

About Your Church 1862-2021

History indicates that, during the days before the Civil War, our forefathers worshipped at the churches of their white masters. Many of our churches that exist today grew and developed from a small group of Black worshippers who sat in some designated section of the “white peoples” church.

In July 1862 and on behalf of a company of baptized believers, a Recognizing Council was called to meet at the old Denbigh Baptist Church. (This church building was owned by the white community, but had been vacated by them because of the Civil War that was raging in the area. This church is still located on Mitchell Point Drive, just one block north of the Warwick Boulevard and Oyster Point Road intersection.) Military documents obtained on two young men - Edward Diggs and Anthony Poole - buried in the church cemetery indicate they served in the Civil War. These young men served with the Union Army, Company G, 36th USC7 (Infantry) and probably fought at the September 29, 1864 “Battle of New Market Heights.” Anthony Poole was a Sergeant and records indicate he was wounded in this action. Also, his family was active in the early church. Edward Diggs was “freed” April 1861, joined the Union Army on October 5, 1863, and served until October 5, 1866. He was a Corporal.

Our first documented history indicates the churches invited to attend the Recognizing Council were First Baptist Church of Hampton, Zion Baptist Church of Chesapeake City Council, and Morning Star Baptist Church of James City County. Based on a 1995 research into our history, First Baptist Church of Hampton was organized in 1863 and Morning Star Baptist of James City County was organized in 1883. However, since there is no way to substantiate the accuracy of whether these churches were a part of the council, we have accepted the history as documented by our forefathers.

The council met and was organized by choosing Reverend W. M. Evans as moderator and Reverend W. M. Thornton as secretary. After a company of brothers and sisters were instructed in the Baptist principles and doctrines, the church was recognized as “The Colored Denbigh Baptist Church.” Reverend Peter Banks was chosen as leader and Brothers Robert Wynne, W. M. Pointer, Searser Harris, Cornelius Cary, Ennis Washington, and Samuel Bailey were chosen as deacons. Reverend Banks is listed in “Who’s Who” in Warwick County 1850-1880 as a farmer, who was married with three children. He could not read or write. Also, he is not listed as a slave or Negro, but rather as a Mulatto. Reverend Banks resigned after serving 1 year.

After Reverend Bank’s resignation, an Ordination Council was called to consider setting apart Brother Thomas G. Wright, Jr., as a minister of the gospel. Reverend Wright was ordained - the first Black to be ordained in Warwick County - and became the second pastor, serving from 1863 to 1869. Reverend Wright was married and had seven children - one daughter was a teacher and one son was the first Black lawyer in Warwick County. His father, Thomas G. Wright, Sr., was a free black man who was Young’s Mill owner, a mill that existed since the 17th century, when one was constructed on Denbigh Plantation. During his administration, the white community returned to claim their church building. Reverend Wright and congregation moved from Old Denbigh Baptist Church to this location and a small house of worship was built. Reverend Wright and his congregation used a mule and cart to haul bricks from a torn down chimney from the Dixon Brown house on Warwick Boulevard, now Old Courthouse Way, to build the foundation.

The congregation increased to approximately 450 members. Reverend Wright also was not considered to be a slave, but rather to be a Mulatto. He is buried where he was reared, in the Mulberry Island Section of Fort Eustis, Virginia. His tombstone reads the “First Black Ordained Minister in Warwick County.”

During the pastorate of Reverend T. G. Nettles (1870-1881), a larger house was built to accommodate increased membership and the church was renamed to “First Baptist Church of Warwick County.”

Other ministers were Reverends Watt Talton (1882-1883) and J. B. Whiting (1883-1887).

Reverend Robert H. Nazareth was elected as leader on July 25, 1887. He was ordained on August 23, 1890. During this period, the congregation continued to increase, and the building was added to and renovated. After serving as the leader for almost 4 years, Reverend Nazareth was elected as pastor on May 23, 1891. His pastorate ended in 1912, after 25 years of service. He is buried in the old church cemetery.

