

MORRIS LEDGER

The mission: Save a generation

Madison church starts initiative for young black males

BY LAURA JOHNSTON
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

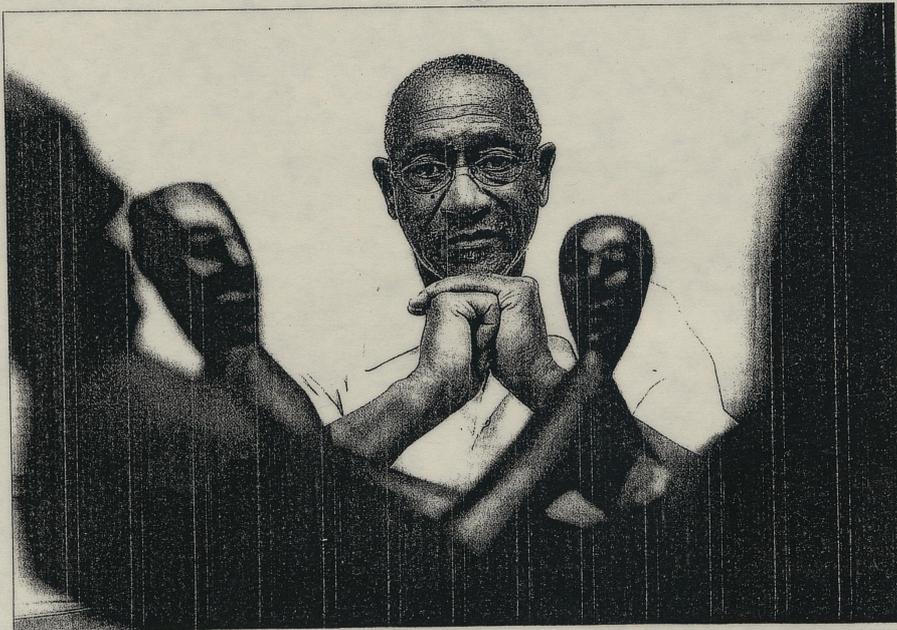
The Spanish word "amistad" means friendship. In the United States, it evokes the horrors of 19th century slavery, of the uprising aboard the slave ship Amistad in 1839.

Leaders of the First Baptist Church of Madison want to give the word a more hopeful connotation with its fledgling Amistad Center, a planned resource center and set of programs aimed at improving the lives of young black men.

This group of men needs help, the Rev. Charles Smith said. More of these young men have spent time incarcerated than in the military or college, according to a recent study published in the American Sociological Review. More than 70 percent of young black men who dropped out of high school were jobless in 2004, compared with 4 percent of white and 19 percent of Hispanic dropouts.

And this is a segment of the African-American community that traditionally has not been a part of organized religion.

"In the black community, from song to dance to portraiture to art, it has a theme coming out of the black church," said Smith. "But the hip-hop generation did



TONY KURDZUK/THE STAR-LEDGER

Pastor Charles Smith of the First Baptist Church of Madison says, "The hip-hop generation did not come out of the church. We have to build bridges to that generation."

THE NATURE OF THE CRISIS

Madison's First Baptist losing legendary pastor

By Jamie Duffy
For the Daily Record

After a decade at the pulpit, the Rev. Charles H. Smith will deliver his last sermon Sunday at the First Baptist Church in Madison.

The 81-year-old engaging and sometimes fiery preacher is retiring from this small locus of African American worship to live near one of his daughters in Atlanta. A medical doctor, she will look after Smith while he tackles writing another book.

How the First Baptist Church will replace Smith, who is not only a preacher but an impassioned civil rights leader, will be a challenge. The 100 or so members are an integral part of his life and vice versa.

"We're always there for him. We lift his arms up," said Robert James, the church president since 1985. "Whenever he has a bad day, he kicks it down to

us. We're a support team."

Smith became interim preacher in 2001 after the death of the church's pastor, the Rev. Johnnie Brewster. At the time Smith was working for the American Bible Institute in Manhattan. "I gave him some Bibles. We became very close," James said. The next year, he became the lead pastor and was able to build the congregation, attracting greater numbers of young people and a more diverse congregation, James said.

