

Diverse congregations coming together as one

Potomac Park, McKendree will worship under same roof

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POTOMAC PARK — One is a small church not big enough to host services for all its members.

The other is a larger church struggling to recruit new members and retain its current population.

One is a predominately black congregation.

The other is predominantly white.

But for at least two hours Sunday afternoon members from McKendree United Methodist Church and Potomac Park UMC were one as they sang, danced and worshipped together as a single congregation on McMullen Highway.

"This is just a joyous occasion of two sister churches both having a need and being able to come together and celebrate and worship and work

together to share common goals and ideas," said Assistant Pastor Andrew Droll of Potomac Park UMC.

The two churches will officially merge July 2 when they hold their first service together under the spiritual leadership of Pastor Joseph Howard of Fort Worth, Texas. Pastor Alicia Blake of McKendree and the Rev. John Footen and Droll of Potomac Park will all be moving on from their positions.

Church members from both congregations as well as pastors and members from neighboring churches came together Sunday to officially introduce themselves and worship under the same roof for the first time.

The service was led by Blake, who said she's continuously prayed for a bigger building for her 30- to 35-

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member congregation at their Paca Street church, but she wasn't expecting what God had planned for them.

"Sometimes you've got to be careful what you ask for," she said. "You have to be careful when you talk to God. His idea of bigger and your idea can be different."

The merger has been an emotional ride for church members who've attended services at McKendree all or most of their lives. Shelly Garner said her parents attended McKendree, but they'd be proud to see "where we've come and where we're going."

The merger has also raised the issue of how the two churches would blend their diverse congregations.

"This is really not a white thing or a black thing," Pastor

Kenny Watkins of Souls Won Ministries confirmed. "It's a kingdom thing."

For members of Potomac Park, the merger creates a big change as well, including a future congregation that will likely be double the 15 to 20 regular members they have now.

"Every week we notice fewer faces we know and love here in our church," said Cookie Weimer. "It does my heart so much good to see faces in our congregation that are part of our family. We're all in this together and God has something mighty for us."

Sunday's afternoon service included a number of performances, including Emma Watkins, Pastor Shannon Watkins and a youth praise dance.

"For those of you who've

been members of Potomac Park now you know what the piano is for," said Weimer, who joked her church only has two choir members.

LaVale UMC's choir also stopped by to show their support of the merger. Blake said McKendree and LaVale are frequent guests of each other.

"Our visits from McKendree have done so much for the spirit of our choir," said an emotional Mandy Hopkins.

The Rev. John Rudisill, district superintendent for the Baltimore-Washington Conference of the United Methodist Church, said both churches have endured their own struggles but didn't give up. He trusts the solution to ease their struggles comes with the merger, even if it may not have been what they had in mind.

"God works in exactly these ways to prove it's not about your way, it's not about my way. It's about God's way," he said.

The newly joined church members mingled over refreshments following the service, with some expressing sentiments that the new congregation could become one of the premier churches in the area.

"Three years ago when I walked in that little church on Paca Street I said, 'I'm home,'" said Rick Shives of McKendree. "Two months ago, the first time I walked in here the feeling was the same. It was deja vu. That was a sign the spirit gave me saying this is going to be my new home, our new home."

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