The “Church Bell,” a tradition in most Black Churches, was installed in the 1890’s and hung in the vestibule of the old frame church. The “Church Bell” was rung for Sunday worship services, funerals, and special occasions such as New Year’s Eve. Each occasion had a special ring or chime. The ring for the Sunday Worship services was three strong ones. Funeral services had long slow rings until the funeral procession was inside the church, and special occasions had six or more loud rings. This tradition was discontinued between 1960 and 1966.

From 1912 to 1947, the following ministers pastored the congregation: Reverend T. C. Williams (1912-13), under whose pastorate cemetery No. 2 was purchased. Families were allowed to buy cemetery plots on the church ground at that time. Reverend A. A. Hudgins (1913-26) was responsible for adding a vestibule, choir stand, and pastor’s study to the church. He also organized the Usher Board, Senior and Junior Choirs, Senior and Junior Missionaries, and B.Y.P.U. (Baptist Young People’s Union). Under the pastorate of Reverend Isaac Daniel (1926-32), the church was remodeled. Reverend J. D. Atkins (1933-40) was instrumental in enlarging the church. The interior of the church was also redecorated. Reverend Joseph H. Brown (1941-48) was responsible for adding two rooms and a choir stand to the building. During this period, the church was renamed “First Baptist Church Denbigh.”



Baptizing of candidates was held once yearly after the August Revival, the last week in August. Revival lasted two weeks and then the candidates were baptized in the Warwick River off Menchville Road. In 1946, a small concrete pool, 8 feet by 10 feet, was built outside in front of the church. The pool was filled with pump water to get it ready for baptism.

The “mourners bench,” a long abandoned tradition in baptist churches, was a seat, usually the first pew, where candidates who wanted to “get religion” would sit on during revival services. At the beginning of each night’s service, a minister would “search the house” for the unsaved and unchurched. Those persons

who fell into these categories were invited to sit on the mourning bench. At the end of the minister's message, those seeking the Lord, that is, wanting to get religion, would get up from the bench when they felt the spirit, and give their hand to the preacher and become a candidate for baptism.

Those not led by the spirit would return again and again to the mourning bench. The ministers, deacons and deaconess would often gather around the mourning bench to pray and sing over them in an effort to try to encourage them to give their hand to the preacher and heart to the Lord.

For the next 10 years, the church was without a pastor, except for Reverends B. F. Burton and I. L. Buie, who each served approximately 2 years. The Pulpit Committee had different ministers to render worship service and to serve as supply pastors.

In the absence of a Trustee Board, Deacons were commissioned to serve as trustees dating back into the 1940's. In 1956, our first Trustee Board was organized and Mr. Linwood Lovett was appointed the Trustee Chairman.



Lovett

Summer Bible School began at the church in the late 1950' or early 1960's. Prior to that time, young people attended Bible School with the Mennonites.

Sunday worship services were held once monthly until 1946. In 1946, the church began holding regular worship services on the second and fourth Sundays and junior church services on the first and third Sundays. In 1963, the church began holding worship services every Sunday. Sunday School has always been held every Sunday.

When Warwick County (City) merged with the City of Newport News in 1958, First Baptist Denbigh became the oldest organized Black church in the City of Newport News. It also became the oldest First Baptist Church in the area. Prior to that time, First Church of Newport News was the oldest church.

Other ministers were:

Reverend Samuel Fladger (1959-63) - the church bought its first electric organ under his pastorate; Reverend T. T. Brown (1963-67) - under his pastorate the following accomplishments were made: street lights were installed on Campbell Road, a telephone was installed, and a Gospel Chorus, Flower Club, Pastor's Aid Club, and Hospitality Club were formed. Much emphasis was placed on fund-raising projects for a new sanctuary.

