



## HISTORY OF THE OCALA Temple

*The Church of God by Faith started in 1914 in Jacksonville, FL. The incorporation plan was developed at the General Assembly Meeting in Alachua, FL in the year 1922 and approved in 1923. The Founders met in the old Assembly Building shown below. During those times, the churches would gather at least once per year for what was affectionately called "The Meeting."*



After a while, the Executive Council deemed it necessary to meet more frequently. Consequently, in the year 1926, Executive Secretary Hubert Steadman wrote, the *"Elders and Deacons will have an extra session beginning the same as the Annual Meeting before December 24th. This session will be subject to move to different churches."* Ocala quickly moved to the top of the list.

Executive Secretary Steadman wrote, *"The Council was called to order at Ocala, FL; December 25, 1931. ...Elder J. B. Bright, Moderator, Elder Aaron Matthews, Bishop, Elder H. Steadman, General Secretary, Elder N Scippio Evangelist, Elder N. Linton Acting Secretary, Brother W. Matthews, Acting Secretary"* were present.

This is the beginning of how this city, this church became the heart of the Church of God by Faith.

Rarely are ByFaith historians able to find governmental documents to confirm church records. This is not the case here. Sister Audrey “Kay” McGriff Irving-Jones found the document shown right on the *State of Florida Memory Archives* (FMA) website. It confirms and adds key details about the first Ocala church before the Temple was ever erected.

Early ByFaith members indicated that they met at the tin, barn-like church which was established in 1929-1930. The document (shown right) refines this by saying, they had worship “*services in an unpainted, rectangular, wooden building, with living quarters for the pastor in the rear, erected and dedicated 1929.*”

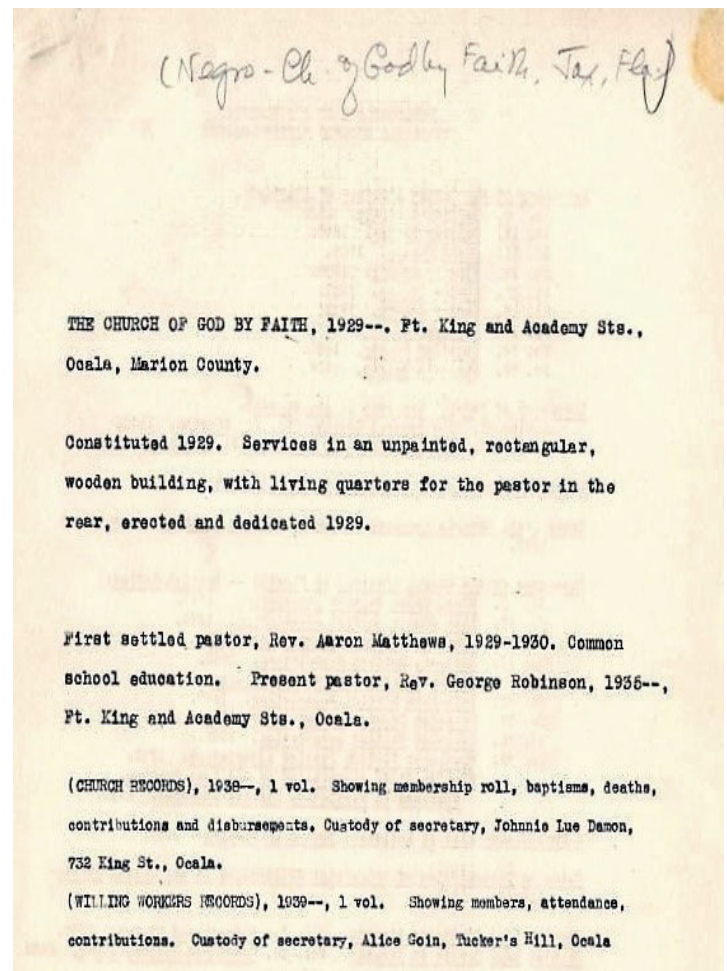
ByFaith records show that among the earliest members were the relatives of Deacon James Jones of Rochester, NY including: his grandparents, Deacon Allen and Dovie Jones and parents, Deacon John and Catherine Jones. Elder M. H. and Dollie Hart, Deacon Rufus and Alice Gore, Sister Betty Wright, Elder Willie and Louise Mann and many members of the late Deacon Leon Daymon’s family also attended. One of his family members, Johnnie Lue Daymon was listed as the church secretary.

