

# MEMBERS ORIENTATION CLASS

## SESSION IV

### THE HISTORY OF HARTFORD

"And so, from the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, to lead a life worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God."

Colossians 1:9-10 RSV

Hartford Memorial Baptist Church  
18700 James Couzens Hwy.  
Detroit, Michigan 48235

Dr. Charles G. Adams, Pastor

HARTFORD MEMORIAL BAPTIST CHURCH  
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THE STORY OF HARTFORD CHURCH

About 1916 and during World War I, there was an influx of Black people migrating to Detroit from the South seeking higher wages, better opportunities and an improved quality of life for themselves and their children. The eastside of Detroit was well nigh flooded with Black people from previous migrations. There was no other alternative but to move "west" and develop a community.

As Blacks kept moving on the westside, they became conscious of the fact that their eastside churches were too far away for regular attendance. Besides, the two oldest Black Baptist Churches in the city, Second Baptist and Shiloh Baptist were overcrowded and bursting at the seams. There was a terrific need to establish a new church in a new area.

For several months the people who had moved to the westside would meet in various homes for prayer meetings because of their desire for religious services in the community. At the conclusion of the prayer meetings, they would discuss establishing a church in the neighborhood.

In 1917, a young Black minister in the community, Rev. E.D. Edwards, took this discussion concerning a new church for westside Detroit to the late Rev. R. L. Bradby, Pastor of Second Baptist Church, and to the Detroit Baptist Union then under the leadership of the Rev. Henry C. Gleiss. They were unanimous in their encouragement and support of the idea of establishing Detroit's first, westside, Black Baptist Church. The green light was given. The signal was "GO"!

Thus on May 27, 1917, First Institutional Baptist Church of Detroit was organized and Rev. E.D. Edwards was elected the first Pastor. Rev. Edwards was an unassuming, humble and quiet man. History rewarded him with the privilege and destiny heaped upon him the responsibility of being the founding pastor of the first Black religious institution to appear west of Woodward Avenue in Detroit. All the other Black Baptist Churches in its community are related to Hartford as a child is related to its mother.

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Dates to remember:

1916

1917

1920

1921

1922

1924

1945

1958

1961

1968

1969

1970

1974

1975

1978

1982

Additional notes:

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Class Leaders: Deacon Mary McKissic  
Deacon Mitchell Mos

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The early strength and vivacity of the new west side congregation is indicated by the strength and vitality of its earliest agencies: Deacons, Trustees, and Deaconesses had vision and vigor; the Sunday School was a thriving organism, the first for Blacks in the community.

The Senior Choir could sing anything including anthems, hymns and spirituals, and was acclaimed from far and near; the Missionary Society was another great "first" for the community.

Rev. Edwards dug deep and wide, laying a solid foundation. After three and one-half years of Christian pioneering, Rev. E.D. Edwards resigned in 1920 to answer a distant missionary call. When he came to the west side, there was no Black Church there; when he left, he had founded one and guided her through the early years when a baby struggles for breath and experience.

Rev. Edwards was almost immediately succeeded by a native Detroitier, Rev. Charles Andrew Hill, who was called from Second Baptist where he had been serving as assistant to Rev. R. L. Bradby. Almost simultaneously with the election of Rev. Hill, the new church felt its first birth pangs and gave birth to Tabernacle Baptist Church. Subsequently, Tabernacle and Hartford both experienced birth pangs together and gave birth to a new Light Baptist Church.

Rev. Hill came to his new post with youth, education, vigor, social activism and business acumen undergirded by the deep spiritual roots of fearless faith. One of the first major changes he recommended was a change in name from First Institutional Baptist to Hartford Avenue Baptist Church. The congregation readily and heartily gave consent. In December, 1921, Hartford Avenue Baptist Church was incorporated an ecclesiastical body and recorded in the Office of the Wayne County Clerk on January 31, 1922.