Reverend Albert L. Hill (1968-73) actively recruited new members and initiated a bond sale of \$100,000 to build a new church, the largest project ever attempted to date by First Baptist Denbigh. On February 18, 1971, ground was broken for the new building, and the corner-



stone was laid on July 3, 1971. The modern facility, with an inside baptismal pool and completely air conditioned, was built at a cost of \$200,000, including furnish-



Hill

ings. The first service was held in the new building in May 1972, and a week of celebrating began on June 25, 1972. The church was licensed to operate the Denbigh Area Day Care in October 1972. A Church Nursery and Nurses Aid were also organized.

Reverend Herbert A. Hill, Jr., began his pastorate on October 18, 1974. In addition to the active boards already present in the church, a civic forum and a Board of Christian Education were organized in 1975 and community involvement and fellowship within the church grew under Reverend Hill's leadership. The cross, bulletin board, and steeple were dedicated in June 1975. In 1977, Mrs. Ruth Grimes and Mrs. Lucille Jarvis were the first female trustees appointed to the Trustee Board. Reverend Hill licensed many ministers and ordained three ministers, including the first female - Reverend Delores Borum. Some of these ministers are now in pastoral positions and some are in assistant pastoral positions. The 8:00 am worship service was added to our church fellowship in 1981.

Also, in 1981, Mr. Anthony Witherspoon, after serving for several years as Director of the choirs, was named "Minister of Music." A Church Historian, Mrs. Evelyn Banks, was also elected under Reverend Hill's pastorate. Prior to this election, the church clerk and other laymembers maintained the historical data. A church bus and van were purchased, a church mother was named, and the prison ministry, Men's Chorus, Mass Choir, and Angel Choir were formed. New member classes were also added. The Hunt Food Locker - named for Ralph Hunt, one of our late devoted members - was also established. The food locker provided canned goods and bread for the needy. The first annual Choir Day, which involved all choirs, was held in 1984. This replaced the traditional annual "choir anniversary" held by each choir. Also, the young adult choir was discontinued.



Witherspoon



Banks

On June 8, 1986, a tragic fire destroyed our church edifice. During the time that we were without a building, Sunday worship services, Sunday School, and church business meetings were held at Sanford Elementary School on Colony Road. Special services, revivals, weddings, and funerals were held at New Beech Grove Church on Tabb Lane. Members of First Baptist Denbigh opened their homes for choir rehearsals and board and organizational meetings.



In January 1987, Reverend Herbert A. Hill, Jr.'s, tenure as pastor ended. While the church membership was without a full-time pastor, the associate pastors - Reverends Haywood Barnes, Dorothy Harrison, and Thaddeus Oliver - provided much spiritual strength and guidance for the congregation, as they continued to conduct the 8:00 am worship services, to help families through crises such as death, and to administer to the physical, spiritual, material, and educational needs. Reverends Barnes and Harrison were ordained into the ministry in September 1987. They presided over the Communion Services, church business meetings, weddings, funerals, and special services and represented First Baptist Denbigh in



Barnes



Harrison

various community activities. Various ministers were provided by the Pulpit Committee for the 11 o'clock services.



Princes

Although the congregation was confronted with a fire and a loss of a full-time pastor, a sense of togetherness and a desire to serve and worship God prevailed. Special prayer service for the restoration of our church was held each Friday night at the home of Deacon and Mrs. Thomas Prince. Other officials offered their help for emergency services.

Several years before the fire, a ground-breaking ceremony had been held for a new edifice. In April 1987, 10 months after the tragic fire, a special ceremony was held on the foundation of the burned church to commemorate the *work on the new church edifice*.

In September 1987, Edward Talton, a deacon at First Baptist Church Denbigh for more than 40 years, was called into the ministry and licensed as a Baptist minister. Reverend Talton preached only two sermons from the pulpit before his death, but his spiritual life as a deacon, Sunday School teacher, and church leader was a sermon in itself.

On October 31, 1987, a ceremony was held for the laying of the cornerstone of the new church.

On January 15, 1988, Reverend Haywood Barnes was voted on by the church to serve as interim pastor.

