

Senior Pastor



Dr. James LaVirt Netters, Sr. is the Senior Pastor of Mt. Vernon Baptist Church- Westwood, where he has served for over 56 years. He is the longest serving pastor of a single church in the City of Memphis.

A native of Aliceville, Alabama, he is the oldest of three sons of Phillip and Bessie Ball Netters. In an effort to provide a better life for their children, they relocated to

Memphis, TN in 1942. Dr. Netters graduated from Booker T. Washington High School in 1946. Two years later he married his high school sweetheart, Leona Jones, on Thanksgiving Day. Their union was blessed with three children, Edwinta, James Jr., and Chandra. They enjoyed fifty-seven years of beautiful marriage until her death in 2005.

Dr. Netters was ordained by Rev. L.O. Taylor at Olivet Baptist Church in 1955. The following October he was installed at Mt. Vernon Baptist Church. He extended his ministry beyond the church and began ministering to youth in the community. Soon they were involved in sports and wholesome activities. Most became members of the church and began witnessing to their peers, leading many to Christ.

In 1963, Dr. Netters received his Bachelor of Arts degree from Lemoyne-Owen College and began teaching in the Memphis City Schools. It was during that time that he became active in the civil rights movement, traveled to Washington D.C. and was on stage as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech.

The following year he and six others were the first arrested during the bus sit-in demonstrations. Their bold effort was successful at having buses in the city integrated weeks later. A few years later the church joined Dr. Netters in his successful campaign to be elected to the new Memphis City Council. Dr. Netters, Rev. J.O. Patterson and Mr. Fred Davis were elected as the first African American councilmen.

During his first year as councilman the sanitation strike began, bringing national labor and civil rights figures, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., to Memphis. Dr. Netters worked tirelessly in public and behind the scenes and was



instrumental in working out an agreement to end the strike. Unfortunately, Dr. King did not live to see the resolution. Dr. Netters completed his service on the council in 1971. He then became the first African American to serve as an Administrative Assistant to a Mayor of the City of Memphis, serving with Mayor Wyeth Chandler from 1972-1975.

Dr. Netters maintained his commitment to Mt. Vernon and had a vision to relocate the church. After overcoming opposition and doubt by some members, in 1973 the Church relocated to 620 Parkrose Avenue. The church continued to grow and in ten years the mortgage was burned. During the following decade the church continued to experience phenomenal growth, making it necessary to once again expand. In 1991 the ground was broken to build a new sanctuary, located west of James L. Netters Parkway, formerly Third Street.

An advocate of education and personal growth, Dr. Netters enrolled in Memphis Theological Seminary, where he received his Masters of Divinity degree in 1987 and Doctor of Ministry degree in 1994. Over the years Dr. Netters has continued to be active in the community, serving in many capacities. A few of his more notable accomplishments are serving on the panel of WREC-TV's "What Is Your Faith?" for twenty years; Regional Medical Center Clerical Advisory Board; Progressive National Baptist Convention and Board of Commissioners of Memphis Light Gas, and Water Division (MLGW). During his last term as Chairman of the Board of MLGW in 2004, he was appointed to serve as Interim President and CEO. MLGW named a building in his honor, the James L. Netters Business Center."

Dr. Netters has received many awards and honors throughout the years for his service in religious, civil and political capacities. Among them as Honorary Doctor of Laws degree, Oral Roberts University; Honorary Doctorate of Human Letters, Lemoyne Owen College and the naming of Dr. James L. Netters Professorship & Faculty Chair of Rhetoric and African American Studies, Memphis Theological Seminary. In 2009 Dr. Netters had the honor of traveling to Washington, D.C. to witness the first African American, Barack Obama, sworn in as the 44th

President of the United States of America.

Dr. Netters continues to be a visionary and has guided the church in electing Rev. Melvin D. Watkins, Jr., as Co-Pastor in 2008 to ensure the work of the Mt. Vernon Baptist Church continues without interruption. Dr. Netters has truly been blessed and is a living example of the promise of God to give the man who pleases him wisdom, knowledge and joy.