The biggest surprise was that ByFaith’s oral history lists the first pastors as Elder McDuffy Croskey, followed by Elder Joe Franklin and Ruling Elder George Robinson. However, the FMA recorded the “*First settled pastor, Rev. Aaron Matthews, 1929-1930.*”

It was common during those times for members of the Executive Council to launch churches, stay a year or so to get the church established before moving to other areas. Apparently, this is the case here.

#### **The Complete List of Local Ocala Temple Pastors are:**

Bishop Aaron Matthews, Sr., Ruling Elder McDuffy Croskey, Elder Joe Franklin, Ruling Elder George Robinson, District Elder H. K. Charles, Bishop Willie W. Matthews, District Elder Pershing Hill, District Elder Willie Mann, Sr., District Elder Lonnie Staten, Ruling Elder Horace A. McKnight, Sr., Ruling Elder Walter Rozier, Elder Ludie Wright, Elder Mose Price, Elder James Jones, Elder Floyd Magwood, Ruling Elder James Ware, Elder Jerome Douglas, Sr. and presently, Pastor Lawendell Price, Sr.



<https://www.floridamemory.com/items/show/249880>

This new information about Bishop Aaron Matthews’ pastorship makes what follows more understandable.

Deacon Allen Jones was instrumental in persuading the Executive Council to move the assembly meetings from Alachua to Ocala. The decision was approved under the leadership of Bishop Aaron Matthews, Sr. (his former pastor) and the *Founders*, Evangelist Nathaniel Scippio and “Daddy” John Bright. The fourth *Founder*, Executive Secretary Hubert Steadman, transitioned in 1936.

At that time, 42 small, ByFaith churches made up the following six districts: Jacksonville, Gainesville, Ocala, South Florida, Florida Eastcoast and South Carolina. In the year 1937, these committed congregations started a major fund-raising campaign called the “Vow” to finance the Temple with the assistance of Deacon Fred Mautsby. They raised \$2,826.00 that year which is equivalent to approximately \$50,000 today.



The plan was to build a convention church significantly larger than the small, wooden churches that were erected before. Consequently, in the year 1940, they purchased a plot of land from Ms. Elois Armstrong.

According to several oral sources, the tin building was torn down in 1940 and the construction of the *Great Ocala Temple* was underway. The Marion County Property Appraiser shows it was completed in the year 1941.

Deacon Aaron Matthews, Jr. (son of the first Bishop) wrote the following in the *Handbook for the Laymen*: *"The third General Assembly was held in Alachua, Florida and continued there until 1940. The General Assembly moved to Ocala, Florida in the year of December, 1941."*

In the book, *The Historical Experience of the Life and Works of Elder George Robinson*, he wrote: *"Sometimes in the City of Ocala where we suffered so long to establish an everlasting peace, and a place of refuge for the people of God, where God did bless us to achieve victory and won the battle of which we fought for."*

*[And], there God did bless us to build the Great Temple of the Church of God by Faith with the strength of others and their help, also with their finances."*

As shown on the photo below, the Temple was always packed with congregants everywhere. There was only a few feet of free-space in the front center of the sanctuary. There was no choir stand and the wood heater was installed in the middle of the floor. The L-shaped structure on the left was the stove pipe to exhaust the smoke.

When studying the photo below carefully, notice the men and boys seated or standing right or center. They are not wearing ties and their hats were hanging around the platform wall; adding a folksy touch. The women were seated left and the entire congregation was focused on the song or testimony coming from that area.



This photo is the same as the one shown top right but from a different angle. It shows the awesome crowd at the floor level. Just above the stove pipe, the balcony is visible and was packed as well. What a great time they had!



*"The Ocala Meeting"* also had a serious social component. Temple goers planned their daily clothing choices very meticulously. The men in fine hats, Stacey Adams shoes and collar bars. The women with beautiful hats, cotton stockings and silk gloves. That was the ByFaith way.



Shown here is a photo of a children's Sunday School class at the Temple. The local congregation made a major impact on West Ocala all year long. Special thanks to Deacon James T. and daughter, Sister Telsa Jones Linton for most of the photos on this page.