Faced with dilapidated structures, Smith led a major renovation of the church and the Arthur D. Brown parish house next door. To help pay for that and for Carole's Garden, a commemorative landscaped area behind both structures, Smith created Chef's Smokehouse, a catering operation led by James, a professional chef who runs the kitchen at

Pine Acres Nursing Home.

"He really got our church moving ... trying to get us ready for the future, to strive and survive," said Keva Holman who joined the church as a teenager and now leads the youth choirs.

Many of the changes at the 117-year-old church mirrored those Smith instituted at another First Baptist in Huntington, W.Va., where he was pastor from 1960 to 1980. His pride was the sanctuary with "beautiful stained glass windows," but he also is credited with a 150-unit low-income condominium development along with a community action program linked to President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty.

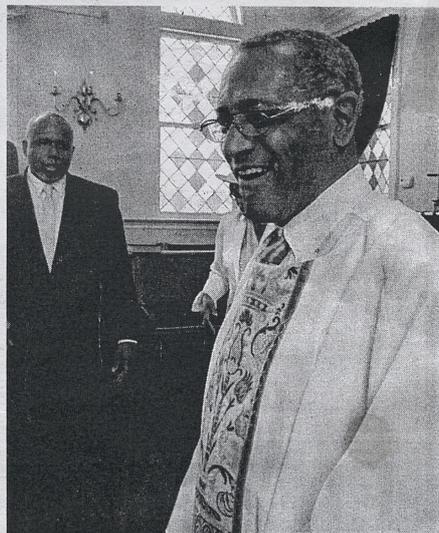
Being pastor of a large downtown Baptist church in the 1960s led to the front lines in the struggle for racial desegregation.

"The whole civil rights movement took place at

Bailey's Cafeteria in downtown Huntington," said Smith, recalling a place he knew well. He was never arrested but knew police harassment. "They were scared of me but they harassed me for years. Every night in the alley behind my house, they would shine lights, blow the horn." At a city hearing on anti-black police tactics, "they all came to City Hall dressed in their uniforms. When we opened up the session, they all walked out."

His sermons often are peppered with recollections from those times: getting injured students from Marshall University to the hospital as they fought to desegregate the town or getting shot at by members of the Ku Klux Klan while riding in Mississippi gathering information for a hunger and poverty study.

The service begins at 10:45 a.m. at the church, 36 Cook Ave., Madison.



The Rev. Charles H. Smith will deliver his last sermon Sunday at the First Baptist Church in Madison. JAMIE DUFFY/SPECIAL TO THE DAILY RECORD

Godspeed, Rev. Smith

A new pastor for the historic First Baptist Church on Cook Avenue will have big shoes to fill.

The Rev. Charles H. Smith, senior minister and the congregation's spiritual leader since 2002, is 81 and has decided to retire and move to North Carolina to be near his children and grandchildren. His last worship service with his flock is due Sunday, Sept. 2.

During his tenure, remarkable achievements have been made at the historic church by the pastor and his energetic and dedicated congregation.

The Rev. Smith's years with the church have been marked by a consistent campaign of community outreach,

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including an annual Italian Dinner, breakfast programs open to the public, banquets and a presence at Madison's annual October "Bottle Hill Day" street fair, which highlights civic groups among its attractions.

A milestone arrived in 2005 when the 1902

church building underwent sweeping interior renovations. The long-needed structural improvements, upgrades and restorations encompassed the church's sanctuary, its original stained glass windows and circular pews, flooring, steps, doors, and the installation of modern lighting and sound systems. An efficient fund-raising campaign by church leaders to raise \$450,000 was launched in January of that year, and the renovations were completed right on schedule in time for a May ribbon-cutting.

The improvements didn't stop there. A wing of the church was dedicated to scholarship programs, vocational training, financial literacy and character development, reflecting the Rev. Smith's deep commitment to build a brighter future for young people.

men, in 2008, the congregation installed "Carol's Garden," a place for private meditation open to the public, and the site of church and community functions. It is dedicated to the memory of Carol Baxter, who served as the church's secretary and deaconess, and its centerpiece is "Carol's Fountain," truly a space of serenity, with benches surrounded by quieting greenery planted by church members.

