

RICH OR POOR, GOD COMES FIRST

Regardless of neighborhood, churches share common mission

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THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Thirteen miles and lots of money separate Franklin County's richest and poorest neighborhoods. But their churches have more in common than at first appears.

In manicured Dublin stands **Berean** Bible Church, strong on evangelism and rooted in Scripture. The middle-class congregation long predates the affluence that has moved in around it in the county's wealthiest census tract.

In gritty Franklinton, where the census says incomes are lowest, Greater Christ Temple Apostolic Church was founded by a former barber. For decades, it has fought the social toxins of poverty and crime, but it hopes soon to sell its building and depart.

In many ways -- including race -- the two congregations differ. But both defy stereotypes. And they share a commitment to spread God's word and serve the needy.

A barber and a forester

Within months of each other in the early '70s, the Rev. Roger Vogel founded **Berean** Bible and Suffragan Bishop John Thompson established Greater Christ Temple.

Vogel had studied forestry before attending Bob Jones Seminary in Greenville, S.C. Ex-haircutter Thompson owned one of the city's largest real-estate agencies.

Thompson is black and leads a mostly black congregation in a census tract where weekly incomes average about \$175. But his flock includes teachers and trades workers, so it's not as impoverished as the neighborhood is.

Greater Christ sits on McDowell Street, about two vrooms south of a Harley-Davidson motorcycle dealership on W. Broad.

The church's stone and brick exterior frames stained-glass windows that came with the building from the original owners, a Spiritualist congregation.

Time and vandals have left scars outside. Water damage is evident, and thrown rocks have hit several of the stained-glass windows.

Until the roof was replaced about five years ago, the interior had been equally time-worn, said Larry Griffin, an elder.

"There were holes in the ceiling, and water was coming through the roof," he said.

The congregation did most of the repairs that have given the sanctuary a safe feeling of home.

Greater Christ is part of the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World, a 1.8 million-member denomination based in Indianapolis. Being Pentecostal "allows the freedom of the spirit to operate within an individual," Thompson said.

The congregation, which began in 1974 with five members, has grown to 170 despite problems in the neighborhood.

"When I first got here -- I've been here 22 years -- there was a lot of crime," said Linda Griffin, church administrator and Larry Griffin's wife. "There were more shootings than we like to think about, and drug activity."

Crime remains a problem, especially in some of the neighborhood's rental units, which had fallen into disrepair, she said. Although some housing has been upgraded, problems persist, Mr. Griffin said.

"The only thing that bothers me is they fix them up and bring the same clientele back in," he said. "That's why they can't get rid of drug dealing."

A message for all

Vogel is white and leads a mostly white congregation that came to Dublin Road soon after golf legend Jack Nicklaus announced the development of Muirfield Village.

The church sits on 6.1 acres of former farmland. Its neatly manicured lawn approaches golf-course standards.

Berean takes its name from a city in ancient Macedonia. Its affluent neighborhood has an average weekly income of \$2,231, but most of the church's members have more modest means, Vogel said.

Greater Christ and **Berean** both draw worshippers from a wide area. Vogel's congregation, which has no denominational affiliation, initially met in members' homes and local banks.

"There was not much here then" except a commitment to provide "a Gospel witness in this area," the pastor said.

Sunday worship averages about 180 in the morning and 110 in the evening.

"Faithfulness to God's word overrides any economic boundaries as far as we're concerned," said Stuart Driscoll, who attends regularly but hasn't joined. Those of limited means "need the same message as people who are driving a Lexus," he said.

Berean appeals to Ruth Mayle, 77, of Delaware because "They stick to the Bible, preach the truth and don't add in social gospel."

Missions vary

Most of Greater Christ's outreach has been to young people, with the homeless and Project Redeem, an after-school tutoring program.

Some of the church's clientele included homeless people who used to live at or near the Open Shelter, formerly a men's shelter on W. State Street, and in the woods nearby.

At **Berean**, some missionary work is local, such as cooking dinner once a month for folks at the Ronald McDonald House. But "Our main purpose is to take the gospel to all the world," Vogel said.

Missionary support accounts for about 22 percent of the church's annual budget, or about \$85,000 last year, he said.

Berean helps missions in several foreign countries. At a recent service, Melvin Purvis of Birmingham, Ala., reported on his work in Chile.

Catholic outreach

Also serving Franklinton's needy is Holy Family Roman Catholic Church. The oldest and largest congregation in the census tract, it's among more than 100 parishes in the Columbus Diocese.

Bill Ellis, 34, turned to Holy Family when he and his fiancée became homeless. Although he's Baptist, he volunteers at Holy Family to repay the assistance.

Some of Holy Family's members, about 500 families, are attracted to its traditional services and Latin Mass, but many others, including alumni of the parish's old elementary and high schools, feel a calling to serve the poor.

"The gospel is a very living force here in terms of our soup kitchen and outreach," said the pastor, the Rev. Kevin F. Lutz. "The motto of our soup kitchen is, 'Serving Christ in his most clever disguises.'"

Certain ministries at Holy Family aren't an issue in affluent communities, he said.

"For instance, you're not going to run a food pantry in Muirfield. It just isn't needed," Lutz said. "But spiritual hunger, knowing God -- that's universal."

Much of Holy Family's outreach comes in conjunction with the Franklinton Ministerial Association, a network of clergy who "all have a heart for the poor," he said.

"Nobody is in competition in that regard," Lutz said. "There's more than enough of the poor to go around."

Lutz has been at Holy Family nine years and sees signs of revival in the area after completion of the Franklinton floodwall.

"There were a lot of restrictions on building because it was a flood plain," he said.

Moving on

Greater Christ feels it is still serving the neighborhood, but it wants to leave once it finds the right buyer. The church owns land on Sunbury Road, near E. 5th Avenue, and plans a one-story building that's more accessible for an aging congregation, Thompson said.

He said he doesn't think his church is abandoning Franklinton, because the area is slowly gentrifying and becoming part of an expanded Downtown. Moreover, the church van will be available to pick up anyone from the neighborhood who needs transportation to the new site.

In any case, the church will continue to knock on doors to spread the gospel in its upbeat manner.

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Illustration: Photo, Graphic with Map appeared in newspaper, not in the archive.

Photo caption: (1) Fred Squillante | Dispatch

This Franklinton neighborhood surrounds Greater Christ Temple Apostolic Church.

(2) Larry Griffin is an elder at Greater Christ Temple Apostolic Church.

(3) Mike Munden | Dispatch

The Rev. Roger Vogel preaches at **Berean** Bible Church.

(4) Suffragan Bishop John Thompson

(5) The Rev. Roger Vogel

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