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## **Massive cross ‘draws people’ to First Baptist Central Florida**

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ORLANDO (FBW)—The motto of First Baptist Church in Central Florida is “where the Cross is central.” Though the phrase was used only figuratively in the past, a stately cross now—visible for miles—literally stands in the center of the church’s Orlando property.

“When our members invite people to church, they can say, ‘Meet me at the cross,’” said Clayton Cloer, the church’s, senior pastor. “It is made to draw people in.”

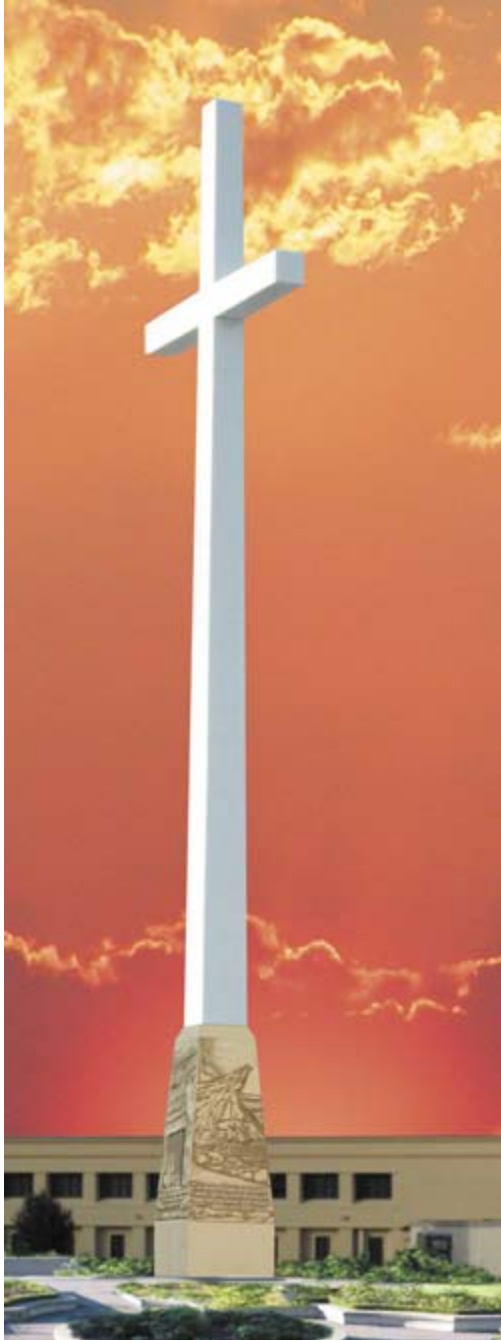
At 199 feet, the cross is the second largest free standing cross in the United States, second only to the 208-foot cross at the mouth of the Matanzas River in St. Augustine.

The St. Augustine structure was erected in 1965 on the 400th anniversary of Pedro Menendez de Aviles’ landing and claiming the land for Spain.

When First Baptist Church of Central Florida was preparing to build a new sanctuary on its campus, the congregation wanted to make sure the community knew the former school property had a new identity. Church leaders at first wanted to build a sanctuary with a tall steeple, but decided they did not want to compete with the Mormon Temple only 2.6 miles away.

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Cloer considered erecting an outdoor cross that would serve as a “rallying point” for the congregation, much like the three crosses at Bellevue Baptist Church near Memphis, Tenn. He



contacted Larry Thompson, former director of communications at the Tennessee church, to ask what he would do differently in building the crosses. Thompson had three suggestions: build only one cross; build it taller than 150 feet; and provide room at the base of the structure to congregate.

“I took his counsel seriously,” Cloer said.

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In 2004, Cloer contacted the company that built the Bellevue crosses, the Headrick Company from Laurel, Miss., which quoted a price of \$400,000 for the construction. Although the church voted to proceed with the project, approval from the Orange County Commission's Zoning Board was more difficult to achieve.

Plans for the 199-foot cross—one foot less than what the F.A.A. has to approve—far exceeded the county sign allowance of a maximum height of 35 feet except for football field lights.

“When the board first heard our proposal they thought it was comical,” Cloer said.



Even with Florida State Senator Daniel Webster, a member of the church, and Pastor Cloer speaking on behalf of the cross in a board room packed with church members, the zoning board unanimously voted down their proposal.

Nearby Ocoee also voted against the cross. First Baptist Church, however, remained undaunted and appealed both decisions.

City leaders of Ocoee, where Cloer said 400 church families reside, relented after a meeting in which Cloer and Webster extolled the power and meaning of the cross.

“The mayor said that ‘God came down at the meeting,’” Cloer recalled.

The Orange County Commission also changed its stance after Webster and Cloer spoke individually with every commissioner, and the pair changed their defense of the cross to “not a sign, but a symbol,” Cloer said.

After two years and four months, the church was free to proceed with the project, but in the two years spent gaining governmental permission, the price of steel and aluminum doubled, and the price of the construction more than doubled to almost \$1 million.

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“If I said it was an easy decision to go ahead with it, I’d be lying. We had to reconsider the cost,” Cloer said. “It was tough to decide to do, but God has already provided the money for it.”

The imposing structure was “the first like this for the Headrick Company,” said John Rebry, account executive with Headrick. Described as a “framed structure over pipe,” the cross is built around a circular steel pipe that was sunk 70 feet into the Florida sand, and the interior pipe was covered with panels of Alucobond. The panels are “thin, but rubberized to flex in the wind,” he said.

The base of the cross depicts four biblical scenes, each 40 feet tall—the Sermon on the Mount, the Crucifixion, the Empty Tomb and the Ascension. The sculpted scenes were painted by artist David Shows.

The cross was dedicated May 4, and 10 new believers were baptized in a portable baptistery on the first night the cross was illuminated. The area surrounding the cross is still under construction, and the church “hasn’t been cut loose to start using it yet,” Cloer said. In its first six months, however, the cross has already been the site of weddings, renewal of vows ceremonies and a marriage proposal.

The completed project will include seating for 250, a permanent baptistery and memorial stones in the courtyard. Cloer hopes the outdoor sanctuary will become a gathering place for both the church and the community.

“I see that the next time there is a 9-11, the community will gather here,” Cloer said. “And for the church—how appropriate it will be to conduct a funeral in front of the scene of the empty tomb, or the Lord’s Supper in front of the Crucifixion.”

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