The Rev. Smith will be well-remembered at his church and in Madison for opening doors to the community, mentoring young people, celebrating African-American pride, outreach programs, and keeping alive the lessons and legacy of the Civil Rights movement.

In that latter concern, the pastor had special credentials. Following two decades as a senior minister in West Virginia, the Rev. Smith served on the national board of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) from 1970 to 1980, when he was called to New York City as deputy executive director. For three years, he was the day-to-day administrator in charge of 2,700 NAACP branch offices in 50 states.

Before coming to Madison, the Rev. Smith, working with Cain Hope Felder of the Howard University School of Religion, immersed himself for seven years in producing the 450-page "Jubilee Legacy," which traces the odyssey of African-Americans. One purpose of the book is to connect that history to the Bible.

"You look through the same text, but through the eyes of the African-American cultural experience," he explained. "It gives an entirely different contextual meaning. And then you can understand how the sacred text played the dominant role in the pilgrimage of blacks from slavery to freedom."

He undertook the project with a special concern for young people at-risk, after three years of visiting churches across the country and weighing how church leaders interacted with young people in connecting their heritage to the Bible. Accordingly, the "Jubilee Legacy" includes an extensive study guide for teachers and students.

The Rev. Smith brought all of those concerns to his decade of activism in Madison. We and many others will miss his inspirational leadership and his gift for revitalization and renewal, and we wish him Godspeed in his retirement and many productive years ahead.

Baptists to repeat tradition of 1902 walk Sunday

MADISON - Leaders and members of the First Baptist Church of Madison will mark the completion of renovations to their historic building at 34 Cook Ave. much the way their congregation did when the new church building opened more than a century ago - with a walk.

In 1902, when the church building was completed, its pastor and members staged a symbolic walk from the birthplace and temporary meeting place of the congregation, the old Odd Fellows Hall on Central Avenue, to their new house of worship on Cook Avenue.

At about 9 a.m. this Sunday, the Rev. Charles H. Smith, pastor, and the church's deacons and deaconesses, trustees and members, will repeat that symbolism, walking from the Madison Area YMCA on Kings Road, their temporary home the past several months during renovations, to their upgraded sanctuary at 34 Cook Ave.

Their walk will celebrate the completion of renovation work that began in January and is wrapping up right on schedule in mid-May. The walkers will be met at the church by Deaconess Cora Jigget and Deacon Arthur D. Brown for a ribbon-cutting ceremony, followed by a tour of the upgraded facilities.

The church disclosed plans in January to undertake a \$450,000 fund-raising campaign for long-needed structural improvements, which got under way with the help of a \$300,000 loan from PNC Bank.

Start At YMCA

Sunday's walk, expected to take about 30 minutes, will start at the YMCA and head west on Kings Road, past the Hartley Dodge Memorial municipal building and the Madison Train Station, to Prospect Street.

The walkers will turn right, proceed under the railroad overpass to Main Street, turn left and head west on the southern side of Main Street to the center of the downtown business district at Waverly Place.

There the procession will march past the Waverly Place plaza, turn right, cross Main Street, and head north on Central Avenue - with a fond nod to the site of the old Odd Fellows Hall, where the congregation got its start in 1895 - finishing the march at the refurbished church on Cook Avenue.

The procession will have the benefit of sidewalks, and a police escort for traffic safety, all along the route.

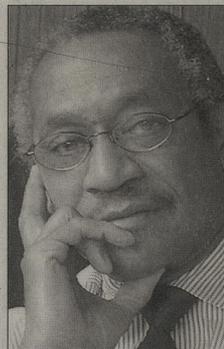
The church, primarily African-American for most of its

history and increasingly more diverse over the past 20 years, can trace its roots to the spring of 1895 and a gathering at what was then called the Odd Fellows Hall on Central Avenue for the purpose of organizing a Baptist mission.

The Rev. R.D. Check, the Baptist State Organizer for New Jersey, led the group, whose new officers were clerk Trim Felton, treasurer George M. Burroughs, organist Jeanette Milton Jones, and chorister James W. Ratler.

