



The Rev. Robert N. Probasco Sr. leads Portland's oldest African-American congregation as senior pastor of First A.M.E. Zion Church. Also known as 'First Church,' the congregation at North Vancouver Avenue and Skidmore Street will celebrate its 150th anniversary this coming April 12-15.

# Living History

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as common as weddings. However, a strong sense of community and passion still reign for members of the church.

"The dynamics of the community have changed," said Sails, a church steward who grew up at First Church after his family joined the congregation in 1976 when he was 10 years old. "But the problems and issues have not, that's why the church must survive."

Church leaders said First A.M.E. Zion has never veered from its original mission of providing an open door to the sick and suffering, the disenfranchised, the sidelined, the homeless, and the "whosoever's".

The 150th anniversary theme, Occupy till I Come: Luke 13, will mark a celebration to take place over three days, and underline the ministry's mission, and its relevancy to the ideals of economic justice and fairness, issues that have grown more pronounced since last fall with the Occupy Wall Street protests that started in New York City.

"The church needs to take back its rightful place in the community," said Sails.

Leading the church through the ever-changing times of the 21st century, however, is easier said than done, he said.

The church ministry struggles to breach a generational gap which keeps youth from becoming more involved.

Though not quite at the hip-hop level, Pastor Probasco attempts to translate messages from the bible in today's language or from "formal to street talk," as he said, "to keep the fire lit in the eyes of the younger ones."

He doesn't just try to preach a

good sermon, but a sermon that will do some good.

"We must make sure we are relevant to the times," he said.

Text messaging in the pews is even allowed.

"Kids are multi-tasking and evangelizing," he said, holding up a cell phone with an animation of a purple cat preaching 'You better wake up this morning and praise God.' "It gets the message through, though some might be insulted."

Father's Community Network, 100 Good Men, and Connected. Church ministers will walk in the parks to engage with youth.

"We want to stay visible, accountable, and accessible," said Sails.

First Church has managed to keep the spirit alive. Prayer, music, family, and friends are the glue that has held the congregation together over the many decades.

Althea Sails, church administra-



PHOTO BY CARI HACHMANN/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER  
Breanna Probasco-Canda sings out in praise during a recent performance with the First A.M.E. Zion Church choir.

Probasco said addressing the needs of young people is a priority.

"We want to find them where they're at, not sit behind the battlements of the building and throw soap and washcloths at them and say, clean yourself up."

In response to the heartache of young lives lost through gang affiliation, the church has created several outreach programs: The

tor and wife of Maury Sails, says remembering the church accomplishments are just as important.

"The church's survival says a lot about families sticking together, expanding, and growing over time," she said. She remembers First A.M.E.'s history by its connection to people. Her memories began after she married her husband and raised her children in First Church, until

