

East Preston United Baptist Church History (1842 – present)

(Updated 9/24/2017)

Background

The East Preston United Baptist Church (EPUBC), formerly known as the First Preston Church, was established in 1842. It has been the cornerstone of the community and the guiding light for people in East Preston since its founding under the direction of ‘Father’ Richard Preston. The original members 175 years ago included Deacon Meredith Stanley, Elder John Collins, George Carvery, Letty James, William Robertson, Thomas Saunders, H. Taylor, Peter Clayton, William Dares, Edward Sye, Thomas Cox, Freeman Kelly, Daniel Brown, and John Rodgers.

While Prestonians are today mostly followers of the Baptist Faith, they were not in the early days. The Anglican Church with their Propagation of the Faith gave early religious instruction to Native and black peoples in the Nova Scotia Colonies. The Anglican rituals did not appeal to early preachers like David George and Richard Preston who came with evangelistic preaching.

Born in 1791, Father Richard Preston was an ex-slave from Virginia. He arrived in Halifax around 1816, searching for his mother who fled slavery from the American colonies several years before and settled in the Preston area. He found his mother near the home of the late William Slawter and Dorothy Evans Slawter, located not far from the Church on Upper Partridge River Road. He would later travel to England to study and was ordained in 1832. In Peter McKerrow’s *A Brief History of the Coloured Baptists of Nova Scotia*, published in 1895, Father Richard Preston is described as “an exhorter of righteousness of no mean order and a great revivalist.”

“The Bible speaks of Paul organizing the Churches in the land around the Mediterranean Sea” (Rev. Donald D. Skeir)...Richard Preston did the same for the developing black community of Nova Scotia. His achievements are demonstrated by the many Churches he established and ministered to in Black settlements throughout the province. Despite the seemingly insurmountable obstacles of that era, Father Preston baptized a great number of people during his ministry and was a champion for the abolition of slavery.

In 1854, at Granville Mountain, Father Preston founded the African United Baptist Association (A.U.B.A.). This vibrant organization continues to exist today and holds the distinction as the leading religious institution for Black Baptists in Nova Scotia - a true testament to Father Preston’s fortitude and conviction. The A.U.B.A. is also indebted today to a former East Preston Church Leader, Rev. George Carvery. After 30 years of existence, when the Association grew weak and was on the verge of dissolution, it was in 1886 that Rev. Carvery proposed an annual tax (now known as the annual assessment) on each member of each AUBA Church. The tax, 25 cents per person per year was fully

endorsed enabling the Association to meet its obligations for several years. Today, both the A.U.B.A. and the East Preston Church stand upon Father Preston's great shoulders, and the committed work and contributions of many faithful servants.

The community of East Preston was built by people of African ancestry coming to Nova Scotia in the 18th and 19th centuries from the American colonies where revolutions and wars were being fought. Many had escaped slavery or were descendants of slaves and upon arriving in Halifax, more often than not on British ships, they were taken across the harbour where they were placed in the eastern section of Dartmouth known as the Preston Township.

The ancestors had faith in God, and as strong believers they recognized the Church as being central to their existence. Faced with the uncertainty of the times and the racial barriers of segregation and discrimination, the ancestors knew that a place of worship was a haven to some, a rock for others and an anchor for many.

Major Challenges and Responses in History

EPUBC saw a major decline in all of her activities between 1882 and 1900. As a new century was dawning, it appeared that a 'new day' was developing for this congregation. A new generation was rising while many of the old guard of leadership and followers were passing on. Rev. Donald Skeir wrote in his 1974 history, "The older leaders in the Church were giving way to new leadership." With new leadership, came new structures, and in 1904 the new Church structure looked like this: Pastor-Rev. Edward Dixon; Deacons-Alexander James, James Thomas, John Reilly, Joseph Diggs, and John Nelson Jr.; Church Councillors- John M. Thomas, William Saunders, and James Glasgow; Treasurer- J. A. Thomas; Clerk- J. N. Saunders; Assistant Clerk- Alex James; Sexton-John Nelson Jr.; Doorkeeper- William Saunders.