After six months of working and worshipping together as a Baptist mission, 12 members - George M. Burroughs, Trim Felton, John Milton, Jeremiah Ransom, Benjamin Gordon, Isaac Garrison, Joseph T. Knight, Richmond Barrow, George Holland, Mary Barrow, Maggie Holland and Mamie Green - volunteered to worship with the Calvary Baptist Church in Morristown for one year, according to Baptist policy before a Baptist church could be organized in Madison.

The Rev. George E. Morris, pastor of the Calvary Baptist Church, instructed them for the specified time. Meanwhile, the



The Rev. CHARLES SMITH
To Lead Congregation's Walk

Baptist mission in Madison continued its worship services under the guidance of the Rev. R. L. Harris.

In 1897, the 12 charter members returned to Madison and the Baptist mission was organized as the First Baptist Church of Madison, with Harris as its first pastor.

In September 1899, the congregation called the Rev. W.S. Smith, a graduate of Kittrell

College in North Carolina, as its pastor. One of his first acts was to have the church incorporated on Nov. 18, 1900.

As its membership grew, the congregation realized it needed a larger house of worship. The lot on Cook Avenue on which the church now stands was purchased from Warren B. Burnet for the sum of \$400.

1901 Groundbreaking

On the first Sunday in June 1901, the Rev. George Morris, pastor of the Calvary Baptist Church, conducted a groundbreaking service. George M. Burroughs, one of the founders, lifted the first shovel of dirt for the church foundation.

The church was built at a cost of about \$3,500. On Sunday, Feb. 16, 1902, Rev. Smith and the congregation marched from the hall on Central Avenue to their new edifice on Cook Avenue.

In 1915, the baptismal pool was rebuilt, and the basement was completed and equipped for a Sunday school auditorium. The church's pipe organ was installed in 1916. In 1921 and 1922 the adjacent parsonage was

built at a cost of \$7,000.

This Sunday, another Rev. Smith will lead the congregation on another historic march, to its renovated sanctuary.

The Rev. Charles H. Smith was installed as pastor in 2002, succeeding the late Rev. J.W. Brewster, the First Baptist Church's longtime pastor, who died in 2000. Smith, a guest preacher at the church during the interim, came to the Madison congregation after 20 years as a pastor in West Virginia, a three-year stint as deputy executive director for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) at its New York offices, a taste of politics in 1984 as an official with the campaign of Ohio Sen. John Glenn for the Democratic presidential nomination, and seven years writing the 450-page "Jubilee Legacy Bible" with colleague Cain Hope Felder of the Howard University School of Religion, viewing the Biblical text through the African-American experience and including a series of 11 guides for teachers and students on subjects ranging from sin to salvation.

"Carol's Garden" behind the First Baptist Church of Madison on Cook Avenue is many things - a memorial tribute, a place for quiet contemplation, and at other times a venue for food and jazz. Among those who take care of the garden and its Chef's Smokehouse, from left, are Willie Sallie, Deacon Eddie Sallie, Deaconess Jackie Love, Doris Sallie, Deacon Robert James, the Rev. Charles H. Smith, pastor, and Madison Borough Councilman Sam Cerciello, a who rebuilt the garden's fountain.

Garden serves as oasis of calm, and as venue for jazz and food

By **LOUISE EASTON**
PUBLISHER EMERITA

MADISON - Blossoms of love and service are flourishing in the First Baptist Church of Madison's garden, a public oasis of greenery, flowering bushes, water fountains and birdfeeders behind the 36 Cook Ave. church.

For most people - and during most of its open hours - the garden is a refuge for the weary or home to those seeking solitude and a place to meditate.

At other times, it is a public social gathering area. A summer evening of jazz and food is its new offering on Friday and Saturday evenings.

