

The Charlotte Observer

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Saturday, October 20, 1990

Bethlehem Center

Methodist Church's Bold Experiment In Racial Harmony Still Spirited At 50

By TOM BRADBURY
Associate Editor

At the Grady Cole Center Wednesday night, the 50th anniversary dinner for Bethlehem Center was a little past the halfway point when retired engineer John Bolen introduced entertainer and educator Thomas Moore.

Moore began to talk about what he had gained from his work with children at Bethlehem Center before going off to Indiana to begin work on his doctorate. Then, as he drew the audience of 400-plus into singing "God Is So Good," a young girl came striding purposefully down the long dais and popped up into his arms.

It was Elaine Baker, the 10-year-old granddaughter of John and Calla Bolen. Members of Myers Park Methodist, they had become good friends with Thomas Moore during their two decades of involvement with Bethlehem Center. "Thomas has known the children since they were toddlers," Bolen said. Elaine was at the dinner because her father is now on the board.

It was a revealing moment. Bethlehem Center is a wide-ranging social services agency tucked into the Southside-Brookhill area off South Tryon St. With a base budget of some \$600,000, it has activities for senior citizens, after-school programs, a day care center, a morning preschool program and citywide responsibility for the federally funded Head Start program, soon to reach 550 children.

The Center's Deep Roots

But the evening was full of examples of deep roots that aren't captured in the statistics. Lucy Gist, a Methodist deaconess and director through most of the 1960s and '70s, came back from her job with the Methodist Church in New York. Bethlehem Center here — like some 70 centers across the country — is a child of the church, which provides over \$100,000 in annual budget support, a third of the board and countless volunteers, particularly from the United Methodist Women.

The room was full of people who wanted to hug Lucy Gist. In the food line and at the tables, people from different churches and different races were renewing connections and telling stories of their involvement. I sat across from school board member Sharon Bynum, who was a volunteer for Lucy Gist.

Presiding was President Jim Evans — who recalled playing with neighborhood children outside the center's original building on South Caldwell Street in the early 1940s while his mother attended to her duties as its first president. The center's purpose was explained in a 1943 brochure reprinted for the 50th anniversary:

"The purpose of the Bethlehem Center shall be to develop interracial fellowship devoted to the task of real-

izing in our common life those ideals of personal and social living to which we are committed in our faith as Christians. In this endeavor we seek to understand Jesus, to share His love for all people, and to grow in the knowledge and love of God."

It's easy to read right by that, and turn to the activities for children and adults, including a kindergarten and the Civitan Club's efforts to help boys find jobs. But the brochure, reflecting its time, adds weight to the commitment to "interracial fellowship."

It notes the use of a lot owned by "the Negro Elk's Club," the center's "Negro Boy's Club," the second-floor living quarters for "the two resident white workers," and offices for "the Negro Girl Scout Secretary and the supervisor of the Negro Division of the Park and Recreation Commission."

And, said the brochure, "The present board numbers approximately 30, with an equal number of Negro and white members." The staff was interracial, as was the corps of volunteers "from both Negro and white civic and church groups, Johnson C. Smith University and Queens College." The "local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, an organization to which all the members of the staff belong, holds its monthly meetings in the large assembly room. . . ."

An Evolving Program

When urban renewal came to Brooklyn, the center moved in 1957 to its present quarters on Baltimore Avenue. It was built with staff quarters upstairs. But Lucy Gist recalls that she lived elsewhere, freeing that space for activities. The Lucy Gist day care center was built in 1977 and, in 1988, another building was added to house the alcohol education program and, soon, the Head Start offices.

Director Douglas Boyd, who came from a similar program in Massachusetts to succeed Lucy Gist in 1978, notes that the program has evolved with the times. But the emphasis on people and personal ties remains.

The walls are plastered with the children's names and their work. He takes great pride in children who grew up in the center, got their educations and have been able to move their families out of the housing projects. About half a dozen staff members were once children at the center.

Community connections remain vital. Church volunteers do everything from driving senior citizens on the Christmas shopping spree and the spring flower tour to providing flashlights and other items for 100 or more youngsters going to summer camps with the center's sponsorship. To cap the 50th anniversary, the center hopes to raise \$50,000 for an endowment at the Foundation for the Carolinas.

Each day, Boyd says, the center's programs touch about 1,000 people. But it was clear at the dinner that the ripples have touched many more.

I didn't have a camera. But I didn't need one to take a permanent mental picture when Thomas Moore and young Elaine Baker — black and white — led the audience at the dinner in "Jesus Loves Me" and had that diverse roomful of people singing to each other, "Jesus Loves You."

**This
Time
And
Place**



Moore



Gist



Boyd