## *Early Days at the Meeting*

### **As Told by Elder Mark Hart**

*"Elder Scippio owned property. He had two duplex rentals behind a thrift store near the railroad. This is where the girls stayed when they come for meetings. Elder George Robinson owned the two houses next to the rentals on 3rd Street.*

*Four brothers, Deacon Linton, Brother Rufus Gore, Deacon Arthur Mann and Deacon Sam Veal would come down and go around Ocala and get rooms for delegates because we were not allowed to rent regular hotel rooms.*

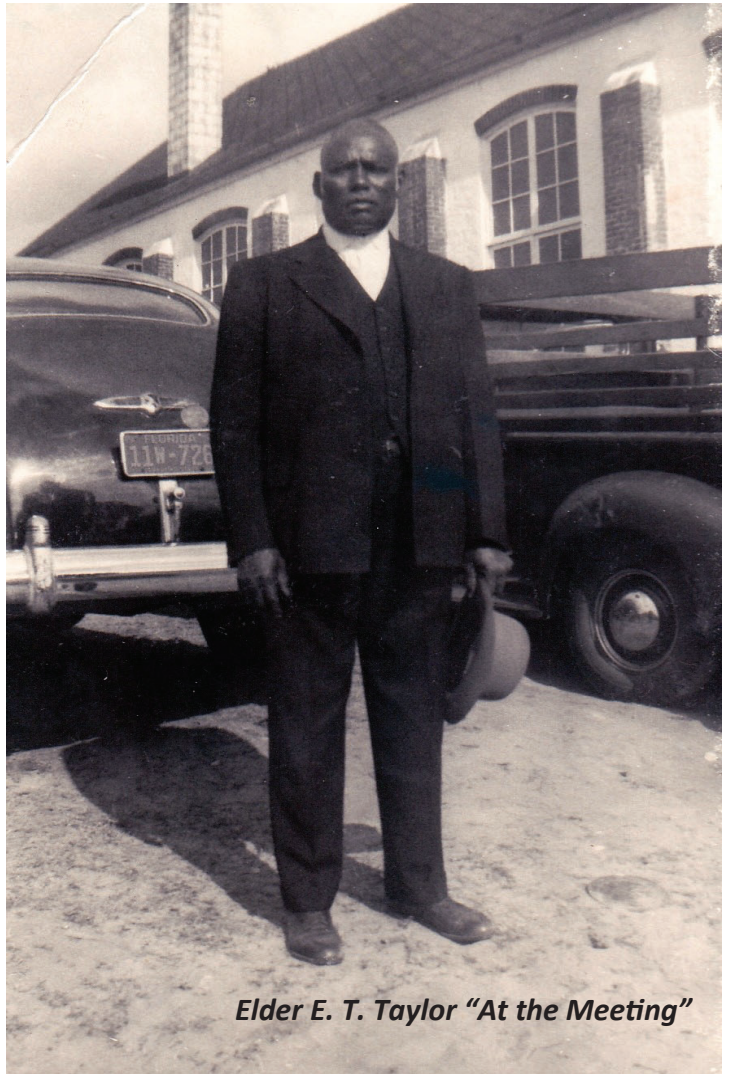
*The saints would pay \$2.00 a night for a room. Not everyone could afford to go to the meeting so two delegates were voted on and money was raised to send the delegates and the pastor to the meeting. Before we had a kitchen, a family named Council (who lived on 5th Street) would let the saints cook food to take to the corner of Broadway (where the old Fairgrounds were) and people would eat there.*

*If there was a fair, we would go to the Moss Factory and eat using bales of hay as tables. The bales were firm enough to hold the food.*



**Daddy John Bright  
"Temple Pulpit"**

*During this time, the major cooks were Brother Clyde Coe, Deacon Hardy, Brother Jerry Kennedy, Deacon Arthur Mann, and Deacon Linton from South Carolina. They would come down two days early. After we got our dining room, all meat would come from Davis Groceries; the store on the next street north of us called Broadway Street.*



**Elder E. T. Taylor "At the Meeting"**

*All the preachers would sleep upstairs in the Deacons and Elders Council Room, [Top right photo on next page]. The building to the left of the church probably held about 100 preachers. The women would clean the sheets by washing them at home in a wash pot and hang them on the dining room fence and/or a clothesline.*