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Under the leadership of Pastor Hill the following agencies were organized:

Senior Usher Boards 1 and 2, Young Adult Usher Board and Junior Usher Board, Ladies' Aid Society (still one of the largest and strongest Christian Women's organizations in Detroit); Willing Workers, Pastor's Aid, Loyal Workers, All States Club, Hartford Progressive Society, Brotherhood, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Twelve Birth Month Groups, Youth Choir, Inspirational Chorus, Sunday School Choir and Usher Board, Youth Unlimited and a variety of championship caliber athletic teams in baseball, basketball and bowling.

Rev. Hill, the father of eight, always maintained progressive ideas concerning Christian youth. He was a theological and ecclesiastical liberal if not radical. Youth were allowed to play, socialize and dance in the Hartford Center when all the other churches in the area frowned upon these practices. Rev. Hill believed that the best way to keep young people in the church was to let them be young, play and socialize under Christian guidance and supervision.

He said that it was far better for the youth to be made welcome to dance in Hartford's Center under Christian restraints than to dance in secular halls under no restraints. Such an attitude on the part of the Pastor helped Hartford to grow by leaps and bounds.

Rev. Hill was also a political liberal and radical. He was one of the early fighters for minority rights in the city's new housing projects. He fought vigorously, and not without being wounded, in the struggle to organize labor unions. UAW Ford Local 600 was organized in Hartford Church. Rev. Hill again put his life on the line during the race riots of 1943, protesting police brutality against Black citizens. He was courageous and uncompromising in his zeal for Black liberation and equality. He fought for FEPC legislation and fair housing laws. He was the first Black citizen to seek election to the Detroit Common Council.

He was one of the early presidents of the Detroit Branch of NAACP. His political activism and courage also won many converts to Hartford.

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At Dr. Hill's invitation Paul Robeson sang at Hartford during the McCarthy hysteria of the 1950's when he was not permitted to appear elsewhere in Detroit. Rpland Hayes appeared at Hartford in concert, and W.E.B. Dubois lectured here. His theology was not high-blown but down to earth. His sermons were clear, precise and applicable to daily life. Under Rev. Hill's teachings and preachments, scores of Hartford's children were inspired, encouraged and helped to seek college and university training. Hartford is not great simply for what it is and what it owns, Hartford is great for what she has produced and developed in terms of human resources.

The church buildings located on the northeast corner of Hartford and Milford were started and completed under Rev. Hill's guidance. In 1924 the first story of the old sanctuary was erected. The building was enlarged and the second story added in 1945. The modern education and recreation wing with a regulation size gymnasium was added in 1958.

Having spent himself in nearly a half century of rigorous and rewarding service, Pastor Hill retired from the active pastorate, April 28, 1968. He continued to do what he could for God and Hartford until his summons home on February 8, 1970.

By that time he had placed the mantel of succession on the present Pastor, The Rev. Charles G. Adams, who was elected on October 23, 1968, assumed the pulpit April 6, 1969 and was installed June 29, 1969.

Rev. Charles G. Adams seemed a logical choice. He was a son of Hartford and an early prodigy of Rev. Hill's influence. At the time he assumed Hartford's pastorate he had been for 6 1/4 years Pastor of the historic Concord Baptist Church of Boston, Massachusetts where he had increased the membership from 300 to over 1,000; tripled the budget from \$25,000 to more than \$75,000 annually, and gotten the church involved in sponsoring the construction of a \$7 million housing project for senior citizens and low to middle income families.

On coming home to Hartford, his priorities were to strengthen and unify the church, therefore he established the monthly family dinners, the marriage forum, and Operation Stewardship. In order to promote unity, he consolidated two morning services of worship into one and put all he had into the one service.

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The 8 a.m. Sunday Worship Service was resumed in 1977 and the monthly family dinner became the weekly family breakfast.

He wanted to continue Hartford's historic interest in politics so he organized the Civic Affairs Committee and charged it with the responsibility of keeping the membership politically and civically abreast. He wanted to keep the church athletically active so he organized the Athletic Board. He wanted to lead the church into meditation and study so he started the annual Church Retreat, the annual Pre-Women's Day Consecration Service and the annual Ash Wednesday Service and Communion and Consecration.

