

The History of TABERNACLE COMMUNITY BAPTIST CHURCH in the City of Milwaukee

"Our ancestors carried the Tabernacle with them through the wilderness. It was constructed according to the plan God had shown to Moses." – The Acts of the Apostles 7:44

The Testimony of our Spiritual Forebears

Brought into being by a vibrant faith and enduring hope of our spiritual antecedents, the Tabernacle Community Baptist Church has been a citadel of hope for Milwaukee and its people for one hundred years. The early band of believers gave a new estimation of black Christians when they organized the congregation under the name of Saint Paul Baptist Church, at a time when there were only a few Baptist churches for African Americans in the city. Bearing witness to a divine impulse, an aspiring minister, **Reverend Hooks**, cast a grand vision and long arc for our charter members, laying a firm foundation for the new assembly. He would be succeeded by **Reverend Johnson** in 1926, after just four years of leadership; and **the Reverend R. H. Foy**, would assume the pastorate upon the completion of Reverend Johnson's six-year ministry, in 1932. It was during this period that the congregation changed its name to Tabernacle Baptist Church.

A Time of Steady Leadership and Growth

In 1936, with just fifty-five members, the congregation called **the Reverend Jewell Lawrence Williams** of Saint Paul's Baptist Church in Racine, Wisconsin, to become its fourth pastor. It would prove to be a consequential decision that secured a prosperous future for Tabernacle. Reverend Williams led in the establishment of numerous ministries, namely, the Sunday School, Trustee Board, Ministers & Deacons Union, the Mother's Board, Baptist Training Union, the Missionary Department, Senior Choir, the Gospel Chorus, Young Adult Choir, the Usher Board, Vacation Bible School, and Boys' Scouts. The membership increased immensely, and 'Community' was added to the name of the church to differentiate it from another congregation of the same name in West Allis. In other ways, the name change also indicated a growing consciousness toward the community Tabernacle was called to serve.

Reverend Williams became an iconic figure and exemplary leader for the congregation and the city. The Honorable Vel R. Phillips fondly remembers the incredible support she received from Reverend Williams and members of Tabernacle during her election as the first woman and first African American to the Milwaukee City Common Council, her later elevation to the bench as a judge, as well as her election as Secretary of State, the only African American to date to have held statewide office.

During the Williams pastorate, Tabernacle purchased an edifice at 1632 North 10th Street, which it vacated a few years later due to a city urban development project in 1960. The congregation then moved to its current location in 1961, purchasing the edifice from the former Immanuel Baptist Church, and burned the mortgage in 1971.

A training ground for ministers, Tabernacle licensed and/or ordained several sons of the church under Reverend Williams including the Reverends Isaac Hoppood, Bennie J. Gaston, Leroy Mixon, John B. Junior, Robert G. Childs, Monroe Meeks, James W. Spann, Roscoe B. Simpson, Walter Smith, O. B. Sartin, and O. W. Webster. After an eximious pastorate of forty-one years, Reverend Williams was retired in 1977. The beloved pastor died in 1980.

A Congregation Forging Forward in Faith

The retirement of Reverend Williams necessitated the call of a leader of notable character and superb gifts for ministry. **The Reverend Dr. Robert L. Harris** of Greater Center Star Missionary Baptist Church, Little Rock, Arkansas, fit the bill and became the fifth pastor in 1977. Reverend Harris was a teacher and tender shepherd. As an innovator and administrator, he established the Board of Christian Education to sustain discipleship and organized the Jewell L. Williams Library to honor his predecessor. Tabernacle also opened a Food Pantry and Clothing Resource Bank, chartered a chapter of the Coalition of the Aging with the State of Wisconsin, and began ministry in the county jails.

Ever the trailblazer, Reverend Harris was a leading pastor in the city to affirm women who professed a call to the ministry. In 1982, he licensed the Reverend Sharon Bell, embracing the vision of the Hebrew prophet Joel, that your sons and your daughters shall prophesy. Other women and men would follow in years to come, namely, Reverends Pauline Brand, Donna Childs, Amanda Gray, Phyllis Hanson, Berta Harrison, and Waynette Spain, Dwight Pleasant, Charles Nichols, Brandle C. Morrow, Ron Williams, Dwain Berry, Alex Durity, George Sims, Martin Childs, Jr., and Paul Owens, whom he would later name as his Assistant to the Pastor.