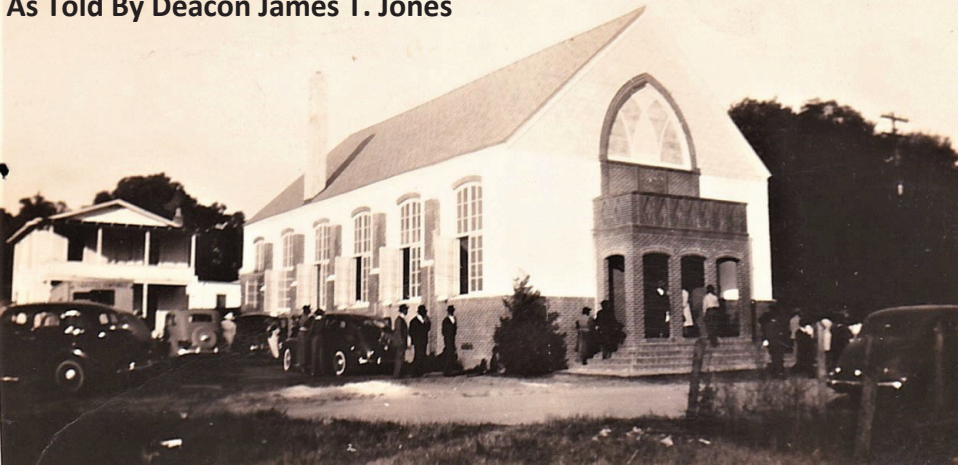
*Sometimes, two men would sleep on a single cot. They took cold showers outdoors or would go to somebody's house who would hang blankets on the back porch for privacy. They would bathe with Octagon or Lye soap. The children would sit on the front porch while the preachers bathed; the women would bathe inside.*

*"Deacon Allen 'Sonny Boy' Jones, one of Ocala's first deacons, was a taxi driver who would pick up saints who took the train to Ocala and chauffeur them around."*



## *Ocala: My Neighborhood, My Church*

As Told By Deacon James T. Jones



*"Elder Nathaniel Scippio was a serious businessman who was buying up property all around the Ocala Temple neighborhood. They worshiped in a rustic barn-looking building before the Ocala Temple construction got started. They hired a man named Mr. Martin as the general contractor and the work was started in 1940. The Temple costs about \$15,000 to build back then [which is the equivalent of \$264,132.86 today]."*

*The two-story building shown above was the parsonage which served many other functions. This was the only restrooms as none were located in the Temple. The men's bathroom was on the left and the women's on the right. The Deacons and Elders Council also met in this building during the meetings. Bishop Willie W. Matthews and his wife, Mother Katie lived there. Ruling Elder George Robinson (Daddy Robinson) and his wife Mother Nona lived in the back of the old, barn-like church. Elder Robinson was pastoring the Temple during the construction but was assigned to Coconut Grove, Miami in 1942. Superintendent H. K. Charles replaced him.*

*One of my disappointments is that Elder Charlie Lambert, from Belleview laid some beautiful designs on the walkway several feet in front of the Temple. Unfortunately, when the City widened Ft. King Street, the walkway had to be destroyed.*

*There were no offices at the Temple because the entire focus was on serving the Lord. In fact, there wasn't a water fountain in the building on the urging of Mother Essie Scippio. The Temple had beautiful wood floors and she stated that dripping water would damage them. Consequently, we had to go to the home of Deacon Rufus and Mother Alice Gore to bring water back to the Temple. They didn't have running water so we pumped buckets of water and thirsty Temple goers dipped their cups to take a drink. The Gores are the grandparents of the Pittsburgh Steelers head coach Mike Tomlin, so he's really a son of ByFaith. After several years, Elder Charlie Thomas, pastor of Jacksonville Beach installed the first water fountains at the Temple.*



*There was also no heat or air conditioning but it had a huge wood heater in the center of the church as shown above. Deacon Arthur Mann and several other brothers gathered wood and fed it all during the meeting. He was the brother of Elder Willie Mann, Sr. who was one of the Ocala pastors. Deacon Veal was the coordinator/boss for the meals along with Deacon Jerry Kennedy. And boy, could they cook! We had two dormitories, which were used as dining rooms during the meeting. In fact, my house was sold to the church as an additional dorm room for the boys.*

*We had to leave Ocala and move the convention to Atlanta because we just couldn't stuff any more people in the Temple. Even though we expanded the church, tore down the parsonage, and added new buildings, it just wasn't enough. Oh, what a great time it was."*



*The height of the building* with its long, slender nave created a natural echo that empowered every voice within. The edifice featured celestial-like rafters, huge windows and a balcony that has a rich legacy of its own.

The building was always packed at every service with standing-room only as shown in the photo below.



There was no vestibule or foyer like today's churches. As soon as the convention attendees parted the doors, the flood of inspiration enveloped all who entered therein. The pulpit platform was always packed to capacity with worshippers, ushering in the presence of the Lord.

The services were shared with the entire neighborhood because there was no air conditioning in the building, only a huge wall fan.

Since the side windows were opened, the teenagers who sat on cars on the right and cafeteria workers preparing chicken sandwiches on the left experienced the same joy as those within.



