

## FROM THE PASTOR

Every year during the General Assembly of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship Linda and I attend a luncheon sponsored by the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty. We always look for our friend, James Dunn, former Executive Director of the Baptist Joint Committee, and former interim pastor of our church. This year James was not there. I asked the current BJC Executive Director, Brent Walker, about him. Brent said that James couldn't make it this year. He didn't say why. We missed seeing James and his beloved wife Marilyn. They have been unfailingly supportive of us over the years, and they always asked about Village.

Two weeks later, on July 4, 2015, James passed away at the age of 83. After James retired from the BJC in 1999, he and Marilyn moved to Winston-Salem, North Carolina where he became Professor of Christianity and Public Policy at the School of Divinity at Wake Forest University. James continued teaching until last year. When James began his tenure at Wake Forest, Dr. Bill Leonard (one of my former seminary professors) was Dean of the School of Divinity. Linda and I saw Bill at the Baptist World Congress in Birmingham, England in 2005. I said to Bill jokingly, "So, Dean Leonard, you are now James Dunn's supervisor!" Bill replied, "Nobody tells James Dunn what to do!"

James Dunn was one-of-a-kind. We shared a bond because we were both from Fort Worth, Texas. Before James came to the BJC in 1981, he served for twelve years as Executive Director of the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission. James met the love of his life, Marilyn McNeely, in children's Sunday School at Evans Avenue Baptist Church in Fort Worth. James was 8 and Marilyn was 6. Her parents served on the music faculty at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. They played together in the high school orchestra—James played the clarinet and Marilyn played the violin. They started dating in 1954 when Marilyn was a music major at Baylor University and James was a recent graduate of Texas Wesleyan College. After graduating from Southwestern Seminary, James served as a pastor, a campus minister, and a college teacher. In his service with the Christian Life Commission, the social action agency of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, James led the response to such issues as juvenile justice reform, environmental protection, and equal rights for women and minorities.

### In Memoriam

**James M. Dunn  
1932—2015**

**Interim Pastor  
1984**

During his almost two decades with the Baptist Joint Committee in Washington, D.C., James lobbied for the passage of such landmark legislation as the Equal Access Act in 1984 and the Religious Freedom Restoration Act in 1993. James served as interim pastor of Village in 1984, while continuing his leadership of the BJC. After the BJC was defunded by the Southern Baptist Convention in 1991, James courageously kept the agency going by soliciting support from other Baptist groups, churches, and individuals. The BJC has been in our church budget for many years. We invited James and Marilyn back to Village when Southern Baptists tried to get him fired. James preached, Marilyn sang a solo, and we presented James with a plaque honoring his service for the cause of religious liberty and the separation of church and state. Jo Reiter invited the Duns and the Salmons to her house for lunch after church that day.

When Village was considering me as pastor in 1984, I went downtown to James' office at the BJC adjacent to Capitol Hill. James told me that "Village is a good church" and that he thought we would be a "good fit." James and Marilyn often returned to Village on Thanksgiving Days, and they were present when Village celebrated our 10th anniversary with the church in 1995. I treasure a book that James co-authored with Grady Cothen, *Soul Freedom*. Inside the front cover he inscribed, "for Bruce & Linda, my other pastor."

James was not tall in stature, but he was a spiritual giant for many of us. Brent Walker said, "How fitting that he died—like fellow freedom advocates Thomas Jefferson and John Adams—on the fourth of July." I was blessed to count James Dunn as a friend, as were many others in our church. He will be missed.