



The current Sanctuary of Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church completed in March 1985.

Photo by Tomiko Meeks.

We've Come This Far by Faith: Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church

By Tomiko Meeks

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”¹

Forty-nine years ago in March of 1962, Reverend William Alexander Lawson and thirteen people submitted to God’s divine will and plan and established a church in Houston’s Third Ward. Rev. Lawson, who now serves as Pastor Emeritus at Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church, first arrived in Houston in 1955 with his young wife Audrey A. Lawson. The Southern Baptist Convention invited the young minister to come to the newly formed Texas Southern University and work with students. Rev. Lawson played an important role in the history of Texas Southern University, serving as the Baptist Student Union Director, during a time when state universities were not allowed to have religious programs.²

Born William Alexander Lawson in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1928, Rev. Lawson grew up in Kansas City. He matriculated from Tennessee State College in Nashville, Tennessee, with a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology in 1950. Reverend Lawson returned to Kansas City where he studied for the ministry at Central Baptist Theological Seminary, which conferred upon him a Bachelor of Divinity and Master of Theology degrees.³

When Rev. Lawson arrived in Houston in August of 1955, race relations simmered in the South. The lynching of Emmett Till occurred on August 28, 1955, the day Lawson arrived in Houston; and on December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks refused to give up her bus seat to a white passenger and was subsequently arrested, tried, and convicted for disorderly conduct and violation of a local ordinance. Parks’ arrest and subsequent conviction led to the Montgomery Bus

Boycott and effectively marked the beginning of the civil rights Movement. Indeed, by coming to the South, Lawson understood the potential for heightened racial tension between blacks and whites in Houston.

During his time at Texas Southern University, Rev. Lawson served as Director of the Baptist Student Union and taught bible classes. Although he was employed at the University, the Union Baptist Association paid his salary because of the restriction placed upon state universities against having religious studies programs on their campuses. While working at Texas Southern, several people approached Lawson with concerns that no churches existed near the university where black students attended school and where black professors lived. These people asked Rev. Lawson to consider starting a church; proposing that because he was a minister and taught bible classes he ought to be qualified to start a church. Rev. Lawson, in a 2008 interview with Jane Ely, stated “I did not have a daddy who was a preacher. There had been no preachers in my background at all, and I had no idea how in the world you would start a church.” Despite Rev. Lawson’s reservations, the entreaties continued. Eventually, Lawson assented with the stipulation that he would start a church and hold onto it until he could find a young man to fill his position.⁴

In March of 1962, Rev. Lawson along with his wife Audrey Lawson and thirteen others, who would become the founding members, assembled in the lounge of the Baptist Student Union and established a church, which at the time was called Riverside Baptist Church. The church

was initially named after the neighborhood in Third Ward where Lawson lived. At the inception of the church, Rev. Lawson recalled that a young man named Prentice Moore was attending Texas Southern University and preparing for seminary.⁵ Rev. Lawson saw Moore as the potential future pastor, to become the leader of the newly formed church. Perhaps by fate or divine intervention, once Moore completed his seminary training he did not return to Wheeler Avenue and Rev. Lawson continued on as Pastor.

Shortly after starting the church, Rev. Lawson realized that it was impossible for him to continue working at Texas Southern and try to build a church on a part-time basis; he needed to devote his time and energy fully to the building of the church. Consequently, Lawson only spent another three years with the university.⁶

From its humble beginnings in the Baptist Student Union, it was unclear what the future held for this small assembly. However, an individual from the Union Baptist Association informed Lawson and his congregation of changes taking place at the University of Houston. The Baptist Student Union at the University of Houston was moving into a new building, which would house all denominational programs, and the small white framed building which housed the Baptist Student Union would soon become vacant. Rev. Lawson inquired about the fate of the building and found out that it would be maintained until somebody purchased it. Many would have given up, knowing that with little over thirty members it was virtually impossible to buy the small church. However, as faith would have it, a wealthy oil man whose daughter heard Rev. Lawson speak at Baylor University approached the minister. On his daughter's word regarding Rev. Lawson's character, the oil man made the proposition of acquiring the building for Riverside Baptist with the condition that the church must be purchased from him by selling bonds, which he gave the church. The selling price was an unbelievable \$25,000, which church members successfully raised through the selling of the bonds.⁷ The location of the University of Houston building was 3826 Wheeler Avenue, hence the changing of the church's name to Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church.

The establishment and growth of Wheeler Avenue during the height of the civil rights era was pivotal for the Black community in Houston and specifically in the Third Ward area. While cities and towns in the deep South were in turmoil during the civil rights movement, Houston pushed for a quieter end to Jim Crow. Reverend Lawson and other leaders associated with Texas Southern University skillfully orchestrated and exercised pressure on powerful whites in Houston. The members of Wheeler Avenue along with Rev. Lawson were instrumental in keeping many young black students, involved in the civil rights movement, out of jail. Lawson's reputation as a peace negotiator is well known throughout Houston. Indeed, one particular event exemplifies this.

On May 16, 1967, the Houston police arrested Rev. Lawson for being on the scene of the Holmes Road garbage dump protest. However, Mayor Louie Welch bailed him out the same day to help settle a standoff between angry students and police at Texas Southern University. When asked

to assess Lawson's role during the tumultuous years of the civil rights era, Welch recalled Rev. Lawson was, "more influential than any other black leader in Houston. He was a voice of reason who believed in confrontation but not force. He was fighting a battle for equality, and many of us agreed with him."⁸ Indeed, this type of sentiment is shared among many political and civic leaders in Houston.