He wanted to enlist the thoughts and talents of young people for the church, and by the same token, to make the support of the church available to the youth who are struggling for self-realization and world betterment, so he organized the Scholarship Committee, the Hartford intercollegiates, the Junior Deacons and Trustees, and helped to revitalize the BTU-Progressive Youth. The Charles G. Adams Dramatic Group was organized in his honor and the Youth Choir has experienced a glorious renaissance during his pastorate.

Pastor Adams desired to expand Hartford's educational ministry so he launched the Neighborhood Summer Youth Program, The Saturday Extension School and the Pastor's Bible Class, the Martin Luther King, Jr. Library was appointed and furnished during the second year of his Hartford ministry.

Under the leadership of Pastor Adams, the following improvements have been made: The membership rolls have been increased to 1000 family units. The budget had been quadrupled from \$69,000 in 1969 to an annual gross of \$417,416.68 in 1975. The paid staff potential and projection is 18 workers on the church payrolls. New carpeting was laid in the sanctuary. A new nurses room was built in memory of the late Mrs. Fannie Watson. A new communion preparation room was constructed. The exterior of the church was painted, a new Baldwin concert grand piano was purchased and a new sound system was installed throughout the building complex. Two mini buses and a ranch wagon were purchased to transport senior citizens and others who need help in transportation to and from Church.

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All of the above was done while Hartford Church was located on Hartford Avenue, where this church was housed for more than fifty-five years. From April 14, 1974 until April 10, 1977, Hartford projected relocation and the expansion of its services and programs.

During that time Hartford Church became more and more conscious of being pushed by its history and pulled by its future into a wider, broader, fuller ministry to the whole of Detroit and vicinity in a building located at the crossroads of heavy traffic. A new era bursting with new opportunities required a new location.

On Easter Sunday, April 4, 1974, the Pastor announced a joint evening of worship services to be held on April 28, 1974 with Covenant Baptist Church, in their beautiful, Gothic, stone facility located at 18700 James Couzens Drive. The music would be rendered by the choirs of Hartford and of Covenant, singing separately and together. Pastor Adams would preach the sermon, and Pastor William F. Keucher, Senior Minister of Covenant would officiate.

As Pastor Adams was announcing the joint worship service to be held two weeks in the future, he put his tongue in his cheek and said, "Now members, I want you to attend the joint worship services, not only to worship but also to look around. If you see what you like and like what you see, it can be yours". This statement was taken with a mixture of smiles and frowns, chuckles of consent and murmurings of discomfort. But the point had been made painlessly and easily.

Needless to say the members of Hartford packed into Covenant on the evening of April 28th, and were delighted by what their eyes beheld. Mother Julia Tucker, the oldest living user of our Church said to me that night "Call the moving van; I'm ready to move in tomorrow morning!"

On May 2, 1974, Hartford met to consider the feasibility of planning to relocate to the Covenant facility. After the Pastor outlined the reasons for and the possibilities of the relocation, he requested that the Church authorize a Capital Funds Campaign to measure the interest and ability of the congregation, and also that the Trustees of Hartford begin serious negotiations with the Trustees of Covenant for the acquisition of our new church home.



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At the May 2nd meeting, the first seven speakers were negative and harshly critical of the idea of relocation. They received rumblings of approval and covert amens from what appeared to be a large segment of the congregation. Quite by surprise, there stood a stalwart mother in the Church who had rendered over 40 years of faithful and dependable service, Mrs. Bessie Pickens.

She said, "Hartford, I can't believe my ears. I heard this kind of talk more than 40 years ago when we were scuffling during the Depression to develop what you see now. Many said, 'It can't be done'; but a few of us had faith and we did it. Where is your faith in God?"

As Sister Pickens took her seat, she was answered with an outbreak of loud, enthusiastic applause. She had turned the tide and there was no stopping it! Sister Pickens was followed by 28 speakers who all spoke in faith's great affirmative.

