

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH

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United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH

Other Name/Site Number:

2. LOCATION

Street & Number: 3300 Fairlawn Drive

Not for publication: N/A

City/Town: Columbus

Vicinity: N/A

State: IN

County: Bartholomew

Code: 005

Zip Code: 47203

3. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property

Private: X

Public-Local: _____

Public-State: _____

Public-Federal: _____

Category of Property

Building(s): X

District: _____

Site: _____

Structure: _____

Object: _____

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing

1

0

0

0

1

Noncontributing

0 buildings

0 sites

0 structures

0 objects

0 Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: 0

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing:

Modernism in Architecture, Landscape Architecture, Design, and Art in Bartholomew County, Indiana, 1942-1999

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4. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this ___ nomination ___ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register Criteria.

Signature of Certifying Official

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of Commenting or Other Official

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

5. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION

I hereby certify that this property is:

- ___ Entered in the National Register
- ___ Determined eligible for the National Register
- ___ Determined not eligible for the National Register
- ___ Removed from the National Register
- ___ Other (explain): _____

Signature of Keeper

Date of Action

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6. FUNCTION OR USE

Historic: RELIGION

Sub: religious facility

Current: RELIGION

Sub: religious facility

7. DESCRIPTION

Architectural Classification: Modern

Materials:

Foundation: CONCRETE

Walls: BRICK

Roof: SLATE

Other:

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Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.

First Baptist Church is located in a suburban area of single family residences, developed in the 1960s and 70s. The property is bounded on the east and north by Fairlawn Drive, on the south by Kennedy Drive, and on the west by Beech Drive. To the north is the city-owned Par 3 Golf Course and Clubhouse (1972). To the east is Richards Elementary School (1965).

The site comprises approximately seven acres. It is mostly flat, but there is a natural hillock to the northeast. The building is held close to the base of this hill. An entrance drive arcs to the building's main entrance, which faces northeast. The building is a two-story brick structure. It is composed of several distinct sections built around a central courtyard: narthex, sanctuary, office wing, fellowship hall, and chapel. Walls are a medium red, pressed brick, which is slightly mottled with a sand finish. Windows are galvanized steel sash, either fixed or casement units.

On the main level, the sanctuary is on the southeast; the narthex and chapel are on the northeast; meeting rooms are on the northwest; and offices are on the southwest. On the lower level are Sunday school rooms and additional meeting rooms. Grade access to the upper level of the building is only at the main entrance. The hill slopes down to the southwest. The entrance elevation (northeast) is composed of a long, low (about 10 feet high) brick wall that wraps around the curved end of the sanctuary on one end (photo 3), and circles around an interior stairwell on the chapel side (photo 4). This wall is a base on which the great roof masses of the sanctuary and chapel appear to rest. A wide, T-shaped opening in the center of the wall accesses a small enclosure, onto which open four glass entry doors to lead to the narthex..

The roofs of the sanctuary and chapel, similar in form and material, are dominant elements of the building (photo 1). The ridge of the sanctuary runs east-west; the ridge of the chapel runs north-south. The roofs of both are steeply pitched and covered with mottled gray/purple slate. They are hipped (the sanctuary at both ends and the chapel at the northwest end). Details in the roof are suppressed to the extent that at the changes in plane slate forms crisp lines. At the eave, the slate stops at the soffit line, with no gutter or fascia. The roof overhangs the face of the building by about 18 inches. In the soffits are set operable windows that indirectly light the interior spaces.

Near the southwest end of the sanctuary, a triangular brick wall rises at a slight angle from the ground to a point high above the peak of the roof, sectioning the sanctuary. Just above the peak of the roof, a circle is cut out where a bell is hung. The wall thus functions as the spire for the building. The wall is coped with lead-coated copper. (This material replaced the original brick coping, which leaked and was replaced with a different material at some point.) The sanctuary roof meets the wall at the top of the roof; at the eaves, there is a gap between the roof and the wall, and the intervening triangular zone, which extends from ridge to eaves, is filled with a skylight.

