

CENTER CITY[©]

VOLUME II, NUMBER 22
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AFTER A
CENTURY AND A HALF
DOWNTOWN —

CITY-BUILDING:

by JAMES ROPER

A NEW ROLE FOR CHURCHES

"The trouble is, we spend all our time coping with problems instead of building. In Downtown Memphis we have all the ingredients to build a community. But only if people have a commitment to Downtown as an experiment in city-building.

"If everyone participates, we're going to have a community Downtown like no one has ever seen before."

— David Freeman

On a hot August day in 1842, Memphians picked up copies of a Fort Pickering newspaper, *The American Eagle*, to find a story about repair work going on at First Presbyterian Church at Third and Poplar.

The church was organized in 1828 and had moved to the location in 1834. Now, according to the story, the Presbyterians were hard at work building a new steeple and remodeling pews, among other chores. The article ended with a description of the church's pastor, a certain Reverend Harrison, from Virginia:

"He is what most wicked folks would call a strict, old fashioned, sober-sided Presbyterian, who preaches a good strong sermon, with a rather harsh delivery, is a good man in his walks, and promptly gives the devil his due."

David Freeman also is from Virginia, and while he might share other traits with Reverend Harrison, it's doubtful whether he could be called strict and old-fashioned.

Since the fall of 1968, when Mr. Freeman arrived in Memphis, the church has become involved in an assortment of projects aimed at interaction with the Downtown community. More recently, the church has been making plans for the celebration of its 147th birthday on June 7.

Mr. Freeman sees the upcoming celebration as a prelude to Memphis' celebration of the Bicentennial and a reminder to the Downtown community of the church's commitment to the area:

"You know, churches aren't taxed," he said, "and the reason isn't because of religion. It's because the church is supposed to be rendering a service to the community. If a church doesn't do that — if it only serves its church members — is there any real difference between it and a country club?"

"The birthday celebration is a way of telling Memphis we're here, we're proud to serve the Downtown community, and we intend to stay."

A spirit of involvement and cooperation with the Downtown community has guided the church in its program of interaction.

One project seemed to naturally lead into another one. When the State Department of Corrections needed space for its First Offender program, the church willingly lent it. The program's staff works in the church's adjoining educational building, training volunteers to work as counselors for first offenders, and providing counseling and assistance for the newly-released.

A recent addition to the program is "Thresholds," which provides counseling for incarcerated persons.

It was the First Offender program which led Mr. Freeman to realize the need for a permanent luncheon facility at the church.

"It began when we asked the First Offender staff if they wanted soup and a sandwich for a reasonable price during lunchtime," the pastor said. "The idea caught on. Pretty soon, workers from the government office buildings and City Hall were dropping by for lunch."

So the "CIVIC CENTER COMMUNITY CULINARY CLUB" was born. Diners seem pleased with their meals, which are served from 11:30 a.m. to 1:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. They're also pleased with the price, \$1.50, which includes tea or coffee.

Wednesday is "Spaghetti Day" and word has spread among the Downtown community that it's the best lunch bargain in town. The ladies who do the serving don't skimp on the portions. Generous helpings of slaw and garlic bread make the meal complete.

"A few church members didn't understand why we had such a program as the luncheons," Mr. Freeman said. "They couldn't see how the church could benefit from such a project."

Now the pastor has an argument for those members. One couple who began going to the luncheons, got to know the staff and some church members, and only recently joined First Presbyterian Church. Their home? St. Francis County, Arkansas.

"They drive over every Sunday for services. But, while we're not trying to win converts with spaghetti dinners, at least now I have an argument for the people who think such activities never help the church.

"The real purpose of projects like the Culinary Club is to bring people together. After all, we're in the people business and the community-building business. It should be natural for people to come together at the table. That's why the place we serve the meals is called Fellowship Hall. That's what it's for, fellowship, regardless of what different creeds are represented."

The church does not make any money from the meals. It simply wants to break even, while providing a much-needed service for Memphians Down-

town. Meal prices recently were increased from \$1.25 to \$1.50 only because of the rising cost of food, especially beef, needed in preparing the lunches.

* * *

In January of 1974, *Center City* began publishing from the church. Hardly a church paper, *Center City* not only covers news pertinent to the Downtown community but explores new ideas relevant to urban life. More importantly, it serves as a forum for writers, or any concerned citizens who want to air their views about the Downtown situation — what's wrong and how can it be improved.

* * *

Parents with jobs downtown who are in need of a day care center for their children can find an excellent one at First Presbyterian. Children of all faiths are accepted and a trained staff of four persons supervises the children's activities. A total of 25 children are enrolled in the day care center — none of whose parents happen to be members of First Presbyterian.

"We are planning to enlarge the program," Mr. Freeman said. "This fall, we will apply for a license to care for 30 children. We conceivably could handle as many as 40 sometime in the future."

Mr. Freeman sees the racial makeup of the day care center as an encouraging sign of what's happening in the downtown area.

"In the beginning, all the children were white," he explained, "Then, gradually, it seemed the day care center came very close to becoming all black. Recently things have changed. Now the center is almost equally divided between black and white children."

* * *

In the late 60's, Protestant and Catholic churches in Downtown banded together to form the Downtown Churches Association, in an effort to create rapport among the clergy who had mutual interests.

"We all realize it's important that we don't waste energy in needless competition," the pastor said.

They proved their point on May 18 — Pentecost Sunday — in an ecumenical service participated by both Protestant and Catholic clergy. Another service is planned for the Fourth of July.