Among them was the late Mrs. Ruth Vincent, a Public School counselor, who said, "If Hartford runs out of sufficient money to hire paid cleaning personnel to keep the new church clean, I'll put on my apron and clean it myself! Nothing ventured, nothing gained." The vote was 4 to 1 in favor of the Pastor's recommendations.

Next came a series of sermons on stewardship and the Capital Funds Campaign. The General Chairman of the Campaign was Mrs. Joyce Maddox. The Campaign, the goal of which was \$400,000, was held between June 17 and July 14, 1974. In that short period more than \$438,000 was pledged by some 700 member families. We were made more than conquerors through Him that loved us!

Based on this victory plus the value of our existing assets, we were authorized by the Church to offer \$1,000,000 for the purchase. The offer was submitted on August 1, 1974 and accepted on August 15, 1974.

Thereafter the general economy hardened and earlier expectations and verbal promises of credit were dashed and shattered against that hardness. In January, 1975, we had no mortgage commitment. Our project lay in limbo.

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During the lag, the opposition decided to strike. We were served with an injunction, enjoining us from either buying the new facility or selling the old facility. Four lay members: one man and three ladies brought a class action suit against the Church, protesting the procedures by which the changes were occurring.

The Court date was January 11, 1975. Judge Peter B. Spivak, Circuit Court, who seemed during the debate, to side with the opposition, mysteriously and surprisingly dismissed the case, pending a congregational meeting to be held Sunday, February 9, 1975. The vote was ordered to be taken by secret ballot less any person should feel intimidated. The vote was better than 3 to 1 in favor of the relocation and including the sale of the old facility.

In order to heal all wounds and seal all divisions, the Pastor preached about love for four Sundays straight. Hartford heeded the word: Nobody was excluded, stigmatized or ostracized. All of the four who initiated the court action are loved, forgiven and accepted, still active in the Church and its various departments.

There is no condemnation or resentment toward those who took us before the law. The reality of prevailing love led the Church into a new era of spiritual awakening. Hartford is the most friendly, loving, peace abiding Church in Detroit. Hundreds of new members joined the Church after the legal catharsis and the extension of absolute forgiveness.

The financial side of the upsurge was indicated by the fact that 1975 was a banner year in financial receipts. Between March 30 and November 30, 1975, the members and friends of Hartford laid \$159,000 on the table for the new facility alone, not counting what was raised for current and operating expenses. The gross receipts for 1975 were \$417,416.88, the highest in Hartford's history! The contract was sealed and the papers were passed on Tuesday, October 14, 1975.

We made a downpayment of \$250,000. We received a rent credit of \$150,000 in exchange for an 18 month waiting period before occupancy. We were loaned \$250,000 by the National Bank of Detroit. Finally, we were loaned \$150,000 by the First Independence National Bank, which was the lead bank in structuring the entire loan package and providing all the debt

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service at minimum cost to Hartford. The former First Vice-President of First Independence National is a member of Hartford, Mr. Herbert G. Ford.

The scheduled date of occupancy was April 14, 1977; but out of kindness, Covenant Baptist church decided to vacate the premises several days early so that Hartford could move into her new home on Easter Sunday, April 10, 1977. Covenant's new structure was not complete at that time, and they held their Easter services in a Jewish Synagogue in West Bloomfield, Temple Beth El.

Covenant Baptist Church held its last service at the James Couzens site on Maundy Thursday, April 7, 1977. Hartford moved its furnishings and equipment on Good Friday evening April 8, 1977. The furnishings were placed and a new sound system was installed on Friday and Saturday.

The Altar Circle spread the Communion table for Sunday, and late Saturday evening, members and workers met in the sanctuary to consecrate the building through prayer and praise. We walked throughout the building, touching the walls, windows and pews while praying aloud, "Lord bless this \_\_\_\_\_ and use it for your glory". Closed circuit television receivers were installed in the Chapel and Fellowship Hall to accommodate the overflow crowds of Easter worshippers.

