

## *Historical Prospective*

Around the turn of the century, in the late 1800's to early 1900's, a group of dedicated and concerned men and women, living in and around the Dancyville, KoKo community in Civil District # 8 of Haywood County, Tennessee, began to meet and conduct church services in a Bush Arbor. These men and women were former slaves and sons and daughters of slaves. Being full of the spirit of God, above all else, they were committed to staying together and worshiping as a group.

The original church building was erected on land given to the congregation by Deacon Charlie Wilkerson. It was a small log church located near the corner of Highway 76 South and the Qualls Road intersection and was known as St John's "across the river". This site included a graveyard that was reputed to have been the burial ground of both local Indians and slaves.

Although, we have no record of the first pastors of the church, we know that in 1916, Rev. Morgan Holloway was Pastor. The original church officers include Mr.'s Charlie Wilkerson, Marion Sweet, William Graves, Henry Carney, Sr., Squire Jeter and George Nettles. Other deacons and trustees from this era include; Josh Gray, Jim "Nig" Coleman, Harvey Pate, Tim Sweet, Jerry Williams, Emmett Winters, Frank Wilkes, Jeff Powell, Olley Graves, Will Dotson and West Douglass.

On November 16, 1904, papers were drawn up to purchase from W.H. Ford and wife a parcel of land consisting of 33 acres, located in the 8<sup>th</sup> Civil District of Haywood County, TN, approximately 1.5 miles from the unincorporated town of Dancyville, TN. History gives us no clue as to why this deed was not filed until January 20, 1906 at 3:45 P.M. The church paid a sum of \$425.00 for the entire property.

A new structure was built by members and officers of the church on the west side of the road. It is known that Marion Sweet and William Graves were master carpenters because of the other structures in the community that they built or helped to build. They along with countless others laid the foundation and built a frame structure that was the place of worship for many years. Another frame church was built later in the early twentieth century by church members and was the nucleus of the church sanctuary until fire destroyed it on September 20, 2006.

A Masonic Lodge was built on the property where the Masonic brothers and Order of the Eastern Star sisters held their meetings and fellowship. We have no record of the name or order of the lodge. The congregation continued to grow and thrive in the community and became known throughout the area for its progressive attitude, leadership and love of God and fellowman. Sometimes after the building of the church on the purchased property, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the St John School was built in front of the church. The school served as the primary educational facility for several generations of African American children in the Dancyville and KoKo community. The St John School closed and combined with the Good Hope and Pilgrim Rest Schools in 1957.

The frame church was bricked in the late 1950's by Brick Mason, Dan Green of Whiteville. The cornerstone was laid in 1953. In the late 1970's, under the leadership of Rev. R.U. Banks, an addition with restrooms, classrooms, kitchen, upstairs finance room and baptismal pool were completed by Bridgewater Lumber Company with Buck Hayes as the major contractor. A beautiful hand painted mural was donated by a relative of Deacon Melvin (Deet) Dotson and was placed behind the baptistry.

In 1987, under the pastorate of Rev. J.W. Shaw, the sanctuary was remodeled. The remodeling included carpet, ceiling fans, chandeliers and new pews. In 1999, a new fellowship wing including, fellowship hall, pastor's study, additional bathrooms, a full kitchen and media room were added.

St John has always been a leader in the community. Members of the church were instrumental in the forming of the Haywood County Civic and Welfare League, which served as the activist organization during the civil rights struggle of the 1950's and 1960's. During, this period the church opened its' doors to meetings to establish and sustain the Haywood County Civic League, and to distribute food and clothing to displaced families who had been forcefully removed from their homes for registering to vote.

In the late 1960's when the USDA & Farmer's Home Administration made available loans to provide houses for low income families in the south, the church sold 6 acres for new homes to Charlie & Luvenia White; Henry & Myrtle Jones; C.P. Boyd; Evelyn Jarmon; Charlie & Elnora Williamson and Percy & Della Lee. Although, ownership has changed on some of the sites, these homes are still occupied by community

families. The leadership exhibited by members of the church has transcended into the community, county, and state. Members of the church can be found, serving on committees, councils and as school board members, County Commissioners and Road Commissioners. Members have held positions as, school principals, supervisors and administrators in the school system, local and regional corporations.

In 2000, the Pastor of the St John Missionary Baptist Church, Rev. Johnny W. Shaw was elected as the first Black State Legislator in Rural West Tennessee since the 1890's Reconstruction Period. Pastor Shaw has served with distinction, being elected as the 2005 chair of the Tennessee Legislative Black Caucus and as the first African American to ever serve as Secretary of the Tennessee House of Representatives Agriculture Committee.

On Sunday, August 27, 2006, the St John Missionary Baptist Church celebrated and commemorated 100 years of service to the community and worship of our God in this place with the theme "**Remembering the Past, Celebrating the Present, Saluting the Future.**" Hundreds of members, former members, relatives and guest, joined the celebration as former Pastor R.U. Banks brought the Home Coming message.

On Wednesday morning, September 20, 2006, Pastor Shaw and members received a call that the church was on fire. After rushing to the scene, the Pastor and Church, stood on the grounds as the building burned. For two years, eight months and twenty-one days the St John church family was without a church building -**But never without a place to worship.**

The Prospect CME Church and Rev. Kaufman; the Good Hope Baptist Church and Rev. Whitley, the Christ Church and Pastor Martin as well as numerous others availed their facilities to allow us to conduct youth and choir practices, revivals and funerals. But most of all the Rawls Funeral of Brownsville, TN gave us a permanent home away from home by providing us the use of their Chapel for Wednesday night and Sunday morning services for the 2 years, 8 months and 21 days.

The church struggled after the burning of the building. Many members fell away, finances decreased, and some became disillusioned but WE STOOD STEADFAST, & UNMOVABLE, Always depending on an all mighty GOD! On **May 30, 2009** the church moved into the new building, that is truly a masterpiece by **God and man!**