GREATER FRIENDSHIP BAPTIST CHURCH

A HISTORY
Five handshakes and two hugs. To reach a pew at your typical Greater Friendship worship service means you will shake at least five hands and hug two members. It doesn’t matter if you are a regular or a stranger. Greater Friendship Baptist Church is an intimate church. Its single public entrance funnels the congregation together physically before they come together in praise. Over time, there have been small changes. The congregation itself has endured cycles of shrinking and growing attendance. But for more than sixty years, Greater Friendship has stood in its current location, an active beacon to those in need.

Every church is more than a summary of its past, but this short history does provide some context. Current and future members should know where the church has come from and what it had to overcome. This church is intimately connected to the history of African Americans in Anchorage and played a crucial role in national race relations. This history provides that overview. In addition, several past and current members generously volunteered for interviews, and their thoughts and memories are included.
Before World War II, Anchorage was a minor railroad hub, smaller and less important than Fairbanks, Juneau, and even Ketchikan. After construction began on Anchorage’s Fort Richardson and Elmendorf airfield in the summer of 1941, thousands of people surged to Anchorage seeking construction work or some other boom-created opportunity. From four thousand residents in 1940, the Anchorage swelled to more than thirty thousand by 1950, well on its way to becoming the population, economic, and cultural center of Alaska that it is today.

Separated from their Outside families and friends, the new arrivals were at greater risk of temptation without the social circles they previously depended upon. And life on the frontier has always been more uncertain and dangerous. Southern Baptists and other denominations in the Lower 48 saw an opportunity for evangelism in Alaska, a new population that needed guidance. In 1943, a congregation of soldiers established Anchorage’s First Baptist Church, the first Southern Baptist church in Alaska.

Anchorage’s African-American population was also small before World War II. Zelmer Lawrence, later an Anchorage club owner and activist, arrived in 1940 and found a black community of only eight to twelve individuals. Largely through word of mouth, black workers in the Lower 48 heard of good work and higher pay in Alaska. Many of them drove up the Alaska-Canadian (Alcan) Highway, which had been partially constructed by African-American U.S. Army engineers during WWII. When the Alcan opened to the public in 1947, many Alaskans called it the Negro Road. By the
early 1950s, as many as five thousand African Americans lived in and around the city.

These new arrivals were members of the Great Migration, the mass movement of African Americans away from the Jim Crow American South and towards greater opportunities north and west. Vanee Robinson, a charter member of Greater Friendship, is a textbook example. Robinson and her family moved from Texas to Vancouver, WA where she and her husband Jacob worked at a shipyard during WWII. After the war ended and work dried up, the Robinsons followed rumors of opportunities to Alaska. They did not know what to expect. Said Vanee later, “I was appalled. I thought Alaska was just ice and snow and igloos, that we’d all freeze to death.”

Founded on June 22, 1951, Anchorage’s Greater Friendship Baptist Church became the first black church in Alaska. All subsequent black churches in Alaska either directly, as with Shiloh Missionary Baptist in 1952 and New Hope Baptist in 1960, or indirectly followed from Greater Friendship. “Even though there are larger churches, Greater Friendship is still like a pillar or foundation of all the black churches in Anchorage,” said one church member. “It is known and respected as that.” The congregation began as a revival led by the Reverend Charles Kennedy, followed by meetings and worship at First Baptist Church. According to founding member Vallie Mae Hawkins, Rev. Kennedy “just preached God’s Word” and “let you know what God was saying all right.” Another early attendee preferred Rev. Kennedy’s “friendly, warm sermons” compared to the hellfire and brimstone sermons at other churches.
Within five weeks, the original congregation of 32 believers grew to more than a hundred. After several months of services at First Baptist, the congregation moved to the Pioneer Hall on 6th Avenue and F Street. From there the congregation moved to 12th Avenue and Cordova Street in 1952. That same year, the church purchased the current lot at 13th Avenue and Ingra Street (then called East H Street) in what is now the Fairview neighborhood.

Around the same size as the current church, the first, wooden church building included a 50 by 72-foot sanctuary that could hold 500 worshippers. A 1952 queen drive for the building raised nearly $600 ($5700 in 2019). Work was done by the congregation. After the concrete basement was installed, the congregation met there while the structure above was completed. Reverend Kennedy dedicated the finished church in October 1953.

