

BLACK CHURCH, WHITE NEIGHBORS

FOUNDED BY FREED SLAVES, MATTHEWS MURKLAND STRUGGLES TO SURVIVE AS ONCE-RURAL SITE BECOMES AFFLUENT SUBURBIA.

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CHARLOTTE OBSERVER: CAROLINA LIVING SECTION

By Elizabeth Leland, eleland@charlotteobserver.com

Matthews Murkland Presbyterian Church formed in the 1880s to serve freed slaves and survived two fires in the next 120 years, but it may be facing its biggest challenge.

The once rural African American church is struggling now that it's surrounded by affluent, predominantly white suburbs.

"We're not out in the country any more," said member Kenneth Alexander. "Our challenge is to make our presence known."

The church, on Old Providence Road near Rea Road, is important for historical and cultural reasons. It attracted worldwide attention in 1996 when an arsonist burned down the old sanctuary.

"It has such a legacy," said the Rev. Alexander Porter, a former minister there.

The church was founded after the Civil War with help from a white minister, the Rev. Sidney Murkland, who was ostracized by whites because of it. Former slaves and freedmen left Providence Presbyterian Church, where they had been relegated to an upstairs gallery, to join the new all-black church. The official name was Murkland Church, according to the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, but members knew it as "Little Providence."

They came by foot or in carts from surrounding farms where they eked out a living by raising what they ate and growing cotton as a cash crop.

THE FIRST FIRE

The first fire came in 1911. A brush fire raged and burned down the church. Only the bell survived. Parishioners built a new sanctuary and, in it, they installed the bell.

For the next 85 years, the church continued on its way, quietly. It merged in 1969 with another church, Matthews Chapel, to form Matthews Murkland Presbyterian Church, and parishioners erected a modern sanctuary, where they still worship. The old wooden sanctuary built in 1911 was used to store pews.

As Charlotte changed, so did Matthews Murkland. Children grew up and moved to the city. Many returned Sundays to worship, but others found churches closer to their new homes.

Membership declined.

Then came the second fire. More than 300 churches - 243 of them African American - were bombed or damaged by fire in the late 1990s. The blaze at historic Matthews Murkland one night in June 1996 prompted President Clinton to call for federal action.

A 13-year-old white girl pleaded guilty, though police said her motives were more anti-Christian than anti-black.

Help poured in from around the world for the little church founded by freed slaves.

But Matthews Murkland didn't need a new sanctuary. And it didn't need a new family life center. An estimated \$264,000 in donations, Alexander said, went toward a bus, a van, repairs and a variety of ministries.

VISITING PREACHERS

The money is gone, and the attention, and many of the parishioners. The church has no permanent minister. Parishioner Walter Nelson said 50 or 60 people worship every Sunday, led by visiting preachers.

"I think the church can be a viable part of the community... serving the entire community as we go forward in the future," Nelson said. His hope is that one day "all people of all cultures and backgrounds will eventually populate the church."

That, said Professor Kameron Carter of Duke Divinity School, is the only way an old country church like Matthews Murkland can survive in predominantly white suburbia.

"They're going to have to reimagine who their constituency is," Carter said. "There needs to be an adjustment of attitudes."

Not just the church's attitude, he said, but the community's attitude.

"It seems to me that in an age of Obama, churches that find themselves in this predicament have a golden opportunity."

LEARN MORE

*To read about the history of the church, go to <http://www.cmhpf.org/surveys&rmurkland.htm>

*Services: 11 a.m. Sunday, 7001 Old Providence Road, 704-365-5032.

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