

**HISTORICAL HIGHLIGHTS PRESENTED ON THE OCCASION OF THE 146<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF Marsden First United Methodist Church, SUNDAY, OCTOBER 14, 2007, BY MR. STEVE SMITH**

Good Afternoon,

Members of Parliament, Pastor Whalen and Mrs. Whalen, visiting clergy, Rev. Dr. Larry Lowe, the Marsden Church Family, visitors and friends.

It is my duty to stand before you with a mandate to “recap” in so many minutes the history and highlights of the Marsden Church congregation. Let me begin with a quotation by

David C. McCullough which states “*History is a guide to navigation in perilous times. History is who we are and why we are the way we are.*”

Well, here we are in 2007, celebrating 146 years. That’s 14.6 decades and I can assure you that I will try to take less than 14 minutes and thirty- six seconds to deliver a precise encapsulation of Marsden’s Church history. Start timing me now, please!

Indeed we here at Marsden have endured some “perilous and trying” times, where we emerged tattered, but not torn and as the words to the popular gospel song by Yolanda Adams read “shattered, but ...not broken” and there are those who might even say we are scattered, but with faith in God, we can still RISE even further.

Marsden First United Methodist Church has a very rich heritage, with humble yet controversial beginnings in the Tucker’s Town Community.

Missionaries of course had a lot to do with the development of this church. Rev. George Whitefield, a Methodist preacher who was a mover and shaker came and stayed for two months

in 1748 and caused a religious awakening throughout the island.

About four decades later, in 1799 Rev. John Stephenson arrived.

He too went against the “status quo” and was fined and imprisoned for preaching the Word of the Lord.

Well, skipping ahead almost a decade, in 1808, we have the arrival of Rev. Joshua Marsden, the man of course whose name the Church bears, in memoriam. What was his significance? He worked with freed blacks, working from the parish of St. George up to Hamilton Parish and he was very well-received by residents. Rev. Marsden also started a Sunday School, educating many blacks in reading the Word of God.

Almost some two decades later in 1830, Rev. John Crofts arrived and worked tirelessly to improve the lot and conditions of several people of colour in that community. In 1835, one year after the abolition of slavery, the Tucker’s Town Methodist

Society was formed. A building called the “School House” was eventually used to worship and praise God after people gathered in “home churches”.

Times were not the best for people of colour. Despite this, they took some three decades to build an aedifice for worshipping and in 1861, a cornerstone was laid in a small stone chapel in Tucker’s Town and as a result of that foundation, Marsden was able to add thirty years to its church timeline. That was the groundwork that was laid for our Genesis.

In 1860, the Rev. William Ryan arrived. He organized the people and established a building fund. How did the congregation assist? The men fished and the women had old-fashioned tea meetings to support the church with financial donations. One year later in 1861, the cornerstone for the Wesleyan Methodist Church of Tucker’s Town, was laid by a Mr. Henry Hallett and a small and comfortable stone chapel was erected and dedicated. The church circuit grew with the addition of the Bailey’s Bay Methodist Circuit including Central Church and Centenary Church at Collector’s Hill. Many of our ancestors were lay leaders in the Tucker’s Town Methodist Chapel.

Things must have gone quite well up until then, but in the second decade of the 1900’s outside events began to impact the church.

After World War I ended, the Government of the day sought to develop the tourist industry, setting aside 600 acres in Tucker’s Town to establish luxury hotels and private homes for millionaires and golf courses. What a déjà vu experience for the Tuckers Town of today!

In 1923, Tucker’s Town residents were “ forced”, under the Expropriation Act, to sell their homes and relocate. This was an unfortunate Exodus, however they still continued to worship there. In May 1923, an agreement was made and signed between the Bermuda Development Co. and the Marsden Trustee Body No. 2 for this present site. The Bermuda Development Co. handed over £1950 cash for the purchase of the old church. Construction began immediately and with the troops rallying around and working consistently, on October 7 1923, this present sanctuary was built and completed with the laying of the cornerstone on the previously mentioned date.

Last Sunday was actually the 146<sup>th</sup> Church Anniversary of the congregation but the 84<sup>th</sup> year of worship in this sanctuary but I guess it’s better late than never to celebrate. The naming of this edifice after Rev. Joshua Marsden ensures that the precepts of his scriptural teachings and his dedication will NEVER be forgotten. The physical plant of this church has grown and continues to grow. In the 1940’s the Rolando Hall, used for our Sunday School and other activities, was annexed to the building. During the next decade, the choir and organ loft were enlarged to include the

Cassavant organ we have today. Subsequent to that, choir rooms and a “modern” kitchen were also constructed.

