

12A

RELIGION

Stephen
first of
Jesus' sevenSunday
School LessonDevotional reading: Matthew
5:43-48.

Lesson scripture: Acts 6:1-8:3.

Jesus had told his followers, "Ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, unto the uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Nevertheless, during the time covered by the first seven chapters of the book of Acts, only Jews in Jerusalem had heard the good news of Jesus. Christianity was still a little more than a sect within Judaism. While Jewish leaders had challenged the Christian's preaching and even had the apostles beaten (Acts 5:40), there had been no recognized break between Judaism and Christianity. Stephen boldly changed all of this.

Stephen is listed as the first of seven men chosen by the Jerusalem church to administer the distribution of food to needy widows. All of the seven were chosen because were "men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom" (Acts 6:3). Stephen is especially noted as "a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost" (v. 5). All seven men had Greek names, a factor that probably helped to reassure the Grecian widows who had been neglected (verse 1). These men took over the daily food distribution, providing more time for the apostles to engage in prayer and the ministry of the word. As a result, "the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith" (Acts 6:7).

The apostles, however, were not the only ones responsible for the increase of the word of God. Although he was one of those who had been designated to oversee the ministry to the widows, Stephen certainly did his part to spread the gospel.

Stephen's power was demonstrated in his ability to work great wonders and miracles among the people. This ability came from the laying on of the apostle's hands (see verse 6 and compare with Acts 8:18).

Stephen's record shows a man who was respected by his peers and who experienced success in whatever he undertook. As the adage says, "Cream rises to the top." From among thousands of disciples in Jerusalem, Stephen was selected as one of only seven men to administer the first "food pantry" of the church. Shortly thereafter, we find him preaching and debating in the local synagogue. He rose from waiter to witness overnight, it seems. He performed "great wonders and miracles among the people" (Acts 6:8).

The next portion of our lesson text is preached by Stephen's defense before before the Sanhedrin (Acts 7:1-53). The contents of this address reveal Stephen's understanding of the radical difference between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant established by Jesus. As indicated in the lesson introduction, prior to Stephen's speech, Christianity was still considered little more than a Jewish sect. But Stephen's speech drew a clear and unmistakable "line in the sand" between Judaism and Christianity, and that is why Luke includes this message in its entirety in his record. The gospel meant the end of the system of laws and sacrifices that the Jews held dear. That they were adamant about not letting go of this system is evident from their reaction to Stephen's incisive discourse.

"The thing that has allowed St. Michael to survive is our people."

