

CHURCHES THAT MADE A DIFFERENCE -Strathmoor/Oakland Church of Christ

As southern Christians migrated north around World War II the Strathmoor Church of Christ was in an ideal location to attract newcomers to Detroit. A. J. Bachman, J. Harvey Dykes, and Norman Beaman were dynamic preachers and encouraged the membership of over 300 to new heights of service. During the 1940s and early 1950s the Strathmoor church was the largest, most dynamic congregation in the Detroit area. In Strathmoor's new building Bible School workshops annually attracted great crowds. An educational effort began here which was to result in the beginning of Michigan Christian College.

With the rise of the Civil Rights Movement and the influx of thousands of blacks from the South the landscape of Detroit also began to change. Will Ed Warren became the minister of Strathmoor in 1959 shortly after two groups had swarmed away to form new congregations in the suburbs. The resulting remnant of 150 members were entering a new era with some apprehension. Will Ed possessed an unusual spirit which was equal to the challenge. He not only worked to heal internal wounds when the group was reduced in size, but led in positive approaches to social changes. He and other members became involved in a city-wide athletic church league involving black and white Christians.

As racial tensions mounted in the city, Will Ed and other white church leaders took the lead in holding race relations forums to build bridges between the black and white Christians. Good crowds attended these sessions but it soon became apparent that there was a great

social and emotional distance between most blacks and whites in the church. The last forum turned into a shouting match with harsh accusations flying. The Detroit riot during the hot summer of 1967 was one of the worst in the nation as many large US cities exploded under the pressure of disenfranchised blacks demanding equal justice.

Will Ed then began a series of monthly racial dialogues which rotated to the homes of church leaders, both black and white. He involved Strathmoor leaders in these meetings with several leaders of different black congregations in the area. Anyone interested was welcome to come. In this informal setting, men and women came to talk about tensions in the community, topics in the news and other aspects of what it means to live a Christian life in a pluralistic society. Once trust developed, the group moved to its deepest emotional level. People talked freely and openly of how past experiences had shaped their own racial attitudes. The deep scars caused by racial isolation, prejudice, hatred, injustice, or discrimination were laid bare. Church leaders laughed together, cried together, asked forgiveness of one another, prayed together and sang together.

Will Ed received criticism for his work, but hindsight has proven he laid the groundwork for leadership in the church which has richly blessed the Strathmoor congregation and made a difference in the church life of Detroit. A few black Christian leaders complained that he stole their best members over to Strathmoor. An atmosphere of acceptance across racial lines was definitely known in Strathmoor. The leadership never considered selling and moving to the suburbs. The

first blacks to attend were neighborhood children whom a deacon's wife gathered up for Vacation Bible School. When black families began to move into the Strathmoor neighborhood and to visit the assemblies, they were welcomed and encouraged to place membership. Will Ed asked some of his black friends to come help for a while in the church bus program which was being launched. They came and they stayed. This encouraged others to come.

Vernon Boyd came to preach at Strathmoor in 1971, after helping the Stony Island Church of Christ in Chicago to racially integrate. At the time, the community around Strathmoor was about 40% black to the east of the building and about 10% black to the west. The congregation was about 10% black. Race relations groups were still meeting in homes. Before long, black men became part of the church leadership and a black associate minister was employed on a part-time basis. As the community continued to change racially, so did the make up of the membership of Strathmoor, until in 1984 the congregation was about 90% black. White members tended to go elsewhere, but a significant number of them had developed respect and friendship across racial lines and stayed. This encouraged the members to develop skills of working together in patterns not previously experienced. Most activities in the church were biracial in leadership. A great sense of Christian love and fellowship was promoted.

It is fair to note that the great racial harmony which has developed in the Strathmoor congregation and elsewhere in the Detroit area churches has been helped by other factors: in spite of riots in

the past which have had racial overtones, Detroit has had a positive racial climate not matched by many other urban centers, due to early inclusion of blacks into labor unions. Blacks have had an opportunity through working in auto factories to "buy into the American dream" on a mass scale. This has encouraged them to integrate into jobs, housing, government, schools and churches with a minimal amount of resistance from whites.

But Strathmoor could not avoid the social evils which have come about due to racial transition. City services declined, police protection diminished, and crime rose. Both blacks and whites who could afford it began to move to the suburbs. Because Strathmoor was located on a major street, a few members had been injured trying to cross to the parking lot. Many members were reluctant to get out at night both to come to church on dark streets or to leave their houses which were subject to vandalism. When it seemed necessary to purchase nearby houses to develop an adjacent lighted parking area, one of Strathmoor's daughter churches which had fallen on hard times, invited a merger to their location in Southfield. Upon discovering the nearby high school was 50% black in student population, the Strathmoor leadership was encouraged to make the move. The positive biracial experience could be encouraged more readily in the biracial community. The merger was completed in 1984 with the group taking the new name, Oakland Church of Christ. Approximately 90% of the Strathmoor members participated in the relocation. Many former white members returned to the new location and have continued the unusual racial harmony.

Since the time of his arrival, Vernon attended the two separate regular monthly meetings of the black and white church leaders. In 1979, he began an annual black/white pulpit exchange program among the 60 congregations in the metropolitan Detroit area. In 1988 he began bringing these two groups together once a year in a fellowship dinner called "God's Family Banquet." Leaders and their wives come to promote more fellowship across racial lines, and to hear a speaker who in the church has made a significant contribution toward racial harmony - a black one year and a white the next. A great climax to these past efforts was reached when the Crusade for Christ was brought to Detroit in the summer of 1991, and great racial harmony was displayed throughout the event. This national evangelistic effort was developed in the black church to saturate a different major city for Christ every other year. Upon coming to Detroit, a biracial local staff executed every phase of the campaign in a most impressive manner.

The Oakland family is far from a perfect congregation, but in the area of race relations it has demonstrated an unusual degree of love and acceptance among its members. Reminiscent of the spirit of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who said "Either we live together as brothers or perish together as fools," the Strathmoor/Oakland history has demonstrated that racial harmony can exist in our fellowship to the good of all members. "If we can't get together down here, how can we ever expect to be together up there?"