

HISTORY OF THE MOUNT ZION BAPTIST CHURCH

1869 - 2007

FROM THESE ROOTS...

Shortly before Alabama became a state, nine settlers constituted the first church in what is now the City of Birmingham. Ruhama Baptist Church (Ruhama, translated means Mercy) began its ministry March 27, 1819. As it grew and established itself in the settlement called Ruhama Valley (located in close proximity to the East Lake area with its mail route in the small village of Elyton), the church included in its role slaves of some its members. In fact, one of the original nine whose names were recorded in the constitutional meeting of the Ruhama Baptist Church was a female slave whose name was Dinah, owned by Richard Rockett.

During this time, the population of the State of Alabama was 127,901 and the main concern for rural settlers was the Indian population and the dangers encountered in settling the land; even though the treaty of Fort Jackson in 1814 had brought about the end of the Indian War. Land grants were given by the President of the United States and the population of the state began to steadily increase.

The church continued to grow through the early years with some difficulties, as expected, but with faith and determination, Ruhama grew, built, and prospered. It became a church that was well known as a host church over the next forty years, hosting several meetings and conventions from time to time. *...In June 1851, a building committee of O.W. Wood, T. M. Turner, and W. H. McMath was named, together with a committee to solicit contributions to pay for the repairs and addition, consisting of W. H. Wood and H. Turner. The building committee brought the recommendation that an addition be built to take care of the Negro members. The first suggestion was that the room be built to the back of the church; then it was decided to change the location to the side of the building. The statement was recorded that the addition was to be twelve feet long, but it must be assumed the clerk meant wide, since the second plan indicated that*

the room ran the length of the church. This was the first experience for a place of their own to worship in for the black membership.

From 1859 until 1869, little was found in the minutes of the Church about the war conditions and how Ruhama was affected during the Civil War years. *The slaves were in the South because they were brought into America by owners moving in from France, England, and Spain. As early as Alabama's being a part of the Mississippi Territory they were a part of the state's economy. The last slave ship landed in Mobile Bay as late as 1859. Slave trade was forbidden in 1808, but smugglers continued until it was so difficult to get rid of the slaves from the last shipload brought in by captain Timothy Meaber, that Africy Town (Plateau, Alabama) had to be established in Mobile County to take care of them. Many articles appeared in the newspapers on returning the Negroes to Africa. Ruhama had relatively few slaves in its membership because Blount and Jefferson counties were not numbered among the counties that had heavy slave population. In fact, there were only six Alabama counties that did have slaves in large numbers...After the Slave Act of 1850 when slaves should be returned to their owners from out of state, some of the writers charged subject matter for many articles leading to this law had been ardently supported. The writers continued to remind all readers or listeners that it was the states which made the Union and not the Union which made the states. Such controversies so rocked the Southern Baptist churches that in 1845 they had withdrawn from the Triennial Convention to organize the Southern Baptist Convention.*

Although the records reflect that there was some *growing disorder* among the "colored people" during that time period, church discipline was meted out as had always been done in the past to all members, white and black. As noted in Ruhama's church history, there seemed to be no change in the attitude of the colored people toward their white friends. At the close of slavery in the fall of 1865, it was recorded by the church clerk as follows: "The subject for discussion was taken up and discussed." There was no record of the topic, but it is thought to have been about the freedom of the slaves and whether they would care to withdraw their membership. A short while later in December, 1865, the minutes record reads: "Owing to the freedom of the colored people

it was thought proper to give them an opportunity to withdraw their membership from the church for the purpose of forming a separate church to be comprised of the colored persons."

A committee consisting of O. W. Wood, LeRoy Hodges, and W. H. Wood was appointed to consult with and to instruct its Black members. However, at that time they did not want to leave and the committee felt that further action, at that time, was unnecessary. Four years later, after having one black female wanting to exclude herself from the church and also following this incident a black male wanting to exclude himself, the pastor of the church shortly thereafter suggested that the withdrawal of the black members be discussed again. The committee named at this time was J. McDonald, E. P. Wood, and E. B. Waldrop. The answer came back a positive yes and that they wanted to *leave as soon as their house was finished (church building)...According to the record of the last roll of the slaves which was made in 1858, it showed that there were twenty-one on roll and the sixteen received in the following ten years made the membership of thirty-seven to start the Mt. Zion Negro Baptist Church, the first church established by Ruhama Baptist Church. The negro church building, according to tradition was built in the area known today as Zion City. The Negroes who had been the slaves of the families in Ruhama Valley lived at this location.*

THE BEGINNING....

