

The future of the church

Congregations adapting to changing times, society

By **JON BLEIWEIS**
jbleiweis@baltsun.com

Rob Powell has seen plenty of change during 47 years as a member of St. John's United Church of Christ in Catonsville.

The 64-year-old Catonsville resident believes it's the willingness to change that has allowed the church to thrive, as it reaches its 150th anniversary on March 9, but it's not change that has come quickly.

Over the years, he has noticed progressives — younger members who want change aligned with current feelings and topics pervasive in society — wanting to push forward, while older members want to keep the status quo.

The cultural changes have included how sermons are delivered, whether it be from the pulpit or as a dialogue with the pastor and someone else, the times of services — the church over the years went from three Sunday morning services to one at 10 a.m. — and what people wear.

"Somewhere along the line there's a compromise that's drawn, and it doesn't happen as quick as the progressive members would want it to happen and it happens sooner than the conservative members want it to happen," he said. "But we eventually get there."

The church is open, but not affirming, to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender members, Powell said. He expects the church will be affirming within the next few years.

"This is something that would not have even entered into discussion 20 years ago," he said. "We're gradually moving in that direction."

At the end, it's fellowship and worship that will prevail, he said.

"We've learned what is important and what isn't so much so," he said.

Does Powell believe his church can survive another 150 years?

"If we're willing to change with the times, I would say yes," he said.

Maryland's religious heritage is deep. Churches on the Eastern Shore date to before the state's settlement in 1632, said John Willard, an instructor in the history department at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, who researches religion.

The age of churches in southwest Baltimore County is not unique to the area, Willard said.

Their longevity, however, speaks to a common theme, he said.

"It's really about whether they create and sustain community," he said. "You get



STAFF PHOTOS BY JEN RYNDRA

Joseph Glaze, center, pastor of St. John's UCC, in the sanctuary with members of the Catonsville church, below. The members are Rob Powell, of Catonsville, left, Bonnie Deibel, of Catonsville, Virginia Hoffman, of Catonsville, Connie Heasley, of Arbutus, and Sandy McCawley, right, of Sykesville.

a community that speaks with a common voice and a common language."

As area churches arrive at more milestones, some leaders express hope that they will thrive but know they need to adapt to changes in society.

Church leaders say community outreach is something that needs to be evaluated as they strive to remain relevant.

At St. John's, church members are active with food drives for the needy, school supply drives and an "ugly quilt" campaign, where people donate materials that members sew into sleeping bags that are given to the homeless. As part of its 150th anniversary, the church is collecting 150 bags of food to donate to Catonsville Emergency Services, a nonprofit that gives food to those in need.

"I definitely want to be optimistic and positive about that, but it takes churches opening up and reaching out to make that happen," said the Rev. Lysbeth Cockrell,



pastor at Halethorpe-Relay United Methodist Church, which was started in 1893.

"The church historically has become a dinosaur in many ways simply because of the structures we struggle to maintain," said the Rev. Beverly Lewis, pastor at Immanuel United Church of Christ, a church in Catonsville that celebrated 150 years last November.

In the 1950s, Immanuel had more than 300 members, Lewis said. Today, there are less than 100. She is unsure whether the church will bounce back to those numbers — or even whether it will last another 150 years.

She said the mainline denominations of churches lost generations of members in the 1980s. Sundays are now no longer a



STAFF PHOTO BY JEN RYNDA

Jim McDonnell, Our Lady of Victory Parish manager, in front of stained glass windows from the old Cardinal Gibbons School, that hanging at the church.



STAFF PHOTO BY JON BLEIWEIS

The Rev. Beverly Lewis of Immanuel United Church of Christ.

sacred time for some, she said, as the decision to go to church competes with school events, youth sports and “everything in the world that didn’t used to exist on Sundays.”

She thinks progressive churches may see a bump in membership because of the current political climate, but the challenge is for her church to overcome its “instinctive timidity” and become more extro-

verted.

“That’s easy for me to say,” she said. “But it’s real hard to do.”

Religion is important to the lives of many, pastors and researchers say.

There are 332,827 adherents to 527 congregations in Baltimore County, as of 2010, the most recent year information was available from the Association of Religion Data Archives, a research center at the Pennsylvania State University. The county’s population then was 805,029.

Of the 153 parishes in the Archdiocese of Baltimore, 34 are in Baltimore County, including Our Lady of Victory Parish, a Roman Catholic church in Arbutus. Its Parish manager, Jim McDonnell, has been at the church since 1996 and said membership has been on a steady decline.

McDonnell, 60, said the church used to be a social hub for people of faith. Now, he said, there’s a challenge to get volunteers to organize events such as spaghetti dinners. The church was founded in 1952.

After a culling of records two years ago, membership went from 1,200 families to 800, he said. Since then, membership has

declined to about 600 as older members die and other families move from the area.

“I think it’s just the demographic of the people who are moving out,” he said. “Those moving in are not Catholic, or if they are, they aren’t attending as they used to.”

The church hasn’t had a membership campaign, but it has provided outreach by expanding its youth group and providing ministry services at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. A change of pastor and associate pastor in September has brought a slight uptick in membership by about 20 families, he said.

At Church of the Ascension in Halethorpe, which started in 1913, its pastor, the Rev. John Williamson, said the church has the means to stay relevant for another 100 years.

“None of us can predict the future but I don’t see any reason it wouldn’t be,” he said. “People seem committed with their sense of ownership and community.”

But that won’t happen without adjustments and thinking outside the box to try to attract members, he said. In his nine years as pastor, the church has started a youth ministry to attract families, as well as adult education programs.

As a result, membership has stayed at about 800 families, he said. While some members die or move away, new families have come.

The challenge for the Arbutus area, he said, is a lack of new housing. McDonnell shared similar sentiments.

“It’s not like in some places where new housing developments are coming up,” Williamson said. “The population is remaining the same in Arbutus. That is a challenge. It’s much easier in a place with more growth going on.”

In recent years, churches have been home to various community organizations and support groups.

Sandy McCawley, a 58-year-old Catonsville resident who is a lifetime member of St. John’s, said that ability will help the church last until its next major anniversary. The church opens its building for meetings for a variety of groups, including the Girl Scouts, homeowner associations and Alcoholics Anonymous, she said.

“Reaching out and sharing our resources is very important to us,” she said.

Over the last 20 years, Immanuel United Church of Christ has housed about a dozen different support groups unrelated to the church, such as for those addicted to alcohol, narcotics, sex or cluttering. It also is the base for community groups, such as the Catonsville Cooperative Market, a member-owned market that sells produce and natural products.

“The least we can do is have a space,” Lewis said. “The most we can do is help.”