

First Nazareth Baptist Church began as a vision and reaffirmation of God's mighty works. The formal organizational meeting of Nazareth Baptist Church in Columbia, S.C. was held on Friday evening, December 14, 1877. The Council of Organization met according to appointment to hear the desires of the brethren of Nazareth. Council members present were Rev. Frank Dobbins, pastor of Zion Baptist Church of Columbia, Rev. F.R. Wallace, pastor of Union Hopewell Baptist Church in Richland County, Rev. Enlyreen of Branchville, S.C., Rev. A.D. Barns of North Carolina and C.M. McJunkins, deacon of the First Baptist Church of Columbia. Rev. Dobbins served as moderator; C.M. McJunkins was the clerk. Said council met on that date and Nazareth Baptist Church was recognized unanimously as an independent Baptist church in Columbia, S.C.

Behind every organization there are committed people. This is especially true of a church, for a church is a body of believers; the body of Christ. In the beginning of Nazareth Baptist Church, members and pastors strived to live according to the word of God. It was Nazareth's custom to elect the officers and pastor annually. Throughout its history, Nazareth has had some of the most outstanding black ministers of the denomination in South Carolina as its pastors.

In the 130 years of the church's history, there has been a myriad of notable, spiritual and visionary leaders. The Reverend Virgil J. Parker was called as pastor in 1878 and served until his untimely death in 1879 at the age of 29. While serving as pastor of Nazareth, he was preparing to work in Africa. During his brief tenure, the Sunday School was organized with Deacon Henry Dobbins as the first superintendent. Records indicate there were nine officers and teachers, along with 50 scholars. The library had 75 books. The Missionary Society was organized in March 1878. Under the leadership of Rev. Parker, the church met in a house on Bull Street, near Laurel Street.

Following the death of Rev. Parker, the Rev. Edward M. Brawley, who was a member of Nazareth, was elected pastor in February 1879 and served until October 1879. Rev. J.J. Durham succeeded him. On Oct. 30, 1879, Nazareth joined the Pee Dee Association during its ninth annual session at Hopewell Baptist Church in Sumter, S.C. At the time, George L. Mitchell was serving as church clerk. Church membership reported was 83.

In 1880, Rev. G.W. Hamblin was elected as pastor, and G.L. Mitchell continued to serve as clerk. Membership increased to 97. Rev. Hamblin was elected as a delegate from the Pee Dee Association to attend the Baptist Educational and Missionary Convention as a testament to his leadership. Also, Rev. E.M. Brawley, church member, was elected as secretary of the Pee Dee Sunday School Convention. Isom W. Simons served as superintendent of the Sunday School.

Rev. J.J. Durham was elected as pastor for a second time in 1881. G.L. Mitchell continued to serve as clerk. Membership was reported as 80.

In 1882, Rev. Durham continued in his capacity as pastor and was elected to the executive board of the Pee Dee Association. Sunday School scholars had dropped to 25. At the Sunday School Convention, Rev. Durham presented a sermon titled, "The Value of the Sunday School to the Church and to the Denomination." Rev. Durham was a strong supporter of Sunday School training and Bible study. Isom Simons continued as superintendent of the Sunday School, and Holland Mitchell served as chairman of the Board of Trustees.

On September 30, 1881, Fannie H. Earle, a member of Nazareth, deeded a lot on Pickens Street to Holland Mitchell, E.M. Brawley and Green Smith, acting as trustees of Nazareth Baptist Church, a society organized for the purpose of carrying on public worship according to the doctrines of the Baptist denomination, for the amount of \$425.00 The lot was located on the east side of Pickens Street between Plain (now Hampton) and Taylor Streets. It measured 59 feet (east and west boundaries) by 150 feet (north and south boundaries). Subsequently, church members solicited subscriptions for the erection of a house of worship.

(Insert subscription)

Rev. Isom W. Simons was elected as pastor in 1883, with an annual salary of \$180. In addition to serving as pastor, he also served as Sunday School superintendent. C.Y. Holmes was elected as church clerk. Church membership was 63. There were 35 scholars in the Sunday School.

