



A BRIEF HISTORY OF DAWSON'S



MUSIC & WORSHIP MINISTRY

By Don Wilson

BUILDING A FOUNDATION

Dawson's Sanctuary, completed and dedicated in early 1951, originally looked much like it does today, though it lacked the transepts and had a much smaller vestibule. In 1954, Lester Barker became Dawson's first full-time music director, marking a pivotal moment as the church transitioned from relying on part-time volunteers to hiring its first full-time music leader. Alongside his wife, Dot, who was the church's first paid organist and children's choir assistant, Barker instituted a strong musical foundation, establishing six choirs for all age groups. It was during this time that the Chapel Choir began, with 59 high school students, traveling to state competitions and meeting weekly. In 1957, they embarked on their first tour to Dothan, AL.

Together, the Barkers built a comprehensive children's choir program that continues to this day. The Barkers' dedication to educating a relatively musically inexperienced congregation transformed the Sanctuary Choir by offering private lessons and training that enabled the members to perform challenging works. Under the leadership of Pastor Edgar Arendall, Barker shaped one of the finest choirs in the region while also solidifying the essential collaboration between the Senior Pastor and Music Minister during worship.

GROWING THE MINISTRY

Following Barker, Marvin Spry built on this strong foundation and elevated the Dawson Sanctuary Choir to new heights within the Southern Baptist Convention. He introduced and enhanced numerous programs, including a new Christmas candlelight service, which continues today as a cherished tradition for church members as well as a gift to the community. A patriotic summer event was soon added, later re-imagined as "Sing Out, America," on the front steps of the Sanctuary. In the late 1960s, the Chapel Choir tour expanded from just a weekend to a full week, reflecting its growth and the significant impact made upon the students. Spry also championed mission outreach, taking the choir beyond the church walls and even touring overseas.

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Dawson Names Spry Minister Of Music

Marvin Spry, of the First Baptist Church of Ocala, Fla., has accepted a call to become minister of music at Dawson Memorial Baptist Church. He will assume his duties here on Jan. 2.

Spry, 34, a native of Coolee, N. C., holds BS and MA degrees in music education from Peabody College in Nashville, Tenn.

He came to the First Baptist Church of Ocala eight years ago where he has done an outstanding job in every area of church music, including children, young people and adult choir work. While in Ocala he also organized a unique hand bell choir.

Before coming to Ocala he was minister of music at the First Baptist Church of Clinton, N. C. He also taught high school vocal music in Raleigh, N. C. for a year and served in the U. S. Army for two years.

In Florida he has served on the faculty of the State Youth Music Camp and is an approved worker for the music department of the Florida Baptist Convention.

He participated in a two weeks evangelistic crusade in Jamaica in April, 1960, sponsored by the Southern Baptist Convention Home Mission Board.

Spry is married to the former Colleen Nelson of Kannapolis, N. C. They have three children — Charisse Anne, 9; Marvin Jr., 8, and Clark, 4.


At Dawson Memorial Spry will be in charge of 12 choirs with an enrollment of almost 500.

1st Church - Baptist - Dawson Memorial



MUSIC MINISTER — Marvin Spry.

THE ALABAMA BAPTIST



MR. AND MRS. LESTER BARKER 10/54

Mr. and Mrs. Lester E. Barker will begin Oct. 15 as the new minister of music and organist respectively at Dawson Memorial Baptist Church.

Mr. Barker comes here from Alexander City's First Baptist Church where he is minister of music and his wife is organist.

He is a graduate of Georgetown College, Georgetown, Ky., where he received his BA degree and attended Southern Seminary in Louisville, Ky. He has been minister of music at Cynthiana Baptist Church, Cynthiana, Ky., at Carlisle Avenue Baptist in Louisville, Ky., and at First Baptist Church in Clarksville, Tenn.

Mrs. Barker, a graduate of Carson-Newman College, Jefferson City, Tenn., has attended Peabody Conservatory of Music in Baltimore and has done work toward an MM degree at Peabody College in Nashville.

She taught organ at Gardner-Webb College in Boiling Springs, N. C., and at Austin Peay State College in Clarksville, Tenn.

Otto Wheeley, chairman of the personnel committee at Dawson Church said, "We certainly are fortunate in securing the services of this consecrated couple. The church is looking forward to their coming with us in October and to the further enlargement and expansion of our church's musical program."

The Barkers plan to organize a graded choir program at Dawson which will be under the music department of the church. Plans are made for choirs for each age group of the Sunday School.





When health issues led to Spry's departure after 14 years, Bob Hatfield took the helm, inheriting a music ministry known for its excellence, with more than 800 participants.

