

## **BETHLEHEM MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH**

### **1882-PRESENT**

In 1882, stood a small frame building, Bethlehem Missionary Baptist Church which was founded by Reverend Thomas Hill. The church was located on what was Lincoln Street in Norfolk County next to Douglas Park School. This section was called Douglas Park. Reverend Hill died in 1910 after which the Reverend Jefferies was called to pastor the church in 1911. He was affectionately known as "The Flying Angel." Reverend Jefferies was called from labor to reward in 1919.

In 1920, Norfolk City incorporated the section of Norfolk County where our church was located. Lincoln Street was changed to Link Street and is the current location of our church. The next pastor to be called was Reverend Nelson Brown of Richmond, Virginia.

Following Reverend Brown's pastorate, the following ministers served our church for short periods: Reverend Tyree, Reverend Red, and Reverend F. W. Williams (who was also a pastor of Queen Street Baptist Church, Norfolk).

The church then called the Reverend John Quincy Adams Lassiter, who served Bethlehem for more than thirty years. Under Rev. Lassiter's leadership, the church was moved from its original location and built on its present site. The spirit of the church was revived and membership increased as a result of God's blessing the church through his ministry.

Upon Reverend Lassiter's retirement, Dr. Dennis Haughton of Eastern Shore, Virginia was called to pastor the church in 1963. Dr. Haughton was pastor of the church until his death in November 1970.

After a pastoral search, the church extended the pastoral call to Reverend Leroy P. Watson in May 1971. Under Reverend Watson's leadership and pastorate, the church experienced a great period of growth. New members were added to the church by baptism, letter and Christian experience. Reverend Watson organized many new ministries such as Mid-Week Bible Study and Preaching Service, a President's Club, the Male Chorus and the L. P. Watson Gospel Choir. During Rev. Watson's tenure as pastor, much of the old equipment that had been in use for many years was replaced with new equipment to enhance the appearance of the edifice.

To keep pace with the progressive changes in the community, in 1978 Rev. Watson was given a vision to enlarge and expand the church facilities. With the cooperation and sincere dedication from the officers and members of the church, God blessed Bethlehem to erect a new Educational Center honoring the memory of the Founder of the church, Reverend Thomas Hill. During this period the church kitchen was remodeled and a new Hammond organ was purchased.

July 1991 a complete renovation of the entire building begun. Extensive repairs and additions were made to the sanctuary. Rooms in the rear of the church were enlarged; two new bathrooms were installed including one that provides accessibility for the handicapped. A special exit was also included. Property was also purchased across the street from the church. Reverend Watson served the church for twenty-two years until 1993. In October 1997 Reverend Watson was bestowed the title of Pastor Emeritus recognizing his many years of service and dedication to Bethlehem Baptist Church.

Dr. C. M. Heidelberg of the Eastern Shore was called to serve as Interim Pastor during the pulpit vacancy. This was to help maintain the stability of the ministry and provide cohesiveness within the church as the search for a new pastor was eminent. Dr. Heidelberg served as Interim Pastor from November 1993 until November 1994.

November 1994, Reverend Harold Bernard Branch of Norfolk was called to become the tenth pastor of the church. In a very short time Reverend Branch, received his vision from God, which included the need to build new ministries and incorporate things that would help to propel the church into the new millennium. New ministries that were established included the Elite Club ministry for seniors, Couples and Singles Fellowship, a monthly Youth Rap Session, and weekly prayer meeting and bible studies increased.

Under the leadership of Rev. Branch, the church experienced new growth. The kitchen was reconstructed to provide better service. A state of the art sound system with sound booth and tape recording capability was purchased October 1995. The Leslie speaker was relocated to an upper wall for safety reasons and to improve the quality of the sound throughout the church. A new van was purchased as part of the Transportation Ministry. New computers were purchased for the financial and administrative components of the church.

Under his pastorate, the Lord blessed Bethlehem with many new members through Christian experience, baptism and letter. New Deacons, Deaconess and Trustees were added to the Boards. The combined choirs' name was changed to the Voices of Bethlehem to promote unity among all the choirs. A special blessing to our church was the establishment of the Bethlehem Praise Dancers in June 1996, which became the Inspirational Praise Team in 1997. In 1999, the BBC Steppers were organized as well as the Little Angels. Together, each of the groups has added a new dimension of praise to the Bethlehem Family. They have blessed our hearts, as well as spread their ministry to other churches and organizations in the community.

The Church praises God as it continues a long tradition of being a part of community outreach. Using the slogan "The Church that seeks to serve the whole community", Bethlehem serves the community by providing bread and clothing to the needy on a daily basis, in addition to, feeding the homeless and needy monthly.

December 16, 2001 the church body voted not to vote on the candidate but to accept the recommendation coming from the Pastor Search Team. The Pastor Search Team recommended Reverend Terence B. Washington, an Associate Minister at Pleasant Grove Baptist Church, Virginia Beach, Virginia as the eleventh pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church. Rev. T. B. Washington's initial sermon as Pastor-elect was preached on January 13, 2002 and entitled, **"Let's Go Fishing!"** which challenged us to become evangelist in our homes, and in our communities. Since Pastor Washington's installation on March 10, 2002 the following new ministries were established: The Men's Fellowship, Women's Fellowship, The Young Adult Ministry, the "Raby-Turner" Intercessory Prayer, the Planning Ministry, and Program/Calendar Ministry. Under Pastor Washington's leadership, we purchased a new marquee, padded our pews, ordained Sister Ruth Mason as a Deacon, and licensed Ministers Sharon Y. Colvin-Washington, Vernita Latten, Helen Alston and Mildred Grant into the gospel ministry. The membership of the church continued to grow, and Bible Study participation grew to include studies for all ages. Through the preaching and teaching of the word of God, we were empowered to evangelize, by becoming fishers of men's souls in our homes, communities and throughout the Hampton Roads area. Pastor Washington resigned from the ministry in July, 2008.

Without a vision the people perish. God predestined the next pastor of the church to be one chosen from the membership of Bethlehem Missionary Baptist. On March 31, 2009, Minister Ralph Quincy "Chip" Moore was ordained and became the twelfth pastor of the BMBC ministry. Pastor Moore has been a part of the Bethlehem family for well over twenty (20) years. His wife, the love of his life, Melva Hart Moore and daughters, Erika and Nicole Moore, lovingly join him in ministry. The ministry of BMBC has been revitalized with renovation of the Church's sanctuary and fellowship hall. Membership has greatly increased, a state of the art sound systems installed, a new 15 passenger van was purchased; and additional property has been purchased.

As we continue this journey of our Christian walk, Pastor Moore leads this ministry according to Matthew 6:33 "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." Guided by God's Divine providence for us, we trust and believe that He will bless this ministry as we become willing, working disciples, spreading the good news of our Saviour, Jesus Christ.

We can, we will, we must!