

A Brief History of the Bethlehem Baptist Church

The origins of Bethlehem Baptist Church date back to a time when ministers traveled throughout the community seeking locations to conduct services. These locations were often referred to as “meeting houses.” The traveling ministers of the Baptist faith would stop at private homes for the night and ask their hosts if a service could be held. If the host agreed, neighbors were notified and crowds came to hear the preached Word.

On December 6, 1772, one such meeting house was established on the Couche’s plantation which was located approximately 3 miles west of Christianville, Virginia, now known as Chase City, Virginia. This meeting house was commonly known as “The Bethel Meeting House,” and it uniquely consisted of both whites and blacks. By August 1840, “The Bethel Meeting House” consisted of 195 members.

Wanting to convert the “The Bethel Meeting House” into a church, several of its white members took the lead and were granted letters to form a church. As a result, the Bethlehem Baptist Church was formed in 1861 with Rev. John Leach as pastor. Some of the first members of the church were: Alex Smith, John F. Smith, Robert A. Smith, James Smith, John D. Brame, Conrad Garner, Nancy Smith, Jane Smith, Harriet Smith, Eliza D. Brame, and Elizabeth C. Smith.

For many years, Bethlehem was the only Baptist church within a radius of five miles of Chase City. It stood as a beacon light inviting all to come, the emphasis being on “ALL”. This open invitation to diversity resulted in blacks and whites who worshipped together at a time when segregation of living and worship was the norm. To better serve the black members of the congregation, five good black men were chosen and ordained as deacons. The training they received gave them knowledge of church discipline and prepared them to contribute to the future growth of the church.

At the conclusion of the Civil War and with the passing of time, many of the white members of Bethlehem Baptist Church left the plantation, moved to the town of Chase City, and established First Baptist Church, Chase City. As a result, the black membership soon outnumbered the white membership, and the church was given to the black members with the understanding that if they ever decided to move, the land on which the church was located would revert back to the estate of the Couche plantation.

In 1874, under the leadership of its second pastor, the Rev. Cephas Davis, the church on the plantation relocated to Chase City and was rebuilt on South Main Street (The Hill). In addition to the relocation, Bethlehem experienced exponential growth. On one occasion at a revival conducted by Jordan Moseley, one hundred persons were received as members.

Following the leadership of Rev. Cephas Davis, Rev. John Allman served Bethlehem as its third pastor. In 1886, the Rev. Dr. R. C. Yancey was elected to serve as the fourth pastor. Dr. Yancey focused on the youth and encouraged them to prepare themselves for service to the Lord and their community. Many young people in the community accepted this advice and challenge, and, in spite of racial and economic challenges, many became ministers, doctors, lawyers, nurses, and teachers. In 1912, to better serve the black community, the church on “The Hill” was sold to the Centenary United Methodist Church. Land was purchased, and Bethlehem moved to its current location at the corner of 5th and Endly Streets. Shortly after the new church was established, Bethlehem experienced a fire which destroyed most of its early records.

One of the historical highlights of Dr. Yancey's pastorship was Bethlehem's involvement as a charter member of the newly established Bluestone-Harmony Association. As the church grew, the Sunday School was also organized and prospered, becoming a significant fixture in Southside Virginia. The Rev. H. L. Brooks appeared before the Bluestone Harmony Association at Bethlehem and requested that the Sunday School be given a special day to do its work. Thus, we are safe in saying that Bethlehem is the Mother of the Sunday School Convention, which is currently observed during the Bluestone-Harmony Association Convention. Dr. Yancey served as pastor from 1886-1940.

In 1941, as a result of Dr. Yancey's retirement, Rev. Dr. F. P. Lewis was elected as the fifth pastor. Under his leadership, a second service on Sunday night was added, stained glass windows were installed, and a new organ was purchased. Dr. Lewis served as pastor from 1941-1951.

In 1952, Rev. R. R. Banner was elected as the sixth pastor of Bethlehem. Rev. Banner lived in Philadelphia but traveled to Chase City on the weekends where he stayed in the white house located across the street from the church. Under his leadership, Bethlehem's heating system was upgraded. Rev. Banner served as pastor from 1952-1954.

In 1955, Rev. K. L. Moore was elected as the seventh pastor of Bethlehem; he served from 1955-1963.