Construction of the first church structure began in 1884, under the pastorate of Rev. Isom W. Simons.

In 1885, the church welcomed Rev. Castle Brewer as its new pastor at an annual salary of \$450. The church building, valued at \$2,500, was incomplete. The Sunday School now was graded and had 50 books. George L. Mitchell was clerk. Holland Mitchell, J.W. Simons and Green Smith, trustees, obtained a mortgage from the American Baptist Home Mission Society in the amount of \$1,000 to finance the construction of the church.

The State of South Carolina granted Nazareth Baptist Church a charter on March 20, 1885 "for the purpose of worship of Almighty God." The charter listed as incorporators Holland Mitchell, Green Smith, G. Housal, Henry Taylor, Albert Curshaw, I.W. Simons, J. Williams, W.C. Davis, R. Williams and A. Green. The charter stipulated that the amount of stock was not to exceed \$1500.

Rev. Brewer remained as pastor in 1886, and George Mitchell served as clerk. Rev. Brewer was elected to the executive board of the Pee Dee Association, and Rev. Isom W. Simons, a member of Nazareth, was called as pastor of New Light Beulah Baptist Church in Hopkins, S.C.

According to the **Works Progress Administration (WPA) Survey of State and Local Historical Records**, the first church structure was a small, rectangular frame building, constructed in 1887. The location was 1520 Pickens St.

In 1888, Nazareth recalled Rev. Isom Simons as pastor, and George Mitchell continued as clerk. He served through 1889 before tendering his resignation.

As the church did not have a pastor in 1890; church membership decreased to 41 members. Perhaps this was a reflection of persons desiring to see a minister called who could continue the spiritual leadership for Nazareth.

The following year, Rev. J.C. Tobin assumed the pastorate, with an annual salary of \$336. His tenure was short lived. In April 1892, he tendered his resignation

Again, Rev. Isom Simons answered the call to lead the church, serving as pastor for 1892-93.

In 1894, Nazareth requested and was granted a letter of dismission (transfer) from the Pee Dee Association and affiliated with the Gethsemane Baptist Association during its 20th annual session at St. Paul Baptist Church in Lexington, S.C. Miss N.L. Scott served as Sunday School superintendent, and there were 35 scholars. Rev. J.C. Tobin and C.F. Holmes, served as pastor and clerk, respectively.

Rev. C. Whitehead served as pastor in 1899. Worship was held at 3:30 p.m. and 8:30 p.m. on Sundays, Sunday School was at 10:30 a.m., and Wednesday service was held at 8:30 p.m. At this time, membership exceeded 100.

Rev. William W. Carter served as pastor from 1901 through September 1903. A.L. Wilson was the church clerk. Church membership was 65, and the church property was valued at \$5,000. F.D. Sims served as superintendent of the Sunday School that had 55 scholars and 75 books.

In June of 1905, it was decided that Nazareth would run a 10-night joint bazaar with Second Calvary Baptist Church, with the proceeds going to the pastor. With a small membership, the church engaged in novel ways to supplement the pastor's salary.

Rev. J.S. Earle served as pastor of Nazareth in 1904, 1905 and 1906; he preached his farewell sermon on Feb. 1, 1907. Alfred E. Simons served as church clerk. In September 1906, the church adopted the envelope system as a means of raising the pastor's salary.

On Jan. 4, 1907, the treasurer's report showed a balance on hand of 40 cents.

As a reminder of what God can do, and where He has brought Nazareth, on January 9, 1907, the treasurer's report showed a balance on hand of 40 cents. In biblical terms, the number "40" always has been a significant number. So it was with this church.

By 1910, church attendance and membership had declined to the point where the congregation was confronted with the wisdom of continuing as a church or moving to a new location. In July and August of 1910, Nazareth's officers discussed the advisability of moving the church to Waverly; they felt that getting the church in a black community would mean its revival and growth. At a business meeting held on Oct. 17, 1910, the majority present voted to remain at the same site, namely, on Pickens Street between Plain (now Hampton) and Taylor Streets. An effort was made to have an evening service from March 1 to Sept. 13, 1910 with little success, and this service was discontinued.

