

CHURCHES 1990- An answer to their prayers

Revitalized Baptist church becomes the cornerstone of SC black community

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SANTA CRUZ — This old, white church with a wooden cross on top is more than a place of ritual and ceremony. It is more than a place of prayer.

The Progressive Baptist Church is a place to believe in, to invest in. It is a place to gather, and a place for its mostly black congregation to remind themselves of their heritage.

The congregation here consists of some 65 people, most living on low or middle incomes.

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Yet among them they contribute more than \$1,000 a week to the Sunday collection plates.

The church suffered some \$80,000 in damage in the Loma Prieta earthquake.

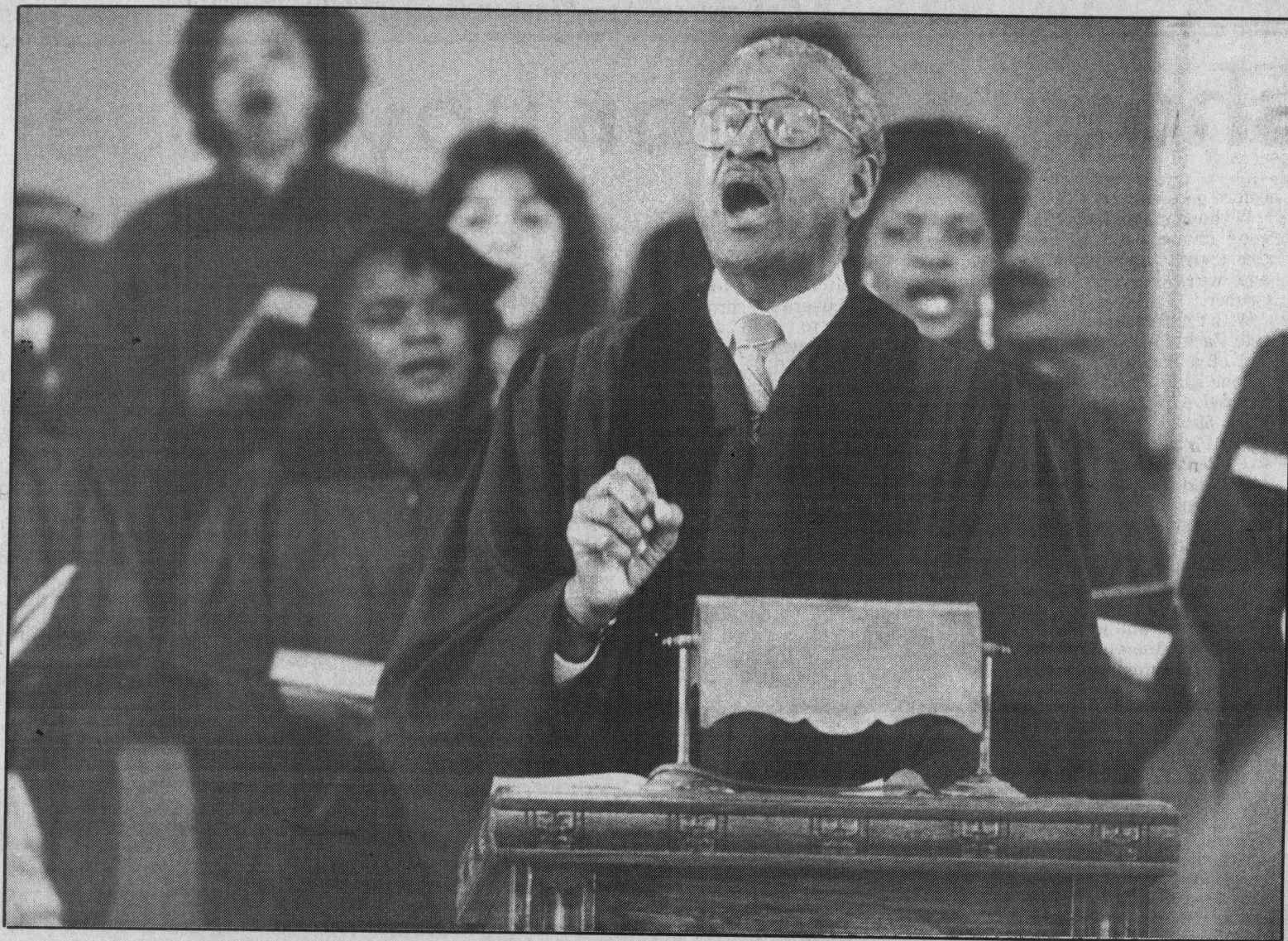
Yet in the year-and-a-half since the quake, the

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Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Led by the Rev. Robert Renfro, parishioners gather in prayer at the Progressive Baptist Church.



