



OUR CHURCH HISTORY

During the year 1912 there arose a great misunderstanding between the pastor, Rev. H.R. Williams, the deacons and members of the Fountain Baptist Church, located at 31st and O Streets. Having been taught by experience that within unity lies strength, several attempts were made to settle this dispute in a way which would be satisfactory to all. They drifted along until 1913. When it was felt that all hope was gone in regard to smoothing out their misunderstanding, the matter was put in the hands of the court. However, in this same year (1913), a last attempt was made to settle the dispute. This meeting was never held, however, because the trustees of the church had padlocked the doors.

Under the leadership of Deacons W.M. Clark, W.H. Hewlett, H.J. Walker and others, the St. Luke Hall on 26th Street was rented. About 200 members of the Fountain Baptist Church went there to worship for two years (1913-1915), while the other members remained at the original Fountain Baptist Church with the pastor, Rev. H. R. Williams. When the 200 members left, the Fountain Baptist Church had an outstanding debt of \$5,000.

The members at the St. Luke Hall were called an outlaw congregation. As a result, only one ordained minister of the gospel in Richmond would administer the "Lord's Supper" to them during those two years. Sad, but not discouraged, this small group of Christian soldiers managed to keep themselves together. Deep down in their hearts unwavering faith had taught them that God would, in his own time and way, bring peace from this great confusion. In the meantime, the members at the original Fountain Church were unable to meet the notes of the church. Finally the church was put up for sale. With an independent person as their bidder, the members at the St. Luke Hall gained possession of the church by bidding \$6,000, while the original Fountain members bid \$5,000.

It is interesting to note how the members at the St. Luke Hall secured \$600 of the amount needed to get a clear deed of the property. This amount was secured by Deacon and Mrs. W.H. Hewlett mortgaging their home. None of the other St. Luke Hall members owned their homes, but there were many more such faithful Christians among them. The church was now in the possession of the St. Luke Hall congregation. The original Fountain Church members, with the exception of a few, moved to another building at 32nd and P Streets under the leadership of Rev. Williams. How happy the St. Luke congregation must have felt in 1915 when they were led back from the St. Like Hall to their home church by the Rev. F.A. Funn. They were without a pastor, but still under the leadership of Deacons Clark, Hewlett, Walker and others. After having named themselves the 31st Street Baptist Church, they were organized by the Rev. R.O. Johnson, pastor emeritus of Moore Street Church.

The deed between the Old Dominion Trust Company, Incorporated, as Trustees, (now SunTrust Bank), and Henry J. Walker, William Clarke, Joseph Goodman, William H. Hewlett, and William Dandridge as Trustees of the congregation of The 31st Street Baptist Church, Colored of Richmond, Va. was made on March 20, 1915. For their incomparable sacrifice, Deacon and Mrs. Hewlett were recognized as Father and Mother of 31st Street Baptist Church and their pictures were etched in stained glass windows in the original building which was later destroyed in a fire. In 1916 the newly organized 31st Street Baptist Church called its first pastor, the Rev. Robert C. Williams. His pastorate was brief, extending over a period of sixteen months. It was during this

time that the first bell was put in the tower of the church. He later organized Good Shepherd Baptist Church.

When the Rev. Simon P. Robinson was called in 1918, the church had a membership between three and four hundred. The church's outstanding debt was \$3,000, which was paid in three years. At this point, the first mortgage on the church was burned. Of Rev. Robinson, the 31st Street Church can say that he was a Christian gentleman, very active in the different departments of the church. It afforded all a sense of satisfaction to see him take an active part, especially in the Sunday school, the future church.

In 1929 Rev. I.H. Hines was called to the pastorate with the church in a \$3,600 debt. This debt was paid in three years and the second mortgage burning was held. Under his leadership the membership increased from 500 to 900. Rev. Hines was considered a master organizer and church administrator who gave all his members a feeling of belonging by establishing various auxiliaries in the church. Some of the groups which came into existence during his administration were the Junior Usher Board, the Junior Missionary Circle, the Young Ladies Usher Board, Boy Scout Troop, Girl Scout Troop, the Inspirational Gospel Chorus, nursery staffed with a medical doctor, professional and practical nurses, the Willing Workers' Club and a dramatic guild. His wife, Mrs. Mollie Hines, was the inspiration for the Junior Sunbeam Chorus, the Youth Church and Young People's Prayer Group. As the Sunday school membership began to grow, he initiated a program for raising funds to build an annex to the church. Just a few months prior to his death he continued his expansion program by having the church purchase a lot in the vicinity of the church. As a result of this program the church raised \$4000. After the death of Rev. Hines on June 7, 1961 the members put their hands in God's hand and cooperatively carried on the work of kingdom building for one year.