On April 9, 1913, after lengthy discussion of the condition of Nazareth, the question was raised as to the wisdom of continuing as a church. An advisory committee was formed to bring recommendations regarding the best step or action, under existing circumstances, for the church to make. These were challenging and difficult times for the church family.

On April 23, 1913, recommendations of the advisory committee were presented, rejected and thrown out. The Trustee Board was empowered to enter negotiations for the sale of the property of Nazareth Baptist Church. They also were charged to look for a new location for the church and bring such report to the church for its consideration at the earliest date possible.

On November 23, 1913, the hour for preaching services was changed from 3:30 p.m. Sunday afternoon to 11 a.m. Sunday morning beginning Nov. 30, 1913. This practice was in conformity with other worship services among black congregations in Columbia.

At a church meeting on Jan. 14, 1914, it was reported that the church lot sold for \$4,900. On March 8, 1914, a meeting was held to decide whether Nazareth would locate elsewhere and continue as a church, or, as had been suggested, donate the money to some worthy charitable purpose. A vote was taken to locate elsewhere, and the trustees were empowered to secure a lot, 46 feet by 120 feet, on Gervais Street, east of Heidt Street. This was a bold and courageous step for the church to take---it was an act of faith.

Looking within the black community for talented skilled builders, the church identified and asked church members I.D. Bailey to serve as architect and builder of the new edifice. The first business meeting of Nazareth in its new home was held July 31, 1914. Rev. Lawrence Keitt was acting pastor.



While World War I was raging, the church was looking for solace and new leadership from within. So in September 1914, approval was given to calling J.J. Harrison as pastor and paying the organist 50 cents a week for service rendered. Rev. Harrison was ordained and installed in 1915. Rev. Dr. J.J. Durham conducted the service and preached the ordination sermon.

On June 4, 1915, it was agreed that a missionary collection would be lifted each Sunday. In July, the church agreed to give \$2 per month out of missionary contributions to the Associated Charities.

The first ushers were organized on March 31, 1916. T.A. Reed served as president, and Henry Harper and R. Renolds were members. Also in 1916, Easter Sunday and Children's Day were given to the Sunday School for the purpose of raising money for missions, and the pastor's salary was set as \$30 a month.

In 1917, Isaac E. Russell was elected as church clerk and served for 30 years. He was succeeded by Theodore Youngblood (1947-1951), Lucius Dakers (1952-2002) and Willie J. Redmond (2003-present), respectively.

At the February 5, 1917 business meeting of the church, approval was given to changing business meetings of the church from monthly to quarterly. In June 1917, it was reported that the Sunday School library donated by friends in Boston had been placed on the bookshelves and ready for use. In June 1917, approval was given to forming a board of deaconesses to aid in keeping up the spiritual life of the church and enlarging its work.

Pastors who served Nazareth from 1907-1933 were: W.P. Jones (May 1907- August 08); Andrew Richbourg, (Jan. 17, 1909-Feb. 10, 1910); J.C. Gilmore, (March 9, 1910-Dec. 4, 1910); Lawrence M. Keitt, (1911-1914 acting); A.A. L. Wilson, (September 1914-

December 1914), served but not elected; J.J. Harrison, (December 13, 1914-November 31, 1915); St. Elmore Means, (December 21, 1915-July 12, 1916); Isaac N. McCants, student at Benedict College, (1917); R.S. Sims, (November 15, 1917-November 1, 1918) H.A. Peterson of Greenwood, S.C., J.C. Dunbar, (1921-1923); Epheus A. Moss of Augusta, Georgia, (1923-1925), B. Robinson (1926-1927), Hatfield of Washington, D.C., (1927-1929); and J.P. Reeder (1930-1932).

During the pastorate of Rev. St. Elmore Means, the first choir accompanied by instrumental music was organized under the leadership of Deacon Isaac Russell, with Amy Boozer serving as organist.

Construction of the church parsonage began in 1915. To complete the task, each member, as well as friends of the church, was asked to give one or more sacks of ackitite or the equivalent in money so that young men of the community could plaster the house and be served a feast prepared by sisters of the church. Rev. St. Elmo Means was the first pastor to live in the parsonage.