On March 20, 1988, Reverend Ivan T. Harris of Hampton was presented to the church body by the Pulpit Committee and voted in as pastor-elect of First Baptist Church Denbigh. Reverend Harris officially began his tenure as pastor on May 22, 1988, 60 days from the above date.



On June 24, 1988, at 7:00 pm, a special service was held to anoint our edifice. On Sunday, June 26, 1988, the congregation motorcaded from Sanford Elementary School to the new church, where the 11 o'clock service was held.

On February 19, 1989, church services were cancelled for the first time, we believe, because of a severe snow storm. In December 1989, Baptismal Services were changed from the fourth Sunday to the Wednesday evening before the fourth Sunday. Baptismal Services are now held on the fourth Sunday, unless the Spirit leads Pastor Harris to do otherwise.

In October 1990, the church voted Reverend Ivan T. Harris to become full-time pastor. On October 1, 1991, he accepted and assumed the full-time pastorate of First Baptist Church Denbigh.



Pastor Harris

Pastor Harris serves as the “Undershepherd” for more than a dozen associate ministers. He also leads a congregational flock of approximately 2,500 members; a large official board that includes 18 deacons and 14 trustees; a Christian Board of Education; 3 choirs; and more than 30 different committees and organizational ministries. Other accomplishments by Reverend Harris include the first “Annual Christmas Day” Service, held in 1991; a continuous growth in membership and community involvement; the largest Baptismal Service having 26 or more candidates; the adoption of a low-income neighborhood; and the organization of the Brotherhood, Baptist Young Women, Acteen, Girls in Action (GA’s), and youth missionaries. The latter five groups are an extension of the Missionary of the Church.

The Summer Feeding Program was undertaken at First Baptist Denbigh, in conjunction with the City of Newport News, in 1993. Through this program, many children from broken homes probably receive their only or best meal of the day.

The Church Bell was erected in December 1993 and dedicated in April 1994. It had been stored since 1971 at the home of Deacon and Mrs. Henry Beveridge. In April 1994, the first Evangelism Classes were taught. These classes are designed to prepare laymembers to go out and win souls for Christ. Also, in 1994, a Singles Ministry was started to provide a means for addressing specific concerns of single saints.



Beveridge



Reerected Bell

Reverend Jesse Jackson, the Civil Rights Activist with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., visited our church in 1994.

Through God’s guidance and Pastor Harris’ efforts of encouraging the members to tithe, the mortgage for our church was burned on October 9, 1994. This was a major accomplishment of paying off a 25-year mortgage in only 6-1/2 years.



The year 1995 will be remembered with the breaking of a tradition and the occurrences of some firsts at FBCD. In January, the Gospel Chorus and Senior Choir, which sang on the third and fourth Sundays, respectively, were replaced by the “Mass” Choir of the church. The Senior Choir had served for more than 75 years. In April, Pastor Harris conducted the “Empowering Men’s Crusade” in an effort to recruit more men into the fellowship of God. This venture was the first of its kind in the area to unite men. In June, Sister Sylvia Harris, wife of our pastor, preached her initial sermon and received her license to preach the gospel. In August, the church’s day care was reestablished and renamed the Child Development Center, focusing on the Abeka Curriculum - for children ages 2-1/2 to 12, with before and after school programs. Also in 1995, the church renamed the Nurses Aid to Health Ministry, started a Grant Writing Ministry, and hosted its first Bread Ministry. The Bread Ministry, which obtains bread and other goods from the Peninsula Food Bank, serves both the community and our church family.

Women’s Day, June 1996, was highlighted with the burial of a Time Capsule that will be opened in 10 years, 2006. The capsule contains memorabilia, messages, tapes, pictures from FBCD members to family and significant other.

The Bible Institute began in January 1997, offering courses such as the Old and New Testaments, Stewardship, and Discipleship. A total of 11 classes are offered for 8 weeks.

On August 22, 1999, ground-breaking services were held for the educational wing of our church.

In March 2000, the old cemetery was designated as a Historical Site, an effort by the Boy Scouts to preserve and maintain the graves of several Civil War Veterans.