Following this interim, the church realizing that a leader was needed, called the Rev. W.M. Davis to lead us to greater heights. Rev. Davis was installed as the Pastor of the 31st Street Baptist Church on November 19, 1962.

On November 16, 1966, our church edifice was destroyed by fire. This experience was truly heartbreaking. Many of our senior members living blocks away would recount seeing the massive flames arching high in the nighttime sky. The congregation, however, under the leadership of Rev. Davis, determined to miss not even one Sunday of fellowship together, immediately began holding worship services in the auditorium of nearby George Mason Elementary School. Weekly prayer meetings were held in members' homes.

Ground was broken for our present structure in March, 1968 in a dedication service which included community clergy, neighbors and friends, as well as the building architect and contractor. Then in May, 1969, with jubilant hearts, the 31st Street Baptist congregation, led by Rev. W.M. Davis, reverently marched from George Mason Elementary School into our newly constructed \$300,000 edifice. The interior of the sanctuary still remained to be furnished with pews, however, this did not dampen the excitement of members and visiting friends as they entered the main entry. Ushers guided members to folding chairs arranged on the first floor of the sanctuary. Pews and carpet would be installed later. Church organizations and members faithfully contributed to the building fund through sacrificial giving in order to retire the church's indebtedness to Central Fidelity Bank.

The original interior design for the newly constructed edifice with educational wing provided for meeting rooms for prayer services and Bible study, classrooms for Nursery, Beginners and Primary Sunday school classes and a child accessible restroom. The pastor's study and clerk's office were originally located in adjoining spaces on the first floor of this wing near the front

entrance. The Primary classroom space was remodeled in the 1990's to accommodate a larger women's restroom. The Beginners' Sunday school classrooms were redesigned as offices to accommodate secretarial staff operations. Children's church school classes were relocated to the fellowship hall.

In 1977, the church steeple had to be replaced after it was blown off during a severe windstorm. At a Monday evening worship service on May 19, 1980 we held our mortgage burning ceremony, having retired the indebtedness of the church. This momentous service concluded with the pastor, choir and congregation joyously singing in unison, "Praise God, from Whom All Blessings Flow." During his tenure Rev. Davis also expanded the Sunday school program with training coordinated through Virginia Union University for Sunday school teachers. Rev. Davis served the congregation until November, 1981.

Thirty-first Street Baptist Church has been served by the following six pastors: Robert C. Williams, 1915-1917; S.P. Robinson, 1918-1926; Isaiah Henry Hines, 1929-1961; Willie M. Davis, 1962-1981; Darrel Rollins, 1982-2007, and Morris G. Henderson, 2007-2018. The Rev. Dr. Alvin Campbell began serving as interim pastor in July, 2018.

Rev. Darrel Rollins was installed as the fifth pastor on November 28, 1982. Dr. Rollins was a highly trained academician, community activist, preacher, and mentor. Under his dynamic leadership, in which the focus was leading the congregation from membership to discipleship through preaching and teaching, church membership grew tremendously. Operating under the prophetic vision of Dr. Rollins and theme, "Combining Relevance with Reverence, the church continued to witness to the wider community through outreach ministries. These included the Nutrition Center offering hot meals five days a week, Clothes Closet, Operation Homework, Radio Ministry, formation of ministries such as the Progressive League, Youth Fellowship, the African Cultural Society, Puppet Ministry and continuous Christian education training, such as an annual Family Life Workshop.

