

# OUR HISTORICAL BIRTH

*By the Church Historical Commission*

## PART 2 OF A 3-PART SERIES ON MT. PISGAH'S BEGINNINGS

In April of 1930, the Reverend Samuel T. Boyd was appointed as pastor of Bethel. Practically from the outset, his leadership was met with opposition from some of the trustees and members of the church. The major cause of conflict was over an attempt by Pastor Boyd to reincorporate the church as a "Religious Society," resulting in a division in the church. This was unsuccessfully attempted by former pastor the Reverend Murray in the year 1916.

While Pastor Boyd and the opposition went back and forth to court to settle this matter, he and his supporters worshipped at each others' residences during the years 1931 and 1932.

This group of members of Bethel A.M.E. Church had a dream of starting another church that would meet their spiritual and social needs. With this dream in mind, they began to formulate plans for making "this dream" a reality. They contributed generously of their time, energy, and finances, and did whatever they could do to get others interested, motivated, and involved.

Finally after losing a nearly three year court battle that consumed much time and energy, Pastor Boyd announced at a meeting held on Monday evening October 3, 1932, the organization of a new church named Mount Pisgah African Methodist Episcopal Church. Later in the month he announced that the remaining former members of Bethel A.M.E. Church of Jersey City, would be reorganized as Calvary Methodist Church (present day Calvary Christian Methodist Episcopal Church). Since late 1932, the last church home of Bethel (Oak Street) has been the church home of our Sister Church, Calvary Christian Methodist Episcopal Church.

Although the announcement of the formation of Mount Pisgah A.M.E. Church took place in early October of 1932 and was incorporated on October 14, 1932, its founding date is celebrated as October 14, 1931.

The newly organized church did not have a meeting place of its own, but through the generosity of ministers and other civic-minded individuals, places of worship were secured and many times their religious services were held in the Community Church basement at 179 Woodward Street.

The founders of Mount Pisgah A.M.E. Church, under the direction and guidance of their pastor, the Reverend Boyd, were inspired to have a church building. In the year 1933, the property located at 350-354 Forrest Street was purchased. A small stable was located at the rear of the property. With alterations and additions, this stable became the place of worship for Mount Pisgah and the house on the property was used as the parsonage. The Reverend Boyd served as pastor from 1931 to 1935.

In the year 1935, the Reverend Harold A. Garcia succeeded the Reverend Boyd as pastor of Mount Pisgah. During the Reverend Garcia's tenure, the mortgage was burned and the idea of the building program was initiated. The Reverend Garcia served as pastor from 1935 to 1944.

In May of 1944, the Reverend Morris M. Ward was appointed pastor of Mount Pisgah A.M.E. Church. Under his administration the property at 357 Forrest Street was purchased.

In September of 1945, the Reverend Ira Stanley Jacobs followed the Reverend Ward as pastor and for approximately three years, plans were made and worked out in every detail for the time when the building of a new church would begin. The building program began in the year 1947, when the Ruth Missionary Society of Mount Pisgah A.M.E. Church transferred to the trustees, the property at 357 Forrest Street. In the year 1948, the parsonage was relocated on this property and remodeled.

On June 5, 1949, the ground was broken for the new church. On June 25, 1950, the Right Reverend Decatur Ward Nichols, the 59<sup>th</sup> Bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and the Presiding Prelate of the First Episcopal District, laid the cornerstone. The year 1950 was also celebrated as the 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the church's founding. Actually, it was the Centennial of the church. The Mother Church, Bethel A.M.E. of Bergen Township, was founded in the year 1850 and not 1870 as thought by the church elders during this time. What was significant was that the elders of Mount Pisgah rightfully recognized the founding date of Bethel as the starting point of the history of the church.

Although the church was not completed in the year 1952, we were able to entertain the New Jersey Annual Conference. Some unplanned debts were incurred in order that the church might be completed by the 1954 Annual Conference. These new debts, along with previous obligations, increased the financial responsibility of the congregation beyond what had originally been planned.

The Reverend Morris M. Ward was reassigned to Mount Pisgah on May 2, 1954. Between May, 1954 and April, 1956, the church was involved in court litigation.

The Reverend Jesse Jerome Jackson, Sr., succeeded the Reverend Ward in April of 1956. He immediately began gathering all available information as to the financial status of the church. He proceeded to initiate and execute plans to avoid embarrassment to the church and the First Episcopal District. By August of 1956, plans had been put into operation and sufficient funds raised to settle the litigation out of court. Following this achievement, the large stained glass window in the front of the church was installed.

The destiny of the church continued to unfold under the leadership of the Reverend Jackson, who stood as a silent reminder of what was yet to come. The church and the new pews were dedicated on November 23, 1958 by the Right Reverend George W. Baber, the 63<sup>rd</sup> Bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and Presiding Prelate of the First Episcopal District. ....**To be continued...**

## PART 2 OF A 3-PART SERIES ON ST. JOHN'S BEGINNINGS

Shortly after the Reverend John Hooks was appointed pastor, he began discussing with the membership the prospect of purchasing a church building. Under his leadership, members began working towards purchasing the building located at 322-326 Pacific Avenue. The purchase of the building was realized during the pastorate of the Reverend T.E. Hollman.

