

# Black churches still growing in Maryland

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WALDORF, Md.—When the Rev. Rodney J. Blackmon took over Christian Unity Baptist Church, it had 35 congregants. Now Blackmon is planning to build a new church with room for more than 3,000.

The migration of black people from the District of Columbia and Prince George's County has fueled the rapid growth of Charles County congregations like Blackmon's, which now has 500 members.

"When I first got here, you didn't hear too much about African American churches," Blackmon said. "Ever since then, churches have been popping up everywhere, and they've been growing."

The expanding number, scale and ambition of black churches in Charles County mirrors what happened when blacks migrated from the District into Prince George's in the 1970s.

"The people came first, and the churches followed. That's the pattern," said Ronald Walters, director of the University of Maryland's African American Leadership Institute.

As the population grows in Charles County, where subdivisions have replaced tobacco farms, many local churches are modeling themselves on the megachurches in Prince George's County.

Church leaders in Prince George's have been teaching their counterparts in Charles how to organize programs for the homeless and cleanup efforts in poverty-stricken areas. They have been advis-

ing them about how to win government funding for faith-based initiatives.

Black people have almost exclusively driven the recent growth in Charles. The county's white population remained relatively stagnant between 2000 and 2005, while its black population increased by more than 50 percent, according to census estimates. Black people now make up about 34 percent of Charles's roughly 139,000

residents.

Black megachurches—loosely defined as having more than 2,000 worshippers—have been popping up in suburbs across the country. Their large congregations give them the resources to run significant social programs.

In Charles, LifeStyles Inc., a faith-based community services organization affiliated with the black ministers group, launched a program a year ago to provide dinner

and overnight shelter in churches for homeless people during the winter months.

Called Safe Nights, the program was modeled after the Warm Nights program in Prince George's. When it began in Charles, two churches participated. Now 26 are involved, and the organization was awarded a small grant from the county government.

This year, an army of volunteers from First Baptist Church of Glenarden, which

has a 7,000-member congregation, came several times to Nanjemoy, a severely impoverished rural area of Charles. They provided free clothing, household goods and books, as well as dentistry and other medical services.

Local churches were so impressed that they asked First Baptist to help them organize their own social programs.

"It really was a blessing to see that there was a system

that was in place," Blackmon said. "I think Charles County has the resources, but no one put the system in place."

Meanwhile, Blackmon is moving forward with plans for a 31-acre campus. It would include a sanctuary that would seat 2,500, plus with computer labs, playgrounds, athletic facilities and classrooms.

"There's plenty of numbers to fill those buildings," he said. "I declare it."

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## Church News

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Methodist Church, 3545 Beaties Ford Road. Rev. Ingram will deliver the New Year's message. Breakfast served immediately following service. For information, or directions call: (704) 399-2717

January 13

The University of Tennessee at Martin choral ensembles and the clarinet choir will perform a concert as they tour throughout the Southeastern Coastal region of the U.S. Selections from the program include the music of Aaron Copland, W.A. Mozart, Benjamin Britten, Eric Whitacre and Moses Hogan. The ensembles are led by Dr. Mark Simmons, UT Martin director of choral activities, and Amy Parks Simmons, UT Martin assistant professor of woodwind studies.

The UT Martin Department of Music has 100 students majoring in music with 13 full-time faculty members. The choral ensembles tour yearly and the January tour in 2007 will take them to Myers Park Presbyterian Church. All performances are at 7:30 p.m. The concerts are free and open to the public.

January 20

Steele Creek AME Zion Church located at 1500 Shop-ton Road will sponsor a Four Season Tea fundraiser from 2 p.m. - 4 p.m. Tickets are \$6. Call (704) 523-6552 for information or to buy tickets.

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