It is not known when the church's name changed from Nazareth to First Nazareth, but it most likely occurred after the establishment of Second Nazareth Baptist Church in 1918.

During the pastorate of Rev. William Downs (1933-1939), the choir became widely known throughout the community as the First Nazareth Radio Choir. Its rendition of "Wade In The Water," led by Deacon Russell, was heard every Sunday night on the radio broadcast from Johnson's Funeral Home. The Church Aid Club, Sunshine Garden Club and Vineyard Workers Club were organized during Rev. Down's pastorate.

The church's charter was renewed in perpetuity on December 11, 1935, with the Rev. W.M. Downs, Isaac Russell and W.A. Means listed as officers of the church..

Reverend Westberry Homer Neal, Sr.



Reverend Westberry Homer Neal, Sr. was called to the pastorate of this church and holds the longest tenure, 1939-1979.. During the early years of the Rev. Dr. Neal's pastorate (1939-1979), Harold Poole organized the first gospel sector within the choir. Known as the Poole Singers, the group traveled to various churches in the community every Sunday night, introducing gospel songs. Some of the major accomplishments during Dr. Neal's 40-year pastorate include:

- Basement built in 1946
- Brick veneered and sanctuary renovation, 1952
- Major renovation and construction of educational annex in 1970
- Mortgage-burning ceremony, August 29, 1976
- Affiliation with the National Baptist Convention of America
- Pastor's Aid Club organized
- Soup Kitchen and Clothing Bank
- Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts programs
- Baptist Young People's Union (BYPU)
- Church membership exceeded 1,000 members
- Vacation Bible School

Rev. Blakely N. Scott, the present visionary, was elected to the pastorate of First Nazareth in 1979. During his 28-year pastorate as under-shepherd of His flock, First Nazareth has continued to grow with a strong sense of mission through worship, discipleship, fellowship, service and the spreading of God's word. Many outreach ministries have been established and reactivated to promote Christian growth and development among the First Nazareth membership and spiritually enrich communities in the city, state, nation and world. Subsequently, First Nazareth has witnessed exponential growth in membership and expansion of church property.

To address the demands of an increased membership, Rev. Scott led the construction effort of a new church edifice. The First Nazareth Church family entered the newly constructed edifice in 1993. During this era in church history, Early Morning Worship commenced, along with a fifth Sunday youth worship.



In 1998, the church purchased Carpenters' Building, located at the corner of Gervais and Heidt Streets. Built in 1941 by Carpenters Local Union No. 2260, United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America, the building served as home to the union, several fraternal and benevolent organizations and businesses and a nursery school. The physical structure, ravaged by years of neglect, was demolished and replaced with the Carpenter's Building Annex, housing the church's administrative offices and a new Child Development Center, in 2002.

Rev. Scott again answered the call of God in 2000 to begin a four-phase construction and renovation program.

Highlights of his pastorate include:

- Implementation of summer day camp program
- Activation and re-activation of outreach ministries promoting Christian Growth and Development
- Construction of new edifice, 1992
- Formation of early morning worship (7:45 a.m.)
- Opening of child development center
- Affiliation with Progressive National Baptist Convention and The Midlands Baptist Association, Inc.
- Establishment of First Nazareth Foundation
- Faith-based partnership with W.J. Keenan High School
- Initiation of more than 20 new ministries
- Construction of current sanctuary, 2005



The Groundbreaking Ceremony for the new sanctuary was held on June 22, 2003 at 1 p.m. The first worship in the new sanctuary was November 6, 2005 at 6 p.m. After Baptist Training Union, the congregation marched from the previous sanctuary on Gervais Street onto Heidt Street and proceeded onto Lady Street into the new sanctuary. Led by the Judah Praise Team and Pastor Scott and his family, the ceremonial march ushered in the newest phase in the progressive history of First Nazareth.

For more than 130 years, First Nazareth Baptist Church has enriched the lives of the Greater Columbia community through Christian service while carrying forth the tradition established by the founders proclaiming mightily that “good things do come out of Nazareth.”