

Part-time Pastor Grace Washington Watches Her Church Mushroom

In Dec., 1985, when the Rev. Grace Washington was assigned as pastor to Flat Shoals United Methodist Church in Decatur, the choir consisted of two women.

"I kept waiting for the rest of the choir to come in," recalled Mrs. Washington about her first Sunday at the church. "I didn't know that was the choir."

Now there are two choirs; a 28-member adult choir and a 40-member youth choir. The growth in the music program is symbolic of this black congregation that has also blossomed in all other aspects of its church ministry.

Started in the 1950s as the white Aldersgate congregation, the church never really flourished and was finally closed and the buildings sold. After the buyers defaulted on the loan, the church was returned to the United Methodist North Georgia Conference which then started a black congregation.

The church's name was changed to Flat Shoals and it was placed under the auspices of the Office of Church Development which allowed it to receive financial and other help from the conference. Still the congregation struggled until Mrs. Washington was appointed as part-time local pastor a little over three years ago.

THE CHURCH'S membership has increased from eight in 1985 to 227 today, including 154 full members and 73 preparatory members from infants to age 18. What's more, Mrs. Washington said, the Sunday School has grown from two classes with five or six present to five classes with an attendance of around 40. Attendance is so good

at the Sunday morning services that the church is thinking about double services.

With a \$35,000 grant from Church Development, Flat Shoals completed an \$85,000 renovation project a year ago with little indebtedness. It will burn the note on the \$4,000 loan it took out in a ceremony next month.

As the church has grown so have Mrs. Washington's responsibilities as pastor. Last month the wife and mother of two teenage daughters quit her full-time job at Decatur Federal in order to devote more time to the church and to her studies. She plans to enter Interdenominational Theological Seminary this fall, and her relationship to the conference will change to student local pastor.

What has brought about this rejuvenation in a church with a history of struggle? Mrs. Washington credits it to several factors. One is a "ministry of love. It's been professed by many who visit the church that love is what they receive when they come here," she said. "We're known as the hugging church."

Another factor just as important is a strong spirituality, she continued. "If we lift up the name of the Savior, then we draw," Mrs. Washington said. "Whatever has happened I must contribute to preaching the word of God."

What's more, members are committed to telling others about their church. "The greatest evangelism," she said, "is word of mouth — members inviting people to come." Flat Shoals has adopted a program of "pew evangelism" whereby different families each

month are charged with filling a pew for that month. Every three months the congregation also visits door-to-door in the community and will distribute as many as 1,500 pamphlets during its quarterly visitation.

FLAT SHOALS also has an active outreach ministry. It collects food all month long and then at the end of the month gives it away to a needy family recommended by the DeKalb County Family and Children's Services. The United Methodist Women serve lunches to homeless women and children at the Women's Community Kitchen, a project of North Georgia Conference Urban Action program. And for the past three years the church has been a part of a "Meals on Wheels" program.

The strength of the Flat Shoals church today is also seen in its increase in giving. "When I went there," Mrs. Washington said, "they were not even receiving \$25 a month. Sometimes one of those eight members would have to take a utility bill and pay it.

"Now," she continued, "we average each week receiving between \$1,100-\$1,200. Again it's teaching the word of God, the principles of giving and the commitment that people make when they unite with the connectional church, that they will support it with their prayers, time and resources."

Perhaps Flat Shoals' vitality today in all areas can best be characterized by Mrs. Washington's statement about her congregation. "We've really learned how to give."