

## Visiting First Baptist Church of Hammond, Indiana

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Date

10 January, 2024

Collection

[Village Reporter](#)

[VR 2024](#)

I was recently invited to speak with Creation Expo at the First Baptist Church of Hammond, Indiana. The church, founded in 1887, is reportedly the largest Christian church in Indiana and the 7th largest in the United States. Megachurches have a reputation of being impersonal, resulting in visitors getting lost in the crowd. One of my main interests is, “why do some churches grow and others die?” One of my goals was to understand why First Baptist thrives.

When I arrived on Saturday afternoon, I explained why I was there to the few people there at this time. I then asked for help to carry my books in for my book table (a major part of my ministry is printed sermons on apologetics). Before I made it back to the door where my car was parked, two young men had loaded 23 boxes of books onto a large cart. As soon as my book table was set up, I began putting the books on the table. In-between services, several people wanted to talk with me about my writing and research; so many, in fact, that I was having a hard time manning my book table.

Several members noted this and cheerfully volunteered to take care of this service, explaining, “The church members who want to converse with you are more important.” It turned out that no small number of people had already read my books and wanted to discuss them with me. To an author, this was the supreme compliment. The entire time I was there, I was part of lively conversations! I soon felt I had been attending the church for a few years, not a few hours.

My Sunday sermon was “why did a good God create harmful germs?” The congregation must have found my sermon very useful because by the time I arrived

at my book table the entire large box of books on the topic of my sermon was sold. I also sold out of several other book titles. This is important because a central part of my ministry is the printed matter.

As I was a presenter, my concern was “are most strangers who attend likewise treated as honored guests as I was?” I observed the church makes an effort to identify new visitors by having new persons raise their hands, and information about the church was then given to them. This identifies visitors so that members or staff can later approach the visitors to welcome them to the church. The fact is, the first visit is critical, and determines if they come back. The three new baptisms that I witnessed supports my conclusion of growth. The church bus ministry brings thousands of people to the services each week from areas surrounding Hammond. The church has ministries for the deaf, youth, singles, and many other specific groups. They also have a church for Spanish-speaking persons at which several hundred attended.

Most helpful to my understanding of why the church was thriving was talking to members who described the sermons as covering, not just the traditional Bible teaching, but focusing on applying Christian principles to the lives of members. The church also addressed concerns related to the scriptural teaching about marriage, family, drug use, abortion, divorce, the requirement for fidelity in marriage, concerns related to LGBTQIA2S+, and the Christian teachings on social problems. The creation/evolution subject was also covered in some detail, which is why I was there. As one member stated to me, “We learn not only the Bible but its direct application to our lives.” Also, inviting guest speakers to inform the congregation on topics of concern was frequent, as illustrated by the visit of the 48th Vice-President, Mike Pence to address the congregation.

My visit to the office of one assistant pastor illustrated the churches’ stress on applying the scriptures. I was amazed at his collection of books, many of which he rebound or repaired. He was well read on a variety of topics related to this ministry. A visit of our group to the home of the Head Pastor, John Wilkerson, for a great lunch made by his wife was one highlight of our great visit. Use of the King James Version was stressed for good reasons. One is that many modern translations attempt to weave social trends into the scriptures, such as referring to God as a she, or a father/mother God. Also, translations differ so much from each other that it is hard to follow along when a different version of the Bible is read from the pulpit.

I also had an opportunity to address the students at the Hyles-Anderson College which is supported by the church. The packed auditorium where I spoke must have had 500 college and high school students, plus faculty and staff. After teaching college students for over 40 years, I have never had a reception even close to this in interest and support. All considered, my visit to Hammond Baptist was one of the best, most-rewarding experiences of the several hundred churches I have visited in the past 40 years. It is obvious why this dynamic church has grown since its founding, and continues to grow to this day.

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