While growing rapidly, Anchorage in the early 1950s was still a small town. When the first Greater Friendship building was erected in 1952, it was outside city limits. No streets in the neighborhood were paved, and there were no sidewalks or streetlights. When not covered in snow and ice, the roads were
doused with oil to control the dust.

Due to pervasive housing discrimination, most African Americans in Anchorage settled in Eastchester Flats, a low-lying stretch of land along Chester Creek, south of 15th Avenue and east of Gambell Street. Outside the city, and on less desirable land, the Flats was one of the only areas within the Anchorage bowl where Africans Americans were legally and socially allowed to live. Today the neighborhood is part of the Fairview community council district. In the early 1950s, the Flats was a prosperous black community with a beauty parlor, grocers, cafes, hotel, launderers, and real estate offices. Resident Joe Jackson proudly noted, “we were a small city within our own selves.”

The Flats was known around Anchorage for its bars and clubs, many of which were black-owned. Zelmer Lawrence recalled that “you could go to the Flats and find things you couldn’t find any other place in the state.” Anchorage’s black community in the 1950s was large enough to attract prominent black performers from the Lower 48, like Billie Holliday and Stomp Gordon. While not within the Flats, Greater Friendship is located where it was allowed and needed to be. A short walk from the Flats, the church serviced the nearby black community. As one church member and Eastchester resident noted, “the church was where people went who weren’t partying and drinking, that was their social community.”

Rev. Leo Josey, Sr., GFBC pastor 1962 to 1969 (1980 GFBC Anniversary Program)
Greater Friendship also became the first black church to affiliate with the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), inspiring further integration of the Convention. Since the 1890s, the SBC has been the largest Protestant denomination in the United States, and second largest Christian denomination after the Catholic Church. And for more than a century, the SBC played a significant role in the discrimination of African Americans.

Southern Baptists split from Northern Baptists in 1845 over a desire to allow missionaries to own slaves. Before and during the Civil War, the SBC endorsed secession, declaring in 1863 that the war was “just and necessary.” After the war, SBC ministers continued to describe the Confederacy in heroic terms, promoting the Lost Cause mythology of a noble South that fought for state’s rights against overwhelming odds.

SBC ministers of the later nineteenth century also advocated a belief in the Curse of Ham, which used Noah’s curse upon Canaan to explain and justify darker skin, slavery, and white superiority. In 1891, the SBC Home Mission Board stated that Baptist evangelism should encourage blacks to accept a “subordinate place” in society that would “settle this race question forever.” It was not until the 1930s that the SBC began to officially and financially support black ministerial education and African-American evangelism.

With a unanimous vote by the state convention, Greater Friendship joined the SBC in 1951. The second African-American church in the SBC, Community Baptist of Santa Rosa, CA, joined later the same year. As terrible as the SBC’s history of discrimination is, the acceptance of Greater Friendship and Community Baptist came three years before the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that racial segregation was unconstitutional in Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka. For change to happen, someone has to be first. And Greater Friendship was the first of what is now more than four thousand primarily black churches affiliated with the SBC. Today, the SBC annually awards the Kennedy-Boyce Award, named for the founding pastors of Greater
Friendship and Community Baptist, to those who advance race relations in the church. Greater Friendship Pastor Rev. Leon D. May received the award in 2003.

After a year, the original church burned down in 1953, forcing a temporary move back to 12th Avenue and Cordova Street. The congregation survived, and by 1955, the current church building opened. Some materials for the construction were taken from the remains of First Baptist, which also burned down in 1953.

In 1964, Anchorage experienced the Good Friday earthquake, still the most powerful earthquake ever recorded in North America. Anchorage's downtown and Turnagain neighborhoods were hardest hit. By comparison, Eastchester and Fairview received only minimal damage. As noted in Jet magazine, weddings continued as planned at Greater Friendship. Said Jet, “housing discrimination spared the brothers up in Anchorage, Alaska the wrath of the city's violent earthquake” as “Negroes are systematically barred from the exclusive areas near the business center.” George Anderson, who operated the Alaska Spotlight, a black Anchorage newspaper, described the earthquake as a Passover with no black residents killed or injured.