Over the years, major capital improvements have taken place such as the completion of two parking lots with handicapped accessibility, the addition of a handicapped accessible restroom, first aid room and expansion of the ladies restroom. The church bell from the edifice destroyed by the 1966 fire was later memorialized and sits on the grounds fronting the 31st Street parking lot. Between 1997 and 1998, the unfinished second floor of our structure was completed allowing for larger and more efficient spaces for our finance office, pastor's study, ministerial associates' office, unisex restroom and large conference room. Pictures displayed in the conference rooms were donated by Dr. Rollins. The fellowship hall and kitchen also underwent major refurbishing, including the installation of a walk-in freezer and kitchen appliances upgrade. The year 1999 marked the beginning construction of our elevator which was donated by the late Sis. Loretta Bowman-Ellis and family. On Sunday, July 9, 2000 the elevator was dedicated to the honor and glory of God and for the comfort and convenience of members and guests. A new heating and cooling system was installed in the sanctuary in 2008.

On June 5, 2007, our fifth pastor, Dr. Rollins, died. His death left a tremendous void in leadership not only in our church, but within the wider community as well. Following the death of Dr. Rollins, the Rev. Dr. Morris Henderson, our assistant pastor who had been the ministry assistant to Dr. Rollins, was called to serve as our acting pastor. On December 17, 2007, the Thirty-first Street Baptist congregation elected Dr. Henderson to serve as the sixth pastor. Through his love of teaching, Dr. Henderson's initial guiding leadership vision was the transformation of believers from membership to holistic ministry. He expanded our former theme to "Promoting Education, Arts, Culture, and the Environment (P.E.A.C.E) by Combining Relevance with Reverence." Under Dr. Henderson, the Mass Choir was renamed the Darrel

Rollins Memorial Mass Choir and the Deaconess Ministry underwent major conversion in name and composition to the Deacons' Auxiliary Ministry, consisting of women and men (designated as "Lay Ministers"). Also, during Dr. Henderson's tenure, Second Sunday morning worship services were designated as Creative Arts Sundays during which song, dance, mime, and drama were combined with the preached word. The audio/visual system in the church was upgraded, an HIV/AIDS Ministry was started and the former Grief Ministry became known as the Journey Through Loss and Hope Ministry. Through consolidation of two other ministries the Transformation and Renewal/Social Justice Ministry was developed.

With the intent of securing additional space for expanded ministry opportunities, our church, under the Rollins' administration had succeeded in purchasing several adjoining lots in the 800 block of N. 32nd Street. Working in conjunction with the City of Richmond, a community garden with vegetables and flowers was established on this property under the vision of Dr. Henderson. Initially, vegetables were made available to the community through our weekday feeding ministry and other community partners. Dr. Henderson's vision also included the development of the Darrel Rollins Memorial Gardens, including a labyrinth. In January, 2015, the church received an Urban Farm designation from the United States Department of Agriculture. Dr. Henderson retired in February, 2018.

The 100th Anniversary of our church was celebrated on Sunday, November 22, 2015 under the theme: "A Century of Service: Honoring Our Past, Celebrating Our Today, and Visioning Our Future." A portion of the anniversary donations was designated to pay toward the church's indebtedness for past capital improvement projects.

During a call church meeting on July, 30 2018, the Rev. Dr. Alvin Campbell, our Associate Pastor, was elected by the congregation to serve as our interim pastor during our ongoing discernment and search process for the next senior pastor. A Transition Team, with mission of clarifying our overall mission, vision, values, and reestablishing clarity and transparency in church processes, procedures and ministries, was also voted upon by the church. Sub-committees designated at the organizational meeting of the Transition Committee include: Constitution and By-Laws, Communication and Surveys, Finances and Budget, Membership and Ministry Descriptions, Intercessory Prayer, and Pastoral Search Process.

Many have been educated, nurtured, dedicated, married, counseled, ordained for Christian leadership and memorialized within the sacred walls of 31st Street Baptist Church. As we remember and honor the past, celebrate the present and share hope for the future, we thank God for this place where we may be still and know that God is God. We are thankful for those who have gone before us and who have encouraged us by their perseverance and faithfulness.

*Blest be the tie that binds, Our hearts in Christian love;
The fellowship of kindred minds Is like to that above.*

Writers----

Deacon Beverly Compton Wynn

Earliest excerpts from narrative by the late Mrs. Charlene Ballard and the late Trustee Constance Bolden.