The side (southeast) wall of the sanctuary is brick with rectangular piers every 14 feet that suggest buttresses. There are no windows in the sanctuary. Tall slit windows serve the classroom spaces located below. On the southwest end of the sanctuary, the brick rises above the base established on the opposite side of the spire wall, and wraps in a semicircle around the end of the sanctuary. The roof above this semicircular section is also hipped.

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The chapel is separated from the sanctuary by the narthex. The chapel is similar in form, but is placed perpendicular to the sanctuary. This section of the building is smaller than but similar in design to the sanctuary. It also has a skylight and a spire wall (though with no circular cut-out or bell), which in this case is buttressed by a sloped wall.

The classroom wing on the northwest side of the building (photo 2) is composed of three bays that are each two stories high. Each bay is the width of a room. The bays are expressed with piers that continue above the roofline. The roof is flat, but there is a slate covered pent roof between each of the piers. A band of windows runs from pier to pier on the main level – which is a story above grade on this side of the building – just under the pent roofs. Windows on the lower level are casements in narrow openings.

The office wing on the southwest side is somewhat shorter than the classroom wing. It appears to follow the base elevation established on the entrance side. The facade is divided into eight bays that are about eight feet wide. As in the classroom wing, there are slate covered pents between pier, and a band of windows from pier to pier. There are louvers in the lower level openings.

The interior of the building is laid out around the lower-level courtyard (see floor plan and photo 7). The courtyard is accessed from the narthex, located on the northeast side of the building. A set of double doors in the south corner of the narthex opens onto a ramp that descends into the courtyard. The sanctuary is reached from the southeast end of the narthex and the chapel from the northwest end. Near the chapel end of the narthex is a circular, brick enclosure that serves as a coat closet. Most of the interior walls on the main level are brick. Ceilings are exposed structural tongue in groove decking, supported by laminated wood beams.

A corridor that extends from the west corner of the narthex has windows on the southeast side that overlook the courtyard. On the northwest side of this corridor are a series of three double door entrances to the large fellowship room. This room, which has a fireplace on the southwest end, may be divided into three spaces. The corridor continues around the corner, following the southwest side of the courtyard. On the southwest side of the corridor in this part of the building are several administrative rooms. The corridor terminates at the southwest end of the sanctuary section.

The sanctuary is the principal interior space of the building. It is a windowless room, made up of simple elements that combine to create a space that is at the same time dramatic and serene. Each element is a simple object – a brick wall, a beam, an opening, a skylight, but they are all exaggerated slightly in size, proportion, or height.

The entrance to the sanctuary is a low, dark space, with a ceiling under eight feet high. In this area, one is guided through a hairpin turn and up a curved flight of six steps to the light-filled sanctuary where the space ascends to a peak about 45 feet above the floor (photo 5). A handicapped access ramp was recently added that follows the curve of the wall at this end of the sanctuary. A sound and light control booth in the form of white oak casework was added at the same time. The additions are compatible in design and have had minimal effect on the space.

The ceiling of the sanctuary is the structural beams and deck of the roof. The brick side walls are very low, about five feet high. The spire wall that is a dominant element of the exterior functions

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in the interior as the front (southwest) wall of the main part of the sanctuary (photo 5). It is built of brick and is pierced by vertically-oriented, rectilinear openings that emphasize its height. The unobstructed openings allow views through to the choir and organ lofts that are located in the apse. Light from the skylight washes across the brick wall. Seating in the sanctuary is in white oak pews. The main aisle is off-center with the space.

The chapel (photo 6) is similar to the sanctuary in materials and detailing, except the spire wall that forms one end of the room is not pierced with openings as in the sanctuary. The chapel is unaltered, except for the infill of a portion of the vestibule as a closet.

In the lower level, interiors are similar to the upper level, except that the ceilings are concrete. In some areas, suspended acoustical tile has been installed to conceal recently installed air conditioning ducts.

The building has few alterations and retains its integrity.

The church was sited on the crest of a prominent knoll. The remnant of a walnut tree fence row was left intact on the east side of the property. Originally the site was bare (except for the walnut trees) and the building was dramatically silhouetted against the sky. Evergreen and deciduous trees were planted in the years following construction, and these have softened the initial impression. The parking lot and drives on the site are intact in their original configuration.