Through various organizations within the Church structure, the minister, deacons, elders, and other members exerted much influence and provided direction for the community. The Men's Brotherhood, Ladies' Auxiliary, the Baptist Young People's Union (BYPU), the Sunday School Program, and the Prison Ministry (formed in 1980 and continuing in service today) are organizations led by strong inspiring men and women of the Church who are involved in helping the community through various activities. The Ladies' Auxiliary held its first meeting in East Preston in 1917, not far from this Church's location. This historic meeting is known as "Meeting of Women at the Well." To pay homage to those women, the Ladies' Auxiliary placed a marker at the site in 2013, located in front of the EPUBC Ministry House.

A stalwart member of EPUBC, Mrs. Mabel Saunders was often heard telling people to "Never give up." A native of Newport, Hants County, Sister Saunders loved children and encouraged them to read and stay in school. She openly expressed her love of God and

her life. Mabel Saunders donated to the Church a substantial tract of land for the erection of a new Church edifice. Her only desire was that there be a library in this new Church edifice. In 2015, the Church developed 'The Mabel Saunders Library of Hope' in the current edifice and efforts by some of our Youth are underway to catalogue the many books and periodicals in the Church's possession, which were donated by Church members and friends.

Church Development, Education and Social Action

During the early 1900s, this Church was very concerned by the lack of a Sunday School. It was realized that the African Baptist Churches were losing much by failing to teach the young the "ways of God." Martha Hones, a day school teacher in Preston in 1900, organized our first Sunday school. When she left three years later, the Sunday school failed. In 1904 a Mr. Irwin, also a normal school teacher, reinstated our Sunday school, and it has lasted since that time.

At the same time the Church had great concerns that there was no government assistance for our community day-school. The Church had provided and served as the first means of formal school for people in the community and many of the school teachers also came through the Church. In 1902, a young well educated black man arrived from Barbados and reportedly offered formal education to our Preston children. This man, also a fine musician, Mr. C. Jemmott played piano in the Church, and was a well-respected resident of Halifax. He travelled for a number of years to teach in East and North Preston, and in Africville.

The EPUBC continues to make Education a priority through a yearly scholarship to students entering post-secondary institutions, as well as many educational programmes to empower and equip East Preston residents. There were several structures built and/or operated under the direction and with assistance of Leadership of the Church, in conjunction with other Churches in the Preston area. This includes the Parsonage/Ministry House built just east of the Church in 1961, by three Churches. Renamed the Rev. Dr. Donald Skeir Memorial Building to honour the second longest serving Minister of the EPUBC, it now serves as a resource centre for various ministries of the Church. The George Washington Carver Credit Union was founded in 1950 and representatives from the Deaconship of the East Preston United Baptist Church were amongst the founding members. This institution was vital to the economic and financial needs of the community. Another milestone for the community was the building of the East Preston Centennial Center in 1967, now the East Preston Recreation Center. The idea for the recreational facility originated with the Baptist Young People's Union at the Church and the major fundraising was undertaken by the youth. This facility continues to be an important part of the community.

Church Leadership Over the Years

Over the years, the Church Leaders at East Preston United Baptist Church have been actively involved in community development. They were influential in forming social, educational, political organizations and committees within the Church structure. This would help shape the lives of the residents and benefit the entire community. An interesting piece of our history is the way disputes were handled in the community. This would involve the minister, deacons and elders interceding and resolving disagreements between two parties – no court if at all possible. A memorable tradition of the Church was the rites of passage for the youth. This involved a period of “communicating with God,” usually two weeks of prayer, meditation and fasting before going down in the water for baptism.

