



Calvary Baptist pastor offers a helping hand during 40 years of service

By Whitney Evans, Deseret News, March 19, 2014

SALT LAKE CITY — If you close your hand, nothing will come in and nothing will go out.

Pastor France A. Davis, 67, keeps his hand open, says his wife, Willene Davis. He offers it to those he leads as pastor of the Calvary Baptist Church in Salt Lake City and to all those he has come in contact with in the community during his past 40 years of service.

"It's always been his goal to help people," Willene Davis said.

This week kicks off Pastor Davis' 40th year of service to the church. People from around the world are coming to celebrate the pastor and his wife with 40 days of events, recognizing the many events he has led.

Not satisfied with blessing his own flock only, he and his congregation have been involved with a ministry to feed the homeless (they fed 337 people during Sunday's early service), built low-income housing units for senior citizens, visited those who are in the hospital and will provide a presentation for preventing teen suicide and teen dating violence, among other services.

While describing Davis as a man who wears many hats, Karen Hale, communications director for Salt Lake City Mayor Ralph Becker, corrected herself:

"I guess, to him, it's a single hat."

His ministry revolves around three central principles that guide him: Everyone is valuable, education is important, and those with education should be a light to others.

Everyone has value

Sunday services find him embracing members of the congregation before and after worship. Normally soft-spoken, Pastor Davis' voice swells to a roar when preaching to the congregation.

This particular Sunday he has returned to the theme of forgiveness, recounting the story of Jesus teaching his followers about how often to forgive.

Pastor Davis playfully names specific members of the congregation while he pleads for each to remember their own humanity and learn to not dwell on the faults of others.

"And Jesus says, 'Tiffany, no, not three. Not seven, Brother McCowan. But I say unto you from a divine perspective, a divine perspective,'" Davis' said, voice rising, "'seventy times seven.'"

"Don't bother counting the number of times that Brother Clayton's messed up. Forgive him and move on. And the next time, forgive him, and there's endless 70 times seven. Four hundred and ninety times and you haven't started counting yet."

Forgiveness is critical for personal growth and to the ability to form and retain relationships, he said. This seems to be an art he has perfected, as his influence in the community transcends his own congregation.

"Everybody has worth and value," he later said. "Everybody has worth and value," he repeated. "Nobody is nobody. Everybody is somebody."

Education is important

Davis sees education as a vehicle that helps one progress.

"With education, we are able to make moves upwardly, mobile moves, in terms of our lives," Davis said.

He teaches this to members of his congregation one person at a time.

For instance, every now and then, he will send grocery money to Joei Robertson, or call her with words of encouragement. She is a member of his congregation who is studying at Colorado State. She knows she is not the only beneficiary of his kindness.

"Pastor Davis will help anyone whether he knows them or just met them. He is willing to help everyone," Robertson said.

Education was a priority for Davis from his early years when he returned to school in California after his service in the military.

He had met Martin Luther King Jr., heard his I Have a Dream and How Long? speeches, and participated in civil rights demonstrations, he told the [Deseret News](#) in 2002. The former A student then failed out of school at Tuskegee. He joined the Air Force to avoid being drafted. Once out of the military, he picked up with his education with the goal to join the ministry.

He earned five degrees between 1971 and 1978, including a bachelor's in rhetoric from the University of California, a bachelor's in religion from Westminster College and a master's in mass communication from the University of Utah. He later earned a second master's of ministry from Northwest Nazarene College in 1994, the [Deseret News](#) reported.

Davis expected to stay in Utah for only a year when the University of Utah brought him on to teach in 1972, he told the [Deseret News in 2011](#). Forty years later, he retires from the University of Utah at the end of this semester.

"When I came initially, there was almost an objection and a rejection of me being here in the community. I was the radical from Berkeley, if you will," Davis said.

Since his arrival, he has made connections throughout the community. He serves on the Utah State Board of Regents, has worked with the Board of Corrections, and the Salt Lake City government with the Convention and Visitors Bureau and the Career Services Council. He is also one of five vice presidents of the National Baptist Congress of Christian Education, chosen from 33,000 congregations.

He has also received **many awards**, including the Pioneer of Progress award in 2011; a notice from the Utah House of Representatives in honor of his service to the community, state and country in 2006; he served on the Salt Lake Community College Board of Trustees in 2007; received Westminster College's Distinguished Alumni Award in 2007; and was given the Regional State Director of the Year Award from the National Baptist Congress of Christian Education in 2011, according to his congregation's website.

"All of those have been opportunities that have allowed us to build relationships that then allows the congregation to grow, to blossom, to flower even more," he said.

Davis spends a portion of his weekly service informing congregants of various scholarships, including the Pastor France A Davis Scholarship. He also helps students find tutoring when necessary. Three private schools and two universities have named scholarships after Davis because of his work to help minority youth get education.

A light for others

"Once we achieve (education) on our own, then we need to do what we can to be a light in the community for others," Davis said.

Gabriel and Rem Dorado were praying for God to guide them to a church close to where they live in Salt Lake City when they met Pastor Davis and his predominantly black congregation. Gabriel, from Mexico, and Rem, from Cambodia, were impressed by the warm reception they received from those who had different backgrounds from themselves.

Pastor Davis helped them feel at home and put them to work.

"He opens his heart to anyone who wants to come in and worship God," Gabriel Dorado said.

Seven years ago, the Dorados joined the Calvary Baptist Church, largely because they admired how Pastor Davis treated those in his ministry. They now serve as a deacon and deaconess in the congregation.

"He's been a blessing to us because of the way he treats all people. He shows no favoritism to anybody," Gabriel Dorado said.

As the 40-day celebration approaches, Davis is looking back at what he has accomplished, where he is now and where he wants to go in the future.

In 1974 he was called to shepherd the congregation that has been a worship resource for African-Americans in Utah since 1892. He stepped into the role knowing that his predecessors stayed in office for about two years on average. Davis realized many in Utah were settling for segregation, something he worked to change.

Davis said he has seen a lot of progress in his 40 years as pastor and looks forward to even more positive change. He looks back to the time he spent with King and is excited about how far the nation has come since then.

"I'm reminded that we are more close to that beloved community that (King) talked about than we have ever been before," Davis said.

He later added, "We are also learning better how to get along within the community one with the other instead of having all these cliques and divisions."

Davis was instrumental in the passage of bills to rename 600 South in Salt Lake City as Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd. and to rename Human Rights Day as Martin Luther King Jr. Day.

"He was really active in that movement. It was an exciting day when that finally happened," Hale, who was a member of the Utah Senate when the measure to rename the holiday passed in the Legislature, said.

The Davises remained in Utah despite his international profile and requests for him to minister in places like Georgia, Sacramento, Calif., or Las Vegas, because he felt there was still work to be done.

His wife trusts the relationship he has with God and said she "has no reason not to." They both feel God called him to be pastor and he will keep ministering "until God says it's time," Willene Davis said.

The celebrations kick off Wednesday with a speech by Marilyn Sanders Mobley— featured in the Dr. France A. Davis Distinguished Scholar Lecture Series — 7 p.m. at the Calvary Baptist Church, 1090 S. State. The event is free and open to the public. On April 25, near the end of the 40 days, there will be a banquet in Pastor Davis' honor in the Tower at Rice Eccles Stadium. Tickets are \$60.