*Evangelist Scippio  
at the Temple*

In the year of 1963, the National Church expanded the Ocala property several blocks southward on SW 7th Avenue with the construction of Matthews Scippio Academy. It was the furthest building to the south of the Temple and faced north. This K-12 school was built and staffed by members of the Church of God by Faith to educate ByFaith children as well as those in the local community.



In fact, special emphasis was given to students who were expelled from the public school system to try to advance the cause of Christ. Also, there were plans to add a Community College. Unfortunately, after nearly a decade, it became increasingly difficult to meet budgets with so few students paying tuition and the refusal of the State of Florida Legislature to help fund *this* private Christian school.





*The photo on the left shows the area* on the west side of the Temple. It predates the expansion that added the westward wing including the Council Room and cafeteria. During that time, the courtyard area was a meeting place for parking, food and fellowship. The long line next to the church was likely for a post-service meal. For younger ByFaithers, it might seem odd to consider that Temple goers could not be seated in a restaurant in its first 25-years.

The photo below shows the local Temple congregation in the same area after the renovation.



## EXPANDING THE Temple

Between the Temple and the school, a dormitory for Matthew Scippio Academy was erected to house ByFaith girls from other cities and states (photo on the right). It was also used by the Executive Council during the Assembly Meetings. The bottom floor level was used for dining and as a meeting place for various national youth groups. Shown in this photo on the right was the famous Scippio vehicle called "Sentinel" with Mother Scippio standing to its left. Elder Scippio was credited for the direct or indirect construction of these buildings. The small structure on the left was a quaint lodge that was used by Elder Scippio during the great Ocala meetings.



Shown left to right is Minister Mark Hart, and Superintendent Willie Mann who was the founder of the Dual-State District. Standing on the steps was Deacon Willie Milling, vice-chair of the National Finance Board.



It didn't take very much to get the Ocala Temple electrified under the anointing of the Holy Spirit. In this photo, Sister Nell Lewis was bellowing out some rendition.



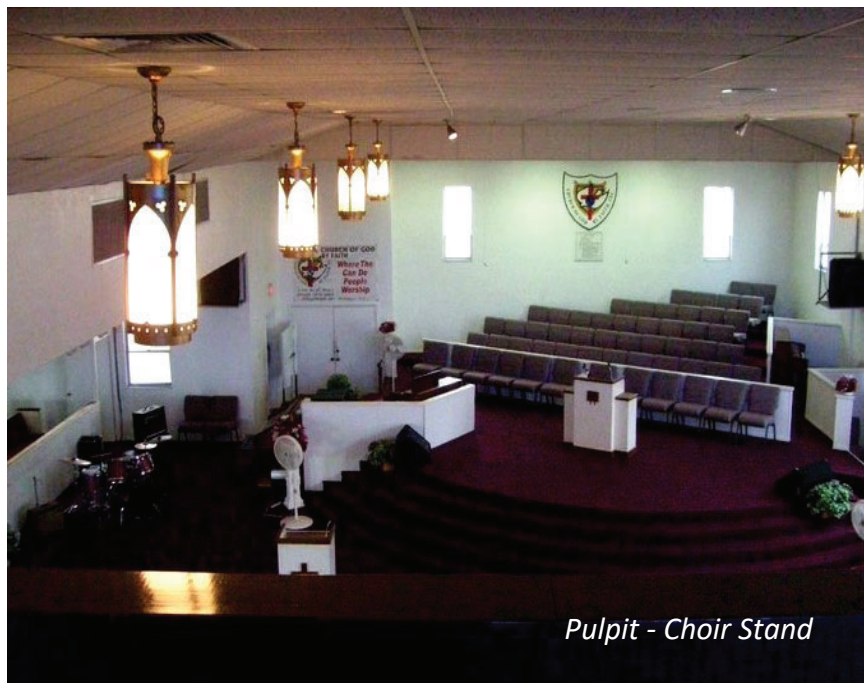
During services, there was often as many outside as within. Being "At the Meeting" was the goal; getting a seat was a bonus. *Special thanks to Lady Brenda Blackmon-Jones for some of the photos on this page.*



## 1977 Temple Renovation

In the Spring of 1977, a major renovation of the Temple was launched under the leadership of Bishop Willie W. Mathews and Assistant Bishop James E. McKnight, Sr. The edifice was enlarged westward and included offices, classrooms and new restrooms. These additions increased the overall building area to 18,724 square feet.

During this first renovation, the trusses were covered with new ceiling panels and overhead lighting fixtures as shown right, and the platform had a totally new look. Although central air conditioning was installed, there were still no bathrooms on the original side.