-Connie Sessoms, Senior Warden

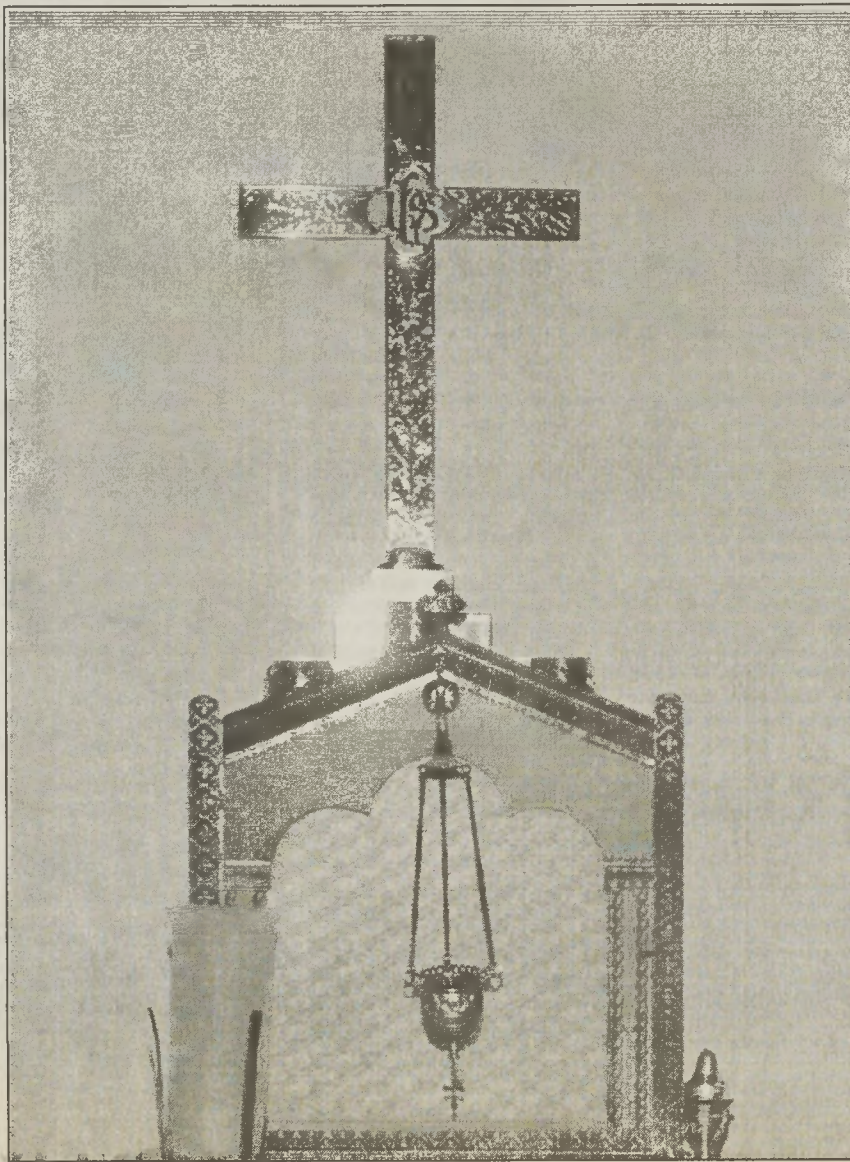


PHOTO /SUE ANN JOHNSON

Eternal flame burns in hearts, minds and sanctuary of dedicated communicants.

Former downtown church
thrives in west CharlotteBy Jeri Young
THE CHARLOTTE POST

A candle burns slowly near the altar at St. Michael and All Angels Episcopal Church.

It has flickered unceasingly for more than 100 years.

"The lit candle lets people know a reserve sacrament is here," Senior Warden Connie Sessoms said. "It means there is always sustenance here."

For 113 years, members have received sustenance at the small

Episcopal church. During the early part of the 20th century, St. Michael was one of Charlotte's strongest churches. Good Samaritan Hospital and Nursing School grew out of it. A nationally renowned boys choir, one of the first black vestried choirs in the country, called St. Michael home.

In the 1940s, Charlotte boasted 18 African American doctors, two-thirds of them members of St. Michael. Charlotte artist Romare Bearden was a member

in the church, Sessoms said.

A member for 26 years, he rode out the storm as the church suffered.

"The overwhelming thing that has allowed St. Michael to survive over the years is our people," Sessoms said. "There is a certain group of committed people that are here that have kept this church alive."

A varied history

When St. Peter's Episcopal

Church's new rector, Bishop Joseph Blount Chesire arrived in 1882, he found only one black communicant.

Before the Civil War, blacks and whites worshipped in the same sanctuaries, though not on the same pew. Black members sat in specially erected balconies or in the back of the sanctuary.

"They saw the need for a black Episcopal church," Sessoms said. "It was after the (Civil) war and it was decided that they would help establish the church."

By 1883, the small church was ready to stand on its own. A sanctuary was begun on the corner of Mint and West Hill streets. By 1885, it was completed.

In 1887, the Rev. Primus Alston became the first black priest, taking charge of the church, which was almost independent of St. Peter's. For more than 20 years, Alston led St. Michael, overseeing the beginning of the hospital and a vocational training school for black children. The school closed when public high schools began to offer vocational courses.

"Besides being one of the first black priests to take charge of the church, it grew tremendously under his leadership," Sessoms said. "He laid the groundwork that was followed for almost 100 years."

After Alston's death in 1910, St. Michael continued to grow. The boys' choir was begun in the 1940s by members of St. Peter's.

"It gives us a chance to teach them reverence for the church," the Rev. J.W. Hertridge said in a 1942 interview. "It has broken down a sense of prejudice others have toward the Episcopal church for it shows we do not confine our work to our denomination, but reach out to help anyone regardless of race."

"That choir was the model for the Harlem Boys Choir," Sessoms said. "It was a wonderful group."

The large church housed offices of the Work Progress Administration, Boy Scouts and the Community Women's Club. The church was further fostered by students at the Good Samaritan School of Nursing. Students were required to attend services at the church.

Dreams deferred

The late '50s and '60s were a period of change for downtown's black churches. First came the closing of the nursing school in 1959. The city bought Good Samaritan Hospital in 1961.