The church property is part of a larger community "center," consisting of the church, neighboring Richards Elementary School, designed by Edward Larrabee Barnes, and Par 3 Golf Course and Clubhouse, designed by Bruce Adams. Each of the three structures has a prominent silhouette or roofline, and together they form an interesting nucleus of an otherwise unremarkable 1960s/70s residential subdivision.

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8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

Nationally: X Statewide: Locally:

Applicable National Register Criteria: A B C X D

Criteria Considerations (Exception): A X B C D E F G X

NHL Criteria: 4

NHL Criteria Exception: 8

NHL Theme(s): III. Expressing Cultural Values
V. Architecture

Area(s) of Significance: Architecture

Period(s) of Significance: 1965

Significant Dates: 1965

Significant Person(s): N/A

Cultural Affiliation: N/A

Architect/Builder: Weese, Harry Mohr, Architect
Kiley, Daniel Urban, Landscape Architect
Repp and Mundt, Contractor

Historic Contexts: XVI. Architecture
Z. Modern

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State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.

First Baptist Church, completed in 1965, is nationally significant under Criterion 4 in the area of Architecture. Though the property is less than 50 years old, it qualifies for listing under Criteria Exception 8 for its exceptional importance. The building relates to the Multiple Property Listing, "Modernism in Architecture, Landscape Architecture, Design, and Art in Bartholomew County, 1942-1999," and to the Historic Context, "Modern Architecture and Landscape Architecture in Bartholomew County, 1942-1999." It is an outstanding representation of the work of distinguished American architect, Harry Mohr Weese (1915-1998), and generally thought to be his best work in Columbus, where he was the most prolific contributor to the body of Modern architecture that made the city famous.

The First Baptist Church was one of Columbus' early congregations. In the mid-1950s, the church building was located in a late nineteenth century Gothic Revival style building on Franklin Street. The church was experiencing the same problem of many local institutions at the time, that of rapid population growth. Though the membership was increasing, the church had no room for expansion on its small downtown site. In 1956, land for a new church at Midway and 20th streets was purchased. The next few years were spent raising construction funds. In 1962, the congregation hired Harry Weese and Associates to plan its new building.

By that time, Weese was familiar to Columbus residents. He had designed Columbus Village (1951), the Boys and Girls Club (1954; demolished 1998), Lillian Schmitt Elementary School (1957), branches for Irwin Union Bank (1958 and 1961), Lincoln Center ice arena (1958), the Bartholomew County Home (1959), Northside Junior High School (1961), offices for Hamilton Cosco (1962), and several projects for Cummins Engine Company.

Soon after Weese was engaged, the congregation decided to sell the Midway property and purchase a different site on the northeast edge of the city. The first site had been located close to the city's hospital on a flat site in a residential area. The new, larger site was located on Fairlawn Drive, adjacent to Rocky Ford Park and a proposed elementary school. The seven-acre, irregularly shaped site was distinctive because of a knoll at its northeast corner. Weese may have seen possibilities for the Fairlawn site and convinced the congregation to buy it.

In an *Inland Architect* article, architectural critic Nory Miller identified three significant church buildings in Columbus: First Christian (1942), North Christian Church (1964), and First Baptist Church. She called Weese's design "eclectic innovation" and compared it to a medieval monastery, with its angular sanctuary and chapel, office wing that resembled monk's cells, and cloister-like courtyard. Weese justified his references to the past, which broke with prevailing Modernistic thought: "We feel the whole gamut of architecture is our preserve, and we are not afraid to use forms that are outdated if they have any function. Faced with the choice, I would rather be right than contemporary."¹

The following statement, released by Harry Weese's office at the time First Baptist Church was completed, explains the architect's simple reasoning for the building:

¹ Nory Miller. "Exploring the Fundamentals in Fundamentalist Columbus, Ind." *Inland Architect* (December 1972).

