

One church, five congregations

Christians and Jews prepare for Easter and Passover holidays

By Larry Perl (lperl@patuxent.com)

Posted 4/19/11



The Rev. Carol Lynn Cook, of First Christian Church, in Roland Park leads a processional on Palm Sunday, April 17. The church is home to five different congregations, one of them Jewish and another mostly black. As Easter and Passover coincide this week, church members and their leaders say the relationship among the congregations is flourishing. (Photo by Steve Ruark)

Longtime Beit Tikvah member Esther Miller tells how the Roland Park Jewish congregation came to call First Christian Church home in 1989.

Beit Tikvah, which first held services in a room at Morgan State University, heard that a church in north Baltimore was willing to share space.

But a contingent that went looking for that church couldn't find it, so they stopped at First Christian, 5802 Roland Ave., to ask directions.

That's when they found out that First Christian was willing to share space, too.

Today, Beit Tikvah is one of five congregations of different denominations, faiths and cultures that worship under one roof at First Christian.

In addition to First Christian and Beit Tikvah, there's a Scottish Celtic church, St. Andrew's Christian Community; a non-denominational group with Baptist underpinnings, The Gathering of Baltimore; and the most recent arrival, the predominantly black Mount Olivet Christian Church, which has worshipped at First Christian since selling its church in west Baltimore. It celebrated its fifth anniversary in March.

The clergy leaders, most of whom lead congregations that are too small to need or afford a house of worship of their own, said they're ecstatic about the relationship.

"It's still flourishing," Rabbi Elizabeth Bolton, of Beit Tikvah said. And since the arrival of Mount Olivet, "there's a lot of renewed energy," Bolton said.

As the Easter and Passover holidays coincide this year, the five congregations are co-existing happily and with minimal logistical problems, thanks to their own flexibility and the help of building coordinator and administrative aide Jason Buckwalter.

They even attend one another's services and hold joint services, as the four Christian congregations did on Ash Wednesday and are planning to again this week on Holy, or Maundy, Thursday and Good Friday.

All five congregations, including Beit Tikvah, participate in events such as an interfaith learning program in the summer and are planning to convene for a Memorial Day picnic that Beit Tikvah is organizing and an interfaith service the Sunday before Thanksgiving. There's serious talk of a joint Christmas Day service, too.

And they are reaching out to Roland Avenue churches, including Roland Park Presbyterian, St. David's Episcopal and the North Baltimore Mennonite Church, for future interfaith events and projects.

"We're worshipping the same God, despite differences in culture," said Mount Olivet's pastor, the Rev. Marcus Adams.

St. Andrew's pastor, the Rev. Ernest Smart, likens the church-sharing to a restaurant and said, "We're all serving the same food."

"I think it's fantastic and it's a model for the future," said the Rev. Sharon Smith, pastor of The Gathering. "We're not about the building. I don't need to raise a million-dollar endowment."

Services go like clockwork.

All of the separate Sunday services run like clockwork. As St. Andrew's 9 a.m. service ends, the 11 a.m. service for First Christian is getting ready to start, followed by the 1 p.m. service for Mount Olivet, and The Gathering at 5 p.m.

"We greet each other and say hello as the shift changes," quipped First Christian's pastor, the Rev. Carol Lynn Cook.

Beit Tikvah meets there on Friday evenings and on Saturday mornings, in observance of the Jewish Sabbath. That congregation covers up the Christian cross, and brings in its own ark and Torah. Beit Tikvah also has storage space in the church's social hall. The only major component of Beit Tikvah not at First Christian is its Keshet Sunday School, which is at the Waldorf School of Baltimore, in Coldspring-Newtown.

On Palm Sunday, the good will was evident at First Christian, where Smart stayed for the First Christian service and told Cook, "You had a nice service."

As First Christian members left, they stopped to chat with members of Mount Olivet, who were just coming in.

"It's nice," said Mary Simms, 79, a member of First Christian since 1963. "I meet new people and make new friends."

"I like it," said Harriet Conion, 74, who joined Mount Olivet in 1954. "You better believe it's different."

Church music ranges from bagpipes to a gospel choir. One year, the St. Andrew's bagpiper played the Hebrew song "Hava Nagila" at a joint service.

"It was priceless," Bolton recalled.

Collectively, the congregations are rich in religious as well as cultural diversity. Mount Olivet and First Christian are the most traditional and are members of Disciples of Christ. Beit Tikvah is a Reconstructionist congregation that emphasizes a progressive, contemporary approach to Jewish life and integrates traditional Judaism with "insights and ideas of contemporary social, intellectual and spiritual life," its website states.

St. Andrew's has a "Scottish flavor and Celtic references to Christian thought," says its website. Smart, former longtime minister at Second Presbyterian Church in Guilford, wears a kilt for services and said too many denominations are "burdened with rules."

The Gathering, in its 10th year, is an offshoot of University Baptist Church in Charles Village and First Christian. Smith said it typifies the emerging church, a movement that crosses boundaries and denominations and stresses community outreach.

But several of the congregations have more in common than the roof over their heads. Cook, 61, a former teacher in Wheeling, W. Va., moved to Baltimore in 2006 with her husband, Russell, who had taken a job as chairman of the communications department at Loyola University Maryland. She has since graduated from the ecumenical institute at St. Mary's Seminary & University, in Roland Park, was ordained at First Christian Church in 2009 and became pastor following last year's departure of the Rev. John Carter.

The Gathering's Smith, 65, of Timonium, a former Black & Decker human resources manager, was ordained in 1998 after graduating from the St. Mary's institute.

Adams, 58, of Randallstown, was also ordained in 2009, as pastor of Mount Olivet, his lifetime church. Adams has kept his longtime job in the Postal Service's statistical programs department. "It can be a challenge," he said.

For Cook, of Original Northwood, Easter Sunday will have special significance. It will be her first as a permanent pastor.

"It is exciting," she said, especially the chance to work with the other Christian congregations during Holy Week. "It's a chance to deepen our relationship."