Building on the educational wing began in the fall of 2000, and building on the gymnasium (family life center) began in May 2002. Classes began in the Education Wing in April 2002. On September 11, 2002, classes for the GED (General Education Degree), Homebound Schooling, and Short-Term Suspension programs were begun.

In June 2003, the Family Life Center was opened to the congregation for evening exercise-related activities. It also housed the Newport News Parks and Recreation Summer Program for youth (6-16 years of age), which included various activities and field trips.

In July 2003, the Greeters' Ministry was organized. This ministry greets and welcomes worshippers as they enter the church edifice. It supplements the Ushers' Ministry. On the fourth Sunday in July, the first evening Communion Service was held in the Family Life Center.

In September 2003, the Child Development Center instituted classes for grades 1 through 3.

The African Village Adoption Project was initiated in 2005. Many members selected a native from Benin, Africa, for adoption and were to correspond with the individual about every 3 months. However, the adoption project did not materialize. "Well drilling" is also a priority to provide the village with clean water to drink. We have provided the villagers with books written in French, English, and Fong (in partnership with Hampton University) and established a micro banking system.

In August 2005, TV screens were provided in the Sanctuary to enhance the worship experience for all members of the congregation. A Teacher Academy was begun in September 2005 to provide training for all teachers at First Baptist Church Denbigh.

In October 2005, the church purchased property that included four apartments and office space, which had been a part of the Menchville House. A ribbon-cutting ceremony was held on August 27, 2006, officially establishing this property as the First Baptist Church Denbigh Outreach Center, Inc. This facility provides transition housing for women desiring to further their education.

The year 2006 proved to be very significant in the history of this church. A new choir, the Young Adult Choir, was reinstated in April. This choir will sing for worship services on the fifth Sunday and consists of members from 18 to 40 years of age. In June, the Time Capsule was retrieved. And in September, our Child Development Center instituted grades 4 and 5; it now provides training for children from 2-1/2 years through grade 5.

On September 8 and 9, First Baptist Denbigh held its first Family Conference, providing spiritual teachings for all age groups.

Our Inreach Ministry provides our church family with the necessary spiritual and intellectual food to keep us growing in Christ. The Outreach Ministry reaches out to our community, our Nation, and overseas.

Pastor Harris, along with other members of the church, makes at least one trip each year to our adopted African village. The annual trip this year included for the first time a married couple. The first well for our adopted village has been completed and was dedicated on September 13, 2006. Pastor Harris and Deacon Pettit traveled to Africa for the ceremony. The villagers, to show their appreciation, donated and deeded to Pastor Harris a plot of land fronting the well. A plaque at the well reads “Donated by First Baptist Church Denbigh, Reverend Ivan T. Harris; Partners, St. Mark and Rising Sun Baptist Churches. Several motorcycles have been provided for the missionaries in our adopted village to shorten their travel time between the villages.

Pastor Harris’ next project for our adopted village is the construction of a Christian School. The facility will provide three classrooms, lodging for a headmaster, and an infirmary, with the capability to add three additional classrooms. This project came to fruition in 2007, when the school was commissioned in the Village of Aclay on May 24, 2007.

Other noteworthy events that occurred in 2007 are: a visit to one of our June worship services by the Governor of Virginia, Governor Timothy Kaine; the purchase of a Food Mobile, which is used to feed people in downtown Newport News (originally, this feeding was done once a month but is now being done twice a month); the installation of a Neon Sign; a Friday night tent service and a Family Conference in conjunction with Homecoming.

Two Outreach Ministries that are operating under the umbrella of FBCD are the Diamonds and Pearls and Boys to Men Mentorship Programs. The Diamonds and Pearls program has been active since November 2002, while this is the first year for the Boys to Men. Both programs are under the direction of Minister Sylvia S. Harris, and they reach out to youth in middle and high school.

Groundbreaking for a medical facility in our adopted African Village was held in September 2007. This facility was completed in 2008 and is now serving the needs of the villagers.

