

'Healing station' targets needs of community

New Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church

8350 Rockbridge Road

Lithonia

770-484-3350

www.newbethelame.com

Services: 7:45 and 11 a.m., Sunday; 7 p.m. Monday; 10:30 a.m., 7 p.m. Wednesday (Bible study)

Members: 1,850

Senior pastor: The Rev. Mark Thompson

Mission

The Rev. Mark Thompson likens New Bethel to a "healing station" where God's love flows freely. "I'm increasingly finding that people are suffering in great degrees from a lot of things," he said. "My mission — and I've known this since I was 7 years old — is to encourage [people's] hearts so that they know God is for them and that there is healing in his presence ... and healing even in abiding in his divine purpose."

History

New Bethel AME emerged in 1891 in the so-called Promised Land community amid a backdrop of plantations and cotton fields. The DeKalb County congregation first began meeting in a little house perched alongside the Yellow River, where early members were baptized. "When the river would rise, the story is told, the water would come right on into the church and the congregants would arrive early, because they knew they would have to sweep the water out," Thompson said. Records show members from the Anderson, Everson and

Livsey families were some of the earliest and most faithful parishioners who helped establish the church. Thompson recalls that in the late 1950s, Georgia's Department of Transportation relocated the church to a nearby hilltop to accommodate construction of Ga. 124. "The church went literally from the mouth of the river to the top of the hill," he said. New Bethel moved into its new sanctuary in 1958, with the Rev. C.H. Adams as its pastor.

Thompson became New Bethel's ministerial leader in 1994, when membership represented less than 10 percent of today's active members. Four years later, New Bethel built its current sanctuary. The old church still sits atop the hill and serves as the New Bethel Senior Center.

Pastor's path

Thompson grew up in a "well-to-do" family in Akron, Ohio, where his mother was a homemaker and his dad an attorney. His early interests were music — jazz, in particular. "I played jazz to get through college, just to pay tuition," the saxophonist said.

After graduating from Akron University, he set his sights on corporate America, although he had majored in broadcasting. "I could never get a job in radio/TV," he lamented.

