

Church celebrates black trailblazers



Minister Kelsey Lodge (left) and Rev. Page recognize the enduring relationship of Dorothy and Junior Kelly. The two, married for 61 years, have served the Durham community together. (Staff photo by Travis Butler)

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Antioch Baptist Church hosted its fifth annual African-American History Celebration on Feb. 28. The event served to educate the community about the accomplishments of African-Americans in Durham, according to Antioch pastor Rev. Michael D. Page.

"We have this event because we want to help our young children understand the importance of contributions from African-Americans in our community," Page said.

The celebration opened with a brief message from worship leader Joseph King Davis Jr. and then transitioned into a sermon and performances by Charlotte's Ebenezer Baptist Church Hymn Choir.

Other groups joined in the celebration. Antioch Anointed Praise Dance Ministry performed a poem reading and a dance. The Hillside High School Alumni Choir, many of whom attend Antioch, performed two historical African-American songs.

Toward the end of the event, Antioch honored five African-American members of the Durham community for their contributions in the area.

"We really wanted to honor history makers and trailblazers here in the Durham community," Page said.

The church honored Ervin Lee Hester Sr., the first African-American inducted into the North Carolina Association of Broadcasters Hall of Fame in 1996, for his work as a journalist over five decades.

The celebration honored former Judge Carolyn Lucille Denton Johnson for her distinguished political career in Durham. In 1983, Johnson became the first black woman elected to the Durham City Council. Three years later she became the second black woman elected to Durham's district court.

Rev. Page said Black History Month reminds him that people like Hester and Johnson are the reason African-Americans in Durham can be successful.

"It is very special to us here at Antioch," Page said. "They paved the way for us to have the opportunities that we have."

Antioch honored Junior and Dorothy Kelly for their community service

work, and congratulated them for their relationship of 61 years.

The event also recognized James H. Speed Jr., the former president and CEO of North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company, the oldest and largest African-American-owned insurance company in the nation.

African-American history is vital to Antioch and the Durham community. Antioch usher Edwin Smith said that Durham needs more positive celebrations,

particularly for African-Americans.

"This part of Durham, I think it needs more events like this, especially on black history," Smith said.

Val Hannah Murphy, a member of the Hillside High School Alumni Choir, said that celebrations like the one at Antioch will be instrumental in bringing the community closer.

"I was in this community as a child, and I knew how important church and family values were," she said. "Everything in the community was centered around the church, and things like this bring the community in the right direction."

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- Rev. Michael D. Page