Pulpit - Choir Stand



The renovation was managed by Deacon Horace McKnight, II and Mr. Buddy Horner was the general contractor. Many ByFaith sub-contractors also worked on the project. The cafeteria shown left was an awesome feature, where home-cooked meals were supervised by Mother Lorene Hardy. Matthew Scippio Academy was closed by then but all the other buildings were at maximum capacity during the assembly meetings.



While the deacons and elders were in the Council sessions, many gifted women taught life lessons in the main sanctuary. One such woman seen in this Temple photo is the late Mother Naomi Middleton. She was a gifted writer, poet and worked professionally as a social worker. She traveled extensively with Evangelist Nathaniel and Mother Essie Scippio and helped them plant dozens of churches. When she wasn't writing, she physically helped dig foundations for some of the early churches.



As shown from this choir-stand view, the church, balcony, and even the staircase was always packed with conferees. All the white hats likely meant that this was *Missionary Day*. The majority of men were likely in the *Deacons and Elders Council*. It was the continuing education program that was 50-years old by the year 1977. All of *Founding Leading Ladies* had transitioned by then which left, Mothers Jessie McKnight, Vivian Brown, Lula Fogle, Etta Matthews, and Maxine Robinson in charge.



The Temple was the place where leaders were assigned at every level. The photo on the right shows Ruling Elder Theodore Brown, (far left). He was participating in the ordination of the then Executive Secretary James E. McKnight, Sr. who was being elevated to presiding bishop in the year 1984. To Bishop's right was the incoming Executive Secretary George Matthews, Sr. On the far right was Ruling Elder John Robinson, Jr. who assisted with their ordination.



As mentioned before, the *Deacon's and Elders Conferences* started in Ocala long before the Temple was erected in 1931. Ten years later, it became the site of the general assemblies for 46-years. However, the administrative/training sessions were still a major component of the Ocala Assembly Meetings. This photo was taken in the Executive Council Boardroom. Shown left to right: Ruling Elders, Collis M. Fogle, Sr., George Matthews, Sr., John Robinson, Jr., and Executive Secretary James E. McKnight, Sr. To their right were Superintendents, David C. Rourk, E. P. Livingston, Robert L. Evens, Sherman Roberts and James Williams. Seated in the middle was Bishop Willie W. Matthews with Superintendent Quainton Neloms to his right. Ruling Elder Theodore Brown was seated on the end.



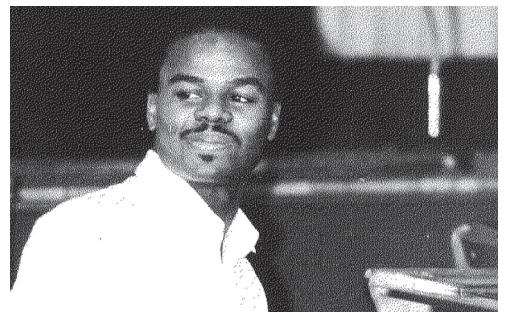
During the 1970s, mass choirs became a featured component of the "*Ocala Meetings.*" Though they were not called as such then, these Second Century ByFaithers (2CBF) delivered soul-stirring renditions every year. In this photo, Bishop Willie W. Matthews and Ruling Elder Collis M. Fogle, Sr. joined them in lifting up the name of The Lord.



Shown here is the late Elder Robert L. Evens; the fifth superintendent of the Ocala District. He was speaking in the Temple Council room. *Special thanks to Supt. Harry Johnson for the photos on this page.*