Since the 1960s, when black church leaders dominated the civil rights movement, the black church exerted a quiet power in the political arena. Hence, Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church and other black churches in Houston and elsewhere still maintained their political influence. Indeed, black clergy and their church members remain a mainstay of political force in Houston and other cities. However, unlike many of his counterparts, Rev. Lawson maintained a clear delineation between politics and the pulpit. While it is true that many politicians worshiped at Wheeler Avenue and several are members, Rev. Lawson has a tradition of not allowing the church to be used as a political forum. In fact, there is but one occasion where a political figure stood behind Wheeler Avenue's pulpit.

In 1963, shortly after the founding of the church, Rev. Lawson invited Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. to speak at Wheeler Avenue. The young pastor's act was bold; during this period in King's life many black Baptist preachers vilified him as a communist. Reverend Manson Johnson,



Portrait of Rev. William A. Lawson, Pastor Emeritus by M. C. Whitman.

Portrait of former First Lady Audrey Lawson by M. C. Whitman.

Portraits courtesy of Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church.





Guest preacher, Reverend Vanessa Hendrickson delivers the sermon at the 11:00 a.m. service on Sunday May 29, 2011.

pastor of Holman Street Baptist Church, was the only other pastor in town who extended an invitation to Reverend King. After King's visit, Wheeler Avenue became the Houston Chapter of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which Rev. Lawson led for over three decades.⁹

From the establishment of the church, Rev. Lawson has represented the Trinitarian reality of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. From this biblical concept evolved the "triangle" ministry outreach program. The "triangle" represents the geographical locale of the Church in Houston's Third Ward. The first aspect of outreach ministry began with the Mission and Mercy Program in 1963. The Infant School, founded by Pastor and Mrs. Lawson, began in 1968. In 1974, the church became involved with the Central City Comprehensive Community Center, a multifaceted project that offered voter registration and other community service programs under the leadership of First Lady Audrey Lawson.¹⁰

Today outreach ministries include: Alzheimer/Dementia — which provides support for caregivers whose loved ones are diagnosed with Alzheimer or dementia related illness; Economic Empowerment — which provides members of the church and the community the opportunity to learn and apply God's financial principles; and Matthew 25 — whose mission is to provide financial relief to seniors and families within Harris County.¹¹ Although the listed outreach ministries represent only a sample of the many ministries available at Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church, the whole of ministries reveal Rev. Lawson's maxim of being a blessing to others as God has so richly blessed you.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the church experienced extraordinary growth in membership, which spurred the expansion to the present day sanctuary. Additionally, the church focused its attention toward the spiritual nurturing of children and youth; expanding the churches min-

istries to include Rites of Passage for young males and Transformations program for young females. While Rev. Lawson continued to pastor Wheeler Avenue, he earnestly sought Divine council for assistance in finding the man who would lead the church upon his retirement. In 1998, Reverend Doctor Marcus D. Cosby, the third child of Roger and Bobbie Cosby of Chicago, Illinois, joined Wheeler Avenue as assistant pastor. Cosby matriculated from Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, with a Bachelor of Arts in religion and English. He also holds a Master of Divinity in homiletics and Christian education from the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, Georgia, and a Doctor of Ministry in homiletics from Northern Baptist Theological Seminary in Lombard, Illinois.¹²

Under the tutelage of Rev. Lawson, Rev. Cosby served as Wheeler Avenue's Assistant Pastor from 1998 to August 2004. In June of 2004, during the anniversary worship service, Pastor Lawson announced to the congregation that he would pass along his duties to another Shepherd.¹³ After forty-two years, Rev. Lawson, through prayer and God's guidance, found the young man he envisioned taking over the newly formed church all those years ago. In a recent interview, Rev. Cosby was asked if he thought he was that young man. Reverend Cosby stated that, in hindsight, "yes," he could see himself as the young man for whom Pastor Lawson searched. Although it took forty-two years to find a new leader, Cosby believes Reverend Lawson was God's chosen vessel, divinely fashioned to lead God's flock for a season—chosen to carry out God's plan to prosper his people, not harm them, and to give them hope for a future.

Indeed, Wheeler Avenue's place in history rests on the shoulders of Reverend William A. Lawson and the faithful thirteen who established the church. The Church's history also has its place in the history of civil rights and desegregation in Houston, serving as a spiritual lighthouse guiding Wheeler's members and the greater Houston community. While Reverend Lawson represents Wheeler's past, Reverend Cosby exemplifies the church's present and future. Reverend Cosby's dynamic presence and extraordinary teaching is ushering Wheeler Avenue into a new season of growth. Since Reverend Cosby became senior pastor, two ministries have developed which are designed to "encourage and celebrate the Grace of God within the flock;" Faith-Filled Friday that celebrates congregants demonstrating their trust in God, and Charter Day, which commemorates the inception of Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church.¹⁴ Although Reverend Cosby's ministerial style and delivery is different from that of Reverend Lawson, it has become clear that this young Pastor is Holy Ghost filled and divinely fashioned to lead Wheeler Avenue, Third Ward, and greater Houston in the twenty-first century.

Revered William A. Lawson's Papers, 1955-2006, have recently been donated to the Social Change Archive, Woodson Research Center, Fondren Library, at Rice University.

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