Through the early 1960s, the church continued to grow in importance, especially under the leadership of Rev. Leo Josey, Sr., pastor from 1962 through 1969. In 1965, the Alaska Baptist Convention unanimously elected Rev. Josey as second vice-president of the convention. Rev. Josey was the first black pastor to represent Southern Baptists at a state level, a milestone noted throughout the SBC. An educated man with many interests, Rev. Josey was known for his concern

1977 GFBC exterior after renovations (Alaska Baptist Messenger, November 1977)
with training the congregation and his ability for impromptu literature quotes. Many members have fond memories of his booming but warm voice reading poems before sermons.

In the mid through the late 1960s, Anchorage’s black community was subjected to a major upheaval. Eastchester Flats, still home to most of the city’s black community, was cleared through urban renewal. The previously undesirable land became increasingly attractive to developers as the city expanded farther south. “Urban renewal means Negro removal,” said author James Baldwin, a feeling echoed by members of the Anchorage NAACP. While many residents fought back, the government won as it had throughout the United States.

The state housing authority compensated property owners with a relatively small payout, and the land was cleared and developed into the denser housing community it is today. Anchorage’s black community scattered through the city. They lost political power and, in many cases, physical proximity to their church.

Greater Friendship began as a neighborhood church but now draws its congregation from across Anchorage. Members no longer walk to worship; they drive.

Through it all, the church survived. The original church mortgage was paid off in 1974 under Rev. Cammie L. Watkins, pastor from 1971 to 1974. Members gathered for a celebratory burning of the mortgage papers. Under Rev. Charlie Dargan, pastor from 1975 to 1985, the church building was greatly improved. From late 1976 through late 1977, the church structure was extensively remodeled, including moving the main entrance from the south facade to its current location at the southeast corner. During this

Rev. Dargan 5th anniversary celebration (Alaska Baptist Messenger, December 1979)
time, the congregation met at the nearby Fairview Baptist, a site that later became Jubilee Christian Center. Rev. Dargan rededicated the church on October 2, 1977. In 1984, the parking lot was paved. That year, nearly a third of the church’s 365 members attended each Sunday.

Rev. John L. Smith, pastor from 1986 to 1995 and 2011 to 2013, fought to ensure the future of the church. “He cared about the people who attended church,” recalled one member. Rev. Smith worked with the SBC to confirm Greater Friendship’s historic standing within the Convention. After years of denying loans to both the church and Rev. Smith, local banks approached him for advice on how to work with minorities. With new financing secured, Rev. Lewis lead the church in purchasing two adjacent parcels.

The church also bought land on C Street near Chester Creek, then considered a possible location for a new church building. For many years, blueprints for a new building hung inside the church. The mortgages for these properties were paid off.
in a third of the expected time. In 1999, the church celebrated with another mortgage burning. The church purchased another adjacent property in 2011, a home that was eventually cleared for a parking lot expansion.

Over the years, the congregation has waxed and waned. Vanee Robinson, the last surviving founding member passed in 2016. Just a few years ago, weekly attendance averaged around twenty members. As few as seven attended one service. Greater Friendship was known as the “trouble church” for its internal strife.

But since Rev. Michael Bunton’s appointment as pastor in 2014, attendance has rebounded to nearly 150 a week. The congregation has embraced change, adapting to technology and culture. During worship, some members read the Bible from iPads and smartphones. Every Sunday service is broadcast and recorded on Facebook. Pastor Bunton oversaw the installation of the screens that hang in the sanctuary. “We put the lyrics on the screens,” said Pastor Bunton. “As I’m preaching, my wife will pull up scriptures so that people can see it. We can have the lyrics up.”

Alaska offers relatively unique difficulties for a church. In the past, many church members have been transient members of the military. Said one member, it is easy during military service to “stray away and backslide.” Without a home church, that familiar fellowship, many do not attend worship at all.

Greater Friendship’s welcoming atmosphere is the cure. One Greater Friendship member and former soldier recalled her first visit and how it made all the difference. “The people were so warm and friendly. It was like we had been members forever. It was like, wow, they act like they already know us.” Greater Friendship is a church home. The fellowship provides members the feeling of homes they may have left behind Outside.

The long Alaskan winters also discourage faithful attendance. Snow, cold, and icy roads make for easy excuses to skip service. During the winter, the surrounding neighborhood sidewalks are notoriously icy and inaccessible. And the short
summers are seductive. Many members want to travel or spend their days outside during the too brief season. “Most pastors hate the summer,” said Pastor Bunton. “They do not like it because their members are gone.” The drop in attendance causes a decline in offerings and tithes. Without support, a church struggles to meet their budget, to maintain programs and services.

