

Mt. Paran Presbyterian Church marks 300 years



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Randallstown's Mt. Paran Presbyterian Church celebrates its past, looks forward to the future.

From its small, simple rectangular structure to its meticulously maintained cemetery where gravestones date to the 1700s, it's clear that Mt. Paran Presbyterian Church has gone to great lengths to preserve its past.

But the bright patterns and colors of African nations that line the pews of the Randallstown church and the beat of drums that accompany hymnals demonstrate the historic church's excitement about its future.

Mt. Paran celebrated its 300th year of worship this weekend, marking its existence as the oldest church in the Presbytery of Baltimore and the second-oldest Presbyterian church in the United States.

The celebration at the church's first Sunday service of its 300th year was reminiscent of its beginnings.

It was established in 1715 in Randallstown and served as a sanctuary for Presbyterians who had been persecuted in Virginia by the Church of England.

Today, its congregation consists mostly of African immigrants, who have flocked there over the last decade.

"We're old, but we're celebrating the future," said Mt. Paran's pastor, Ed Terry, who stood bedecked in an African shirt given to him by a worshipper. "And this is the future."

"When we get to heaven," he continued, "there are going to be people from every nation, every race and every creed, and we need to learn to live together now and worship Him together now so we'll be prepared."

Terry opened his sermon Sunday by asking the parishioners to reflect on what brought them to the church and why God had blessed it with 300 years.

He also urged them to consider the church's membership growth from the single-digits to 225 not just a blessing, but a calling. "God would not have provided for, protected, preserved and guarded this church for 300 years unless the Lord has plans for us," Terry said.

Terry said that when he took over the church in 2004, he was troubled when the membership was made up of only eight or nine white people, though the church was located in an area that was predominantly black. "We knew that was wrong," he said. "We prayed, and God sent us one great family to join us."

That family was Gabriel Tanwani's. The native of Cameroon was the first black family to join the church under Terry's leadership, and they were responsible for bringing hundreds of others.

One Sunday in 2005, he and his family passed a number of churches along Liberty Road and for some reason that still escapes him, he decided to stop at the small church tucked away on a hill.

"When we walked in, we were afraid a little bit," Tanwani recalled of walking into the all-white church. "But we were very welcomed."

Looking around Sunday, he said he felt he had very little to do with his arrival that Sunday 10 years ago.

"It was just a mission that God has assigned me," he said. "I'm very, very excited."

The sense of joy and unity in the church was palpable Sunday as church members celebrated God, but also each other.

Among the testimonies were ones from former members and missionaries who had returned, and an older member with special needs, known affectionately as "Our Fred," who lives at a nearby nursing home and loves singing, even when he doesn't know the words.

On Sunday, cheers erupted before he could get out the first line of "How Great Thou Art."

The parishioners' journeys as immigrants were also celebrated.

Lydia Ayukarrey, who came to the United States from Cameroon six years ago, proudly announced to the congregation that she had recently become a U.S. citizen.

"I'm happy, grateful, that I can follow laws and I can vote," she said. "I'm proud to be part of the American family."

Ayukarrey said that Mt. Paran has served as a support system for her family. It's where she has planted roots, having renewed wedding vows to celebrate 10 years of marriage.

"We are all one, we are all united," she said.

People who had benefited from the church's history also came back to celebrate its progress.

Ron Metzger was 24 when the church took a chance on him as a young missionary 50 years ago. It was part of a network of churches that supported him on a trip to South America to translate the Bible.

He has continued that work, and while he doesn't attend the church regularly, he buried his wife there eight years ago.

"This was the first church that supported me," he said. "This is what the Lord does — he brings all of the cultures of the world together. I'm very much enamored with what they've done here."

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