

REFLECTIONS ON OUR HERITAGE

Organized in 1868, this church has stood for 110 years as a symbol of God's saving grace, His mighty power, and everlasting love. No storm or stress could shake it from the things for which it stood: a steadfast faith, a love of God, and all things pure and good. We salute the organizers of this, the Bethlehem Baptist Church.

Unfortunately, no written records of the early church were preserved, but we were told that the land for the first location was purchased from Fate Walker. This one acre of land was purchased by Sister Emily Hudson and later donated to the church. This site was located where the Walker cemetery is now located. Later, we were told, the church purchased another acre of land adjacent to the former site. Exactly who built the first church is not known. Rev. Green Bolton, a blind minister, was the first pastor. Rev. Bolton is a very historical figure as applied to the Black Baptist Church in Panola County. This pioneer antebellum preacher was the first Black pastor of the first Black Baptist Church in Panola County, namely, the Old Bethel Baptist Church of Clayton, Texas. This church was founded in 1843. This man who had been a cohesive force in the slave community before the Civil War, led this group of ex-slaves during the bleak, but joyful days of Reconstruction into the founding of this church.

Members of the Deacon Board during his pastorate here at Bethlehem were Brothers Dave Allison, Charles Holland, Beverly Gray, William Alexander, Sr., Tone Anderson, and Henry (E.E.) Coleman. The first church clerk was Robert Brown, the youngest brother of William Alexander, Sr.; he was followed by Sister Charles Louisa E. Monnie and then Deacon A.A. Black. The fourth Sunday in each month was established as the regular meeting day. Rev. Bolton's pastorate ended in 1881.

The first light that was shed in the minds of the group of organizers of this church spread with such force that it became a beacon in the center of the hill that beckoned men and women into its paths. From the small edifice lacking in detail of many things, it grew to a capacity which necessitated a move to the present site

in 1894. Here a new building was constructed, under the Rev. W.H. Starling. Rev. W.H. (William) Starling, the second pastor of this church, was born around 1897. This native of Rusk County served as Vice Moderator of East Texas Bethel Association and as Missionary over the East Bethel Association field. He also had a notorious teaching career in and around this area. He pastored both Smyrna Baptist Church in Timpson, Texas and



W.H. STARLING

Bethlehem. His service ended at Bethlehem in 1914 after 33 years of service. The Rev. Simon Pipkin served as interim minister until a regular pastor was called.

In 1915, Rev. James Monroe Carter, a native of Louisiana, was called as the third pastor of



this church. Though born a slave, he was blessed with enough innate vim and push to start to the front, and when the opportunity came, he attended the following schools: Wiley College, Marshall, Texas, Straight and Leland University, New Orleans, Louisiana. He made a good record at these institutions, being at one time a student teacher at Leland. Rev. Carter was indeed an outstanding character. In 1888, he was ordained to the work of the Ministry, and was called to pastor St. Peter Baptist Church, Pelican, La. The following year he was elected corresponding secretary of the Louisiana

BISHOP JAMES MONROE CARTER

Baptist State Convention, and served successfully for 20 years. The following churches were successfully pastored by him: Cross Road, 5 years; Mary Magdalene, 4 years; Stonewall, 3 years; Mayflower, 7 years; Friendship, 1 year; Morning Glory, 26 years; Good Hope, Keachie, La., 24 years; and the Oakland Baptist Church, Shreveport, La. He was honored by the 13th District Association for a four-time election to the Moderatorship. During this time he recommended the establishment of the 13th District Academy in one of his annual messages. He held these positions of trust: Member State Executive Board; Vice-President Louisiana Baptist State Convention; Member of Executive Board 13th District Association; and Editor News-Enterprise, one of the leading

Black newspapers of the state. Under the very capable leadership of this great minister, Bethlehem experienced a period of outstanding growth. It was remodeled; a piano was purchased and a choir organized; the membership was divided into tribes; two Sundays for regular worship services (second and fourth) were provided. This church then became the first church in this area to have two Sundays for worship services each month. During his administration, the membership increased to more than 500. At this time the Board of Deacons were J.C. Tatum, A.A. Black, S. Moore, W.M. Alexander, S. Flakes, Caleb Allison, Jas. Roberts. J.C. Tatum served as Chairman of Building Committee.

It is interesting to note that a thorough biography of Rev. Carter is entered in the book, History of Louisiana Negro Baptists by William Hicks. This book is in many of the libraries of our leading colleges. He resigned in May of 1927. Rev. B.S. Solomon, then a student at the Carthage Colored High School, served as interim minister until a pastor was called. Rev. Solomon now pastors the Second Baptist Church, Fowler, California.



