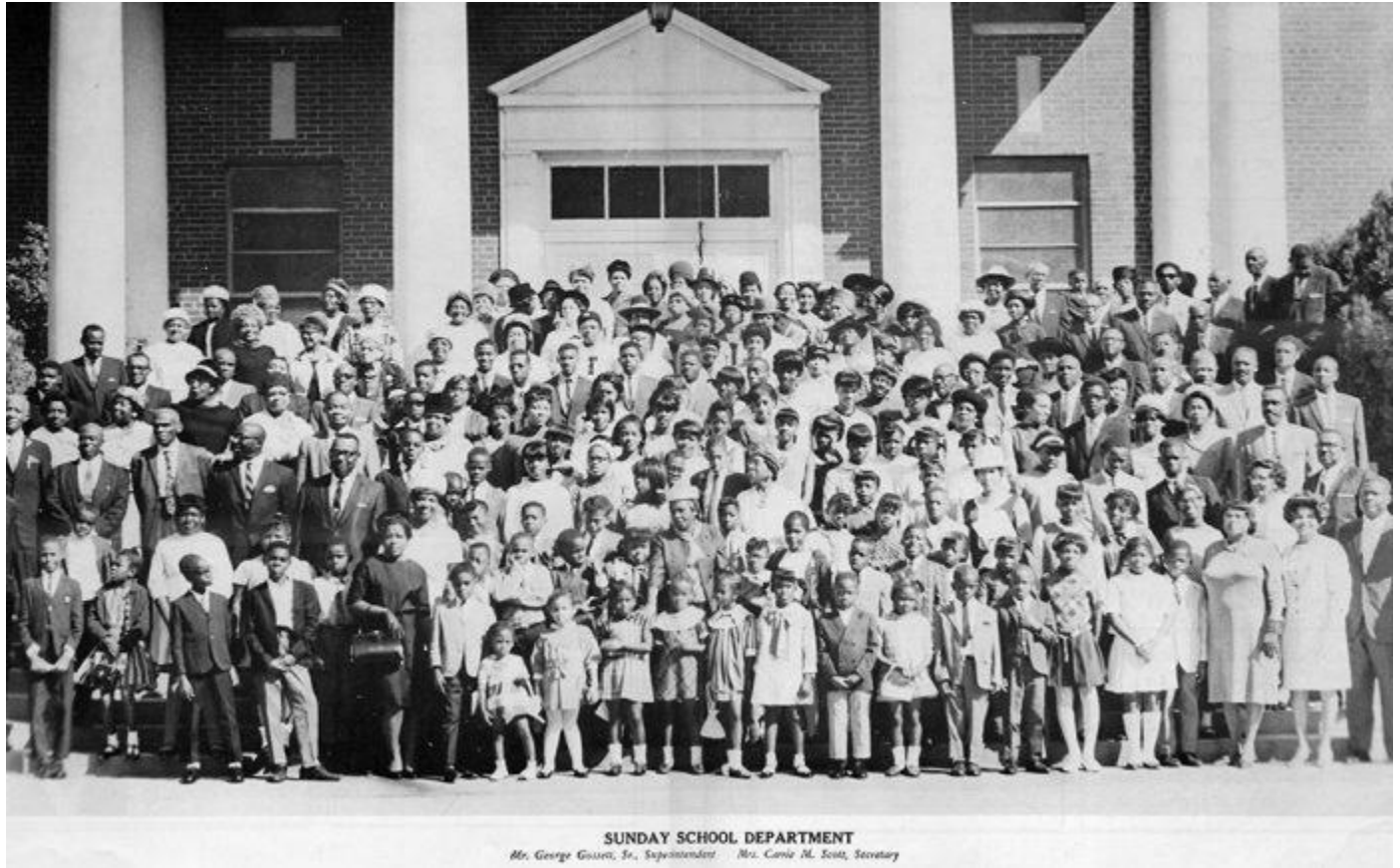


Yearlong celebration marks 150th year at St. John M.B.C.

By Dr. Sybil C. Mitchell - 02/23/2018 117 0



The St. John Baptist Church Sunday School department as depicted in the Centennial Celebration booklet in 1968. George Gossett Sr. was superintendent, with Carrie M. Scott serving as secretary.

St. John Missionary Baptist Church is an historic landmark, not only in Memphis, but in the consciousness of the city's collective church community.

It was a heady time in 1868 when St. John was organized by “a faithful few.” Memphis, like so many other Southern cities, struggled to adjust to the racial dynamic following the Civil War.

Thousands of freed African-Americans set out to create a community where their children could grow and thrive. They established churches, schools, social clubs and cemeteries – institutions where their lives would remain untouched by the harsh racial segregation that replaced slavery.

St. John Baptist Church, at the corner of what is today Washington Avenue and Fourth Street, was established by such pioneers, and the Rev. George J. Mosby became the first pastor.



St. John M.B.C. Pastor the Rev. Henry L. Key, shown here with his wife. (Photo: Tyrone P. Easley)

Some 150 years later, Pastor Henry L. Key now holds the office. He never expected to be leading a congregation when he returned home from Texas.

“You know, I came back from Texas five years ago because my parents were ailing,” he said. “I was a pastor, briefly, in Houston, prior to returning home.

The church theme, even way back then, was ‘St. John: Advancing the Kingdom of God.’”

The succession of pastors and church leadership have become an integral part of St. John’s history. In 1881, under the leadership of Father L. Patterson, the church moved to Exchange and High streets. The Rev. Charles Spratlin was elected pastor in 1885 and he was succeeded by M. L. Copeland, Alex Hunt and J. B. Martin.

Under Martin’s leadership, the church moved to 55 North Lauderdale. Other pastoral changes for St. John included:

- In 1889, William J. McMichael was elected pastor.
- William Bivens, a cousin of McMichael, was elected as an associate and served until Jan. 1, 1933.



The Rev. A. McEwen Williams, then St. John’s pastor, exchanges greetings with the Rev. Dr. Benjamin L. Hooks on Dec. 18, 1982. (Courtesy photo)

- The Rev. A. McEwen Williams was elected as an associate pastor on Jan. 1, 1933.

- At the death of McMichael in 1935, Williams was elected pastor. Williams, an educator, led the church to move into its present facilities at Vance Avenue and Orleans Street in 1953. During his tenure, many accomplishments were made, including a new fellowship hall built in 1978 and dedicated as the A. McEwen Williams Fellowship Hall. The Leota B. Ellis Library was also established by a bequest from Leota Ellis and officially dedicated on Nov. 20, 1988.
- In March 1991, after 57 years of service, Williams passed.
- On Nov. 23, 1991, the Rev. Robert Williams, Jr. (no relation to the former Rev. Williams) was elected as pastor. On Jan. 1, 1992, Robert Williams began his ministry at St. John with the theme “Building On a Firm Foundation.” He continued yearly themes which provided a spiritual focus for the congregation as the work of ministry advances.
- On Aug. 28, 2011, Robert Williams gave his resignation and left to pastor elsewhere.
- For the remainder of 2011, as well as 2012 and part of 2013, St. John had numerous visiting ministers preach the word.
- In May 18, 2013, Key was elected pastor, with an installation celebration on June 9, 2013.

“Little did I know that the whole of my life experiences would come to bear,” said Key. “I came home to Memphis and earned my master’s in community

psychology. I worked in human services for the state, assisting adults with high risk and vulnerability. All of that has helped me in the pastorate.”

The church’s celebration of its 150th anniversary will continue through the year with Men’s Month in February, Women’s Month in March and Youth Month in June. Anniversary festivities will culminate in November.