* * *



Mr. Freeman sees Downtown churches as unique in that they offer something their suburban counterparts can't:

"Downtown is a community which represents the whole city. It is a place open to everyone. Nobody owns it. It's made up of different people who do different things."

The pastor tells the story of an East Memphis couple who visited churches of many denominations in the suburbs, hoping to find one they liked and could join:

"The wife complained that in the suburbs everyone seemed to look alike, think alike, and talk alike. There was no diversity. They came to First Presbyterian and they found different age groups, a racial mix, and people with varied backgrounds. I'm happy to say the couple recently joined our church. They come all the way from East Memphis for Sunday services."

Downtown Memphis and its potential represents a challenge for its residents and workers, according to Mr. Freeman:

"For the first time in the history of Memphis, there is a chance for a cross-section of people to experiment in interdependence."

The pastor feels that only in Downtown has the risk factor been lowered. Memphians who are interested in revitalizing the area don't have to be fearful in experimenting with new ideas or exploring ways of making the area a viable, healthy community. The decline of Downtown Memphis is now history, it's over. A vacuum has been created so there is room for exploring and testing.

"The trouble is, we spend all our time coping with problems instead of building. In Downtown Memphis we have all the ingredients to build a community. But only if people have a commitment to Downtown as an experiment in city-building," Mr. Freeman said.

"If everyone participates, we're going to have a community Downtown like no one has ever seen before."

Mr. Freeman says the church serves a vital role that is fundamental to Downtown. Regardless of the different faiths, the churches represent an aspect of human life not found anywhere else. He complains that often many of those who are the most vocal about the need for Downtown revitalization overlook the important work that the church has been doing in that area.

Each Sunday, Mr. Freeman observes, people come from all over the city to First Presbyterian Church. Also, for the first time in several years, the church's memberships are on the upswing.

Soon, visitors who cross the Hernando DeSoto Bridge into Memphis also will become aware of First Presbyterian Church and its pride in being part of the Downtown.

A huge sign with the words "First Presbyterian Church" will be painted on the back wall of the church, visible from the expressway:

"Again, we're telling Memphis and everyone else that we're here and we're doing our part."

During a recent visit to City Hall I stopped by to look at the model of our new Mid-America Mall. While examining the model I noticed that the existing bandstand in Court Square was omitted. Is this an oversight on the part of the model builder or is the bandstand to be demolished?

I not only hope that the bandstand will remain, but I believe that it should remain. Last spring & summer the bandstand was used frequently for concerts, and after completion of the mall there will be an even more frequent need for it. It might be well to note that there is a need for public restrooms somewhere in the mall area, and these facilities are already available under the bandstand.

Will you please check with the "Powers that Be" & let us know about the future of the bandstand.—**BOB HARPER**

EDITOR'S NOTE: Several of our readers have expressed sentiments similar to those voiced in this letter. If anyone can respond to this question with some authority, their doing so would be most appreciated by CENTER CITY and its readers.

earthly delights

DOWNTOWN EXHIBITS

First National Bank (Lobby)

June - Paintings by Richard Knowles
City Hall

June - Smithsonian Exhibit of Mississippi Folk Architecture, featuring the photographs and research of Wm. Ferris, co-director of the Memphis based Center for Southern Folklore

ACTIVITIES

Overton Park Shell (8:15 p.m.)

June 10 - "An Evening of Jazz" - MUS Jazz Band

June 12 - "A Night of Harmony" - Sweet Adelines & Dixie Cotton Boll Chorus

Over 70 Memphis celebrities, media personalities, and City officials will be racing their bikes at 1:00 p.m. Saturday, June 7, at Overton Park in the "See the Light - Save a Sight" Bike Race sponsored by the Shelby County Lion's Charities and Seven-Up Bottlers.

Anyone 16 years or older is invited to enter and predict the winner from the field of riders which will include radio personality Rick Dees, Mayor Wyeth Chandler, former Governor Winfield Dunn and his wife Betty, and Memphis Southman Willie Spencer.

Winners need not be present to win, and prizes will be awarded by random drawing bearing the bike race winner's name. Prizes include an old-time big wheeler bicycle, Sears ten-speed bikes, Sears radios, plus other valuable merchandise.



166 Poplar
Memphis, Tenn. 38103

words
swords

MORNING SKY RIBBON

*In a burst of sheer delight
the early birdman
Flung a wide length
Of white satin ribbon
Across the grand proscenium arch
Of blue Southern sky,
And hung a great loop of it
On the golden nose
Of Ole Sol himself:

Watching and admiring
Was a mesmerized audience
Of twenty brown sparrows
On a telephone wire,
A lacy, lop-sided moon,
A tom-cat returning
From a night of carousing,
A family of geese,
And me.*

Nell Gardner

CIVIC CENTER COMMUNITY CULINARY CLUB

Serving from 11:30 to 1:00

First Presbyterian Church, 166 Poplar Avenue

PRICE: \$1.50 per serving, including drink

MENU FOR JUNE 5 - JUNE 13

FRIDAY, JUNE 6

Meat Loaf, Whipped Potatoes, Fruit Salad, Rolls

MONDAY, JUNE 9

Steak w/onion gravy, Green Beans, Buttered Carrots, Rolls

TUESDAY, JUNE 10

Turkey-Dressing, English Peas, Cranberry Sauce, Rolls

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 11

Spaghetti, Cole Slaw, Rolls

THURSDAY, JUNE 12

Ham, Macaroni-Cheese, Turnip Greens, Corn Bread

FRIDAY, JUNE 13

Chili-Mac, Three-Bean Salad, French Bread, Ice Cream

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