In 2008, groundbreaking took place in our adopted African Village for a worship facility that would seat 300 worshippers. The first of its kind in the village. Also noteworthy, to culminate the FBCD Family Conference, a “Family of the year” was chosen for their dedicated service to church. In conjunction with distribution of food items by our Bread Ministry, a Clothes Closet has been established. Clothing articles are now distributed as needed on Wednesdays and Thursdays during the hours food is distributed.

In 2009, FBCD’s weekly announcements went hi-tech. The Audio/Video Ministry pre-records the announcements, with Janet Roach, a local television newscaster who attends our church, as the announcer, and shows them on the large screens.

In July 2009, Pastor Harris, while riding his motorcycle in South Carolina hit a pothole on Interstate 95. He sustained life-threatening injuries. The FBCD congregation, when informed of the accident, went into prayer twice daily (noon and 6:00 pm) for the pastor. Other churches locally and

nationwide also went into prayer for our pastor. God wrought a miracle in Pastor Harris' life, restoring him back to health and back to the church. Today, in 2010, the prayers continue on Mondays at noon and 6:00 pm. These prayers have also been a mechanism for bringing the church family closer together and showing them that the prayers of the righteous do avail much.

The Mass Choir was invited to sing in the production of the "Porgy and Bess" opera, in May 2010, at the Christopher Newport Cultural Arts Center. This experience was a great honor not only for the choir but also for the church.

The worship facility for our adopted African Village has been completed and a dedication service was held in May 2010.

On July 24, 2010, Pastor Harris, surrounded by the Diaconate Ministry conducted a Baptismal Service in the York River. During the service not only were the candidates for baptism baptized, but also members of the diaconate and the congregation at large. Singing and praising God at the river's edge was reminiscent of baptisms of years past.

Also in September 2010, the church purchased a handicapped bus to become better equipped to serve those members of the congregation who are wheel-chaired bound.

Thanks to Ann Whitaker, visitors and even some of our members no longer have to ask where certain offices of the church are located. She donated funds for the signs that have been erected throughout the church to guide people in the right direction. Placement of these signs were done in 2011.

Each year, the kickoff to the Family Conference is a Unity Walk through the community. This year's walk was one of the most memorable with about 200 plus members who walked through the Warwick Lawns community.

This year, after a long hiatus, First Baptist Church Denbigh once again entered a float in the Denbigh Day Parade. Even though the weather was less than favorable, the participation by the church members was enthusiastic.

In September 2011, First Lady Sylvia S. Harris was appointed Executive Administrative to the Pastor.

On Sunday, September 18, 2011, Pastor Dominique Gouday and Missionary Boris Houeze, from our adopted village in Benin, Africa, spoke at both of our morning worship services. Their messages included praises and thanks to God for the contributions that have been made to their people - the well, church, school, motorcycles, medical center, and provision of other personal items.

In 2012, this church celebrated its 150th anniversary. For 150 years, First Baptist Denbigh has been a steady beacon of light in the community. It has been a shelter for the needy and weary, by feeding the hungry, visiting the sick, clothing the naked, and administering to those in prison. - continuing in the tradition of saving, serving, and sacrificing.

This year, 2013, Pastor Ivan T. Harris celebrated his 25th year of faithfully ministering to this congregation. He now has the distinction of being tied with the longest serving pastor in the 151-year history of the church. Under his leadership we have a flourishing outreach ministry that touches the lives of people not only in the community but extends all the way to Africa.

On June 8, 2013, the historical Civil War marker for two members of the United States Colored Troops (USCT) was formally dedicated. The marker is in our already designated Historical Cemetery.

Also, in 2013, online giving became a welcome format for members desiring to donate their tithes and offerings simply with the push of a button. Members and friends can now access the church's website to give back to God what He has mandated.