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D.C. aides
rebuild
burned
churchesBy David Pace
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON - A black church in East Georgia that burned down nearly a year ago got an unusual infusion of federal aid recently - a bus load of Capitol Hill volunteers ready to help in the rebuilding effort.

More than 20 congressional aides left on a chartered bus for the trip to Gay's Hill Baptist Church near Millen, where they were joined for the workday by Reps. Jack Kingston of Savannah and Charlie Norwood of Augusta.

The congressional volunteers were recruited by the Faith and Politics Institute, a nonprofit, interfaith, nonpartisan group whose mission is to provide political leaders with opportunities for moral reflection and spiritual community.

"We're giving them with an honest opportunity to put into action the resolution they passed (last June) condemning church arson and encouraging Americans to work together to avoid future arson incidents," said David Riihimaki, the institute's rebuilding project coordinator.

The institute is one of a growing number of non-governmental organizations that have taken the lead in rebuilding the dozens of black churches across the South that have been burned during the past two years.

Habitat for Humanity, the ecumenical group that builds homes for poor families with donated tools and volunteer labor, has been coordinating construction, while the National Council of Churches and other groups have been raising money to finance the effort.

Monday's workday is the second the institute has organized for congressional volunteers. In October, a group that included Rep. Eva Clayton, D-N.C. led a crew that cleared the site in Richmond where the Glorious Church of God in Christ is rebuilding.

A third congressional workday is planned this spring to help in the reconstruction of a in Orangeburg, S.C.

The institute hopes that workers who participate will have a heightened sense of the role race plays in church arsons.

Four charged in church burning

By Kim Gamel
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

RALEIGH - The pastor of a predominantly black church that was set on fire last summer said she has mixed feelings about the arrests of a white man and three white juveniles in the case.

"I'm sure they have a mother and I'm sure their mother is concerned and affected," the Rev. Jean M. Anderson said Thursday. "I don't feel anger. I would like to see them and perhaps maybe talk to them and ask them what their reason was."

But Anderson said she and the rest of the congregation felt strongly that those responsible should be brought to justice.

An indictment unsealed Thursday in U.S. District Court in Raleigh charged Matthew Neal Blackburn, 18, of Stella and three juveniles with conspiring to maliciously damage and destroy a rural Jones County church. The St. James A.M.E. Zion Church is located near Maysville.

"Today's indictment shows that we are continuing our commitment to vigorously pursuing arsons at our

nation's houses of worship," said James E. Johnson, co-chairman of the National Church Arson Task Force, which is overseeing investigations into last year's rash of church burnings.

The four are accused of filling seven beer bottles with gasoline and paper towel wicks, pouring gasoline around the church and throwing the firebombs at the church, according to the indictment.

The fire's heat and flames melted the upholstery on the

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A Matthews-Murkland member sifts through rubble after arson.

Jesse Jackson eulogizes father in S.C. service

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

GREENVILLE, S.C. - The Rev. Jesse Jackson hailed his father Sunday as a "model citizen, praying deacon, devoted father and loving husband," in front of more than 500 people who came to honor Noah Robinson.

Robinson, Jackson's father, died last Monday at Greenville Memorial Hospital several hours after being hospitalized

for heart problems. He was 88.

Jackson delivered the eulogy for his father at Robinson's funeral service at Tabernacle Baptist Church in Greenville. Jackson called his father a "bigger-than-life" figure, a man who "was never arrogant but always confident."

"He was called Mr. Robinson," Jackson said. "It was a big deal to be Mr.

Robinson's son."

Jackson daughter, Santita, who recently sang at President Clinton's inaugural, also performed two solos for her grandfather.

Jackson said his father overcame obstacles throughout his life, which he said began in poverty as "a defiant slave."

"There were all types of slaves," Jackson said. "But history only gives high marks

to runaway slaves. Noah Robinson was a defiant slave who never let go of his dignity."

Robinson spent more than 40 years working as a highly skilled laborer for a textile manufacturer. He was born in a suburb of Greenville.

Robinson spent part of his youth in Philadelphia, where in 1926 he was named Philadelphia Golden Gloves

boxing champion. Shortly after, he followed his mother back to Greenville.

Jackson said his father reached out to people less fortunate.

During the service, Robinson was honored with resolutions by the Greenville City and Greenville County councils and by the South Carolina Senate.