During the Harris pastorate, Tabernacle responded to the Lord's command to go into all the world, supporting several foreign missions projects in Monrovia, Liberia, as

well as organizing an annual neighborhood outreach event which continues today. The church's facilities were also renovated and upgraded for the support of ministry. A man known for his deep laughter and sincere love, Reverend Harris died in May 2008, after giving thirty-one years of meritorious service to God and his members. He is remembered by laity and clergy alike for his instruction in the former Milwaukee Theological Institute and the Congress of Christian Education of the Wisconsin General Baptist State Convention, Inc.

A Renewal of Promise

The faithful ministry of **the Reverend Paul Owens** guided Tabernacle during the pastoral vacancy until the congregation called **the Reverend Dr. Don Darius Butler**, a Bahamian native, as its sixth pastor. Fresh from a clinical pastoral residency at Norton Healthcare in Louisville, Kentucky, Reverend Butler would bring a zeal and innovation to the established fellowship. With his coming, Tabernacle experienced a renewal of promise, witnessing the return of scores of member-families to their spiritual-home. The ministry and program life of the congregation has been reformed and strengthened. Former mission circles have become the Dorcas Circle, a network of wise, mature women performing good works in the congregation and community. The men's ministry has become the Tabernacle Brotherhood, and the ushers have been united to serve under one banner. TIPS for Growth (Tabernacle in Prayer & Study) was established to support adult discipleship, and the AWANA Club was launched to teach children and youth to know, love and serve the Lord Jesus Christ. In addition, Tabernacle is now a leading congregation of So Send I You, an African American world missions organization, supporting mission ventures in Malawi, South Africa, and Haiti.

Tabernacle became more engaged on issues pertaining to Milwaukee's common life. We have hosted vigils for homicide victims, creating a safe space for the city's grief, and reclaimed the sanctity of an elementary school playground after the shooting death of a ten-year-old. In 2014, Tabernacle hosted a city-wide Gun Buyback event with the Milwaukee Police Department and the City of Milwaukee that turned over 300 firearms. Later that year, Tabernacle led the Black Lives Matter Sunday at Red Arrow Park, drawing attention to and protesting the killing of unarmed black citizens by police across the country. During the 2016 Presidential Election Campaign, Tabernacle lifted the issue of gun violence onto a national platform, hosting the former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in a community forum, along with Congresswomen Gwen Moore, Annette Nance-Holt, and Geneva Reed-Veal, mother of Sandra Bland.

We continued to mark new accomplishments in ministry. In the ninety-fifth year of our existence, we celebrated the ordination of the first two women deacons, Hazel Armstrong and Geneva Carlisle, and the leadership of the first woman to lead the Trustee Ministry, Dr. Gloria Pitchford-Nicholas.

Tabernacle also continued their engagement in diverse social justice issues throughout the city and state. Pastor Butler served dutifully and faithfully for nine years.

In January 2019, Tabernacle called **the Reverend Dr. Donna M. Childs** to serve as the Interim Pastor to lead and serve as a bridge of continuity during a season of transition. This historical call signifies our faith in following God's plan for this church. We continue to mark new accomplishments in ministry including the call of **the Rev. Dr. Donna M. Childs** to serve as the seventh Pastor of the Tabernacle Community Baptist Church, on August 23, 2020. A daughter of Tabernacle, Pastor Childs is recognized as the first woman to serve as Pastor at the Tabernacle Community Baptist Church. The Lord has used Rev. Childs to propel Tabernacle along His divine path, in the midst of a Pandemic and beyond.

As a lifelong member and product of Tabernacle, Rev. Childs exudes and displays a deep love for God and a genuine love for the people of God. In this new historic season, the Lord has blessed Tabernacle to implement innovative and inspired experiences and to respond to the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself with diverse community outreach initiatives. Aligned with the teaching, preaching, and healing ministry of Jesus; anointed and creative ministry continues to occur at Tabernacle and the result is a hunger for the Word of God.

Throughout our one hundred years and under now seven successive pastors, Tabernacle Community Baptist Church has responded to the call of God to be a light in the world. We have held up this light for the illumination of hearts and minds to the glory of God. In this milestone year, we recommit ourselves to the faith that brought us into being and strive to build a greater Tabernacle for God and humanity. The future continues to be bright for Tabernacle as we endeavor to empower and transform lives through the Word of God. The Lord has more phenomenal work for us to do!