After the end of World War II, Education became more of a concern than at any time in the everyday lives of people in the province. Church Leadership was called upon to play an even more active role in education, politics and social issues as the Black community grew. Rev. Donald Skeir took the mantel at the East Preston United Baptist Church in 1953, and was a strong leader with the ongoing efforts to deal with conditions in the segregated schools in the Preston area.

The East Preston United Baptist Church has been blessed with gifted Pastors sent by God to provide religious leadership and guidance. Besides the First Preston Church, internal strife in the early 1850s resulted in three churches at Preston East. There was the First Preston Church, (EPUBC today), Fulton Church, and The South Church (Smithers’ Church). The South Church pastored by Rev. Benson Smithers in 1879 relocated as the St. Thomas Baptist Church at North Preston, formerly called New Road. The Fulton Church died with its founder, Rev. George Carvery in 1893. In more recent history, two other Churches branched off from EPUBC - the New Beginnings Church, Cherry Brook, formed by Rev. Glenn Gray in 1998, and Shiloh Baptist Church, Dartmouth, under the direction of Rev. Ogueri Ohanaka in 2008.

The names and dates of service for Ministers serving as Pastor of the East Preston Church after the death of Father Richard Preston in 1861 are as follows:

Reverend James Thomas (1861-1869) A native of Wales married to Hannah Saunders, and they resided at Preston. He was a respectable Halifax Businessman who operated a Furrier Business on Sackville Street. Thomas had succeeded Father Preston at Cornwallis Street, then at EPUBC. He was remembered for giving First Preston its largest cash donation of \$1500 in the 1860s. After a great deal of dissension at the Preston Church, Thomas left the Pastorate, and the Church left the A.U.B.A.

Reverend George Neale (1869-1893) was born in Georgia 1807, Baptized in 1815, and was ordained in 1864. Neale loved the work of the AUBA and would walk from

Preston to Yarmouth to attend Association meetings. He successfully brought Preston back in to the AUBA in 1880. In his 80s, he Baptized 25 candidates.

Reverend Edward Dixon (1893-1908) His Pastorate followed two Licentiates. Dixon was the next ordained minister to lead this flock. He lived at Africville and walked to Preston on the weekends to minister to the people, returning home on Tuesdays with his 60cents salary. It was under Dixon that Preston Church came under great changes in organized structure.

Reverend John Smith (1908-1910) He was called to serve after the sudden death of Dixon. Smith himself was not well, thus his short term. It was a time when many young men and women stepped up to assist in the Ministries of the Preston Church.

Reverend Arthur Wyse (1910-1953) the man who mined gold in the Montague Gold Mines not far from his Lake Loon home. As a young man he had no interest in the business of the Church. However, at the age of 26, he was converted and Baptized in 1893. There was no organized Church at nearby Cherry Brook, the record is not clear whether he was Baptized at Preston or New Road because Cherry Brook and Lake Loon folks attended both Preston Churches. Wyse's Mother, Maria Wyse was a member at Preston East. Rev. Wyse became very interested in the Church following his conversion, and worked to establish a Church at Cherry Brook in 1902. When Pastor Dixon died in 1908, Wyse took over the Pastoral duties at Cherry Brook until 1918. He did preaching at New Road and Preston East in 1910, until 1915 at New Road. He sought full time ordained ministry. Cherry Brook would have no part in that for various reasons. A young Lawyer in Halifax, James R. Johnston took up the challenge on behalf of Wyse to the A.U.B.A. It took three years but succeeded at the age of 48 on a mid-winter night 1915. Wyse was a renowned fiery evangelistic preacher and the longest serving Pastor of the East Preston Church with 43 years of service!