In 2014, the church's annual Christmas Fellowship was held for the first time at the Fort Eustis Club on the Joint Base Langley-Eustis, Virginia. Also, in 2014, FBCD partnered with the Bon Secours Virginia Health System to become a site for the Care-A-Van, which provides free general medical care to uninsured adults and children in the Hampton Roads communities. Further, a new church directory, containing members' phone numbers, addresses and pictures, was distributed to our church family. The directory is a ready reference for members to become familiar or communicate with each other. This directory is one in many of others published by the church, the latest being 7 years prior.

The year 2015 saw a change in our revival schedule, from 3 to 2 nights - Tuesday and Wednesday. Also, for the first time our annual outdoor baptism was held at the James River. Further, First Baptist Church Denbigh's 2015 float in the Denbigh Day Parade won First Place.

In April 2016, Virginia lost one of its beloved senators, Senator John Miller. Because of his close ties to First Baptist Church Denbigh, his family honored both him and this church by having his home-going service here. Such an honor - hosting a State funeral - was the first in this church's history.

In November 2015, our beloved pastor suffered a life-threatening illness. God once again wrought a miracle in Pastor Harris' life, restoring him back to health and back to the church. He returned to the pulpit on Sunday, September 18, 2016, which had been campaigned as "Back to Church Sunday." The essence of this campaign was to encourage persons to return to church or to become united with a church.

Other occurrences in 2016 are: Pastor and First Lady Harris celebrated 28 years of serving this church; the FBCD Child Development Center and Academy (FBCDCDCA) purchased a 15 passenger van; members of the church participated with Habitat for Humanity in restoring/repairing 15 homes in the Warwick Lawns community (the church was presented a plaque for this service); Sharron Miller, wife of the late Virginia Senator John Miller, donated \$2,000.00 to the FBCDCDCA in honor of her husband's passion for the education of children; and the African Children's Choir performed on October 7 during the church's 154th anniversary (this was the choir's third visit to the church).

As 2016 is an election year for Federal, State, and local elections, many candidates vying for office visited FBCD to include Tim Kaine (former governor now a vice president candidate), Bobby Scott (State senator), Mark Warner (State senator), Marcellus Harris (city council), and Shelly Simond.

The year 2017, as in other years, continues to be eventful in God's faithfulness and promises. For 155 years, God has blessed this body of believers to be a beacon of light for the lost. To memorialize this occasion, a beautiful souvenir journal is under publication. Pastor Ivan T. Harris and First Lady Sylvia S. Harris, for 29 of the 155 years, have faithfully led this congregation. God's promise of opening the windows of heaven allowed FBCD to upgrade the audio and sound system in the sanctuary and fellowship hall in December 2016 and to purchase two new projectors - one for the choir room and the other for the sanctuary in 2017. Other purchases (July 2017) include five monitors - one each in the skylab, the kitchen, the trustee room, the Child Development Center, and the Educational Wing. This year's annual "Choir Day" (August 6) was a momentous occasion. Highlighting this event was a "Reunion Choir," consisting of former choir members and musicians, dating back to 1979, who had been invited to participate in the choir. Many of those persons accepting the invitation traveled great distances to be a part of this historical event - the FBCD Reunion Choir. Also, to enable the Bread Ministry to better serve the community, a freezer (September 2017) has been placed in the Outreach Center.

During 2018, Pastor Harris licensed six persons who had met the requirements to become preachers of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They are: Robert Broadnax, Ryan Perkins, Gloria Fox, Lonnie Chamblee, James Grant and Douglas Pettie. The 156th Church Anniversary (October 2018) was highlighted with displays of the various FBCD ministries, featuring pictures, artifacts, and games. Each ministry provided a question and answer session to test participants' knowledge of FBCD's history. Participants also relished the opportunity to partake of the food, receive gifts/tokens, and to fellowship with each other. This was a fun-filled, learning event for all ages.

