African American Church in Barnegat Marks 90 Years, Seeks Recognition on Natural Register of Historic Places

By: Victoria Ford

Mount Zion Baptist Church in Barnegat is a landmark erected in 1931, making it one of the oldest African American churches in Southern Ocean County, – although its congregation is made up of faithful people of all colors.



Church Founder Honored. Photo Credit: Victoria Ford

"We don't close our doors to anyone," Deacon Peter Bell said. The church welcomes "anyone who wants to come in."

At the present time, COVID concerns have put in-person church services on hold, though they may resume in the fall. In the meantime, a recent visit to the church for a meeting and tour meant playing it safe and masking up, as three parishioners – Deaconess Laurie Worthy, Deacon Peter Bell and Deaconess Edna Bell – provided information and insights into the church's preservation efforts.

"We are looking to have our church recognized," Worthy said, by applying to have the church listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The designation would also help them get grants for ongoing maintenance and improvements.

As for what it would mean to the congregation, Peter Bell said, "it should mean more to the community of Barnegat."

The church, he explained, is "part and parcel of the community." The late Rev. Richard I. Bell gave presentations at the Barnegat branch of the Ocean County Library each February for African American History Month, and the church organized soul food events there. The reverend has been gone eight years now, and those traditions await reinvigoration.

While closed, the church is still "open," Worthy explained, as members are "going about our Father's business, making disciples of all nations, preaching the good news, and most of all sharing our personal testimony so that someone else can be saved and come to the throne of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We continue to share God's Word, have meetings, and whatever else is needed to do via Zoom – Sunday morning Services and Wednesday evening discipleship classes as well. Because of technology today, we are able to go live and connect with others."

The building itself is 87 years old, but the church started three years before that; the cemetery associated with it is older, dating to 1924; and of course the traditions of African American culture and heritage in the area go back much further, though historical records are scarce. The late Rev. Richard Bell once told a reporter that all the information he could find about local African American history "would fit under a thumbnail."

Continued on page 8

Mt. Zion from page 7



Deaconess Laurie Worthy, Deacon Peter Bell and Deaconess Edna Bell
Photo credit: Victoria Ford

Zion is a name that refers both to specific hill in the city of Jerusalem and to the city itself, and it's also used as a general term for "holy place" or "kingdom of heaven."

The Barnegat Hill Cemetery, originally called Rosehill Cemetery, in a segregated world, was the final resting place "for anybody who was born African American," Bell said. Less than an acre, the small cemetery contains about 100 graves, many of them with modest headstones that read "Unknown." Some are hand-carved rock with illegible inscriptions. Over the years, groundskeepers and funding have not always been readily available.

Rev. Bell was quoted in a news article in 2011: "It was the only place in Barnegat where a African American person could be buried. African American people were not allowed to be buried alongside white people at the time."

In the area of Gunning River Road, where the church is located, many African American families settled going back to the days of the Underground Railroad, Peter Bell said. "We're not dealing with transient people," he noted. "Generations of roots" run deep.

The African American community has been thriving in Barnegat since the late 1800s. As of the 1930 census, 32 African American residents were counted in the township. That number increased tenfold over the next 70 years. After the 2000 census, the Ocean County Library reported its Barnegat branch served twice as many African American residents as other branches in the region. Between 2000 and 2010, the African American population doubled from 338 to 681.

Forked River, Waretown, meanwhile, "those were Klan country," Bell said. Taking the historical view of African-Americans in the area, he said, "it's a struggle to maintain what you had."

Mount Zion Baptist Church was founded on March 21, 1931, by the late Rev. Edward Simmons. In 1930, he received a divine message in a dream to start a church. Later that year, a man named John Smith donated the land, and then neighbors got together and donated their time and efforts to see Simmons' dream come true.

While the building was being constructed, the church's founding members held services in their homes. The congregation consisted of Rev. Simmons and his wife Lottie, Mother Addie Jackson, the Wests, the Kings, Whitfield Holloway, and Annie Miles.

The foundation was completed on July 22, 1934, when the cornerstone was put in place. The first service was held in the basement on the fourth Sunday of that month. Ten years later Rev. Simmons passed away. Since then, 13-plus pastors have come and gone. One of the long-term leaders of the church was Rev. Richard I. Bell, who came to Mount Zion as a fill-in pastor in 1988 and took on the full-time role officially in 1991.

Mt. Zion from page 8

Pastor Bell was instrumental in the church's growth and prosperity, having received a divine vision of renovation. With help from Worthy's late husband Deacon Terence Worthy, church members and neighbors from the community set out to remodel the humble 75-person- capacity sanctuary and bring it up to code. The work began in the fall of 2001 and was completed in the summer of 2003 and included a new balcony section, bathroom updates, new hymnals and bibles, pulpit furniture and communion table, a wooden informational sign, additional seating and office furniture. The basement, which serves as fellowship hall – "Mother Rose Smith Hall," to be precise – got upgrades for cooking and eating with a new stove, refrigerator cabinetry, tables and chairs. Mount Zion also purchased the adjacent property for a parking lot; invested in digital recording and audio equipment; and addressed other building projects including a new roof, HVAC system, windows, outside water faucets, vinyl siding, ADA signage and an electronic sign out front. A parking lot paving project is on the to-do list.

In ensuing years, the church established a scholarship program for high school graduates and a building fund with generous help from an outside family.

Rev. Bell passed away in early 2013, and his wife, Ruth, who took over after his departure, passed away four and a half years later. After a formal search, Rev. Joshuwa Armstrong came onboard as pastor at the end of 2018 and brought many new institutional and social ideas to fruition, such as "Men on the Mount," Mother of the Church, Sunday "Q&A with Pastor J," Sunday Bible "Jeopardy!", outings to the park or the beach, game day for the youth, "Sip and Paint" events, and discipleship classes. He also implemented TVs, a church logo and website, and the use of both the volunteer management app Vomo and the virtual meeting platform Zoom for bible study, which proved beneficial for transitioning to virtual worship services once the pandemic took hold.

"When it happened, I didn't know which way to go," Worth said. She was grateful to have her church community for support and comfort. "This is the place that's going to build me up," she said. "It's not just a church, it's a hospital – to get healed by the Word of God."

Next to help lead, guide and preach God's Word will be Rev. Agnes McClendon of Middletown, Del. who has served as interim pastor since March.

Edna Bell explained deacons and deaconesses are helpers to lighten the pastor's load by leading prayer meetings, bible study, Sunday school, communion, etc. Peter Bell pointed out references to the word diaconate, meaning office of deacon, appear in the biblical texts of Titus and Timothy. The Greek origin of the word is *diakonos* meaning "servant."

For Christians, part of serving God is also serving humankind.

Mount Zion Baptist has always had a philosophy of extending fellowship to other churches in the area, Peter Bell explained. Local pastors of different congregations would get together for prayer meetings. Nowadays, though, a lot of churches are going through changes, he said.

Currently the Spanish-speaking congregation of Bethel Viva is utilizing the Mount Zion facility as they are in the process of expanding south from Lakewood.

As ever, the church puts its collective faith in a divine plan. As Worthy put it: "Wherever He takes us, we're going."