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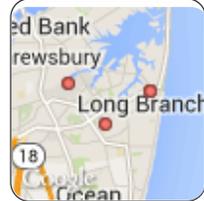
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Second Baptist Church grows in size and spirit New addition and expanded community outreach as church marks 125th anniversary

BY KENNYWALTER
 Staff Writer

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Founded 125 years ago, the [Second Baptist Church in Long Branch](#) continues to expand both the church facility and its community outreach programs.
 PHOTO BY NICOLE ANTONUCCI

Rooted in humble beginnings 125 years ago, the Second Baptist Church will dedicate a multimillion-dollar expansion on April 14 that includes an expanded sanctuary and community outreach.

The 15,000-square-foot addition to the church houses a 700-seat sanctuary, 12 classrooms, a 300-seat banquet hall and extra office space.

According to Chanta Jackson, who serves as church treasurer and project manager for the expansion, there will be a ceremony on April 14 to officially open the expanded facility.

Jackson, who has been affiliated with the church since 1968, described how the church has grown over the past 125 years.

“The physical structure has expanded greatly during that period,” she said. “The addition alone is an additional 10,000 square feet since 1968.

“We also put on the educational wing in the 1970s and we expanded the sanctuary,” she added.

“This is the fourth expansion that I have seen.”

Jackson said that as the church, located at [93 Liberty St.](#), has expanded physically, it has also grown its community outreach to now include more than 30 different ministries.

“In terms of outreach, we now do the Meal at Noon program, which runs every Saturday and feeds the homeless,” Jackson said. “On Wednesdays we have a bag lunch program, as well as a program where we give out clothing.



Some of the Second Baptist Church members honored for more than 35 years of continuous service to the church. The awards were presented by the Rev. Aaron N. Gibson Sr., pastor, and Deacon Rodney Morris on March 10. PHOTO BY CHANTA L. JACKSON



“We have a tutoring program three times a week for Long Branch school-age children,” she added. “There is a lot more outreach and services we provide.”

She explained that the impetus for the expansion is to provide even more services to the community.

“The primary reason that we did the expansion project was so that we could increase ministry,” Jackson said. “So the sanctuary opens up all kind of arenas for community organizations to utilize the church.

“When the sanctuary is not being used for church purposes, it could be used for concerts and things of that nature,” she added.

While looking forward to the new space, Jackson said that the existing space would continue to be utilized.

“We will still be using it, because it is historic; we will still be doing our baptismal services in that church,” she said. “We will be doing small weddings and small services in that church because that church holds about 250 people.”

Jackson said the church currently has about 450 members, an increase from the approximately 125 members of her early years with the congregation, adding that about eight years ago membership was at an all-time high.

“At the height, I think we had 600 members,” Jackson said. “During the recession we had a

decrease, but I think we are back on the incline.

“A large portion of our membership worked for [Fort Monmouth](#) or they were contractors,” she added. “So when Fort Monmouth moved to Aberdeen [Md.], we took a hit.” Jackson explained that while membership has fluctuated over the years, the role of the church has remained the same.

“Our role has been to meet the needs of the community,” she said. “Whatever the needs are, our church has done a great job, whether it has been clothing people, feeding people, helping people with their housing.”

Church members have embraced the 125-year milestone, she said.

“I think it is just a tribute in itself to get to 125 years,” she said. “This is the oldest church in Long Branch, so everybody recognizes that. “It is a major, major milestone,” she noted. “Everybody is trying to do their part to make sure that we get to another 125 years.”

Jackson, along with about 200 church members, celebrated the milestone during a March 10 ceremony held at Branches in [West Long Branch](#) during which several members were recognized for more than 35 years of service to the church, with at least one member topping 60 years of service.

The Second Baptist Church was originally organized in the home of Ephraim Bell on March 21, 1887, and in the early years had several pastors, including the Rev. Asbury Smallwood. Pastor Smallwood was responsible for erecting the foundation of the stone building in 1904 that the congregation still worships in today.

In the fall of 1978, the church began construction on what would come to be known as the educational wing.

On Sept. 5, 2000, the church began offering two Sunday services, at 7:30 a.m. and 11 a.m., to accommodate its increased membership, according to a press release.

The current pastor, the Rev. Aaron N. Gibson Sr., was installed on May 19, 1996, as the church’s 13th pastor. According to the press release, the Second Baptist Church was one of the first to open its doors to Portuguese and Brazilian congregations who had no place to worship.

“We have chosen to be a ‘whosoever will let them come’ church,” Gibson said. “That means that we view ourselves as a multicultural, multiethnic and pluralistic church.”

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