

IV

Growth of the Churches

VECA has a diversity of beautiful church buildings and active congregations. One of the largest Orthodox Jewish congregations in the world is in the neighborhood. Baptists, Catholics, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians of both the southern and northern branches, and members of the Church of Christ can all worship in their own neighborhood. In addition to these main line denominations, several other religious groups meet in the neighborhood offering a wide variety of fellowship. Many of these churches have played vital roles in the neighborhood.

Two of the churches were organized when the area was considered far out in the country and have remained at their same locations; the original frame buildings have been replaced by brick structures. These are Springdale United Methodist Church, 751 North Trezevant, the oldest congregation meeting at the same site, and McLean Baptist Church, 815 North McLean, which began much later.

In the days of Terrytown, Baptists probably worshipped at the Terrytown Sunday School, sponsored and promoted by the Seventh Street Baptist Church. The first service was held Sunday, June 6, 1909, at the Terrytown school at the northeast corner of Vollintine and Evergreen.¹ Mrs. Faye Lloyd said she

... had a vivid recollection of going with her people in a surrey out what is now Parkway, but this was only during the dry summer weather. When the fall rains would come it would be impossible for the surrey to make it over muddy Parkway. Most of the time the journey was made out Vollintine.²

Evergreen Baptist Church was another early neighborhood church. Research revealed little information about this congregation which was located at 1823 Crump from around 1916 until it moved to 732 North McLean about 1925. It appeared in the City Directory listings from the 1914 edition through the 1926 edition. Reverend J. A. Carter seems to have served as pastor until 1922 when he was succeeded by Reverend Samuel M. Ellis.³ Chalmers Walker, a charter member of McLean Baptist Church, was a member of Evergreen Baptist Church. He said that the small congregation moved to the McLean Avenue location near the L & N tracks when it needed a larger building. Neither building was large by present day standards. Evergreen Baptist was dissolved one year before McLean Baptist was organized following an "altercation in the congregation over the pastor."⁴ Some of the members went to the Seventh Street Baptist Church; others remained with the Reverend Ellis for awhile before participating in the organization of McLean Baptist Church.

Four other congregations have their roots in 19th century Memphis at other locations, and they moved into the VECA neighborhood at varying times. These are: the Lindsay Memorial Presbyterian Church; the Baron Hirsch Congregation; the Church of the Good Shepherd; and Saint Teresa, Church of the Little Flower. Each of the four is distinctive and will be discussed later.

One other highly respected church was formed in the early 20th century and spent its first forty years in an adjacent neighborhood. Evergreen Presbyterian Church sponsored in 1910 by Second Presbyterian Church was located on the southeast corner of Autumn and Dickinson. At the end of 1950 it moved to its beautiful red brick sanctuary at 613 University and held its first service there in 1951.

The First United Lutheran Church which began in 1924 moved to a small building which it used as a church and parsonage at 1548 Jackson in 1926. The Jackson Boulevard Improvement Club used its facilities as a meeting place in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

The Springdale Church of Christ, which is one of two black congregations in VECA, occupies the building at 2212 Jackson Avenue which formerly housed the Jackson Avenue Church of Christ. The latter, which began in 1944, moved to Bartlett in March 1978 and is now called Sycamore View Church of Christ.

The Springdale Baptist Church is located at 1193 Springdale. It began in 1928, and it purchased its building from the New Hope Baptist Church, which has now disappeared. The Reverend Lee R. Brown has just been installed as pastor. He is the recipient of The Ten Most Outstanding Young Men in America Award for 1979.⁵

Three groups outside the main stream denominations are located in VECA. They are Faith Temple, the Open Door Bible Church, and the Evangelical Orthodox Church.

Most of the churches are down from their peak membership which occurred in all the main line denominations in this neighborhood from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s. Some are drastically reduced while others are less so. It was the concern about the declining church memberships in the 1960s which caused the ministers to meet and ultimately to form VECA.

SPRINGDALE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH, 751 North Trezevant

The history of Springdale United Methodist Church began just after the end of the Civil War. In 1865 people in the outlying area five miles from town were eager to gather again for worship. A group met at a home near Old Raleigh Road (now Jackson Avenue) known as the Williford Place. The Reverend T. P. Davidson, a circuit rider, is credited as the founder. His regular circuit, which was Memphis to Nashville, took a week each way. When in Memphis he met with Dr. W. C. Johnson, a Methodist, who was able to persuade the Leas of Nashville, descendants of John Overton, to donate an acre of land on which to build a church.⁶

In the summer of 1868 the few families held a revival on the site and raised enough money and pledges to begin their building. By 1870 a small, white one-room church was dedicated; this building, which served as the Youth Hall after the sanctuary was completed in later years, was incorporated into the present Youth Hall. (See Picture)

