



April 24, 1975

--- FEATURES

produced by Baptist Press

SBC Executive Committee
480 James Robertson Parkway
Nashville, Tennessee 37219
(615) 244-2355
W. C. Fields, Director
Robert J. O'Brien, News Editor
James Lee Young, Features Editor

Walnut Street Cracks Inner City Barriers

By Larry Jerden

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (BP)--When someone describes Walnut Street Baptist Church in Louisville, Ky., as an "inner city" church, they must be prepared to deal with an "inner city" that goes beyond the common stereotype.

The church is in the center of the geographical heart of "Old Louisville," an area about a mile wide and 1 1/2 miles long.

Because of its elaborate variety of Victorian architecture, the area is listed in the national registry of historical landmarks.

"There are about 17,000 people in this area," says Robert Nowlin, the church's minister of community missions, "and for years the church operated on the assumption that this was a total poverty area.

"But it isn't. It is the most diversified area in Louisville. Almost 40 per cent, for example, are middle and upper income."

The Old Louisville area is seeing a reversal of the deterioration that had been letting many of the fine old structures go to ruin, and there is now an influx of young professional families moving in, Nowlin said.

A Neighborhood Development Corporation is supported largely by Walnut Street and other area churches. And Nowlin is looking forward to the organization of an Old Louisville Business and Professional Association.

While about three-fourths of the church's 6,000 members commute from the suburbs, the congregation maintains about the same number of local families in its membership it had 15 years ago.

In an effort to minister to all segments of the local community--and the suburban membership--Walnut Street has organized its work in five areas with a minister to head each: (1) preaching and pastoral ministry, (2) recreation, (3) education, (4) music (5) community missions.

All five, said Associate Pastor Robert Young, have one common purpose. "Everything," he emphasized, "points to evangelism. We are here to touch people and put them in a relationship with Christ.

Both Young and Nowlin emphasized the role of the laity in the church ministries.

"We only hire staff to enlist and train laymen to do the work," Young explained.

"Bob Nowlin can't deal personally with every alcoholic...but he has trained 25 laymen... David Leyerle, the minister of activities, doesn't coach all 47 ball teams..."

The various ministries are geared to reach the diverse elements in the church's constituency, Young cited a two-week religious fine arts festival sponsored by Walnut Street.

"That got people in our church who would never come otherwise," he said.

The \$1.5 million recreation building, which includes a gym, handball court, sauna, bowling alley, snack bar, crafts room, table game room and dining facilities, is open daily for both neighborhood residents and suburban church members.

"Participation," Young pointed out, "is keyed to Sunday School attendance, and anyone missing three weeks has to be reinstated before they can use the facilities."

The church peaked in Sunday School attendance in 1956-57, then started a decade-long decline that dropped the average to a little over 1,000 a week in 1967.

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The decline caused concern, that precipitated action through several committee studies of the church's work.

The result was a statement of purpose emphasizing evangelism and the five areas of work still followed.

The studies' also resulted in the commitment, Young said, that Walnut Street could settle for nothing less than the best in its program and still survive.

"We had observed that an inner city church that ministers only to the inner city will die."

The answer, he said, was to match the resources of the suburbs and apply them to the inner city.

"If we don't offer something that will get people to drive by 15 other churches on their way down here, we'll be dead in two years."

Music, education, and preaching ministries continue to draw the suburban members, but social and recreation ministries mostly touch those in the neighborhood--especially the poor.

Nowlin's social ministries--the name is changing to community missions--is primarily in touching the inner city.

"A lot of our work is crisis intervention," he said.

"When we are put into contact with someone who needs help...we try to determine the need, how to meet the need, and what we can do to solve it and break the dependency cycle."

"If all we do is give them something to meet the immediate need, then we haven't really solved anything."

But there is more to Nolen's ministry than the "welfare" and "crisis" roles, he said.

A larger facet is aimed primarily at "socialization" of people who simply do not know how to relate to others.

"We have girls' clubs, mothers' clubs, and other activities," he explained.