In the year 1959, Pastor Charles F. Milton and former pastors the Reverends T.E. Hollman, James A. Jones and Frank N. Williams, along with the members of Saint John marched to their new church from Halladay Street to Pacific Avenue.

On November 20, 1962, a resolution was written and later submitted by the membership to the New Jersey Annual Conference seeking approval of the building and mortgage.

Succeeding the Reverend Milton as pastor were the Reverends Percy W. Bryan, William M. Campbell and John A. Boxley, respectively.

In the year 1969, the Reverend Lawton James, Jr., a son of Mount Pisgah was appointed as pastor and "put his hand to the Gospel Plow." The interior of the church was painted, the bell tower was fixed and the cornerstone was put in place. The pipe organ was repaired and a bus was purchased to transport members and aid in the growth of the church. The Reverend James served as pastor for ten years before being appointed elsewhere.

In June of 1979, the Reverend Reginald T. Jackson was appointed as pastor of Saint John, where change was inevitable. The Reverend Jackson was a young minister who attracted industrious young people into the church who had a mind to work. Indeed, Saint John was blessed and happy with the spiritual growth of its members. In April of 1981, the Reverend Jackson was succeeded by the Reverend Ernest E. Curry as pastor. The Reverend Curry served for one year and was succeeded in the year 1982 by former pastor the Reverend Lawton James, Jr., who served until his retirement from the ministry in the year 1987.

In March of 1987, the New Jersey Annual Conference appointed the Reverend Howard L. Grant as pastor. A son of Mount Pisgah, he was very capable of obtaining funding when needed. Under his administration, the interior of the church was repainted, the gym floor was reinforced and new furnaces were purchased and installed.

During the decades of the 1970's and 1980's, Saint John sponsored several community outreach programs from Lawton Hall. Lafayette Teen Post provided recreational activities, tutorial services, sewing classes, African dance classes and other activities for the community. The Senior Citizen's Program provided meals, games and other social activities for the elders of the community.

In March of 1991, the New Jersey Annual Conference appointed the Reverend Frederick Parrish as pastor. Under his administration, many improvements were made to the building. Some of the improvements were the following: renovation of the pastor's office, installation of new bathrooms, new floor covering, paneling of the walls, installation of new windows, installation of a new dropped ceiling, additional office space constructed for the sanctuary, finance committee and conference room, remodeled gymnasium, installation of central heating and air conditioning, new cushions for the altar and pews, and the completion of a handicapped ramp. The Reverend Parrish was an inspiration to Saint John and we thank God for him and his wife, former First Lady Crystal Parrish.

In March of 1998, the Reverend Maurice Barnes was appointed pastor. He served as pastor until November 25, 2001.

On November 25, 2001, God sent us the Reverend Charles Winston McNeill, Jr., and First Lady Audrey McNeill (daughter Jade would be born less than a month later), to serve as pastor of Saint John. He came with a vision filled mission of hope and progress. Through the Reverend McNeill's leadership and faith, Saint John became a vehicle for learning the Word of God. "Educating God's People," was his mission statement while he inspired and preached to the masses with a message of love and expectation. Extensive water damage to the sanctuary resulted in the congregation holding services and meetings in Lawton Hall, located in the annex building of the church on Whiton Street. Due to this, Pastor McNeill's vision was for the members of Saint John to be able to worship in the sanctuary again. On August 24, 2003, that vision became a reality. For the first time in five years, members were able to worship God in the newly restored and remodeled sanctuary.

In March of 2005, the New Jersey Annual Conference appointed the Reverend Dennis Hughes as pastor. Serving along side of him was First Lady, the Reverend Valerie Hughes. Pastor Hughes came with a vision and possessed great leadership qualities. He had a new heating system (the old system was damaged by water) installed in the church and was a great advocate and enforcer of the Faith Fund. With the help of the America Group Health Clinic, Pastor Hughes and the Reverend Valerie Hughes developed workshops for young mothers. These workshops were uplifting and provided invaluable information to the young sisters.

Pastor Hughes believed in education and in training for his officers. His belief was that each officer should be able to officiate at a worship service. He required his stewards to actively participate in every service. Pastor Hughes and the Reverend Valerie Hughes remained with us for four wonderful years. We thank God for their leadership.

In August of 2009, history was made at Saint John. The Reverend Tomaya Buckley was appointed as pastor. She was the first woman ever appointed as pastor of Saint John. We were excited to have a woman serve as pastor. During her pastorate, the food pantry was renovated and financial assistance was obtained for the Public Service Utilities bills. Pastor Buckley was a passionate preacher and teacher. She faithfully taught Bible Study and the new member's class.

In April of 2010, the Reverend Bernard Wingate was appointed as pastor. Pastor Wingate was responsible for establishing the first Bible Reading Day at City Hall in Jersey City. Every Wednesday at noon, he delivered a sermonette at the church for people of all religious affiliations. He named it "Hour of Power." ..... **To be continued...**