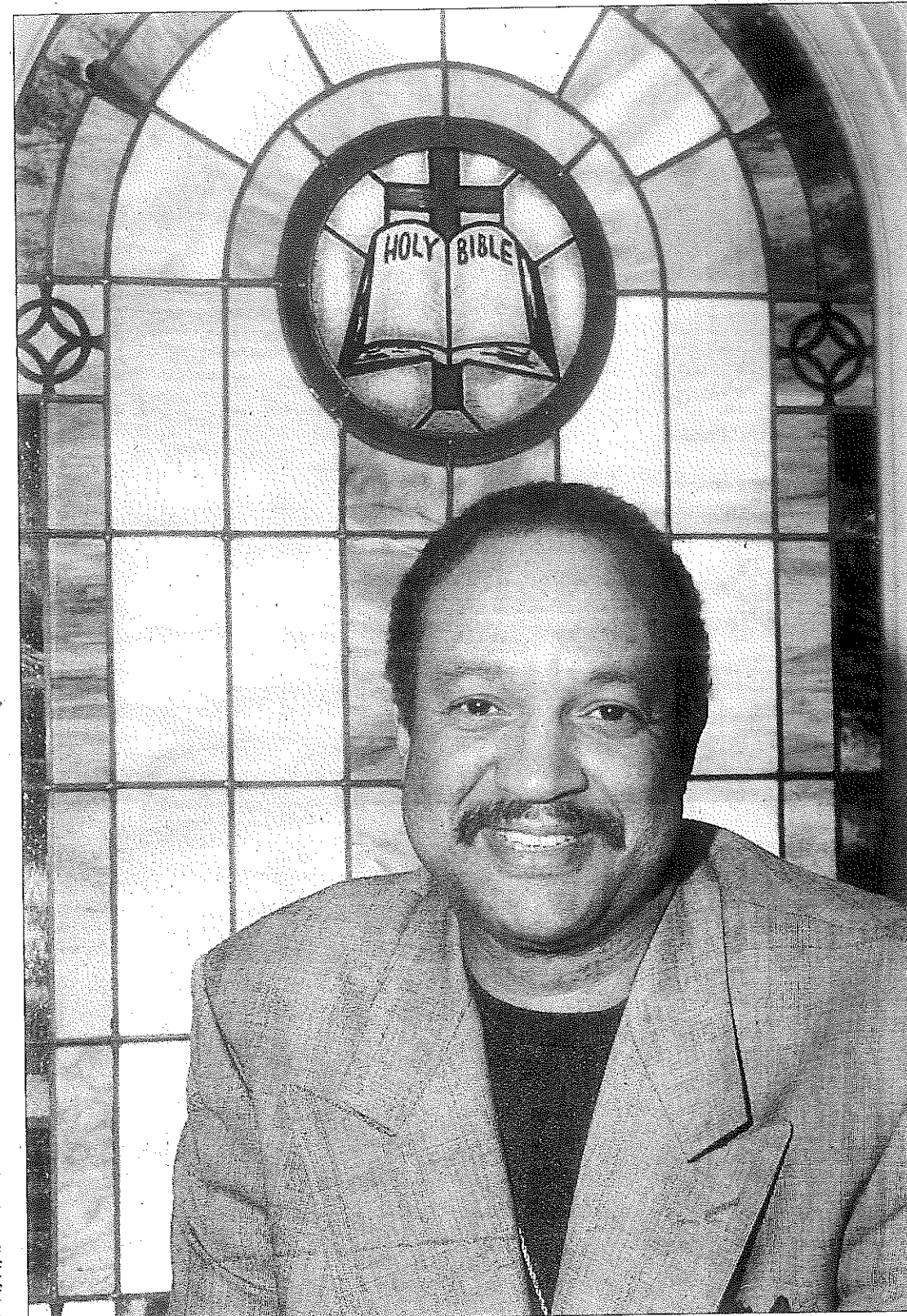
Thompson had his longest run at Xerox Corp., where he worked in sales over a span of 15 years. The 49-year-old says it was about four years after leaving Xerox that he answered his call to the ministry. "Since 1987, people have always come to me and sought guidance and help," Thompson said. But that was a role he shrugged off initially. Today, he embraces his counseling abilities. "Bethel [means] the house of God ... and it is in that place that God uses this strange old dude to say a word to encourage

mall sparked a fairly new program at New Bethel AME. Thompson recalls a group of youths hanging out in the shopping center's parking lot and being questioned by police for loitering. Today, New Bethel's "Youth Hang In" gives them an alternative. "What we were responding to [was] the need for youth to hang out," Thompson said. The ministry provides children and teens the opportunity to congregate in a supervised Christian atmosphere and play computer games, music and pingpong. There are also discussion groups and dancing during the Friday night gatherings.

On the third Saturday of each month, New Bethel holds a Youth Summit, in which students from a Stone Mountain public housing complex are invited to the church for an evening of high-spirited worship and fellowship. Children run the entire service, which includes religious step dancing, poetry readings and the traditional call to salvation. "We have approximately 600 youth in our church," Thompson said. "So, far be it from us to not reach out to those persons who God has sent."

The minister also talks about New Bethel's threefold prison ministry that targets inmates and their families. One component ministers directly to people in maximum security prisons and the Fulton County Detention Center. Another addresses the concerns of parents who are dealing with children in jail or detention. And the third arm pairs parishioners with kids whose parents are incarcerated. "Statistics say, if you can get to the kids of children who have parents in jail, 60 [percent] to 70 percent of those kids won't go to jail themselves," Thompson said.

Additional ministries include a free after-school tutorial program, which is



PHIL SKINNER / Staff

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Thompson received a master of divinity degree from Atlanta's Interdenominational Theological Center and is a doctoral degree candidate at United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio. His doctoral focus is on suburbanites and spirituality. Thompson is married to Stephanie. They have two children and two grandchildren.

Ministries

An incident at a nearby

during the Friday night gatherings.

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Additional ministries include a free after-school tutorial program, which is available to the community. The Senior Center, open Monday, Wednesday and Friday, is also open to the public. Exercise, arts and crafts, games and excursions are among the activities offered.

Thoughts from the pastor

"We promise only to love you," Thompson said. "We promise only to grow together in Christ."

— Kysa Daniels,
For the Journal-Constitution

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