"Our goal is socialization--how to relate to each other, to adults, to teachers. Last year probably every girl in our girls' club had been expelled from school because they couldn't get along with teachers."

Others to reach include unwed mothers and other singles, many of whom feel rejected by the church.

One approach is in combining the mothers' clubs with Bible study.

Nowlin told of one young unwed mother who was very negative in her attitudes about church, and wouldn't come to any of the activities.

But she never missed a Bible study held in her mother's home.

Understanding the acceptance of the group, she exclaimed one day, "You mean you want me in your church?"

Even when many understand they are accepted, Nowlin said, there is still a large gap between "where they are" socially and emotionally and the social and emotional state of the upper and middle class church members.

To try and bridge that gap, Walnut Street is beginning a Wednesday Community Worship Service, tentatively slated for Saturday afternoons.

Nowlin said the Saturday service-fellowship is a steppingstone to help those who need to learn to interact with others in a church setting and, probably, with the rest of society as well.

David Leyerle, who recently joined the staff as recreation minister, also sees his ministry as one that will bridge gaps.

At present, about 100 neighborhood youths a day, mostly blacks, use the activities building for recreation. On Wednesday nights the majority swings to suburban, mostly white, members.

Leyerle's associate, Larry Briggs, said one attempt to bridge the neighborhood-suburban gap is in expanding the athletic program to include intramural leagues. At present, the church fields teams in sports which compete in association leagues.

Walnut Street's ministries are diverse and challenging. Pastor Wayne Dehoney studies 30-hours per week to make his preaching meaningful for everyone from illiterates to the elderly to young blacks to University of Louisville professors.

And if the church has met some challenges, there are others ahead. Many of the programs are geared for after-school periods, and are possible only because Louisville still has neighborhood schools.

"There is the threat of busing in the courts right now," Nowlin lamented, "and if it comes, it will kill our after-school programs."

But Walnut Street has not lost its vision. If anything, it may be on the verge of its greatest expansion. The church recently purchased, for a little more than half-a-million dollars, an old vacated hospital.

"The possibilities of what we can do with 259,000 square feet are endless," Young said.

"So far we've discussed day care, elderly day care, ministry to the blind, class for alcoholics, ministries for retarded children, and others."

DALLAS (BP)--An 83-year-old author-evangelist-watchmaker poignantly recalls the pinnacle of God's power in her life.

Corrie ten Boom, author of 11 books including the best-seller, *The Hiding Place*, spoke to a Baptist women's meeting at First Baptist Church here attended by about 4,500 people, who overflowed the sanctuary into other areas equipped with closed circuit television.

Her peak experience came, she said, not during the 10 months she spent in a Nazi concentration camp as might be expected but several years later at a Munich church.

She was leaving after giving her Christian testimony. The memory of those grueling months spent in a cell with 700 women during World War II and the deaths of her sister and father were all still very vivid.

A man approached her to thank her for the testimony. Suddenly, the horror of her imprisonment at the Ravensbruck extermination camp painfully flashed through her mind.

"This man was a former S. S. (Nazi storm trooper) and one of the most cruel guards at Ravensbruck," she said.

"But he told me Jesus had come into his life," she said, "and now he wanted my forgiveness."

She bitterly remembered the cruel atrocities he had caused her, her dead sister, Betsie, and many others.

"He wanted to shake hands but I just couldn't. I tried to smile but it wouldn't come," Miss ten Boom said. "So, I breathed a silent prayer asking forgiveness of my hatred."

Miss ten Boom continued, "As I took his hand an incredible thing happened. God's love went streaking through my arm to my hand. You have never felt the ocean of God's love as when you forgive someone you hate."

The Dutch spinster had been arrested in 1944 for aiding Jews in their escape from Nazi occupation forces.

She was released from the concentration camp by clerical error only days before women of her age were exterminated.

Since then, Miss ten Boom has traveled around the world giving her Christian testimony.

A film based on her *Hiding Place* book will be released this year under the banner of World Wide Pictures, an enterprise of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association.



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APR 25 1975

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HISTORICAL COMMISSION
127 9TH AVE. NO.
NASHVILLE TN 37203