Although the Zion City Community was established in 1867 and was called "the Colony" at that time, the Mount Zion Baptist Church was built in 1869 and was organized by the Ruhama Baptist Church of East Lake. Although the freed slave members of Ruhama were numbered as thirty-seven, forty letters were requested from Ruhama Baptist Church as was later documented in the Mount Zion Baptist Church archives. Those freed slaves who founded the Mount Zion Baptist Church are as follows: Louisa Wood Marshall, Roda Miller, Sarah B. Brown, Hannah Goins, Jennie Reed, Dan Latham, Watt Clift, Frank Roebuck, Minor Clift, Dynishia Woods, Isaac Latham, Jemima Reid Latham, Harriet, the grandmother of all Woods, Reverend Henry (Father) Wood,

Hansen George, Pinckney Wood, Amanda Wood, Alfa Wood, July Wood, Julia Wood, Esther Massey, Mariah Hayes Tarrant, Elvira Hawkins Wood, Farr-A.B. Turner, Lucy-A. B. Turner, Rody-E. Wood, Easter-Massey, Coy Roebuck, Barbary Roebuck, Frank Woodson, July Waldrop, Wade Waldrop, Joshua Wilson, Emma Hayes Wilson, Alex Latham, Jim Wood, Rachel Roebuck Wood, James “Jim” and Amil Hayes, Frank Wood, Sr. and Elvira Wood, and Larkin Roebuck Hayes.

The land for the church and the Mount Zion Baptist Church cemetery was donated by Frank Wood, Sr.; one of the former slaves who had been granted 40 acres of land. The first church was built of logs across from the brick church site and its first pastor was Father Henry Woods, who served as Pastor until 1881.

Under the pastorate of Reverend S. D. Sanders, whose tenure lasted three years from 1888 until 1891, the first frame structure for Mount Zion Baptist Church was built.

When Reverend S. M. Hall came to Mount Zion in 1894, the church was in chaos as a result of the panic of 1893. He proved to be a wonderful leader and led the congregation competently through these troubled times. The idea of building the first parsonage was introduced by Reverend J. E. A. Wilson who served as pastor from 1897 to 1901 and the idea became a reality before his service was done.

The years from 1910-1928 were marked by steady growth through the spiritual guidance of Rev. R. N. Hall. He interested the members in adding a Sunday School Annex, Pastor’s Study, Choir Room, and beautiful stained glass windows to the church. Following his departure, it was during the great depression when a call was extended to the Reverend C. C. Welch. He served as pastor in the ensuing five years during which time the Mount Zion Baptist Church entertained the Mt. Pilgrim District Association in such an immeasurable way that it went down in the Annuals of the organization as a memorable milestone in its history.

Prior to World War II, in 1938, Reverend J. E. Moss was chosen as pastor. His main objective was the erection of the present brick church building and parsonage. Tithing was introduced and begun.

In 1951, Reverend Alfred L. Bratcher accepted the pastorate of the church and the church began a period of swift expansion. His intelligent influence and labors were reflected in every area of community life. Reverend Bratcher brought about the rebirth of the Civic League in 1951 and the organization of the Community Council in 1954. He led his followers to better the community with street lights, markers, street improvement, stop signs, and natural gas. He saw a need for more home building and encouraged home ownership. After five years of steady growth under this leadership, the church banded together and remodeled and beautified the church; completely decorating the auditorium by adding new carpet, new pews, choir chairs, pulpit furniture, Hammond organ, Communion table, modern baptismal, and an equipped nursery, in addition to adding a central heating system. Another achievement was the initiation of the Mount Zion Baptist Church Kindergarten in January 1955. On May 5, 1964, all payments on the church indebtedness were paid in full and a Mortgage Burning celebration was held on June 3, 1964. Reverend Bratcher was pastor of the Mount Zion Baptist Church from 1951 until 1964.

Reverend J. L. Dansby became Pastor-elect in April 1965 and served until October 1975. Under his leadership there was considerable progress recorded: A second mortgage was paid in full, he encouraged the membership to tithe, completion of the first floor with a modern kitchen and furnished Pastor's Study was added, the Head Start program was implemented in 1966, a public address system was installed in 1967, a Junior Usher Board was organized in 1972, there was activation of a Playground Committee to curb juvenile delinquency, the church was beautified with new windows, doors, and lights in 1973 and 1974, and air conditioning was installed in 1974.

Listed below are the former pastors of the Mount Zion Baptist Church, Zion City, from 1881 through 1977:

Reverend Henry Wood (Father Wood) 1869-1881

Reverend W. M. Ware—1881-1882

Reverend R. B. Hunter—1882-1885

Reverend Harry Blackburn—6 months

Reverend A. C. Jackson—1887-1888

Reverend S. D. Sanders—1888-1891

Reverend P. C. Caddell—1891-1894

Reverend S. M. Hall—1894-1897

Reverend J. E. A. Wilson—1897-1901

Reverend F. R. Kennedy—4 months

Reverend G. R. Nash—1902-1910

Reverend R. N. Hall—1910-1928

Dr. S. M. Hall (Second Call)—1928-1931

Reverend J. M. Jordan—1931-1932

Reverend C. C. Welch—1932-1938

Reverend C. L. Vincent—Interim Pastor

Reverend J. E. Moss—1938-1944

Reverend W. O. DeVaughn—Interim Pastor

Dr. A. L. Bratcher—1951-1965

Reverend J. L. Dansby—1965-1975

Reverend J. Green—Interim Pastor

Reverend W. O. DeVaughn—1977

THE PRESENT...