Back in Tucker’s Town, the old chapel, the School House and Community Store still stand today but are private residences. The old graveyard which was again briefly, in the news a few months ago, was rededicated in 1996 to the Marsden Congregation. The plaque there today, presented by the Bermuda Properties Ltd and dedicated by the Marsden Congregation in November 1996 reads:

*“In memory of the members of the Tucker’s Town Methodist Community who faithfully toiled in the service of the Lord and in the light of His love. 1861-1923. God is our refuge and strength – a very present help in trouble. (Psalm 46:1)*

Moving on from the 1920’s, I shall mention the following ministers and the most significant and predominant decades in which they pastored:

- Rev. Ernest Rowlands...the 1930’s
- Rev. S.W. Armstrong...1940’s
- Rev. J. W. A. Nicholson 1940’s
- Rev. Ralph Knock.... the 1950’s
- Rev. Ron Dempsey...the 1960’s
- Rev. Peter S. McDonald...the 1970’s
- Rev. Glen McLean.... the 1970’s
- Rev. Gordon T. Hyde.... the 1970’s
- Rev. Colin West...the 1980’s
- Rev. Norman Penrose...the 1990’s
- Rev. W. Norman McFarlane the 1990’s
- Rev. Dr. Peter Tink....the 1990’s
- Rev. Joseph F. Whalen the 2000’s

The 1990’s gave us one of our greatest challenges as we wrestled with turbulent issues with the United Church of Canada. Of course, you know that Marsden isn’t the only church who has suffered challenges, as dissension is by no means unknown in the history of churches.

Hence another Marsden Exodus period is again highlighted and to paraphrase a lyric line in one of Yolanda Adams’s songs we must realize that “The Battle is not ours...it’s the Lord’s”, although we can do our part by praying fervently without ceasing. We weathered that storm and are now on a much firmer foundation with our current pastor, the Rev. Joseph F. Whalen.

Pastor Whalen is also an integral part of our history as he is the first minister of African descent to pastor this congregation full-time, as we were finishing out the old millennium in 1999, and beginning the new one in 2000. His wife, Heather, who has a very positive and spiritual influence on members of this congregation, is constantly embraced with open arms.

Pastor Whalen continues his vibrant Sunday homilies with excellent delivery and even dramatic illustrations to get specific points across. Under his leadership we have welcomed a number of new members in the Church; increased excitement in teaching and sharing in the weekly Wednesday Bible Study and also Disciple Bible Study.

God is really moving in our midst here at Marsden as we endeavor to “make disciples of Jesus”. We have God to thank first and all members of the Congregation for their faithful service and duty in any and every aspect of Church life.

There were several highlights that punctuated our journey which resulted in our new affiliation with the United Methodist Church from September 1, 2001 through the General Board of Global Ministry (GBGM) and the Baltimore-Washington Conference.

Here is a brief synopsis of events which consolidated our association with the United Methodist Church:

- Visitation by Bishop Skeete and Dr. Nugent from the General Board of Global Ministries in July 2000 to field questions re Marsden’s pending affiliation with the United Methodist Church
- Delegations from Marsden and Centenary going to the Annual Baltimore-Washington Conference in June 2001.
- Visit by Bishop Felton Edwin May and Mrs. May in June 2001 to field further questions regarding the UMC affiliation and a follow-up visit by Dr Nugent and Rev. Michael Rivas of the GBGM
- Dedication and consecration of the newly acquired “Talbot School” on Thursday June 14, 2001

We continue each year also with the traditional programmes on our church calendar such as our Family and Friends’ Service, our special Christmas and Easter services, and our Women’s and Men’s Day Services with their special Guest Speakers and invited guests.

There are also quite a few initiatives that have been accomplished although some are still a “work in progress” which have evolved from our Strategic Planning Session at CedarBridge Academy with Christian Washington, a dynamic Christian consultant (no pun intended) well-versed in strategies for Church development and growth. The whole congregation was involved in developing plans to move the church from strength to

strength. Committees were formed and strategies for overall church improvement were developed with some being already implemented. Mr. Washington returned in July 2007 to get an update on the work in progress. We have to be accountable for what we do to build God's kingdom to the honour and glory of our Father above. Out of this, the much under-used Talbot School building will be embarking on a new and exciting project.

Marsden is moving forward by the grace of God endeavoring to fulfill our vision as we carry out our mission: One major milestone and celebration in our history was the consecration on 15<sup>th</sup> July 2007 of our first-rate parsonage commonly known as "Aunt Minnie's House" by Bishop John R. Schol. And I shall read a modified version of the tribute that was read in recognition of that occasion:

**"A wonderful quiet, God-fearing family oriented lady decided to bequeath her house to Marsden Church. Aunt Minnie worked tirelessly in the church as a dependable and profound bass singer in the Women's Day Choir; she also taught the adult class in Sunday School and successfully organized and hosted the Valentine's Supper."**

The then UCW was successful in particular because of her dedication and labour. So naturally when Aunt Minnie upon her death in 1993, bequeathed the home given to her by her sister Essie Smith to the Church. In 2003 the church became the sole beneficiary and it was decided that it would become the home of our Pastor after extensive renovations. Aunt Minnie's wish has now been fulfilled and she has left a legacy.

As we look back on Marsden's Genesis and Exodus in the vineyard of the Lord, we honor our origin and give thanks to Almighty God for our rich heritage. It is as though those great founding fathers of the past have emerged reminding us to "keep the faith" and move upward and onward to the Promised Land. With Christ as our guide, we will continue to achieve the goals and dreams envisioned by that great Methodist missionary whose name the church bears—the Rev. Joshua Marsden.