In 1964, Rev. Dr. J. F. Ragland was elected as the eighth pastor of Bethlehem. Under Dr. Ragland's leadership, the interior of the church was completely remodeled with the purchase of new pews, carpet, ceiling lights and a piano. Dr. Ragland served as pastor from 1964-1981.

In 1982, Rev. Dr. John E. Jones was elected as the ninth pastor of Bethlehem. Dr. Jones was the catalyst behind the exterior building project which bricked in the church, installed central air, and added additional restrooms in the basement. Dr. Jones served as pastor from 1982-1987.

For several years, Bethlehem was without a pastor, and in 1990, Rev. Robert Winfree was elected as the tenth pastor. Under his leadership, new carpet, a public announcement system, and a new roof were installed. Rev. Winfree served as pastor from 1990-2003.

In 2004, Rev. Dr. Ricky A. Lee was unanimously elected as the eleventh pastor of the Bethlehem Baptist Church. Under his pastorship, Bethlehem once again experienced physical, financial and spiritual growth. Since his arrival when 22 people were present, Dr. Lee, along with his wife the Rev. Dr. Pamela Lee, has encouraged authentic praise and worship. Dr. Lee is also one of the most energetic preacher/teachers to pastor Bethlehem. His unique methodical style of presenting the Gospel has resulted in 80 new members and 33 baptisms to date; Bethlehem once again is considered one of the fastest growing churches in Mecklenburg County.

Dr. Lee has also automated church records, established a web site, upgraded the public announcement system, re-established fellowship with other churches near and far, re-instituted Wednesday night Bible Study, established a bi-annual church trip, and by example as well as instruction, taught biblical tithing principals.

Under the leadership of Dr. Lee, one deacon has been ordained to the Deacon Board, the church's first Baptist minister was ordained, and the Deaconess of the church were consecrated. Furthermore, recognizing the significance of reaching out to the youth in our community, Dr. Lee initiated a Youth Explosion program, featuring praise dancers and various types of Gospel music artists. In an effort to

keep the outreach ongoing, a weekly Youth Night meeting is held and is open to all teens throughout the community.

Additionally, recognizing the incidences of cancer diagnoses in our community, Dr. Lee also implemented the Cancer Survivors Support Group (CSSG), which provides an opportunity for cancer survivors and care givers to minister to and encourage one another.

In addition to working with individual leaders in the church to develop their leadership strengths and skills, Dr. Lee holds Annual Leadership Workshops with the trustees, deaconate, and auxiliary chairpersons. He holds annual Town Hall meetings, which are informal meetings designed to give the church body an opportunity to openly ask questions and discuss current and future church plans.

Dr. Lee also spearheaded the formation of the Deacon Family Ministry, Me-Time Ministry, and the Transportation Ministry. Various committees were formed to promote the advancement of church operations. The Bylaws committee formulated bylaws that the church adopted in 2009. The Cemetery committee took on a renovation project that included the survey of the grave yard, excavation, and landscaping.

The highlight of Dr. Lee's short tenure as pastor is our self-financed stained glass window project. Some said it couldn't be done, others thought it wouldn't be done, but with the support of church leadership, members, and families coupled with a sound plan and clear vision, this project was flawlessly planned and executed. All windows were prepaid before installation, and a \$3,000 surplus was turned over to the building fund after all bills were paid.

We are excited about all that God has done through the members of the Bethlehem Baptist Church. Moreover, we believe that this is just the beginning. We wait with great anticipation and great expectation as God continues to move through us! For we believe the Words of the Prophet Isaiah who declared that since the beginning of time "no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him" (Isaiah 64:4). Amen.

Pastors of the Bethlehem Baptist Church

1. Rev John Leech (Exact dates unknown)
2. Rev. Cephas Davis (Exact dates unknown)
3. Rev. John Allman (Exact dates unknown)
4. Rev. Dr. R.C. Yancey (1886 - 1940)
5. Rev. Dr. F.P. Lewis (1941-1951)
6. Rev. R.R. Banner (1952 -1954)
7. Rev. K.L. Moore (1955 -1963)
8. Rev. J.F. Ragland (1964 -1981)
9. Rev. Dr. John Jones (1982 -1987)
10. Rev. Robert Winfree (1990 - 2003)
11. Rev. Dr. Ricky A. Lee (2004 - present)