In October 1977, Pastor Earl Harry, Sr., arrived at the Mount Zion Baptist Church; a young man with a vision. He took upon himself the task of the restoration of the Mount Zion Baptist Church. For several years the church had been in a downward spiral and was in dire financial straits. His first acts were to encourage the church to pray daily and he emphasized love and unity among the church family. Being a strong leader and a powerful financial manager, he led the church out of the financial dilemma and placed it on solid ground. Projects that needed to be completed were top priority. For church

security, a chain link fence had to be installed. Opposition was faced in more than one area; but, unafraid of opposition, with God's help and through prayer, many battles were fought and won for the benefit of the church. A major area was the parking problem and the completion of the parking lot for the church. Mismanagement beforehand had resulted in less than satisfactory results and a great deal of work had to be done to straighten out the problem.

The church cemetery that houses the beloved remains of former members was in an overgrown condition, barely recognizable as a cemetery. Pastor Harry, true to form, tackled that problem immediately. After a few months, members were able to walk among headstones that had been hidden for several years and visit the graves of their loved ones. Not only was the cemetery reclaimed, but perpetual care is provided for the church grounds continuously. Always a good manager, the opportunity arose to purchase property from the City Board of Education that is in close proximity to the Church and located near the Church cemetery, another good investment.

Much needed renovation was again performed on the downstairs area of the church, revitalizing the church kitchen and Sunday School classrooms. Mrs. Gwendolyn S. Harry, the Pastor's wife and a teacher by trade, organized the Children's Sunday School and served as its Superintendent for several years.

Through his years as Pastor of the church, the comfort and welfare of the congregation has been Pastor Harry's main concern. The church is a two-story building and elderly members, or those who were physically challenged, found it hard to climb the stairs to the Sanctuary. Although unable to have an elevator installed, Pastor Harry was not deterred—the church was able to purchase and install a chair lift for those members with needs.

The church has been redecorated with cushioned pews and chairs, new organ and piano, new lighting system, new public address system, carpeting throughout on more than one occasion, and indoor/outdoor carpeting for the outside steps to the Sanctuary, on several

occasions. The church vestibule and entrance was renovated along with the Pastor's study. General upkeep of the church has always been top priority with Pastor Harry and is usually done in a "hands-on" manner. Through the years there has been a need for transportation for various trips and church outings, and according to those needs the Pastor saw fit for the church to purchase a bus and two vans.

There is a well-defined Finance Department governed by rules set up by Pastor Harry to administer to church upkeep and charitable gifts for public welfare. Pastor Harry is an anointed person with a gift for giving. Therefore, the church has been taught regularly that it must follow biblical principles of tithing and also to meet the needs of their fellow man when at all possible. The church shares with others in need on a regular basis due to this teaching and has been blessed.

The Mount Zion Baptist Church Music Department has grown tremendously under the supervision of Pastor Harry. The choir and musicians are as such that they are recognized city-wide for their talent. Pastor Harry recognizes that this was no coincidence and that God provides because of prayer. When the congregation assembles on Sunday morning, there is a joyful worship experience. Always open to what will bring about positive results for the church worship service, Pastor Harry was one of the first in the city to allow this music ensemble to perform. It includes, drums, bongos, organ, keyboard, saxophone, and bass and lead guitar.

The personal attributes of Pastor Harry are numerous. His motto stands that "there are no hands on the clock," if a member needs him, he is available to the congregation. For the last several years, his ministry has spread further than the Mount Zion congregation. He has been called upon to minister to complete strangers, or family members of other congregations. There is a definite call on his service to God for prayer. Pastor Harry has been pastor of the Mount Zion Baptist Church for the last 29 years. He holds the longest tenure of any pastor to have led this Church for the last one hundred and thirty-seven years. He was called to preach the gospel and called only to the Mount Zion Baptist Church; and, is considered, therefore, to be a gift from God to the church.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE...

The Mount Zion Baptist Church of Zion City in the year 2007 now stands at the crossroads that lead to a new direction—where will it go from here? It is particularly hard to imagine this move, since the church has been in this location since its organization over one hundred and thirty-seven years ago, and has seen a neighborhood grow, prosper, and die around it. At this point, the church family can only stand in blind faith, as the thirty-seven slaves who founded this church stood, waiting on a mighty move of God-- and so--We wait.

“Standing, standing—standing on the promises of Christ our Savior—Standing, standing—we are standing on the promises of God.”

Compiled by Brenda F. Davis Godhigh
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Sesquicentennial History, Ruhama Baptist Church 1819-1969, Fanna K. Bee, Lee N. Allen, pp.12, 45, 61 and 62.

In Memoriam 111 Years Ago, the Historical Preservation Cultural Phase Young Progressive and Advanced Matrons Circles of the Mount Zion Baptist Church

History of Mount Zion Missionary Baptist Church, One Hundred and Six Glorious Years, Carrie B. Burns, LaVergia Bates

History of Mt. Zion Baptist Church (Past, Present, and Future) 1869 to 1981, LaVergia Bates, Historian; Carrie B. Burns, Director of Archives Production; Librarians, Mesdames Velora Chamblin and Barbara Rivers.

History of Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church (117 Glorious Years) Compiled by Carrie B. Burns and Robert F. Woods 1869 to 1986