



**Leo W. Wagoner**

Leo W. Wagoner is being honored as a 2013 Town Treasure for his life-long commitment to making a difference in the community, especially when it came to inclusiveness and opportunity for all. Leo Wagoner moved to Chapel Hill from Mt. Airy, NC, in the 1950s to take a sales position with a predecessor to Blue Cross Blue Shield of North Carolina. He traveled the state, eventually knowing someone in almost every town, before retiring as vice president of sales for the state's largest health insurer. While he enjoyed the work and was successful at it, his true passion was to make sure inclusiveness and equal opportunity for all were practiced in his adopted hometown. Never satisfied with the status quo, Wagoner took the lead where he saw the need. Seeking a church where they would be stimulated spiritually and intellectually and actively promote social justice, Wagoner and his wife, Grace, joined a handful of like-minded couples to begin the groundwork for a new church to meet their needs. The group met in one another's homes, until their commitment and passion for the plans they were laying drew wider interest, necessitated a move to Gerrard Hall on the UNC campus. An interim minister led the growing congregation until sufficient size and resources were amassed that the Rev. Robert Seymour of Mars Hill accepted the call, and Binkley Baptist Church

formally was established. The guiding principles established by the Wagoners and the other founders set the course that the church follows today.

Leo Wagoner also believed that every child should have the chance to play Little League baseball, but with only four or five teams in the local sanctioned league, if you weren't good enough to make the team, you didn't play. Wagoner took the lead in brokering a deal with the local Little League teams to donate their used equipment so that a second, but unsanctioned, league could form. While neither league was integrated, when a coach invited a black player to join his team, the loaned equipment was pulled. Again, Wagoner took the lead, amassing a team of coaches and ministers who raised seed money from local businesses for new equipment that bested the equipment used by the sanctioned league. The unofficial league also no longer had fields to play on, but Wagoner talked to then-chancellor Bill Aycock, who authorized the teams' use of UNC fields as long as the teams remained integrated.

- Wagoner's most gratifying work is "a toss-up between the work he did founding Binkley Baptist Church and the work so that every kid who wanted to get the chance to play Little League baseball," said Lee Wagoner of Hickory, Leo and Grace's son. "Our parents always told us and showed us 'make a difference where you are'. They did."
- Beyond these accomplishments that gave opportunity to so many, Wagoner fondly recalls the community July 4<sup>th</sup> celebrations that felt like big family reunions. The festivities included a watermelon-eating contest, a bingo tent and a battle of the bands—all on Fetzer Field. The fun moved to Kenan Stadium for spectacular fireworks, shot off from the south side, while the bleachers on the North side teemed with local residents weary but grateful for a full-day of Americana.
- Chapel Hill is no longer the quaint college town the Wagoners and their four children remember from those earlier days. Wagoner hopes the community would look to its past for inspiration for the future, "not forgetting where we came from or how we got to where we are today. And above all, may we always find ways to be each other's neighbor and brother."