For the happy occasion of the church's dedication, a train on the L & N Railroad was chartered and delegates were brought to a stop at Jackson (then Old Raleigh Road) and Springdale. The passengers unloaded, were met and driven to the church where they heard an address by Dr. J. B. McFerrin.⁷

Hardly had the church been completed when thieves tried to steal from it:

At an early hour the night before last, that is sometime before midnight, a thief or thieves stole a horse and wagon from the stable near the residence of Reverend W. C. Johnson, editor of the Western Methodist, and proceeded to Springdale Church, nearby and close to the L & N Railroad, and five miles from the city. They backed the wagon up to one of the windows, and boldly lighted it up. They then proceeded to take up and roll up for transportation the carpet, the organ cover and the cushions. The lamps, hymn books, Bibles and every movable piece of property not too heavy to lift, were collected preparatory to removal.⁸

Fortunately a church member who saw the lights went to investigate and scared the intruders.

The property they had appropriated was worth several hundred dollars, as Sprindale Church is a neat structure, and is rather elegantly furnished within.⁹

During its hundred-year ministry, the church has meant much to the community. The parsonage was built in 1923 at 745 North Trezevant on the site of the present sanctuary. In 1926 the original church was remodeled and bricked; an addition with classrooms, bathrooms, central heating, a kitchen, and fellowship hall was added. During World War II the church had notable growth. Its most famous member was Miss Barbara Walker, "Miss America - 1947" (today Mrs. John Hummel) who was a Sunday School teacher.

To meet the increased enrollment, the parsonage was demolished in 1950, and the present sanctuary was built at a cost of \$104,000. The pastor was the Rev. Raymond W. Council. In 1952 church membership peaked at 846 members. During 1955-1956 a further addition was completed, giving the church educational and office space. In 1960 a parsonage adjacent to the church at 755 North Trezevant was purchased.¹⁰

The suburban building boom during the 1960s saw some of the church members begin to move from the neighborhood, and the membership gradually declined. The church celebrated its First Century of Witness in 1968; by 1975 church membership dropped to 493. In spite of this decline the church was able to retire its indebtedness in 1971. Further losses to newer churches in other locations caused the 1978 membership count to be ca. 374, 60 percent of whom live in the area.¹¹ The Rev. Elton A. Watlington, the minister who arrived in June 1978, faces a new decade with optimism, for he sees relative stabilization in the church and neighborhood now. Though many of his congregation are elderly, he has started a new young adult group. He has also instituted Bible study groups, a Mothers Day Out program and other special interest classes. The church has not yet experienced a turn around in membership trends, but the leadership is optimistic.¹² The Watlingtons live in the community and are involved in it; their son attends Snowden School.

MCLEAN BAPTIST CHURCH, 815 North McLean Boulevard

McLean Baptist Church began June 6, 1926, just at the time the area started to experience its major development. Southwestern had located on the Parkway one year earlier, and developers were buying up property to open subdivisions. Jackson Avenue east of Watkins was only a narrow road when thirty-three people met to organize a Baptist church in the area. They purchased a lot on the northwest corner of McLean and Crump and erected a rough shed of cypress siding with a tar paper roof.¹³ (See picture) The Rev. D. A. Ellis became the first pastor of the small, one-room church which was then named McLean Boulevard Baptist Church; Boulevard was dropped in 1945. As membership grew, the members added to the original shed until it was "a sprawling monstrosity."¹⁴ In 1929 the church purchased the southwest corner of Jackson and McLean, the site of the present sanctuary. In 1932, the middle of the depression, the 500 members erected a new building at a cost of \$9,000.¹⁵ (See picture)

In the 1940s membership grew until it was time to begin planning another sanctuary. By 1948 the membership was 800. The year of the church's 25th anniversary, 1951, Dr. Herbert Gabhart was pastor. As the church spread out it engulfed lots around it to use for Sunday School departments and parking lots. On August 9, 1953, ground was broken for the new sanctuary.

Today the church proudly occupies the corner of Jackson and McLean with its steeple soaring taller than any other church in the city. Its interior painted wedgewood blue has a vaulted ceiling and parquet floor. Edwin A. Keeble & Associates of Nashville was the architectural firm.¹⁶

In 1954 the membership reached 1169, its high point. The Rev. Lloyd O. Barker was called to the pastorate in February 1960. The 1960s were years of social changes which affected neighborhood churches in central city communities. Members began to move away from the Vollintine/Evergreen neighborhood, and in time they moved their church membership. McLean lost 17 percent of its total membership between 1964 and 1970.¹⁷