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The First Baptist Church is located on a hill in the northeastern part of Columbus. It is basically a two story building which utilizes the natural topography so that the principle entrance is at the upper floor. The narthex, a chapel seating 100 persons, a community room with kitchen facilities, the pastor's office and administrative space are located at the level of this entrance with the main sanctuary seating 500 a few feet higher. These elements are grouped around a central court which, in good weather, is utilized for religious services. The lower floor of the building consists entirely of Sunday School rooms plus a small heating plant. This Sunday School floor, which is never more than two feet below the surrounding grade, also has direct access to the central court.

This two story scheme grew out of an effort to take advantage of as much height as possible in a generally flat countryside and to emphasize the chapel and sanctuary which otherwise might have been dwarfed by the large Sunday School requirements of the congregation.

There were, of course, also economic advantages to building a more compact structure. The structural system is basically brick bearing walls with concrete floors and a heavy timber roof. The building is naturally ventilated, but was designed to accommodate the future installation of air conditioning.²

Writing about the building in his 1989 book on Columbus architecture, architect and architectural photographer Balzathar Korab (1926-) opined that Weese was ahead of his time in integrating the principles of Modernism with elements of historical and vernacular architecture. Korab wrote in the book (as if addressing Weese), "As for historic allusions, nobody has built a more Romanesque church than your First Baptist Church since H.H. Richardson."³

Weese received his Bachelor of Architecture from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1938. After graduation, he received a fellowship to study city planning and architecture at Cranbrook Academy of Art. After a brief period of working for Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill in Chicago, he opened his own firm, Harry Weese and Associates in 1947.

Weese was relatively unknown when he was hired around 1950 to design Columbus Village in the small city of Columbus, Indiana. As the city's fame surrounding its Modern architecture grew, so did Weese's. Weese has had the largest number of commissions in Columbus of any nationally known architect (at least 18 built projects). In addition to those mentioned above, notable Weese buildings in Columbus are Otter Creek Clubhouse (1964); Cummins Engine Company Technical Center (1968), and several private residences. Architectural critic Paul Gapp, who wrote about Columbus for the *Chicago Tribune* in 1976, called First Baptist Church the best of the Weese buildings in Columbus.⁴

In a 1979 interview with Robert Cross of the *Chicago Tribune*, Weese discussed how his work in Columbus helped his practice in the early years: "Our firm was young, and we were competing against some very big stuff here in Chicago. So for the first 10 years I was very involved in

² Harry Weese & Associates. "The First Baptist Church, Columbus, Indiana." (Architect's statement, c.1965).

³ Balzathar Korab. *Columbus Indiana*. Documen Press, 1989.

⁴ Paul Gapp. "Discovering Columbus." *Chicago Tribune Magazine* (22 August 1976).

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Columbus, Ind., and Irwin Miller was my mentor.”⁵ (J. Irwin Miller was CEO of Cummins Engine Company and founded the Cummins Engine Foundation architectural program.)

Though much of Weese’s early work was in Columbus, he was the architect for many high-profile commissions in other places. He designed the U.S. Embassy in Accra, Ghana (1958), and thus became a member the elite group of architects chosen by the U.S. State Department for such projects. On a national level, Weese was probably best known for his design of the Washington, D.C. Metro system in the 1970s, called by the New York Times, “among the greatest public works of this century.”

Weese received many honors and accolades during his half-century career. He was elected to the College of Fellows of the American Institute of Architects in 1961. In the January 1966 issue of *Architectural Forum*, he was named one of the country’s 14 leading architects.⁶ In 1977 he received the Gold Medal of the Tau Sigma Delta Honor Society in Architecture and the Allied Arts. Harry Weese and Associates was named Firm of the Year in 1978 by the American Institute of Architects. Among other numerous awards received by the firm were:

- AIA National Honor Award for Buckingham Fountain
- President’s Historic Preservation Award for Union Station in Washington, D.C.
- 25 Year Award for the Seventeenth Church of Christ Scientist, Chicago Chapter, American Institute of Architects

Weese loved his hometown and was a major figure in Chicago architecture and planning. Some of his important commissions there were the Metropolitan Correction Center and Federal Courthouse Annex (1975), the Time-Life Building, and the Seventeenth Church of Christ Scientist. Weese’s firm grew to be one of Chicago’s largest and most respected. Upon his death, the Chicago Tribune called Weese “the renowned architect who shaped Chicago’s skyline and the way the city thought about everything from the lakefront to its treasure-trove of historical buildings.”⁷

