

# FOUNDATIONS

CONSTRUCTING YOUR FACILITY



## Zion Baptist Church

Portsmouth, Virginia

By Jennifer Walker-Journey

**Working with a blank slate for the design of a new church campus is a dream for most architects. But Barnes Design Group's Jimmy Clemmer found his most rewarding project to be a renovation and addition to an existing historic church in Portsmouth, Virginia.**

"It stands out as my most rewarding project in 30 years," Clemmer recalls. "It was a historical building, we had to follow specific guidelines for the tax credit program, and all the people involved in this project had to work together. Plus, all the details from the floors not lining up to making the building wheelchair accessible – those are the things that make it my most rewarding project."

The story of Zion Baptist Church's new building and Barnes Design Group's involvement in renovating the facility begins nearly a decade ago, when another congregation, Park View Baptist, contacted them about developing a master plan for their campus. The

project consisted of a 1925-era sanctuary building and an adjacent 1952-era classroom building. The connector between the two buildings led to multiple stairs providing difficult access to the multiple floor levels.

Park View Baptist had enjoyed a century of success but membership had started to wane. In its height, the congregation swelled as high as 400 people, but, in recent years, membership had dwindled to about 50-60 people. The old buildings were also in dire need of updating. Both the sanctuary and the classroom building were three-story structures, yet there was no elevator for the aging membership to easily circulate through the buildings.

If the church was going to service its congregation and try to impress new members, it needed a master plan – someone to put all their needs into action. Their leadership hired Barnes Design Group, who discovered the solution would take a lot more



thought than first anticipated.

Connecting the two buildings would create a challenge, especially since the floors of the sanctuary building were about a half-story lower than the floors of the classroom building. Barnes Design Group designed an elevator and stair tower that accessed all six floors – the three sanctuary floors and the three classroom building floors.

However, Park View Baptist Church would never put the plan into action. "The writing was on the wall. They knew they couldn't afford to stay there," Clemmer says. The Park View Baptist Church leadership decided it was time to end its 112-year history and give another church the opportunity to make a home there.

At that time, members of Zion Baptist Church, one of the oldest African-American congregations in Portsmouth, had been homeless nearly four years after a fire had completely destroyed the church's sanctuary and community center. Church leadership was considering many deals, including one with the Portsmouth Redevelopment and



Housing Authority, in which the authority would take Zion's vacant site for redevelopment, requiring the church to relocate.

"We had a Baptist church membership in an old, historic building in downtown Portsmouth that was struggling to make ends meet and another Baptist church whose building had been destroyed by fire," Clemmer says. "It was a great fit for both churches when Park View Baptist decided to sell their building to Zion Baptist."

When Zion Baptist moved into the old Park View building, their leadership knew improvements were sorely needed. Zion Baptist reached out to Barnes Design Group Architects. Barnes Design Group pulled out the old plans they had designed for the building when it was owned by Park View and the Zion Baptist leadership signed off on them with only minor changes.

The plans included adding the elevator and stair tower, updating the bathrooms, gutting the classroom building and adding a stairwell to bring it up to fire code, and adding a welcome center/narthex that would access the elevator and stair tower as well as provide a central entry for the entire church. The renovation also included new windows in the classroom wing, as well as new electrical and new heating and cooling systems.

The brick veneer and cast stone façade of the sanctuary also needed pressure washing and painting. The Lexan storm windows that were placed over the stained glass windows in the 1970s – which had yellowed over the years – needed to be removed and replaced with new glass, which would considerably brightened up the building.

It was important to both the church and to Barnes Design Group to preserve the building's historic identity during the construction and renovation. In doing so, the church would qualify for thousands of dollars in tax credits. Thus, every aspect of the design and construction had to follow strict guidelines. Paige Pollard with Commonwealth Preservation Group was pivotal in assisting both the church in its application process and Barnes Design Group in the design details to ensure the project followed the guidelines required to obtain the tax credits.

Construction began in October 2013, nearly 18 months after they moved into the building, and was completed at the end of July 2014. The finished product has made Zion Baptist Church eternally grateful.

"Most of the membership was really surprised when the building was completed. We had seen the renderings, but the building turned out much more beautiful and exciting than anyone had really anticipated," re-

calls Debra Jones, chairman of Zion's Trustee Ministry.

Today, the former Park View Church building is revitalized as Zion Baptist Church. It brims with energy from growing worship services to special events like its women's conference. None of it would have been possible without teamwork of Barnes Design Group, Zion Baptist Church and Commonwealth Preservation Group.

"We had a great team of people who worked very hard and were committed for a long time," Jones says. "It was just a great experience all around." RPN

Barnes Design Group has provided architectural services for churches, hotels, residences, commercial projects, industrial expansions, restaurants, and government work for more than 30 years. However, the distinct and unique expertise in religious and church architecture grew over time both in the number of commissions awarded and in the passion that Barnes Design Group and its staff has for church architecture, [www.BarnesDesignGroup.com](http://www.BarnesDesignGroup.com).



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