

A Church on the Move

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As 22-year-old Tracy Barnes marched under the sunny skies in Randallstown yesterday morning, she urged several of her Sunday school children never to forget the day. "You all had better remember this," Ms. Barnes told the students at Union Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church. "Tell your children. This is history."

After 166 years at 8502 Liberty Road, Union Bethel A.M.E., known as "the Church on the Hill," was moving to 8615 Church Lane, less than a mile away. The congregation marched in procession to the new building to formally mark the move. The church's growing membership made it necessary to find a new building, said its minister, the Rev. Charles T. Sembly. Luckily, church officers said, the new site already had a building and was close by, so the church can continue to serve the same community.

The new building, a former synagogue, cost "several hundred thousand dollars," Mr. Sembly said, adding that members pitched in by helping to paint and clean the building. It seats 600 to 700 people, compared with 200 at the old location, Mr. Sembly said. "It's because of God we have been able to acquire this facility," he said. "It's truly a blessing."

Ms. Barnes, a member for nine years, said she'll always have fond memories of the old building. "There's a lot of history there," she said. "A lot of people were baptized and found the Lord there." More than 200 people joined Ms. Barnes in the 20-minute march from the old to the new church. Some carried banners such as: "We are family." Happy, rhythmic verses of "Amen" and other gospel songs filled the street. Some marchers waved to residents.

"The old church, we'll miss it, but we've got to keep on moving," said Joyce Blackwell, 38, who has attended Union Bethel for 36 years. As the congregation moved around the corner onto Old Court Road, member Jacqueline Zachary said that she was enthusiastic about how the bigger site could allow Union Bethel to reach more people in the Liberty Road corridor.

When the marchers reached the gray marble building on Church Lane, Mr. Sembly greeted them with a big smile. "We're just excited about this," he said. Since Union Bethel held its last worship service July 26 at the Liberty Road building, First Christ United Baptist Church has moved in.

During the first worship service on Church Lane, Union Bethel members sang and clapped to Gospel music in the jammed sanctuary. The church's officers thanked God for their new home. "We've come a long way from the Log Cabin on the Hill," said steward Norman Horn.

In 1826, a white family named Jean donated land called George's Park to free blacks in predominantly white Randallstown so that they could build a church. The congregation named their church Good Hope Church, because they had hope for the future. Because members used logs to build the church, they nicknamed it "Little Log Church." The name was changed to Union Bethel A.M.E. in the mid-1800s. The church was used in the Underground Railroad that transported slaves to the North.

A brick building replaced the wooden one in 1963, Mr. Sembly said. He has been the minister since October 1984.