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel photos

The Rev. Renfro gets much of the credit for getting the Progressive Baptist Church back on solid footing.

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church has been completely refurbished. And the parish didn't borrow one dime to help with repairs.

"We just decided to commit ourselves to sacrifice something (at home) and pay more there," says longtime parishioner Beatrice Carter.

Parishioners say they give money gladly, because of what they get back.

What they get back is a sense of community and a sense of pride, as well as a place to worship God.

"Blacks, before they migrated west and north, the church was their central focus of most activities," says the Rev. Robert Renfro, pastor of the church, which is located downtown on Center Street.

"There were a lot of restrictions on where you could go and what you could do (in the South), but when you did things with a church, people kind of stood back — it was hands off," Renfro says.

"From the church we sort of blossomed out.... It was kind of an outlet," says Renfro.

It still is an outlet for many blacks here. It is a place where old traditions are honored while new bridges are built.

"The church is really a place I can go and get in touch with my blackness, especially in a community like Santa Cruz where there aren't many other places you can go and find a lot of black people together," says Tony Hill, director of the local Alliance for Improving Race Relations.

According to Hill, the church offers blacks a chance to realize their many strengths as a culture.

"We don't usually identify with the strengths of black values of perseverance and struggle and patience," Hill says. "The church does that for us."

The church is a monument to the value of perseverance. Built in 1902, the church first served

Unitarians, then later became a Church of Christ.

In 1962 about 20 members of another local Baptist church became "dissatisfied with the leadership" there, according to parishioner Hazel Everly, and decided to start a church of their own. Everly and others bought the church on Center Street and over the next two decades struggled to keep their dream alive as five different pastors came and went.

In the early 1980s, the church was in trouble. The building itself was run down, as was the house next door which serves as the pastor's home and a meeting hall. The church finances were a shamble.

"For about two years we were just praying for a pastor we could work with and who could work with us," says Carter.

Their prayers were answered when Rev. Renfro, now 70, signed on as pastor. A 20-year Army veteran turned elementary school teacher in Monterey, Renfro brought a strong sense of direction and a pragmatic financial mind to a job he knew was going to be tough.

"When I came here from Monterey, it was so slummish here and the congregation was troubled because once or twice they had almost lost the church," Renfro remembers.

Over the next seven years Renfro turned things around. Where previous pastors had kept no financial records, Renfro began keeping close tabs on the money that fills the weekly collection plates.

Within a few years the church had paid off its mortgage and invested in money market certificates. By the time the Loma Prieta quake hit in 1989, about \$100,000 worth of upgrade work had already been done on the church grounds.

Now there is nothing "slummish" about the church, which is freshly painted inside and has new carpets lining its aisles. A yard area behind the church and pastor's house looks



A woman listens intently to the Sunday sermon.

like a small park and serves as a gathering place for the barbecues, picnics, potlucks and parties the church hosts during the year. Sunday School is taught in the meeting hall beneath Renfro's living quarters.

Renfro is particularly proud of a hot water heater in the back of the church that warms the waters in which parishioners are baptized. "No cold baptisms here," he says with a smile.

After years of sacrifice, the church is a tribute to those who cared enough to invest in it. And they see their investment paying heavy dividends.

There are some whites in the congregation now, and Renfro has kept the doors open for anyone who wants to visit. But the congregation is still primarily black, and the church is still invaluable to many local blacks who may not formally be members of the congregation, but who like to drop by for services.

A church service is a joyous mix of traditional gospel singing by a robed choir, confessional prayer, and inspired preaching

by Renfro. Two young boys are applauded after they read biographies of black men who struggled and overcame obstacles set in their path. Their readings are part of the church's observation of February as Black History Month.

The normally low-key Renfro becomes animated as he speaks and his sermon is a loud and soft rollercoaster of oldtime religion, punctuated by "yes, yes" 's and "well, well" 's from the congregation.

At one point the congregation holds hands in a semi-circle and prays together. Later the sounds of "Amazing Grace" fills the church.

After the service ends, Renfro waits at the back of the church, shaking the hands of each and every member of his congregation.

"Thank you for coming...thank you...good to see you," he says.

He embraces many, smiling for all.

All smile back at him. They have accomplished something together.