I.S. BARRON

In 1927, the Rev. Isaiah Barron, the third Shepherd, was called to lead this flock. He was born in Henderson, Rusk County, Texas, and attended the public schools there. He later attended Bishop College, which was then located in Marshall, Texas. Rev. Barron was married to Emma Hill and they were the parents of five sons. One son, George W., pastors the Live Oak Missionary Baptist Church, Galveston, Texas. Rev. Barron served the East Texas area as a spiritual advisor for many years. He pastored numerous churches in the vicinity and served as Moderator of the East Texas Bethel Association for many years also.

During his pastorate at Bethlehem, the present church edifice was constructed; when he served as pastor at Shady Grove, Gary, a new church was built; he led the membership into constructing a new edifice at the Friendship Baptist Church, Tenaha and also the Smyrna Baptist Church at Timpson, Texas. With Arzie Sanders, chairman, the Building Fund Committee consisted of Brothers Amos Hall, Whitson Garrett, Jessie Bell, Hamon Lewis, William Alexander, Jr. At this time the deacons were S. Moore, Levi Hudson, A.L. Turner, A.H. Roberts, James Goree, and Gettis Black. Rev. Barron lost his eyesight during his later years, but he feasted on what he had read earlier and continued to preach. He was a dynamic speaker, known throughout the nation. He served Bethlehem until he passed away in 1949. He was laid to rest at Union Grove in Henderson.

In April of 1950, Reverend Jeff Rollins from Beaumont, Texas became the fifth pastor of Bethlehem. He began his pastorate in May of that year. This flock was richly fed spiritually



V.P. PERRY

Care Center.

under his leadership. He was instrumental in leading the membership to full-time. The parsonage was built; a cooling system was installed; a new piano and an organ were purchased; a mimeograph machine and pews were purchased; and a public address system was added. He liquidated the indebtedness of the church, also. He resigned to become pastor of the New Bethel Baptist Church, Marshall, Texas. Presently, he pastors the First Baptist Church in Palm Springs, California. There he is doing a magnificent duty. He has built several buildings including a parsonage, a most modern church structure, and a beautiful Day



W. LEO DANIELS



R.T. GEORGE

Rev. Rollins was succeeded by Rev. V.P. Perry of McKinney, Texas, the sixth pastor of Bethlehem. He graduated from Bishop College and attended various Theological Seminaries. Under his leadership, this church continued to grow. The central heating system was installed. Rev. Perry is remembered most for his profound sermons. The impact of those sermons still linger in the hearts of those who heard them.

He was called to the First Independent Baptist Church, Corsicana, Texas in 1960. Presently, he is pastoring the Mt. Zion Baptist Church, Amarillo, Texas. During the summer of 1960, Rev. R.T. George of Maywood, Illinois became the seventh pastor of this church. This energetic minister was an asset to both this church and the community. During his pastorate, the church experienced a period of rapid growth. The floor was carpeted, the walk around the church was laid, the bell tower was erected, a Pastor's Aid was organized, the church conducted weekly radio programs and several T.V. appearances were made, the

hot-water system was added to the kitchen, a communication system was installed, pulpit furniture was purchased, the church purchased it's first church bus, a community choir was organized, a Hammond Organ was purchased; and Rev. George was interested in recreational activities for the youth. Several deacons were added to the deacon board during his stay here.

Rev. George resigned as pastor of this church to become pastor of the Antioch Baptist Church, Oakland, California. There he is still making outstanding contributions to the work of the Master. The Rev. W. Leo Daniels succeeded him.

On April 4, 1965, the Rev. W. Leo Daniels, the eighth pastor of this church, arrived to assume his duties. This talented young minister was reared in Center, Texas and graduated from the C.H. Daniels High School. He attended various colleges, universities, and seminaries Jarvis Christian College, Wiley College, Texas Southern University, Houston Baptist University, and the Inter-Baptist Theological Seminary. Vowed with rare determination, one of his outstanding character traits, he dedicated himself and everything with which he associated to the leadership of this church.

His many sermons on stewardship inspired many members to become tithers. For the first time in its history, Bethlehem was represented in the Baptist World Alliance which was held

in Miami, Florida, June, 1965. He traveled extensively carrying out his missionary duties in the name of God. Many tasks were accomplished for the church during his tenure. The parsonage underwent a complete renovation; transportation for the church members was continued with the purchasing of another bus - a beautiful 32 passenger bus; he established an office for the secretary and furnished it with new equipment; the finance more than doubled; and the church opened a savings account.

He did a mighty work for the community, too. It was he who was instrumental in intergrating many of the public facilities of Carthage. This existing injustice disturbed him greatly, and though the task was an awesome one, he pounced into it. This venture has made all the difference. Still he dreamed. He saw the poignant need for a complete renovation of the church, and the need for an Educational Center with a library included. This was to have been his next giant step. Virtually, this is what he had in mind when he established the savings account. We deem it a blessing to include him as one of the historical leaders of this church. It was here where he did his first full-time pastorate. He was here when

he first began his outstanding recording career, On September 26, 1966, Rev. Daniels was called to the Greater Jerusalem Baptist Church, Houston, Texas. There he became nationally known as one of the most dynamic gospel preachers and recording artists of America.

