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Historic Decatur Church To Close Downtown Doors

By FRAN FOSSETT

Decatur's Mt. Zion Baptist Church, quietly going about the Lord's business in the shadows of Court Square for nearly a century, is closing its weather-worn doors and taking that business to the outskirts of town.

The old, one-story frame structure, its paint now peeling and its rooms showing their age, will probably be torn down, says Pastor Ulysses Buggs. In its place will eventually be the new Fidelity National Bank facilities.

Unless you happen to be among its eighty-some members, Mt. Zion is not a church you'd be likely to notice. Tucked away in a grove of hardwood trees behind DeKalb Office Supply and the Decatur Medical Specialists buildings on Church Street and the Big Star grocery on Columbia Drive, its access is still only a sometimes-passable dirt road.

But its view from the front door is enviable. Ad-

joining the historic Decatur Cemetery, Mt. Zion's front steps overlook the cemetery lake and the rolling hillsides beyond. And the little, shaded lot is still 'home.'

"We tried to find a way to rebuild here," Rev. Buggs says, "but there just wasn't the space."

So when the property was sold, Mt. Zion purchased land on Pharr Road near the city's McKoy Park. Plans for a new, brick structure to be built there hang on the walls just off the sanctuary, and the congregation hopes to have groundbreaking ceremonies within the next few weeks.

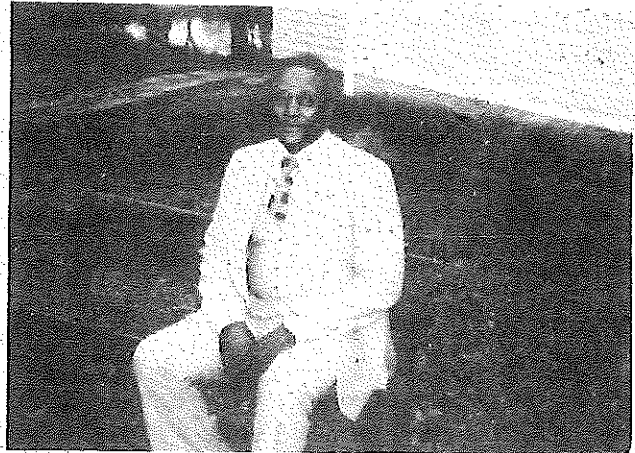
"We'll move to Beacon School while the new church is built," Rev. Buggs explains, "and that will be all right."

Rev. Buggs is only the third pastor of Mt. Zion's flock, much of which is third-generation Mt. Zion.

The soft-spoken pastor says his congregation is enthusiastic about breaking ground for the new church, and the prospect of central

heat, and easier-upkeep construction, and paved parking, and classroom space, and all those other latter-day amenities is cause for rejoicing.

But if you gaze outward from the front door of proud, little Mt. Zion Church, it's hard not to feel that the soul of the Decatur Cemetery won't miss that watchful eye from across the lake.



Watchful Eye To Close

Rev. Ulysses Buggs, minister of Mt. Zion Baptist Church in downtown Decatur, sits beside the old, frame structure which overlooks the city cemetery. Mt. Zion's congregation plans to break ground soon for its new facilities on Pharr Road, as progress overtakes its heart-of-the-city location.

Debate
9/12/90



**ASHLEY SMITH
WINS CROWN**

Ashley Riana Smith is crowned Little Miss Mt. Zion by Mrs. Grace Rowe. The church is located on LaVista Road in Decatur.

Failed effort to rename his Decatur street for him becomes a vehicle for bringing his neighbors together

By Lillian Guevara-Castro
STAFF WRITER

When members of Mount Zion Baptist Church set out to honor their lifelong pastor and friend, they had no idea that it would test his ability to unite people.

Soon after family and friends of the Rev. Roy Moss Sr. got approval from the city of Decatur to rename the street where he lives for him, a handful of neighbors contested the decision. As a result, city officials reversed themselves.

Now, black and white residents of Garland Avenue, who for years had virtually no con-

tact, are sitting down to work out a way to honor the 91-year-old pastor.

"Reverend Moss may have given us an opportunity to really put to work what his life represented," said Decatur Mayor Mike Mears.

Gary Thurman said he opposed the street name change because of the inconvenience of having to notify all his creditors. But after meeting the Rev. Moss, Mr. Thurman said he favors honoring the lifelong Decatur resident somehow.

"He's a wonderful man," said Mr. Thurman, who went to the Rev. Moss's home to tell him that his disagreement with the street

name change was not personal. "He told me about his life. When you live 90 years, you have a lot to say."

Roy Moss Sr. was born in Decatur in 1900 "before Decatur was big enough to be called a city," he recalled.

When he was 22 years old, he began working for the city as part of a street construction crew.

When the new Decatur City Hall was completed in 1926, he became the building's first full-time janitor. He retired at age 53 after 30 years of service but wasted no time in finding another job.

"I retired on a Monday and

started to work for Belk-Gallant [department store] the next day," the Rev. Moss said. He worked 16 years with the store, which at the time was next door to City Hall.

Members of Mount Zion Baptist Church, where the Rev. Moss was pastor for 29 years, had planned to surprise him with a ceremony renaming the street. Then they heard that not all Garland residents agreed with the change and that the city, as a result, would not proceed.

The news of the retraction still has some church members sorely disappointed.

"You've never seen a man so happy when they read the letter

[announcing city approval] or loud at the church," said Eugene Teasley, the Mount Zion Baptist Church clerk. "Even though he doesn't want an honor here on earth, he was overjoyed."

After a meeting of Garland Avenue residents last month, a majority of the neighbors agreed to name the small triangular park in front of the Rev. Moss home for him. The city, church members and his neighbors plan to turn the natural area into a garden. One neighbor already has offered to donate several hundred bulbs for planting.

Please see PASTOR, 5

Pastor: Disunity leads to harmony

► Continued from 1

Neighbor Izora Seymore, who spearheaded the petition drive to rename the street, said she cast the lone vote to stick with the original plan. But she also said she'll be a part of any honor bestowed on him.

"If we start a committee [to work on the park], maybe we can get together as a community," she said.

*"He's a wonderful
man."*

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Gary Thurman

Decatur City Commissioner
Elizabeth Wilson, who mediated

the meeting, said she expects to hold the first official community workday at the park sometime in the spring, when a commemorative plaque renaming the area will be erected.

"Out of all the negatives, [the neighbors] turned it into a positive," Ms. Wilson said. "Now we have a common cause to make our community better."

HONORING A PASTOR

Idea gone awry comes aright for 91-year-old



The Rev. Roy Moss Sr., pastor of Mount Zion Baptist Church in Decatur for 29 years, sits in a favorite easy chair, his Bible at hand.

DAVID TULIS / Spec