

our giving to world hunger threefold, as well as significantly increasing our collections for the Lottie Moon and Annie Armstrong offerings" for Southern Baptist missions work, Langley said.

"The tower is a one-time ex-

pense. Our giving to missions is a continual thing. We hope the bell tower will serve as an inspiration to sacrificial giving, to sacrificial living."

(The dedication service for the bell tower will begin Sunday at 1 p.m. at First Baptist. The service will conclude with a "Concert of the Bells," featuring Richard Watson of the I.T. Verden Co. of Cincinnati, which built the 48-bell carillon.

On Sunday only, the book "The History of First Baptist Church: the First 175 Years" will be on sale at the church for half price.)

St. Thomas'