

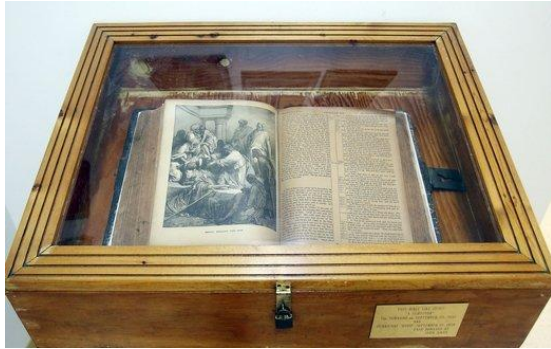
Calvary Baptist Church celebrating 150 years

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A person heading to the corner of Rutledge Avenue and Strawberry Lane a few years back was more likely to be looking for trouble than for God.

Around 2006, members of Calvary Baptist Church erected a big brick house of worship on that corner.



The Bible that was on the pulpit at Calvary Baptist Church when its sanctuary on Sumter Street survived a tornado in 1938. The only thing spared by the tornado was the Bible, which is displayed in a wooden case in the hallway of the church's present building on Rutledge Avenue.

“When we first built that church, Strawberry Lane was a big drug haven,” said Billy Green, Calvary’s chief deacon. “Our whole thing was to clean up the community and reclaim it. Look at it now. It’s a neighborhood that has turned around.”

Calvary was founded in 1865 and the congregation has been celebrating its 150th anniversary all year.

On Sept. 5, there was a big church picnic at Hampton Park, and on Friday night, there was a gala event at the Alfred Williams Community Center.

The main anniversary celebration is to take place at the church at 10 a.m. Oct. 11.

In its 150 years, Calvary has been through an earthquake, a fire, a tornado and a hurricane, with nothing causing the congregation, which was formed shortly after the end of the Civil War, to stumble.

“A great deal of transformation was happening to the South, to Charleston, and to the church,” said the Rev. Arthur Evans, Calvary’s pastor. “The freeing of the slaves and Reconstruction culminated in Calvary Baptist Church being formed.”

The church's charter is dated Oct. 10, 1865, and it was originally called "The Baptist Church in Charleston," according to a brief written history supplied by the congregation. To distinguish it from other Baptist congregations in town, it was called "Colored Baptist Church," the history says.

"We're the second oldest black Baptist church in Charleston," Evans said.

As slaves, African-Americans were not allowed to gather for worship, Evans said. When they were allowed to worship in white congregations, they were usually forced to sit in an upper balcony, segregated from the white parishioners.

After the Civil War ended, black Christians quickly began forming their own congregations and denominations.

Once Calvary was established, it began to work with the other black Baptist churches to organize a local association of churches and a state convention.

It was among the founding members of the 14-congregation Gethsemane Baptist Association when it was formed in November 1865.

Gethsemane was predecessor to the Charleston County Baptist Association, which was the first African-American Baptist Association in South Carolina.

In 1877, the congregation officially adopted the name, "Calvary Baptist Church." Its official name in the conveyance document was: The Calvary Baptist Church of Charleston for the Advancement of Christianity in the State of South Carolina.

In April 1877, the congregation bought its first house of worship on Smith Street.

Trials and tribulations

The great Charleston earthquake of 1886 wiped out many buildings in Charleston and caused widespread damage but Calvary's building, though damaged, was not destroyed.

On April 15, 1887, the church was destroyed by a fire and burned to the ground.

Though they were disheartened, the remaining members met at Brown's Hall on St. Philip Street until the church rebuilt a small edifice a year later on the same parcel.

During this time, Calvary Baptist Church held services with Shiloh AME Church for many years on the corner at Morris and Smith streets. Around the turn of the century, the pastor and members moved to 387 Sumter St.

Under the leadership of the Rev. William G. Kinard, Calvary built a new sanctuary on Sumter Street in 1935, but a tornado destroyed that building in 1938.

All that remained after the tornado was a Bible that Kinard kept on the pulpit. It was found in the midst of the rubble, completely dry and intact.

“God preserved the word,” Evans said as he pointed to the Bible, which is kept in a wooden display case in a hallway at Calvary. “The building was gone but his word remained.”

That Bible also later survived Hurricane Hugo in 1989.

After the 1938 tornado destroyed the building, Kinard asked for help from his friend, the Rev. T.O. Mills, pastor of Central Baptist Church. Members worshiped at Central Baptist until Calvary was rebuilt in 1940.

In 1948, Calvary Baptist Church elected its 16th pastor, the Rev. Frederick Douglas Dawson. Thus far, Dawson, who retired in 1992 and died in 1998, has been the longest-serving pastor, having served for more than 44 years. Dawson was pastor when Hurricane Hugo struck in 1989.

“Hurricane Hugo put Calvary into the street,” said Catherine Hicks, a member of Calvary for the past 85 years. Hicks, who is 98, joined the congregation when she was 13 years old and has been active ever since.

She said there have been many changes over the years but she likes everything about the church and would recommend it to anyone looking for a church home.

Looking to the future

Evans, the current pastor, has high praise for two of his predecessors, Kinard and Dawson, saying they both had a significant influence on Calvary’s development.

“The church grew considerably under Rev. Kinard’s leadership,” Evans said. And Dawson was well-known as an advocate for civil rights and equality. He galvanized the congregation into action, Evans said.

Evans, who is 60, grew up in the Lowcountry on Edisto Island and still has relatives in the area.

Being a full-time preacher is a second career for Evans, who spent 20 years in the Air Force as an aircraft hydraulics technician.

He said he vividly recalls the day he felt God call him into the ministry.

“It was December 31, 1978,” Evans said. “At 2 a.m., I heard a voice. This voice was utterly shattering.”

He awoke and pondered what he’d heard. “The voice said, ‘Preach my word.’ ”

So he went to the church he was attending in Arizona. “The preacher’s sermon was about being called by God,” Evans said. He responded by going up to the altar and saying he’d been called to preach.

From that moment on, he set a course for seminary and a pastorate. He was at a church in North Carolina when he was called to the position at Calvary.

Calvary has about 450 members, with 150 to 200 attending on a typical Sunday, Evans said.

Barbara Nelson, chairwoman of the Trustee Ministry and a member for more than 50 years, said Calvary is a warm and welcoming congregation. “It’s more of a family,” Nelson said. “It’s almost like you’re a member of a family. I like the closeness.”

As the church marks its 150th anniversary, the congregation is reflecting on its past and looking toward its future, Evans said.

“In the community, we want to be a beacon for justice,” he said.

Worship at Calvary is blended, a mix of contemporary music and old favorites, Evans said. Like many congregations, Calvary is working hard to hang on to young adults. Among its outreach programs are a special Bible study for young adults and the incorporation of praise dancers into the worship service. Every third Sunday, the praise dancers assist in leading the congregation in praise and worship to God.

Plans also include a child care center and the installation of video screens in the sanctuary, Evans said.

Calvary also is celebrating its third jubilee at 7 p.m. Thursday with the Rev. Leonard O. Griffin of Morris Street Baptist Church as guest preacher, along with the choirs from Morris Street Baptist Church and New First Baptist Church on Edisto Island.