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NEW MT. JOY HONORS ITS PASTOR FOR 42 YEARS SERVICE ELDER WILLIAM P. WIGGINS SR. WILL RECEIVE AN HONORARY DOCTORATE OF DIVINITY DEGREE.

The congregation of Suffolk's New Mt. Joy Church of God in Christ will gather to pay tribute to their beloved pastor, Elder William P. Wiggins Sr. at 6 p.m. April 19.

During this special ceremony, Wiggins will receive an Honorary Doctorate of Divinity Degree from Trinity Hall College and Seminary.

Bishop Cornelius Range of Detroit, Mich., will be on hand to confer the degree and share his insights into Wiggins' life and ministry. State and city officials will participate in the ceremony and New Mt. Joy's choirs and worship ensemble will perform.

``It's going to be a great service," Wiggins said. ``Our people are really excited about this, but I don't take a lot of credit. . . It's all part of the Lord's plan, and if you use the gifts the Lord has given you, then He'll make room for you."

Today at 68, an age when most people are slowing down and seeking some well-earned R 'n R, Wiggins is gearing up to continue to lead at New Mt. Joy.

Reflecting on his 42 years as a pastor, Wiggins noted that 30 of those years overlapped his work as an employee of Planters Peanuts of Suffolk. For half of those years, he led a daily noon Bible study open to all employees of the company.

During this time - on nights and weekends - Wiggins served as pastor and teacher at New Mt. Joy.

And through the years, Wiggins' wife Lula, their four children and their spouses and all the grandkids have worked alongside Wiggins to build up this ministry.

Today New Mt. Joy's 600-member congregation is a testimony to Wiggins' religious zeal and faithful leadership.

“New Mt. Joy grew out of a Bible study with about eight people that met in a lady's living room on County Street,” Wiggins said. “They asked me to come over (from Whaleyville) and help them, and I became their pastor.”

As the numbers increased, this band of believers moved from a home to a store front to their first sanctuary. Today, the church has expanded to four buildings covering the 300 block of County Street including the recently completed W.P. Wiggins Educational Building.

And plans are being drawn to enlarge the existing sanctuary and add additional educational space and an office complex to offer church members an opportunity to establish their own private businesses utilizing church facilities.

According to Wiggins, the present congregation at New Mt. Joy is warm and welcoming. The people excel in hospitality and practical service. “Our people are very interested in the work of the Lord,” he said. “We have a good core of workers who are always willing to work.”

And without a doubt, the programs at New Mt. Joy offer abundant opportunities for work and involvement. There are three worship services every Sunday - at 8 a.m., 11 a.m. and 7:30 p.m. There's a 9:30 a.m. Sunday School for all ages, and frequently the congregation travels to other local COGIC churches for Sunday afternoon gatherings.

On Tuesdays at New Mt. Joy, there's a 7:30 p.m. Bible study with an emphasis on missions. Wednesday evenings feature a program for young people, and on Fridays there's a Family Night meeting. “We're teaching families how to live together,” Wiggins explained. “So many people today just want to do what they want to do, and many families are breaking up.”

Wiggins noted that New Mt. Joy creates new ministries to meet the changing needs of the community. A food and clothing program and a support group for those affected by drug and alcohol abuse are two new programs recently added to the church's busy schedule.

Over the years Wiggins has invested much time and energy into his local church, but he's also shared his expertise in a broader context through his 28 years as district superintendent for the Suffolk District of COGIC. Also, since February 1995, Wiggins has served as administrative assistant to the Virginia state bishop of COGIC supervising five districts including about 125 elders and pastors. "I meet with the district superintendents to give counseling, advice and training," Wiggins explained.

One of many local leaders personally affected by Wiggins' role is Elder Felton Whitfield, former president of Suffolk's Ministerial Association. "He's had a great influence on my life showing me by precept and example how to live a fruitful and spiritual life," Whitfield said. "He and his wife have always supported one another and worked together in ministry and that has set a great example for others in the church," he continued.

While busy in ministry all his life, Wiggins has had little time for formal theological training. "My training has been through my years of experience," Wiggins admitted. "I've had a lot of on-the-job teaching."

But Wiggins encourages the young people of his congregation, "Stay in school and get all the learning you possibly can. . . Obey your parents, set some goals and work hard to reach those goals. And, above all, trust in the Lord and he will build you up and give you strength to do what He wants you to do."