Weese’s buildings were admired by many as pragmatic solutions to human problems. Korab wrote, “Harry’s buildings never beat their chests or stood on their hands in an effort to dazzle. They simply answered the needs of body and soul.”⁸ J. Irwin Miller said after Weese’s death in 1998, “Anything Harry did was sympathetic to human beings. If he built a house it was a good place to live. If he built a factory, it was a nice place to work.”⁹

In Columbus, as in Indiana in general, churches were historically built in town centers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Few new religious buildings were constructed between about 1920 and 1960 in the city, partly because of slow population growth in the 1920s and 30s, and partly because of economic reasons. In the post-World War II era, congregations grew rapidly, and churches were challenged to expand existing structures or build new ones. The new churches were built on the outskirts of the city on larger tracts of land, for, in addition to larger

⁵ Robert Cross. “Rest Assured Harry Weese is Keeping Chicago.” *Chicago Tribune* (20 May 1979).

⁶ *Architectural Forum*. January 1966.

⁷ “Harry Weese, Visionary Architect Known as ‘Chicago’s Conscience.’” *Chicago Tribune* (1 November 1998).

⁸ Balthazar Korab. *Columbus Indiana*. Documen Press, 1989.

⁹ “Weese left imprint on Columbus.” *The Republic* (1 November 1998).

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congregations that needed new buildings, parking need had to be accommodated for. First Baptist was one of the Columbus churches that moved to a large site in a newly developing area of town. North Christian Church (1964), built around the same time, was another.

First Christian Church (1942), one of the first churches in America of a non-historical design, paved the way for others in Columbus. While most new ecclesiastical buildings in other parts of the country still displayed the overused Gothic, Colonial, or Romanesque styles, Columbus watched the construction of a series of simple, Modern churches, most notably, North Christian Church (1964) and First Baptist Church (1965).

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9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Cross, Robert. "Rest Assured Harry Weese is Keeping Chicago." *Chicago Tribune* (20 May 1979).

First Baptist Church Dedication Program. 7-10, 12, and 19 of September 1965.

Korab, Balthazar. *Columbus Indiana*. Documen Press, 1989.

Harry Weese & Associates. "The First Baptist Church, Columbus, Indiana." (Architect's Statement, c.1965).

"Harry Weese, Visionary Architect Known as 'Chicago's Conscience.'" *Chicago Tribune* (1 November 1998).

Miller, Nory. "Exploring the Fundamentals in Fundamentalist Columbus, Ind." *Inland Architect* (December 1972).

"Weese left imprint on Columbus." *The Republic* (1 November 1998).

Weese, Harry. Interview with Nancy Lickerman Halik (12 January 1979).

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- Previously Determined Eligible by the National Register.
- Previously Listed in the National Register.
- Designated a National Historic Landmark.
- Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: #
- Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record: #

Primary Location of Additional Data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State Agency
- Federal Agency
- Local Government
- University
- Other (Specify Repository): Cleo Rogers Memorial Library Architectural Archive

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10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Acreage of Property: 7.1 acres

UTM References: **Zone Easting Northing**

A 16 597340 4343100

Verbal Boundary Description:

The property is bounded on the north and east by Fairlawn Drive, on the south by Kennedy Drive and on the west by Beech Drive.

Boundary Justification:

The boundary includes the building and grounds that have historically been known as the First Baptist Church and that maintain historic integrity.

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11. FORM PREPARED BY

Name/Title: Laura Thayer, Architectural Historian
Louis Joyner, Architect
Malcolm Cairns, Landscape Architect

Organization: Storrow Kinsella Partnership Inc.

Address: 212 West Tenth Street
Studio A440 Stutz Center
Indianapolis, IN 46202

Phone: 317-639-3420

Edited by: Carolyn Pitts, National Historic Landmarks Survey (215) 597-8875
Beth L. Savage, National Register of Historic Places (202) 343-9540
National Park Service
1849 C Street, NW, NC400
Washington, DC 20240