New Bethel AME Church

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HughesNet for Business Helps Rural Florida Church Support Ever-Expanding Programs

The New Bethel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in Monticello, FL has weathered many changes since its founding by 15 freed slaves following the Civil War.

The first church building—a log cabin built in 1876—eventually decayed and was replaced by a wood-framed structure in 1931. That church was destroyed by fire, with yet another one built in 1974. As the congregation grew, church members built an adjoining Fellowship Hall to accommodate its expanding programs and activities.

As the AME Church entered the digital age, it encountered the "digital divide" challenges faced by many rural churches across America with no viable access to high-speed Internet. Lack of connectivity had become a serious impediment to supporting the church's many ministries. But then the church discovered HughesNet, which could deliver speeds on par with out-of-reach terrestrial broadband services by satellite.

Monticello is a small farming community with about 40 churches of different denominations, most of which lacked Internet access. Terrestrial broadband service was only available in the center of town, so people had to visit county facilities, try to make do with spotty cell phone service, or travel to Tallahassee where they could utilize university Internet access.

"We couldn't get Internet service from the local providers because we were so rural. But when I discovered HughesNet for Business I said 'Thank you, Jesus! We can finally do everything we need to do,'" said Carolyn Hill, a volunteer member of the church. Hill serves as the church's technology teacher, webmaster, and de facto IT technician.

Internet access has become as critical as electricity and water utilities to church operations. In addition to regular Sunday worship services and Bible Study, church facilities are used for a variety of activities that require good connectivity. This includes serving as a voting precinct, a USDA food distribution center, health fair center, music ministry, and civic group meeting space.

HughesNet for Business gives the church staff a robust Internet connection to maintain communications with congregants and to support its many business applications. "For example, we email with congregants and other churches to let them know about our Voter Education forum, or to get the word out about what food assistance is available to those in need through our food distribution program," Hill said.

A reliable Internet connection is also critical to church operations, enabling staff to download and utilize publicly available church applications used during worship services. It is also critical to Hill's maintenance of the church website.

Hill said that church continues to explore new uses for the technology, such as offering computer training in the future to help congregants find jobs. "Our church is

mostly families, young adults and older people. When young adults grow up, graduate from college or enter the military, they tend to move back into the community. We would like the church to be able to serve as not only a social and spiritual center for them, but as an educational and vocational resource as well," she said. "HughesNet for Business allows us to provide a reliable Internet connection that not only helps run our Church, but provides our congregation accesses to all the online resources we need."

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