In 2019, Pastor Ivan T. Harris retired on May 5, after serving for 31 years. At the time of his retirement he had earned the distinction of being the longest serving pastor in the 157-year history of the church. After operating without a pastor for six months, the church body voted on the formation of a Pastor Search Committee, consisting of 12 members and chaired by Deacon Anthony Heyward. The committee's search process consist of 15 steps, based on "The Comprehensive Guide for Pastoral Search Committees" published by the American Baptist Personnel Services.

As we celebrate our 158th Church Anniversary, this year, 2020, has been unlike any other year in the history of our church. A deadly virus (Coronavirus or COVID-19) has ravaged the entire world from January to the present, and it shows no sign of relenting. This virus has caused, schools, businesses, churches, sporting events, and governments (Federal, State and local) to be shutdown and families to shelter in place. While governments are scrambling to produce a vaccine to counteract the virus, they have not as yet been successful. The preventive measures for keeping safe are: wearing a facial mask and social distancing (keeping 6 feet apart).

Our church has been closed since March 15. However, the leaders have found a way to insure the

membership is fed spiritually. The age of technology allows the FBCD Audio Video and Technology Ministries to stream the church services live on Facebook and YouTube or Zoom. Most of the major events that had been scheduled for 2020 were accomplished. On October 7, 2020, Rev. Dr. Earl C. Johnson, of Raleigh, North Carolina, assumed leadership as the Interim Pastor of FBCD. God still provides a way for His people to praise and worship Him.

While we are still worshipping remotely, we do look forward to the day when some normalcy can return to our lives. In the meantime, we are striving to do our best to survive this pandemic, which has, at this writing, caused the death of more than 210,000 US citizens.

As we prepare to celebrate the 159th year of God's blessings, the COVID-19 Virus Pandemic continues to be rampant. At this time, it has consumed more than 660,000 US citizens. The Government has been successful in overseeing/securing the production of three vaccines to counteract the virus. These vaccines have proven to be very effective in counteracting the virus' severity or death and have been made available to all citizens desiring to receive them. However, because of misinformation and hesitancy of many citizens to receive the vaccines, social gathering safety requirements continue to be in effect. As a result, FBCD officially reopened on July 4, 2021. Everyone in attendance at the services are encouraged to have temperature checks, wear masks, and socially distance. This year our communion service changed from the 4th Sunday to the 1st Sunday. The theme for the year is "Praising Our Way Into A New Era."

God continues to bless this church with persons who desire to serve and praise Him. Our church family now consists of many cultures, all serving and praising the only true and living God.

We praise and thank God for all that He enables this branch of Zion to do. God is good, and He has blessed this church family for 159 years and He continues to bless us.

The fruits of the labor of First Baptist Denbigh leaders are great. Many family members of our forefathers are still active in this church. Many adults who were taught in the Sunday School and church here are now pastors and ministers, while others are active in the fields of medicine, business, law, music, politics, engineering, electronics, education, entertainment, and the military. Many are still working in ministries of our church today. One person in particular is Arlisa Harrison Powell who began playing piano for the music ministry in 1976, at the age of 14 years. Except for 3 years in the military and 4 years of college, she continues in this capacity. Most of our young people are doing great today because of the spiritual background that they received here and carried with them while pursuing their studies and beginning their families and careers.



Powell

The First Baptist Church Denbigh family is experiencing a new level of spirituality as we strive toward "**Putting God First.**" We have so many qualified, gifted, and dedicated members within our church family who, along with our pastor, are helping the members to meet the challenges of using modern technology for teaching, preaching, and learning. This equips the entire congregation to grow spiritually and intellectually in the word of God, for our ultimate goal is to **glorify God** through our obedience and service to Him and to our fellow man so more souls will be won for Christ.

Thanks be to God for 159 years of divine guidance; thanks to our past leaders who paved the way for

us; and thanks to our present leaders who are striving to help develop the total person to be strong Christian men and women.

References

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7. Long-time residents of Warwick County and members of First Baptist Denbigh
8. Black History Encyclopedia - Volume 3
9. *Daily Press* columnist Felicia Mason, article entitled, "Framework for the Future - 2030" @ www.nmgov.com