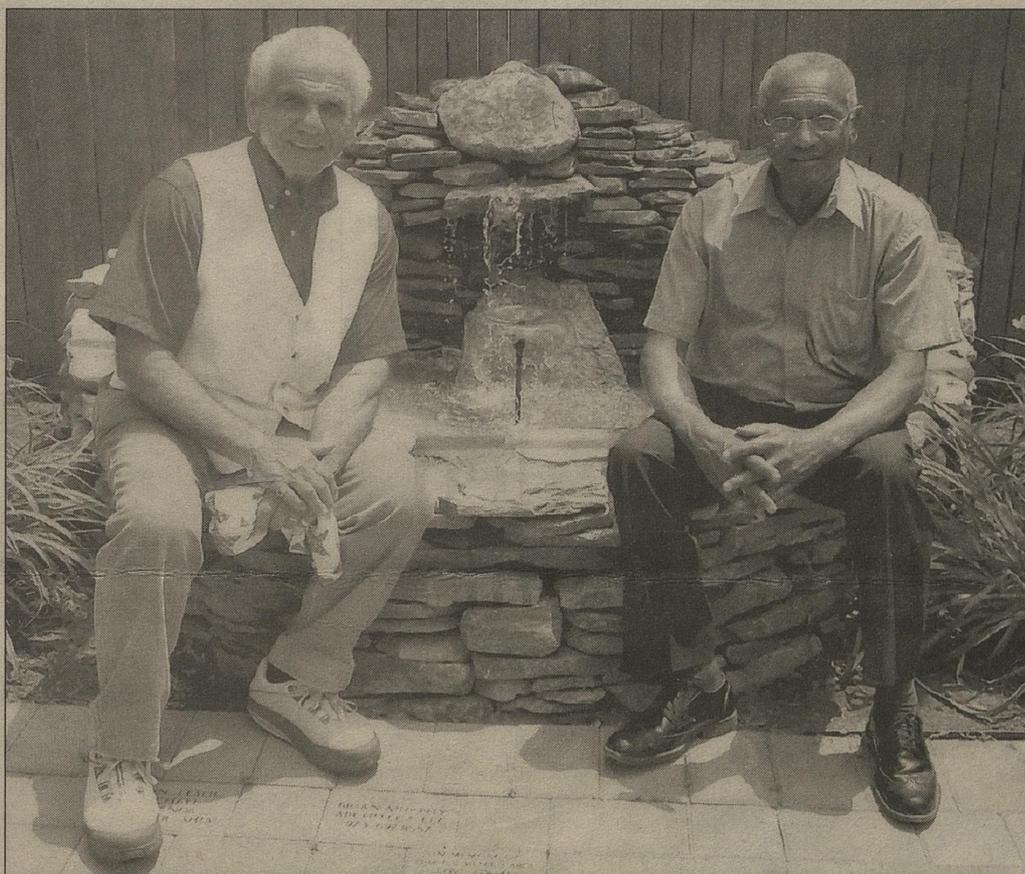
Honoring Two Women

To the Rev. Charles H. Smith, pastor, the design of the great lawn's garden intentionally connects the congregation's community worship with its mission of service within two distinct gardens.

"Carol's Garden" honors Carol J. Sallie Baxter, a Madison native whose years of service to the church and community are gathered in memories among the 50 plantings, annuals and trees, or flow quietly in the waters of "The Fountain of Living Water."

The public garden, dedicated in 2008, was made possible through private and corporate donations. Incorporated in the garden are memorial pavers that afford friends and donors the opportunity to commemorate their special connection to Carol Baxter's life.

Church Deaconess Jo James is honored in a garden dedicated to the love and respect she exhibited during her years of service to the church and her



Madison Borough Councilman Sam Cerciello, left, and the Rev. Charles H. Smith, pastor, enjoy the calming effect of the recently reconstructed "Fountain of Living Water" in the garden behind the First Baptist Church of Madison.

own ministry of caring. The garden's title, "Circle of Love," refers to the special connection Rev. Smith sees in the people to whom he has ministered over the past 10 years.

The gardens were designed by an architect but created and built by parishioners and friends.

"It has given people the opportunity to use their talents to bring into being this beautiful

creation for others to see and share," noted the pastor.

The church members' talents abound in every phase of the garden construction, maintenance and fund-raising. The Chef's Smokehouse, an outdoor garden and take-out restaurant open from noon to 6 p.m. on summer weekends, features specially prepared ribs, pulled pork, chicken and fish, prepared by the church's talented volun-

teer chefs. Six members also run the catering service, which carries a full menu. Proceeds of their events underwrite the garden's upkeep, as will the Smokehouse's new venue on Friday and Saturday evenings at 7 p.m. for jazz music and finger foods.

The chefs invite the public to drop by, spend a relaxing evening with them, and get to see their garden under the lights.

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH OF MADISON