Reverend Donald D. Skeir (1953-1995) succeeded Pastor Wyse with the same 'firebrand' style of preaching! A native of Halifax, Rev. Skeir was converted from Methodist to Baptist. A public educator, Pastor Skeir received a much celebrated acknowledgement when Acadia University recognized his many social and spiritual contributions, by conferring an Honourary Doctorate of Divinity Degree upon him. Skeir was a major figure, both spiritually and politically, especially on issues of the black community, he was outspoken both in Church and the public arena. Under Skeir's leadership, the Church witnessed substantial growth in membership. Rev. Skeir conducted the largest baptism in our history on July 26, 1976, when 110 candidates received believers' baptism. Rev. Skeir was an historian in his own right, well versed in the Black Church. Regrettably, he did not publish any journals on the History of the Church, however he did extensive writing of his written history has been preserved unto today. Rev. Skeir was, by 1 year, the second longest serving Pastor of the East Preston Church by with 42 years of service!

Reverend Glenn Gray (1996-1998), a native of Windsor Plains, was a very youthful and energetic Pastor, and had a 'matter of fact' style. Rev. Gray instituted one 11 a.m. worship service and he emphasized the importance of family time. The EPUBC Revival Choir was formed under his leadership as was a 40 member Children's Choir under the direction of Marilyn Smith, which was featured on Live at Five one Christmas Eve and sang at Mount Saint Vincent University at an event where Rosa Parks was the Speaker. Rev. Gray's sermons emphasized the importance of transforming the body, mind and soul. Rev. Gray faithfully served the East Preston Church until March 1998, when he left to form the New Beginnings Ministry at the Ross Road School. They later settled into new worship facilities off the Cherry Brook Road.

Reverend Ogueri Ohanaka (1998-2008) came to the Church as Interim Pastor during a very difficult time in the life of the Church. Rev. Ohanaka effectively guided the Church through a healing process. In October of 1998, the Church called Rev. Ohanaka to serve as full time Pastor. During Rev. Ohanaka's tenure, the Church appointed eight new Deacons on November 14, 1999, including four Women. This marked for the first time in the Church history, and the history of the A.U.B.A., that female Deacons were appointed. Within the year the Church established two more firsts. The Church confirmed the Pastor's selection of a Board of Elders to be comprised of 3-men and 3-women; and the Church honoured the age and services of the late Deacon Albert F. Colley, as "Deacon Emeritus." One Lay-Pastor-In-Training was appointed, and three Church moderators; and in October 2000, we commissioned our first Coordinator of Prison Ministries. After that time, two female Ministers, Dr. Carolyn Thomas and Dr. Joyce Ross were licensed. Also in 2005, Bro. Howard Williams received a license to preach in the Church. Rev. Ohanaka left the EPUBC Ministry in 2008 to form the Shiloh Community Church in Dartmouth.

Reverend Matthew Lucas (2008-2010) It is important to note that before Rev. Lucas and after several months of supply Pastors, Deacons, and Lay Preachers, the Church welcomed the spiritual mediation of Rev. Dr. Morley Shaw (Ret'd). In March 2008, the Deacons then called Rev. Matthew Lucas to help bring stability to the pulpit. Rev. Lucas, an Armed Forces Chaplain, served our pulpit as Supply Pastor, effective in May 2008, and the Church was grateful. God richly blessed with Pastor Lucas' services, which went well beyond that of a Supply Pastor. Pastor Lucas invoked healing by way of the Holy Spirit and gave diligent and prayerful leadership and guidance in several areas. Under his leadership, there was a restructuring of the Church Constitution, a new dimension to Bible Study that resulted in overflow-attendance, and a streamlined order to the process of Church leadership. A powerful and anointed Praise Team was also established under his Leadership. As Interim Pastor, Rev. Lucas worked graciously in healing divisions, and making the Love of Christ central to his Gospel messages. When we engaged in the 167th Anniversary year of the Church, Rev. Lucas wound down his time with us by offering strong leadership to the Pulpit Committee, in search of its next Pastor.