A GOLDEN AGE

Hatfield's 36-year tenure emphasized that music in worship served as a "second sermon," complementing the pastor's message. Dr. Hatfield's ministry was marked by godly selflessness and musical excellence, leading a congregation eager to worship God while navigating the ever-evolving landscape of church music. Under his leadership, Dawson's Music Ministry reached truly unprecedented heights. Partnering with longtime pianist and organist Lynda Little and Diane Norton, the Christmas candlelight service, now *Candlelight at Dawson*, was expanded and included more ensembles of the church. The Chapel Choir continued to grow, and traveled internationally every four years. "Sing Out, America," a patriotic event hosted on the front steps of the Sanctuary each July, was loved by the community. Annual choral events became regular occurrences, later accompanied by Dawson's first orchestra.

Hatfield's collaboration with Dawson's church leadership and his hymn selections reflected a deep theological commitment. His personal influence extended well beyond the Sanctuary, taking Dawson's Music Ministry across the globe. In 2008, he led the Sanctuary Choir to a memorable performance at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., where they sang Randall Thompson's *Testament of Freedom*. This milestone inspired further international tours, blending musical excellence with opportunities to share their faith in places such as China, Germany, and Hawaii.

One unforgettable moment occurred during a concert at a German retirement home, where the choir's rendition of *God So Loved the World* moved many listeners to tears. Stories from residents who had lived through dark chapters of history highlighted the healing power of music. Similar experiences in Hawaii revealed a spiritual void, and the choir's music deeply touched congregants who had rarely encountered such expressions of faith.









Sing Out, America!
Sunday, June 27, 7:00 p.m.

A NEW CHAPTER

With the retirement of Dr. Gary Fenton and Bob Hatfield, Dawson entered a new era under the leadership of Dr. David Eldridge and John Woods. This transition marked the beginning of continued growth and evolution for the Sanctuary Choir & Orchestra, as well as other aspects of Dawson's Music & Worship Ministry.

In recent years, worship services have become more unified, reflecting Dawson's commitment to a richly diverse worship experience. This vision is driven by robust congregational singing across a broad range of musical styles and rooted in deep, thoughtful theology. The commitment to "groups leading groups" remains stronger than ever, fostering an environment where every ensemble plays a crucial role in shaping Dawson's worship life while emphasizing the congregation as the church's most important choir.

The Sanctuary Choir & Orchestra continues to play a vibrant role in both corporate worship and through community outreach. On April 10, 2016, in a groundbreaking collaboration with 6th Avenue Baptist Church, they premiered a four-movement work at the historic Lyric Theatre in downtown Birmingham. Building upon this momentum, the Choir & Orchestra later partnered with 10 local churches to debut a seven-movement composition at the Alabama Theatre. In May 2024, the Sanctuary Orchestra presented its first stand-alone concert in the church's history, a milestone that underscores its growing prominence within the worship life of Dawson.

The Chapel Choir remains a cornerstone of Dawson's worship, offering students a dynamic space to develop worship practices that will guide them through life. Their travels have taken them across the country and around the globe, with recent mission tours to Switzerland, Ecuador, and Wales. These tours have evolved to emphasize not only music but also service, with students earning the privilege to perform by first serving the communities they visit. The creation of the Chapel Jazz Band has further energized these mission tours, expanding their reach and impact.

WE REFLECT
ON HOW GOD
USES MUSIC TO
STRENGTHEN
AND BRING US
TOGETHER.

Dawson's commitment to outreach extends beyond traditional settings. In recent years, the Collide Children's Choirs have taken their music to local women's shelters, demonstrating a desire to extend ministry beyond the church's walls and into the community. The Chapel Choir found itself in a similar position during the COVID-19 pandemic, leaving their parking deck rehearsal space to sing in the backyard of an ailing church member who listened from her second-story window. Such moments reflect Dawson's dedication to serving through music wherever there is need.

The Dawsonaires Choir, founded in 1981, has been a keystone ministry of Dawson's Senior Adults. Through these years the choir has ministered in local senior living facilities, churches, VA Centers, traveling throughout the southeast sharing the Gospel and encouraging others.

Another testament to Dawson's musical legacy is the Dawson Music Academy. Founded by Dr. Hatfield, the Academy has grown to welcome over 300 students each week. Under the leadership of Director Kimberly Jones, the Academy recently celebrated its 20th anniversary.

PRESSING ON

As Dawson's Music & Worship Ministry celebrates our church's 100 year anniversary, we reflect on how God has used music to strengthen, challenge, and bind together our congregation over the past century. We commit ourselves to being found faithful as God's people, striving to serve and lead in ways that honor His calling. As we look ahead to the next 100 years, we continue in the firm belief that, in the words of Bob Hatfield, "The song goes on."



Don Wilson Before retiring as a Professor of History at Samford University for 25 years, Don served in the Air Force for 26 years, retiring as a Lt. Colonel. In 2009, he was selected for the Freedom's Foundation Award and is a member of the Alabama Senior Citizens Hall of Fame. He and his wife, Alleen, have been active members at Dawson for more than 60 years. They have three children, five grandchildren, and four great-grandchildren.

Learn about our Chapel Choir Reunion on April 6 at dawsonchurch.org/chapelchoirreunion.