

## CHARLOTTE'S OLDEST BLACK BAPTIST PLACE OF WORSHIP

# Church still faithful to traditions

### First Baptist-West's devotion to history draws worshipers

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Staff Photographer

(12.02.2007)--Carolyn McAdoo, 15, is baptized by senior minister Dr. Ricky A. Woods at First Baptist Church - West on Sunday, December 2, 2007. The second oldest black church in Charlotte celebrated its 140th anniversary Sunday. - YALONDA M. JAMES - [yjames@charlotteobserver.com](mailto:yjames@charlotteobserver.com)

The Civil War had set them free two years before, but they still got herded up to the balcony every Sunday when they showed up to worship at Charlotte's predominantly white First Baptist Church.

So 66 ex-slaves gathered under an oak tree on the church grounds one day in 1867 and decided it was time to start their own church. There'd be no second-class seating in this First Baptist for African Americans.

On Sunday, the spiritual heirs -- and even some flesh-and-blood descendants -- of those founding members packed into what is now First Baptist Church-West to celebrate its 140th birthday

Vibrant music evoked a past that started with spirituals in plantation fields. A rousing sermon compared those ex-slaves to Abraham on his biblical journey to find the land God promised him.

At a time when many churches -- black and white -- feel pressured to market themselves as "new" and "modern," First Baptist-West is part of a counter-trend: one that holds up history and delights in the old hymns and stained-glass symbols.

"We've sort of made a commitment that we're not going to change to attract people," said the Rev. Ricky Woods, the church's senior minister since 1995. "This is who we are, and we're going to continue to tell our story."

And though First Baptist-West's congregation of 600 active members hardly qualifies it as a mega-church, Woods said a growing number of people are attracted to the traditional, too.

"The largest area of growth in our church are people who've been away from church for awhile," he said.

"They have children now. They came up with these old values, they heard these old songs. And they want their children to know them."

Sunday's service began with a pair of baptisms -- of Carolyn McAdoo, 15, and sister Sidney, 16. After they professed their faith in Jesus and got dunked in the baptismal pool by Woods, the girls' father, Julius, a member of the choir, raised his arms heavenward in thanksgiving.

Omari Wilkerson, 27, another member of the choir, acknowledged that many people his age are looking for something new on Sundays. But he said he cherishes the traditional.

"You have to appreciate the old stuff to appreciate the new stuff," said Wilkerson, a bank teller who studied music in college.

"You'll never know where you're going unless you know where you've come from."

And where the African American church has come from, he said, is old Negro spirituals, anthems and traditional gospel.

All were on grand display Sunday, as aural punctuations to Woods' recounting of the church's long history.

The founders of First Baptist-West first worshiped at the "Yankee" hospital near the site of the present YMCA on Morehead Street. It wasn't until 1901 that construction of their own church building began at 1020 S. Church St.

It took 10 years to finish, with men returning from day jobs in factories and fields to work on it into the night.

The women and children held lanterns as they worked -- a scene commemorated Sunday with the spiritual, "Keep Your Lamps Trimmed and Burning."

The urban renewal of much of uptown in the late 1960s and early '70s meant the church had to relocate. Members bought land on Oaklawn Avenue, a few miles northwest of uptown, from the Catholic Diocese of Charlotte. In 1977, they dedicated their current building.

As Woods finished this chapter about searching for a new home, the choir sang "Savior, Lead Me," a traditional-style gospel song that had those in the pews swaying and clapping.

Among those soaking up the history: Anita Thornton, 80, a lifelong member of the church and a descendent of Harriet Knox, one of its founders.

"She was one of the ones who held the lanterns," said Thornton, a retired administrative secretary at Lincoln Heights School. "We cherish the past here. That's important because, sometimes, history is lost."

In its history, First Baptist-West became the spiritual home of many local educators, supported the civil rights movement in the 1960s, opened a \$3.2 million family life center as an investment in children and teens, and birthed two other Baptist churches -- Friendship Missionary and Ebenezer.

First Baptist-West isn't Mecklenburg County's oldest African American church. That distinction belongs to Clinton Chapel A.M.E. Zion, which celebrated its 197th anniversary in October.

But First Baptist-West is the Charlotte's oldest black Baptist church. And according to the Rev. Cleophus LeRue, a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary and the one who preached Sunday's sermon, the church's ex-slave founders were religious pioneers.

"Just as soon as freedom came," he said, "they took their destiny and future into their own hands." Charlotte's oldest black Baptist place of worship