Reverend LeQuita H. Porter (2010 – present), from Plant City, Florida, is the current Senior Pastor at the East Preston United Baptist Church. A trained and experienced attorney and businessperson, and Master of Divinity graduate of the Princeton Theological Seminary in Princeton, New Jersey, Pastor Porter began her ministry at EPUBC on July 4, 2010. Rev. Porter is a staunch advocate of Empowerment and Education as a full expression of our Spirituality, and has introduced programs to develop and train leaders for the Church and Community. Under her leadership, EPUBC has ordained a Minister, Dr. Joyce Ross (2014), trained and licensed a spirited and committed Minister, Licentiate Debbie Simmonds (2015), ordained 5 formerly commissioned Deacons (2011) and is preparing the first Junior Deacon Apprentice for possible Deacon ordination in 2018. In addition, EPUBC has employed its first Minister of Music in many years in the person of Shawn Downey, an anointed and gifted musician from the North Preston community (2017). The Church has developed a Youth Empowerment Ministry (2014) now led by young leaders (ages 13-19), a Junior Deacon Apprenticeship program preparing young adults (ages 19-25) for Diaconate service (2011), a Minister-in-Training programme to discern and prepare potential Ministers for service (2013), and the Sunday School Teacher Apprentice Program to prepare youth for teaching leadership (2016).

The East Preston Empowerment Academy (EPEA), a registered non-profit educational society, was introduced in 2014, focussing on Education and Empowerment, through upgrading of academic and literacy skills in an Adult Learning Program, Trade Apprenticeship Program, Youth Tutoring/Career Guidance Program, and Professional Development Workshops. Pastor Porter is currently in the final stages of completing work on a Doctor of Ministry (DMin) degree from the Acadia Divinity College, with the focus of her research on *'Equipping the Church in Empowering Leadership Practices for Transformation of the Church and Community.'*

There have been only two Ministerial Ordinations in the history of the East Preston United Baptist Church. The first was held on February 15, 1915 when Rev. Arthur Wyse, from Lake Loon, the longest serving Pastor of the East Preston Church (1910-1953), was ordained at a special A.U.B.A. Council meeting. Almost 100 years later, the second was held on December 7, 2014 when Rev. Dr. Joyce Ross, of East Preston, was ordained. In addition, there have been a host of Deacon Ordinations and Commissioning throughout the history of the East Preston Church.

Through the years the East Preston Church Leadership has also included four elected Halifax County Municipal Council members, including the first County Councillor George Diggs, when the County government was first formed in 1880, Deacon A. W. Evans, Church Clerk William B. Thomas, and Elder Wayne Adams, the first African Nova Scotian Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA). Deacon John Albert Colley, Deacon James Slawter, and others also served on the Municipal School Board. In 2016, Elder Dr. Wanda Thomas Bernard was appointed by the Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, to the Senate of Canada, becoming the first African Nova Scotian female to serve in the Senate in Ottawa.

EPUBC also has individuals who have received the Order of Canada and the Order of Nova Scotia, and numerous other prestigious Provincial and Federal awards. There have also been many entrepreneurs and business owners within the Congregation over the years.

EPUBC Today

This is but a snapshot in time into the life of the East Preston United Baptist Church. The work of accurately chronicling EPUBC's rich history continues. EPUBC is aware of so many contributions made by Leaders and Members in history, and recognizes the obligation it has to further these contributions through spirited witness and service in the world today!

On this 175th anniversary, the East Preston United Baptist Church marches forward with efforts to be the motivating force in the lives of the many people who look to it for direction and guidance. We are **EPUBC** and we are focussed on "**Empowering People United By Christ," through our four pillars of **E**vangelism, **E**ducation, **E**mpowerment, and **E**xcellence. The Best is Yet to Come!**

Compiled and Prepared by Sis. Regina James, Elder Dr. Wayne Adams, September 12, 2017

**Sources: McKerrow's A Brief History of Coloured Baptists/Blacks in Nova Scotia 1783 - 1895;
Rev. Donald D. Skeir's July 14, 1974 unpublished writings; Oral History**