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---FEATURES

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Baptist Church at Retirement
Village Youthful, Vigorous

By Tim Nicholas

SUN CITY, Ariz. (BP)--First Baptist Church of Sun City has become what is believed to be the first Southern Baptist church to be constituted in a retirement community.

But a visit to the church denies the image you might expect to see of a fellowship of tired, decrepit retirees who hobble around, hardly able to go to church.

Sun City itself is unique in the nation. An unincorporated, non-political community for senior citizens, governed by a homeowners association, Sun City has a current population of 25,000 adults. Living in homes with prices starting at \$25,000, the residents can enjoy any of more than 125 clubs and organizations and complete recreational facilities.

Residents must be at least 50 years old. But it is hardly just a place for bridge, whittling and loneliness.

First encounter at the church was with five members digging trenches by the prayer garden. They laughed and yelled at each other, oblivious to either their ages, or the 90-degree heat.

Their pastor, Eugene Virt, "a 49-year-old kid" with pepper hair and moustache, is not even old enough to live in the community. He is loved by the congregation, not simply endured as a young upstart.

Last year 24 members came to interview Virt for the job. After his trial sermon, a member told him, "In your 20-minute message you said more than we've heard before in 45 minutes. This means a lot to us."

"The one thing this group appreciates is good old fashioned country preaching," said Virt. "They're conservative and I'm conservative; they're thrifty and I'm thrifty."

Nonetheless the church has been giving \$400 per week over their budget, which is paying a property loan from the Arizona State Baptist Convention and a building loan from the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board.

What makes a grandfather clock like this tick?

John Hoffman, 82, and his wife Dora, married for 61 years, are typical of the lifeblood of the former mission of First Baptist of Phoenix. "I worked harder at this church than any other job," said Hoffman, who formerly worked with Wernher von Braun in early American rocketry research in New Mexico.

"I never planned on getting involved in a church," said Hoffman. But he did help begin the congregation five years ago in one of the resident's homes.

Hoffman received a presidential commendation for 33 hours of bravery in rescue work at Pearl Harbor in 1941, and he can still throw his weight around. He took care of 10 lawns for neighbors last year.

"People come here crying sometimes. These people need to be taught that Christianity is no rocking chair life," he said.

One depressing fact came to light during the course of the conversation. There is a suicide nearly every month at Sun City.

The church's pastor, Virt, explained that "the reason we have suicides is that people reach retirement age and see what's ahead and think about eternity."

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Church visitation is a bit different here than in most churches, according to Virt. "You call ahead for an appointment, especially if that person is not a church member," he said.

In riding across Sun City to another church member's home one saw people outside bowling on the lawn, swimming in the pools which have no lifeguards, and playing golf on Sun City's golf courses. "The Ten Commandments" was playing at the local theater with two shows daily.

It was hot, but low humidity made it bearable. It hadn't rained since Dec. 29. Lack of rain was one golfer's complaint--the only complaint heard. Most people agreed that the climate had brought them there.

Bob Looper, one of the church members, said he had been taking 14 pain pills per day two years ago when he came to Sun City. Now he takes none.

Leroy Smith, an associational missionary for the Phoenix area and a resident of Sun City, said that he and his wife Claudine ride bikes each night about seven miles. Smith is one of the 7,000 non-retired residents in the city of 25,000. The population doubled last year, with 2,200 homes sold in 1971.

All the church members seem to have quite a set of credentials. Mrs. Janie Boyle, a senior budget analyst for the U.S. Navy, is church treasurer. Bill McKnight, a member, helped start one of the few locally owned banks and became a vice president of it.

Herbert and Kathryn Everett, church historians, are not yet retired. Both work in local real estate. They married only six years ago after both had lost a spouse.

Everett described the Sun City church as a fellowship of unity. "I know of no animosity at all," he said. "We disagree about a lot of things, but we aren't disagreeable."

Among other things, Everett is chairman of the church's board of deacons, secretary to the directors of a local hospital, and president of the local Kiwanis International organization.

The only thing that seems to be missing from Sun City is children. But some of the residents, like Mrs. Ouida Place of Georgia, admit they came to Sun City to get away from such things as "noise, traffic and kids."

Missionary Smith said he believes the Sun City church is the first Baptist congregation to be constituted as a self-supporting church in a retirement village, though there are some "missions" or "chapels" located in other such communities.

The constituting service of the church began with a Bible-belt-style "Amen," and ended with a baptismal service. It included a dinner on the parking lot--the location symbolizing the willingness of the 81 charter members to have fellowship out of doors until they have a fellowship hall.

The occasion was a happy one, full of joy and good cheer, enthusiasm for the future, and surprising vigor and vitality for a church full of retirees.

First Baptist Church of Sun City shattered all the stereotypes of "retirement," convincing a 24-year-old writer and 30-year-old photographer that "aged" is a dirty word.



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