What an overflow it turned out to be! We started with an Easter Exodus Service held at the Hartford Avenue location at 8 a.m. We remembered what had happened in "those walls" across fifty-five arduous years, and we anticipated what would occur in our new community. The sermon topic, shared by pastor and people, was "In These Walls and More Beyond".

That service was dismissed at about 9:30, in good time for two events: (1) The passing of the keys of the old location to the incoming occupants, the Rev. S. Damon Mays and New Ebenezer Baptist Church. (2) The loading up and lining up of more than 500 cars for a ten mile motorcade from the old location to the new site.

When we arrived at the James Couzens site, we paused at the main entrance beneath the tower for an outdoor ceremony.

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The Honorable Jackie Vaughn, III, State Representative represented Mayor Coleman A. Young as he cut the blue ribbon in the name of the Father. Mother Wilhelmina Hamilton King, Charter Member, cut the red ribbon in the name of the Son. Mother Georgia Roberta Hill, widow of the late Pastor, Charles A. Hill, cut the white ribbon in the name of the Holy Ghost.

The youngest member present, Ronald W. Turner, Jr. placed the key in the door. The oldest member present, Mother Bethel Langston turned the key. Deacon Isaiah Johnson, Chairman of the Deacons and Trustee Charles H. Vincent, Chairman of the Trustees, opened the door, and the saints went marching in! More than three thousand people attended the service and heard the Pastor preach on the subject, "Easter versus The Stone".

Between that Easter Sunday and September 25, 1977, more than 270 persons united with Hartford, while less than fifty members were lost.

Several physical improvements have been made on the structure, and several new programs have been organized. For example: The Head-Start to-College program, an eight week series to orient prospective Collegiates to the academic, social, financial and spiritual realities and demands of college study. A stronger Nursery Department. A more aggressive Scholarship Program.

A more effective Church School Administration under a Minister of Christian Education and the General and Departmental Superintendents. A better program of Bible Study. The expansion of the Women's Work of the Church. The organization of Hartford Men United for Prayer, Power and Progress Spiritually, Ecclesiastically and Economically. The organization of the Youth Council. The Expansion of Membership Orientation Classes. The launching of an Employment Referral Service.

The growth of our athletic programs including "Hartford Wheels", bowling, basketball and gymnastics. A wonderfully lively Senior Citizens Program, offering meals, friendship and daily activities for our senior citizens. A Sick Visitation Committee, which includes all the members.

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A Fund of Renewal Project to raise \$25,000 for Black Baptist Colleges and Universities and other minority causes.

We have come a long way, and we still have a long way to go to be what God wants us to be. So still we pray till Heaven we've found, "Lord lead us on to higher ground." By the Grace of God and our loyalty to Christ and church we shall overthrow the limitations of the past, overcome the difficulties of the present and overtake the brilliant possibilities of the future.

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"A HISTORICAL FOOTNOTE"

From its inception until 1961, Hartford Avenue Baptist Church was affiliated with Metropolitan District Baptist Association, The Wolverine Baptist State Convention and the National Baptist Convention, Inc. In 1961, under the leadership of Dr. Charles A. Hill, Hartford severed all former denominational ties and affiliated solely with what is now called the Michigan Progressive Baptist Convention and the Progressive National Baptist Convention. Dr. Hill was a pioneer in the Progressive denominational evolution and served as President of the Michigan Progressive Fellowship which later became the Michigan Progressive Baptist Convention.

Dr. Hill also registered the Church in the World Baptist Alliance beginning in 1960 when that organization held its Tenth World Congress in Rio De Janerio, Brazil. Dr. and Mrs. Hill also attended the Eleventh Baptist World Congress in Miami Beach, Florida. Dr. Adams attended the Twelfth and Thirteenth Baptist World Congresses; the former met in 1970 in Tokyo, Japan; the latter met in 1975 in Stockholm, Sweden.

In 1969, Pastor Adams sought approval of the Church to seek affiliation with the American Baptist Churches, U.S.A., Inc. Hartford affirmatively and enthusiastically gave consent and was in turn accepted in the American Baptist denomination in December, 1970.

