

A Testimonial of Faith and Witness Of Old Bethel Presbyterian Church By Rev. Dr. Franklin D. Colclough

The Old Bethel Presbyterian Church of Hamer, SC was organized around 1870, some five years after the Civil War between the states ended and about seven years following the Emancipation Proclamation. During the 1860's, 1870's and following the Freedmen's Board of the Northern Presbyterian Church sent missionaries to the South to organize schools and churches for the newly freed slaves. The Southern Presbyterian Church, or the PCUS, also developed an evangelistic outreach to the freedmen by organizing churches in the south. Old Bethel was one of those churches that was organized under the auspices of Pee Dee Presbytery. At that time the presbytery did not accept into membership any African American ministers or churches and Old Bethel in 1870 was assigned to the all-black Georgia- South Carolina Presbytery. It remained a member of the Georgia-South Carolina Presbytery until 1968 when the church was finally admitted to Pee Dee Presbytery following a request in 1964 by Rev. Thomas J. James. According to Dr. Charles Raynal in his book, Presbyterians in South Carolina 1925-1985, at the age of 86, Rev. James, one of my heroes, who was still preaching and teaching among the African American churches, made his appeal to the Judicial Committee appointed to deal with the dispute between Pee Dee and Harmony presbyteries and the PCUS General Assembly. His appeal was that the African American churches be admitted to membership. These are the words of Rev. James to the committee:

"Mr. Moderator, Fathers and Brethren, I bring you greetings and goodwill from the Synod of Georgia, in behalf of the Presbytery of Georgia-Carolina and the seven churches in its bounds: Cousar Memorial a Bishopville, St. James at Kingtree, Mt. Pisgah at Hartsville, New Bethel at

Florence, New Bethel at Dillon, Old Bethel at Hamer, and Mt. Herman at McColl. These churches have been organized some eighty or ninety years ago by our fathers of both races. These churches desire to come under the banner of the Synod of South Carolina, where they can have communion and fellowship with the saints. We beg your prayers that we might grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.”

His eloquent request persuaded the committee and in 1968 Pee Dee Presbytery voted to receive Old Bethel and the few African American congregations that had been segregated since the nineteenth century.

Located right at the South Carolina – North Carolina state line in rural Dillon County, Old Bethel had its hey- day and had a profound impact on the community. It was a place for religious and social gatherings and church picnics under the old oak tree that still stands in front of the church. In 1988 when New Harmony Presbytery was organized, the membership of Old Bethel had dwindled to twenty or so members. However, the church doors were kept opened under the faithful leadership of Elder Ruby Page who served as clerk of session for many years until his death in 2014. The love and devotion of Elder Page for Old Bethel was symbolic of the love and devotion of all the saints who were members of this church and through their faithfulness and commitment moved Christ’s mission forward for some 150 years.

The congregation was officially dissolved on October 17, 2020 by an Administrative Commission of New Harmony Presbytery. Even though its life of service and witness is no more, I am certain the descendants of Old Bethel who yet live, such as the McClellan, Carmichael, Blue and Butler families, who today serve in various churches and denominations, will continue to carry with them Old Bethel’s history, her record of service, and the memory of the faithful saints who were nurtured in the faith in this little country church in Hamer. SC. To God be the glory. The work and ministry of Old Bethel Presbyterian Church will continue to speak for her.