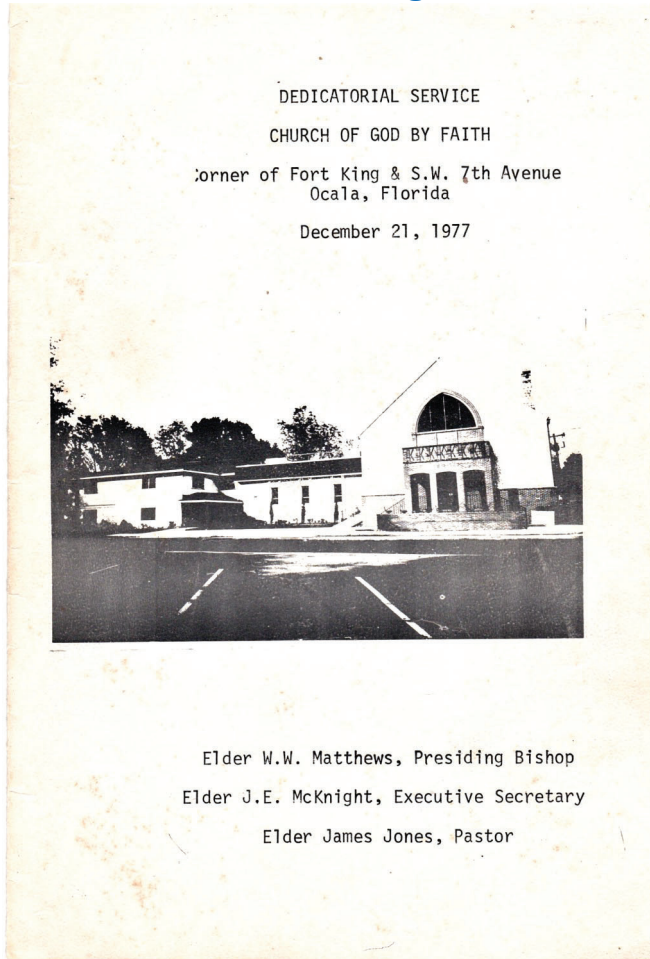
Pictured above is the presiding executive secretary of the COGBF, Ruling Elder David C. Rourk at the podium in the renovated Temple. In the early days, he was the first leader of the young adults.



Pictured here is the young Minister James E. McKnight, Jr. long before he became the presiding bishop. He was also a youth leader in the 1970s and was seated at the piano in Ocala; probably in a rehearsal.



## 1977 Rededication Program



### PROGRAM

Bishop James E. McKnight ..... *Presiding Minister*  
 Processional begins at entrance of Temple ..... *Bishop, Executive Elders, District Elders and Pastors, in like order*  
 Entrance Prayer .... Elder George Robinson, *Ex Officio Ruling Elder*  
 Procession Continues:  
 Song, "I Will Trust In The Lord" ..... *Choir*  
 First Scripture, 122nd Psalm, Leader ..... Elder D. L. Smith, *Northwestern New York District Elder*  
 Invocation ..... Elder James Williams, *Gainesville District Elder*  
 Selection, "We Have Come This Far By Faith" ..... *Choir*  
 Expressions of Greetings:  
 Mayor, City of Ocala ..... Mr. Christian J. Meffert  
 President, Marion County Commission Board ..... Mr. Murry Fugate  
 City Council Member ..... Mr. James Cunningham  
 Chief of Police, Ocala, Florida ..... Mr. Lee McGehee  
 Builder and Contractor ..... Mr. Buddy Horner  
 S. K. Church Furniture Nat'l Sales Manager .... Mr. Michael Acierno  
 City Ministers ..... Rev. O. Van Pinkston, Rev. Splights  
 Selection, "Leaning On The Everlasting Arms" ..... *Choir*  
 Dedicatorial Scripture, 1st Kings 8:22-61 .... Elder George Matthews, *Assistant Executive Secretary*  
 Dedicatorial Hymn,  
 "I Love Thy Kingdom Lord" ..... Elder John Robinson, *Ruling Elder*  
 Selection, "How I Got Over" ..... *Choir*  
 The Act of Dedication, Leader ..... Elder Theodore Brown, *Ruling Elder*  
 The Ministry of Giving ..... Elder W. H. Livingston, *South Carolina District Elder*  
 Offering ..... General Finance Committee, *Deacon H. A. McKnight, Chairman*  
 Presentation ..... *Ep2:11 - Ep1:21-23*  
 Selection, "Amazing Grace" ..... *Choir*  
 Dedicatorial Message ..... Elder W. W. Matthews, *Presiding Bishop of the Church of God by Faith, Inc.*  
 Benediction .....  
 Musicians ..... Sister Naomi Watts, Brother Howard Robinson

## 1987: General Assemblies Moved to Atlanta



As the general assemblies continued to rapidly grow, it became logistically impossible to keep hosting them at the Ocala Temple.

In the year of 1987, the general assemblies were moved to the Hyatt Hotel in Atlanta, GA. The summer conferences were also moved from Sumter, SC to different cities.

Even with the greater comfort and conveniences of fine hotels, none can take the place of the *Mother Church*, Ocala Temple.