It was the American Baptist Home Mission Society that was so instrumental in the founding of such Baptist institutions as Morehouse College, Benedict College and Shaw University. Hartford enrolled its Pastor and office staff in the American Baptist Ministers and Missionaries Benefit Fund, a retirement program for American Baptist fulltime personnel. Had it not been for our affiliation with the American Baptists and the encouragement and help of Rev. John A. Sundquist, then Area Minister for the Southeastern Area of the American Baptist Churches of Michigan, and the large loan from the American Baptist Extension Corporation, Hartford would hardly have been in position to purchase the Detroit location of Covenant Baptist Church, a strong American Baptist institution.

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It is safe to say that when Dr. Adams led Hartford into the American Baptist denomination, he led the Church into a new future budding with promising opportunities and an ever expanding mission.

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ABOUT THE REVEREND CHARLES G. ADAMS

**COLLEGE:** B.A. with Honors, University of Michigan

**SEMINARY HONORARY:** B.D. with honors, Harvard Divinity School

**DEGREE:** Awarded Doctor of Divinity, Birmingham Baptist College, 1975

**PASTORATES:** Concord Baptist Church, Boston 1962-1969  
Hartford Avenue Baptist Church, Detroit, 1969

**PAST POSITIONS:** Former Rockefeller Fellow, Harvard University  
Former Danforth Inter-Seminary Intern, Morehouse college  
Founder and President Concord Baptist Homes, a non-profit corporation for the construction and/or rehabilitation of low and moderate income housing  
Former President, Massachusetts Committee Black Churchmen  
Former Treasurer, Bermuda Baptist Witness Committee  
Former Teacher, Andover-Newton Theological School  
Lecturer, Boston University School of Theology  
1969 Preacher before the Annual Session of the National Council of Churches, Detroit, MI  
Former Treasurer, Cass Technical High School Association  
1970 Guest Preacher and Lecturer, Howard University, Washington, D.C.  
1970, 1971, 1972 and 1975 Guest Preacher and Lecturer, Tuskegee Institute, Tuskegee Institute, Alabama  
1971 Guest Preacher and Lecturer, Boston University School of Theology, Conference on Ministry  
1972 Guest Preacher and Lecturer, Pennsylvania State University



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Former member, Mayor's Health Care Advisory  
Commission, City of Detroit  
Former Secretary, Publishing Board,  
Progressive National Baptist Convention  
1973 Guest Preacher and Lecturer, University  
of Detroit  
1973 Guest Preacher and Lecturer, Vanderbilt  
University, Nashville, Tennessee  
1973, preached in and near South Africa at  
Tsomo, Johannesburg, East London, Capetown,  
Swaziland, and Lesotho  
1974 Guest Preacher at Harvard Memorial  
Church, Cambridge, Massachusetts  
Past Member, The Executive Board, Metro-  
politan Detroit Council of Churches  
Former Trustee, The International Afro-  
American Museum  
Former Board Member, Greater Detroit  
Opportunities Industrialization Centers  
Former Chairman, Board of Trustees, Shaw  
College at Detroit  
Former Board Member, Michigan Chapter,  
Southern Christian Leadership Conference  
Delivered a paper in Baptist Bicentennial  
Convocation, Washington, D.C.  
Delivered opening sermon at the Bicentennial  
Celebration of The Black Religious Experience  
held at Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee

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QUESTIONS FOR STUDY

1. What value is a church history?
  2. Why was Hartford Avenue Baptist Church organized?
  3. Who was the founding Pastor of Hartford Avenue Baptist Church?
  4. How many choirs has Hartford Memorial Baptist Church?
  5. How many Pastors have served Hartford?
  6. What was Dr. Hill's distinctive contribution to Church and society?
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7. Why did Hartford Avenue Baptist Church relocate?
  8. Who were the institutions who loaned the money to finance the acquisition of our new Church Home?
  9. Why was Dr. Adams called to Hartford?
  10. What has been accomplished under Dr. Adams?