And Greater Friendship is an active part of its community. “It was always a very small church, very loving church. It was always about helping the community,” said one longtime member. Some members disliked the idea of moving the church because of its longstanding connection to Fairview: "It feels like it belongs right here, in this neighborhood.” Politicians and media members used to call Greater Friendship’s pastors for advice and comments. During the 1980s, the church leadership and members advocated for the conversion of the nearby and blighted S&S Apartments into affordable housing. That respect for the church appears to be returning.

The church also ministers to the more direct needs of Fairview. Every year, the church hosts a giveaway. Nothing is for sale. “People bring things from their homes, like nice clothes, all kinds of tableware, whatever,” said Pastor Bunton. “We invite the whole community here.” The church also offers a community food giveaway each month with people lining up hours in advance. “Every third Saturday, rain, sleet or snow, 50 below or not, we feed about 150 to 200 people.” These services inspire members. “I'm interested in doing work outside of those four walls,” said one such member. “In my opinion, you go to church to be refueled and to go out in the world.”

Members know that Greater Friendship--the fellowship and
church—has molded them into the people they are, better than they would have been without the church: “I grew up with this church’s philosophy and foundation, and I attribute it to who I am today, wanting to give back to the youth because I was a youth who grew up in the church with good values and everything. My kids was raised up in here.” Said another, “I have found that the study of the Bible has taught me how to handle things and how to live. Through what it says, things come out better for me.”

That service to the community and congregation defines Greater Friendship. Multiple members described the church as a beacon in the community. “Just being a light to those who are hurting, this church has always been like a beacon in the neighborhood.” “The church was a beacon light for families.” And the future of the church is growth, spreading the church’s impact throughout Anchorage. Said Pastor Bunton “Why do you think it’s going to be easy doing these things? The devil is not going to just sit back and let you do good things. You stand strong in the strength of Jesus, and let me tell you, He always wins out.”

Greater Friendship Baptist Church was the first black church in Alaska and the Southern Baptist Convention. As important as that history is, those facts represent the church’s past. The church remembers its past but is focused on the present and future. “We’re going to be the most diverse church ever in Alaska,” declared Pastor Bunton. “Not the first black church, but the most diverse church is my vision.”

Another member sees the church as finally ready to reach its potential. “Greater Friendship is in a good place now. I think that God has his hand on Greater Friendship. It has been through its ups and its downs. It went through a period of downs that was really troubling, sadness and bitterness, but we came through that. But God saw us through that, with prayer and people.” Through the strength of God and his people, the church will no longer endure but thrive, reaching out to save new generations. As an Alaska minister once said, “The reward for work is more work.”
Rev. Charles Kennedy
1951-1955
Rev. Kennedy returned to visit the church in 1982.

Rev. L. Lewis
1955-1959

Rev. O.R. Pigford
1960-1962

Rev. Leo Josey, Sr.
1962-1969
Rev. Josey served 22 years in the Air Force and was an avid fisher. He passed in 2010.

Rev. H. Ring Griffin, Jr.
1969-1970

Rev. Cammie L. Watkins
1971-1974

Rev. Charlie Dargan
1975-1985

Rev. John L. Smith
1986-1995
Rev. Smith was on the boards of several local non-profits and had a Sunday morning radio program.

Rev. Clifton J. Gay III
1996 (interim)
Rev. Gay was an Air Force chaplain for 14 years.

Rev. Leon D. May I
1997-2009
Rev. May oversaw the church's 50th anniversary in 2001. He was twice elected president of the Alaska Baptist Convention.

Rev. John L. Smith
2011-2013
In a time of need, Rev. Smith returned to pastor the church.

Rev. Michael A. Bunton
2014-
Son of a pastor, Rev. Bunton spent several years as a youth pastor at Shiloh Missionary Baptist.
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OUR MISSION
TO LEAD A DYING WORLD INTO A GROWING RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD AND SAVIOR.
--MATTHEW 28:19-20

OUR VISION
WE WILL LOVE AND TRAIN DISCIPLES THROUGH THE WORD OF GOOD AND THROUGH HIS HOLY GHOST POWER.
--ACTS 1: 8

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