In April of 1977, at the height of a beautiful ministerial career, he went home to be with the Lord. The members of Bethlehem are proud that he passed our way at the opportune time.

In March of 1967, Rev. L.R. Davis, the ninth pastor, was called to lead us. He was born in Long Branch, Panola County, Texas and attended school at the Shady Grove School. Here



L.R. DAVIS

he did both his elementary and high school work. With his family he moved to Indio, California in 1940. Later he moved to Palm Springs and there he united with the First Baptist Church. He served on the Board of Deacons under the pastorate of Rev. T.H. Reagins. In 1951 he moved to San Diego, California. There he became a member of the Calvary Baptist Church under the leadership of the Rev. S.M. Lockridge. Rev. Davis acknowledged his call to the Gospel Ministry there. Shortly after, with the encouragement of Rev. Lockridge, he entered the Ministers Lyceum and the San Diego State College. From there, he was called to pastor the Second Baptist Church in Indio. Determined to continue is

educational preparation, he enrolled in the Riverside Baptist College and the American Baptist Seminary. Rev. Davis often spoke of his fruitful experience at Second Baptist;

leaving was a painful decision for him. But, with God directing him, he came to serve the Bethlehem Baptist Church. Humbly he did a mighty work here. Many souls were added to the Kingdom of Heaven; and with the support of the members, a most-needed Annex was erected. This included several classrooms and a Fellowship Hall. Central air was also installed. The bus that we presently own was purchased; and three deacons were ordained -- Deacons Carroll K. Beck, Mozelle Holland, and Jessie (Bobby) Gates. Others serving as deacons under Rev. Davis were Gettis Black, Amos Hall (deceased), Marvin Smith (deceased), Jessie Bell, Joe Goree, Sr., Thomas Butler, Arzie Sanders, and C.H. Hooper. Brothers E.W. Brewster, William Terrell, Elijah Allison, Carroll Beck (later became a deacon), Harold G. Wells, Sam Parker, Elmer Randall, Thomas (Jack) Reese, Curtis Lilly (deceased), and Buford Grant (deceased) served as trustees. Rev. Davis served here until September, 1976. He then moved to Dallas, Texas and organized the Grace Missionary Baptist Church. Presently, three acres of land have been purchased; and a church-building project is in progress.

On November 15, 1976, Rev. J.T. Harris was called to Bethlehem. Rev. Harris is a native of Longstreet, Louisiana. After finishing high school at Logansport Rosenwald, he served as



REV. J.T. HARRIS, JR.

four tour of duty with the U.S. Navy. It was while he was enroute to the Mediterranean on September 20, 1970 that he preached his first sermon. He is a graduate of Panola Junior College and Wiley College (Cum Laude). Pastor Harris is presently attending the BMA Theological Seminary of Jacksonville, Texas working toward his Master of Divinity Degree.

This young man, who takes very seriously the saying, "A call to preach is a call to prepare yourself to preach," has already made plans to attend the Brite Divinity School of TCU in Fort Worth to pursue a Doctor of Ministry Degree when he completes his present studies.

Pastor Harris has prior pastoral experiences from Todd Springs and Greater Smyrna Baptist Churches of Timpson. Since coming to Bethlehem, he has led the church in purchasing the property adjacent to the church at a cost of \$9714, which has been paid for. In addition to this, we have added more than \$10,000 to our building fund. Above all this, since Pastor Harris has been with us a total of 46 souls have been added to the church and one deacon ordained -- Brother Clinton Cato. With this man of God at the helm of the Ship, Bethlehem looks at the past two years with rapt admiration and stares into the future with great anticipation. Surely, the waves will dash, and the billows will roll, but we will weather the

storm. We are proud that we can join in the great chorus of glad thanksgiving for the goodness that the Lord has showered upon us. Bethlehem has had 110 years of the best pastoral leadership in the nation; and we are glad to be a part of this great organized body of baptized believers. We have passed over the rough roads that led to here; we have pitched our tents on land near turbulent waters, but each of our pastors, during his own turn and in his own way, has brought us into greater and more secure avenues of success.

Since we who are here have been helped along the way by those who have served and gone before, we too must so inspire those coming on so that the new generation will continue marching on. As proud as we are of our church, we must constantly pray to keep humble enough to be of service, that the Master may be able to point with pride to us as those who have kept the faith, who have stayed in the fight for right and righteousness, and who one by one, will answer to the call from a righteous Father. O Lord, we thank You for those men and women of our past who honored You and left a faithful tradition for us to follow. May it ever be so. Amen.