

Alumni Spotlight: Sandra James (DMin '20)



Current title: Acting Pastor at First Mount Zion Baptist Church

Family: Husband: Rev. Ralph Ellis James, Children: Derrick V. James, Johnathan Ellis, and Olivia Justine James

Favorite professors: Ken Swetland, Mary Haven, and Dave Currie

Favorite class: Any class taught by Ken Swetland. I always appreciated his integrity and insight even on topics that may have been difficult or uncomfortable. Through the aid of the Holy Spirit, his teaching stretched me.

Favorite memory: The notes of encouragement on my reflection papers from the instructors. The postcard from Dave Currie saying, “I prayed for you today.” They were always timely and received just when I needed to know I was covered in prayer. Although campus was days of travel away from my home, and filled with academics, research, and study, I always felt like my soul was being cared for, refreshed, and nurtured. Finally, another favorite memory is being interviewed by the local news—with a unanimous push from my cohort group—as a DMin student at Gordon-Conwell when the Rev. Billy Graham died.

Would you tell us about the church you are currently serving?

Our church is a congregation of well over 4,300 members. We have over 77 ministries that serve in a multi-million dollar, 108,000 square-foot sanctuary and multi-purpose facility just south of our nation’s capital. We have members from across the tri-state area: Washington D.C., Maryland, and Virginia—better known as the DMV. We are a large multi-generational church where everyone is welcomed. Our vision is “Sharing the Light: From the Promise, to Pentecost, to Points Around the World.” Our mission is to connect people who have a desire to become fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ. We live this out through a four-step strategy: Worship, Study of the Word, Stewardship, and Service. Our 2024 church theme is “*Generation to Generation - Growing Deeper, Growing Stronger, Reaching Higher*,” with Scripture reference to Deuteronomy 32:7: “Remember the days of old, Consider the years of many generations. Ask your father and he will show you; Your elders, and they will tell you” (NKJV).

First Mount Zion is a church with a heart for service. We believe in being servants who minister beyond walls both at home and abroad. During the pandemic, and through all

that was and is still happening, we were able to pay off our mortgage in 2022, three years earlier than expected, as a result of God's blessings and the faithful stewardship of our church family. Over its 157 years since being founded, First Mount Zion has grown both numerically and spiritually in size and influence, becoming a cornerstone of the community. The church serves not only as a place of worship but also as a center for social justice and community outreach. Our members are actively involved in advocating for civil rights and addressing the pressing issues of the times.



How has God woven together your Gordon-Conwell education with other life events to bring you to where you are now?

Gordon-Conwell, in the words of Dean Dave Currie, taught me that this was more than an academic journey. I was being prepared to be a “doctor” of the church. I was mindful to always remember to be a “Passionate, Reflective Practitioner” of the church.



How did you come to be doing your current work in ministry?

I became a member of First Mount Zion Baptist Church in 1996 when my family moved to the area as a result of a military assignment at the Pentagon. My family was in search of a church home and the Holy Spirit led us to FMZBC. My family is very active in ministry and in 2003, I was asked to consider retirement from the Army after 24 years in order to come on staff full-time as the Assistant Pastor. In 2023, the former senior pastor retired and I am currently the “Acting Senior Pastor”

with prayerful expectation of becoming the next and first woman pastor.

What do you love about the ministry work you are doing now?

What I have always loved about the church...the people.

What are the particular challenges of serving in a large church in general, and in your specific context?

Taking care of the people, getting people to actively participate in ministry, and use their spiritual gifts and talents to be a blessing to the church and give glory to God

What has been Gordon-Conwell's biggest impact/influence on your ministry or the way you engage in ministry?

The experience of diversity in people and religious thought in seminary. You realize that there is more that unites us than that which separates us, if we are willing to hear from others.

What piece of advice would you give to young alumni who are beginning in ministry?

Be prayerful and patient. Love God and love the people and remember a call to ministry is a lifelong call to preparation.