## 2018: New Chapter in Temple History

On December 20, 2014, the newly appointed Bishop James E. McKnight, Jr. rolled out a five-point plan called Vision 20/20. He wrote:

*"We are extremely grateful to God for the completion of one hundred great years. As we celebrate our past, we must view our first century as the foundation and preparation for what still lies ahead. We remain devoted to the proposition that Jesus Christ is the only hope for the world, and that the Church of God by Faith still exists to convey that hope. I, along with the Executive Council, seek to covenant with every willing 'ByFaither' who will commit to the fulfillment of Vision 20/20. At every level of our connection and in every local assembly, we are to engage in carrying out this vision in the spirit of our fathers. This church evolved out of the prayers, faith, sacrifices, selflessness, and dedication of men and women who committed to a cause far beyond themselves. It is in that spirit that we commit our time, treasure, and talent to the actualization of this most noble cause."*

He said the following about Goal #1 of the Vision: *"The Temple" is a historical landmark that in previous years was the dwelling place for assemblies and extravaganzas. It was once known as the National Headquarters for General Assemblies. Our vision is to renovate The Temple to its former glory for the purpose of worship, training and ministerial opportunities."*

The foundation and structural integrity of the building started in July 2015. Deacon James Montgomery also assisted with other pre-construction preparation.

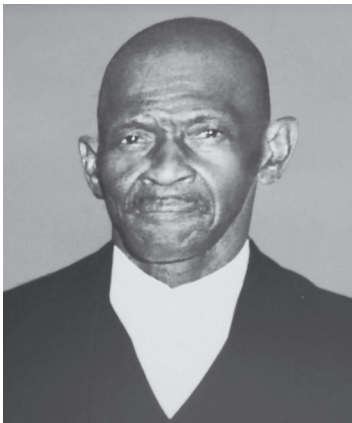


On August 4, 2017, the Temple restoration/renovation began under the leadership of Presiding Bishop James E. McKnight, Jr. Two of our very own were instrumental in leading the project. Pastor Jessie Covington (bottom left of photo on the left), provided countless volunteer hours as the lead project manager ([read more about him on page-26](#)). By his side was Pastor Moses Anderson, who also worked diligently in so many ways to help make this Temple renovation a success (bottom right of photo on the left). The general contractor was Mr. Chap Dinkins of *Dinkins Construction* ([see more on page 30](#)). He is a man of great faith and was a joy to work with. As shown below, several ByFaith men also provided labor called *Workdays at the Temple*.





*On June 21-23rd, the Temple was restored to its former glory with the Act of Dedication on Saturday, June 23, 2018. It was always the heart of this church. ByFaith has only had four bishops over 103-years and each of them made an impact on the Temple in various ways. Bishop Aaron Matthews, Sr. built it; Bishop Willie W. Matthews and Bishop James E. McKnight, Sr. expanded it and Presiding Bishop James E. McKnight, Jr. restored it to its former glory. In the photo top right, Bishop McKnight and several others watch as Site Superintendent Shuan Tillman of Dinkins Construction planted a Bible in the Temple foundation.*



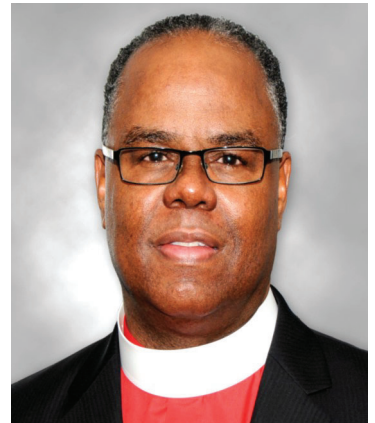
Bishop  
*Aaron Matthews, Sr.*



Bishop  
*Willie W. Matthews*



Emeritus Bishop  
*James E. McKnight, Sr.*



Presiding Bishop  
*James E. McKnight, Jr.*

*The Temple* had to be renovated because its legacy is too important to let go. Why? Because this was the mecca, the destination, the fellowship, the “Bethesda Healing Pool”, the reunion, the place to launch ministries, the place to receive an education, the place to get free counseling, the place to find condolences for love ones lost. Yes, the Ocala Temple was and is the heart of the Church of God By Faith.

It was a place where old men launched visions that young ones turned into reality; catching convictions and running toward the hills of greatness with all deliberate speed. ByFaith was launched when the World fought the first time; the Temple was erected when they took up arms again. As the old hymn goes, all of that didn’t matter because they “Studied War No More” as they fought for eternal life.

Now that new generations can experience the majestic flavor of this Great Sanctuary, let us hope that its prominence will bud flowering seeds anew. Moreover, as long as we await the Lord’s return, we will guard the legacy *It* so richly deserves. In this photo, workers from *Sauder Pew Company* was installing the pews on June 1, 2018.