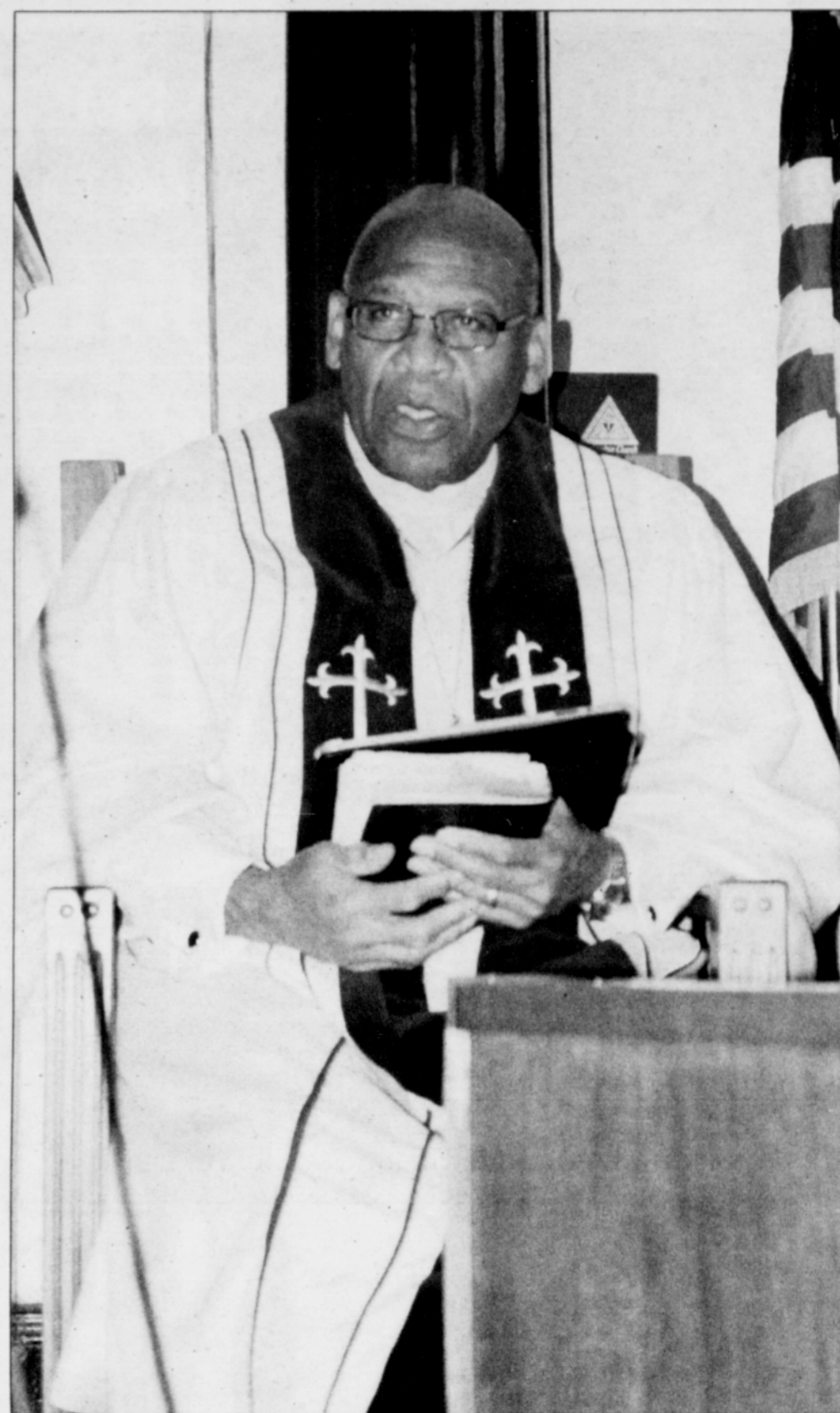


PHOTO BY CARI HACHMANN/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER  
The Rev. Robert K. Kemp during a recent Sunday service at First A.M.E. Zion Church. Kemp is also the presiding elder of the Cascade District of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church.

she later became more involved.

She recalls a snowstorm, where people who had no heat huddled together for warmth inside the church, the countless breakfast mornings hosted for families and members, and the giant dinner celebration that had everyone's eyes fixed on the TV, watching the election of Barack Obama as the first black president.

Phillis Whitmore, the church's minister of music and pianist, remembers the day she marched along side others to their current church location.

The act of marching was quite familiar for blacks during the tumultuous 1960's civil rights era. Whitmore was 19 and had just joined the choir, for whom her parents had sung since the 1940s. Intrigued by the spiritual rhapsodies of church music, she later learned to play piano from the former church pianist, Mrs. Turner. She has hardly missed a Sunday service ever since.

Decorating the walls of First A.M.E. Zion's Sunday School, alongside old and recent photos of the choir, are black and white portraits of important figures in African-American history, like Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglas, and Harriet Tubman all of whom were members of the national A.M.E.

Zion Church.

Laverne Toliver, who joined First Church in 1968, remembers many of her friends, former members and ministers who have passed on or are sick, and shut in.

"The first day I came here, Rev. Nellie Thompson made me feel at home," she said.

Prayer requests are sent out to those who cannot make it to services, including retired Presiding Elder Emeritus Rev. L.J. Thompson, Rev. Nellie and Odell Thompson, Rev. Z. James Purifoy and many other sisters and brothers.

First A.M.E. Zion was the first church to have a float in the Rose Festival, and today, they continue to parade in the community at Good in the Neighborhood. The church also hosts the Women's Home and Overseas Missionary Society, and the Restorative Listening Project, where community members hear one another about healing and reconciling issues of gentrification.

Having survived 150 years, church leaders say First A.M.E. Zion Church intends to occupy its place in the community of north and northeast Portland by following God's words well into the future.

In the end, the church mission is simple, as voiced by Senior Pastor Probasco, "Let's save the people."