

# Sun Journal

HUMAN-INTEREST

## Robert Johnson

**Holly Desrosier**

Published 6:34 a.m. ET July 29, 2019 | Updated 2:49 p.m. ET July 26, 2019

Pastor Robert Johnson has been making a difference in the New Bern community for nearly 40 years. Revered for his leadership skills and natural ability to bring people together, Robert has left his footprint on numerous civic, religious and philanthropic organizations across the city.

His calling to serve others struck him early in life. He was born in the tiny town of Due West, South Carolina. After a terrible car accident nearly took his life at age six, Robert began the uphill battle of recovery and self-reflection at a remarkably young age. Everyone who knew him predicted he'd one day become a minister, but the notion didn't resonate with him until age nine, when he felt the call and his purpose became clear.

After earning a Bachelor of Arts in History degree and Master of Divinity degree, he moved to New Bern to take over as pastor of Ebenezer Presbyterian Church in May 1980. The historically registered church is the only established African-American Presbyterian Church in New Bern. Robert has offered his guidance there for almost four decades, making him the longest serving of the 15 ministers to lead that church. He is often referred to as "New Bern's Pastor" for being one of the area's longest serving ministers.

What makes Robert's pastoral career unique is his gift of bringing people of all denominations together. He uses this ability to find ways of uniting people by accentuating common goals.

"I believe a pastor that's been called to ministry is not limited to his own flock," he explained. "When I accepted the call to pastor Ebenezer, the Lord allowed me to reach beyond the walls of this congregation to involve the congregation, as well as myself, in the community—a ministry connecting the community and the church together—and I've found that through the years it's been a rich, rewarding experience."

In 1982, he played a big part in the establishment of Religious Community Services (RCS) of New Bern. Ebenezer's fellowship hall served as the first soup kitchen for about three years. It

was one of the first African-American churches to partner with RCS.

“RCS has a very special place in our church ministry, and especially my heart,” said Robert. “I’ll forever cherish the ecumenical fellowship. It’s been the greatest ministry that has come to this community.”

He was the organization’s first black president and served two terms before becoming supervisor of the family home ministry. He also monitored the 24-hour hotline and later became the shelter manager. “I listened to troubled men and women that had addictions to drugs and alcohol,” he said. “It was very instrumental in serving as a listening ear to them and saved many lives from going off a cliff just by being there.”

RCS played a major role in helping the City of New Bern win the All-American City Award in 1989. Robert was one of the RCS representatives to accompany city officials to Chicago for the competition. The award recognizes communities that implement civic engagement, collaboration, inclusiveness and innovation to tackle local issues.

In 1983, Robert was one of the founding members of the Martin Luther King Jr. Outreach Ministry of New Bern. He served two terms as president and is currently vice president. “We have a great outreach ministry stemming from Martin Luther King,” he said. “We believe in his legacy and try to keep that legacy alive in our community.”

In 1995, Robert became the chair of Phoenix House, a program that provided addicts with counseling and steps to assist in the recovery process and beyond. He was influential in leading his congregation to open the church’s doors to the Clean Freedom Group. The group held recovery meetings there three times a week from 2013 until 2016, encouraging and helping alcohol and drug addicts adjust to living sober one day at a time.

Robert is also the longest serving chaplain at CarolinaEast Medical Center, serving as the staff chaplain for 25 years and volunteer adjunct chaplain for five years. During those years, he’s been a source of comfort for many people, through good times and bad.

“That has been an excellent, rewarding experience to my faith and just my whole life,” he said. “I love people, and every day of my life, I am very much involved in ministering to people. God has really allowed me to be the instrument of people, love, reconciliation, grace and compassion. He allowed me to use my gifts of pastoral counseling, listening, being present in times when families, patients and even staff just need a listening ear.”

Robert has been a member of the New Bern Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance for over 20 years and previously served as president. In 2017, he received the organization’s annual

Annual Joseph C. George Award for upholding positive principles and virtues and spreading them throughout the community.

"My call there was to unite both communities together in ecumenical worship in services, and we were able to accomplish some of that," he said.

He is the current president of the Duffyfield Phoenix Project, headed by a group of individuals with a mission to advocate for improvements in the physical surroundings and quality of life for residents of Duffyfield. Since joining forces with Anne Schout in 2017, the group has held several successful cleanup events. It also holds regular forums to enable residents to express concerns and workshops to educate the public on specific issues at hand.

"We're a 501(c) now, and we're doing some positive things in the Duffyfield community and aiding people that have been affected by the hurricane, assisting them and working with the other organizations in the community that's reaching out to hurricane victims," said Robert.

People were quick to aid a community that many felt was just pushed aside. Robert said they saw the vision that where there is life, there is always hope. Their capital campaign raised nearly \$17,000, which will go toward rebuilding the historical Duffyfield area.

"It definitely needs the love and compassion of the entire city," he said. "That's our dream—to bring the whole city together to make a difference."

His previous community involvement includes serving as past president of the Historic Dryborough Neighborhood Association, chair of Reviving Lives Ministry for 22 years and member of the Craven County AIDS Task Force and the Neuse River Community Development Corporation. He began serving as assistant chaplain for the Good Shepherd Home for the Aged in 1989 and currently serves as the chaplain.

Robert also assisted with an afterschool program at Ebenezer. Around 1998, a group of diligent volunteers assisted 12 J.T. Barber Elementary School students with homework, helped mentor them and ensured a safe, enriching environment for afterschool care. The program had a lasting impact on the children who attended, and each one made the honor roll.

"The parents were very appreciative that we took interest in spending some extra time with their children," he said.

Robert is the proud father of two adult sons and husband of 27 years to Martha, a special education teacher. He hopes that telling his story will inspire others to get out there and

make a difference as well.

"We need for people to get involved in the community," he said. "I always believe when there is unity in the community, there's strength. We can accomplish so much when people come together, have the same compassion and love their neighbor."

Do you know somebody who should be featured in 52 Faces of Community? Visit <https://www.newbernsj.com/52faces> and click on the "Submit a Face" button.

From the nominator:

Pastor Robert Johnson is one of New Bern's finest public servants. He has faithfully guided Ebenezer Presbyterian Church on Bern Street for nearly 40 years. In addition, for many years, Pastor Johnson has served at CarolinaEast as a Hospital Chaplain. In that capacity, he has brought comfort and reassurance to those facing uncertainty with health issues. Likewise, he is quick to celebrate the birth of a new baby with the family. "New Bern's Pastor," as many refer to him, was instrumental in founding Religious Community Services (RCS), which first operated out of the church fellowship hall. Pastor Johnson was also founding member of the Dr. Martin Luther King Committee of New Bern. He has served on many city boards and committees. He is truly a public servant!

-Steve Mabie