

Minister sees need for building racial bridges

By Susan Steinmueller
staff writer

Only two children have come to the newly opened Oakland Christian Pre-School at the Oakland Church of Christ in Southfield this morning.

Eddie, 3, who is black, and Robbie, 5, who is white, are happily spending the day playing, eating and taking a nap to classical music together, under the supervision of director Linda Hiter.

That's the way it should be, believes R. Vernon Boyd, who is co-minister of the two-year-old church, which is also led by minis-

ter Kenneth Skeens.

Boyd takes pride in the fact that his church is an "integrated" one — from the pre-school to the congregation. Much of his ministry over a period of 31 years has dealt with promoting racial harmony, and the thesis for his recently awarded doctor of ministry degree from Harding Graduate School of Religion, Memphis, Tenn., was focused on race relations in the Church of Christ as a whole, and on what a congregation can do to face up to integration.

"I believe if we can't get along down here, we won't be invited up there," he said. "There is a great

need for building racial bridges."

THE OAKLAND Church of Christ was formed by a merger of two sister Church of Christ congregations.

At that time, Boyd was minister of Strathmore Church of Christ in Detroit and hoped to expand programs and facilities. But the church, with a congregation of about 200, was hampered for reasons including space, he said.

That's when they found that the Southfield Church of Christ was about to close its doors as, over the years, its congregation had dwin-

dled to about 20.

The two churches merged to form the Oakland Church of Christ, at the old Southfield Church of Christ location, 22355 W. 11 Mile. Most of Boyd's Detroit congregation followed.

The merger was a good one, he said. And he enjoys the new location.

"One of the things everybody notices when they come is the beautiful wooded setting. Everyone likes a church in the woods."

But there is still a lack of facilities for all the programs and activities of the 250-member church, he

said. Church buildings are being renovated, and the goal is to expand on the six-acre property.

SOUTHFIELD is a good location for the ministry of the new church, as it is an increasingly integrated community, said Boyd. "As the community changes, I really would prefer to have a biracial congregation." The congregation is about 60 percent black.

The church, however, promotes racial understanding quietly.

"It's not something we talk about, it's just something we do. It's been just really a beautiful blend of two cultures," said Boyd.

He said that an integrated church is not in the "comfort zone" of everyone.

"I have come to accept the fact that the black culture and the white culture just really are highly different in many ways," he said.

"We are just two to three generations away from slavery, and we really haven't overcome a lot of those problems.

"You have to do what you can to try and improve the situation — my generation is not going to solve all the problems.

"I think the biracial setting enables blacks and whites to have a greater appreciation for different cultures," he said of his church. "I like to think our worship style and worship program takes the best of both worlds and blends it together.

"Genuine friendships have been formed across racial lines."

THE CHURCH is one of about 60 Church of Christ churches in Michigan. It is a non-denominational church that originated in Tennessee, Texas and Arkansas, said Boyd. As a free, independent and self-governing congregation, it acknowledges Christ alone as its head.

The new testament is closely followed. For that reason, ministers are not referred to as "Reverend." "The new testament never used a special title for any person," said Boyd.

"Two key words to explain our church are 'restore' and 'unity,'" said Boyd. "Restore the church of the new testament and unity of Christian people on the basis of the church and the new testament."

Boyd, originally from Chattanooga, Tenn., has been a minister since 1955. He and his wife, Alice, have six children.

Boyd said he was inspired by Martin Luther King in the 1960s and has spent much time studying race relations in America. He was invited to Detroit to become minister of the Strathmore Church of Christ because he had helped a church in Chicago as it dealt with changes resulting from community integration.

Boyd looks forward to accomplishing goals such as building more Sunday School space and working toward more Christian education. The church hopes to one day establish its own Christian elementary school.

The preschool, which is state licensed, is open to all children age 2½ to 6 years. For more information, call 352-9150.

Some of the other programs at the church are a teen program, and women church members sponsor such programs as a Holiday Benevolent program, in which food baskets are made up and distributed to the needy.

Boyd teaches a weekly Bible class at the Arnold Home for senior citizens in Detroit.

"We try to get people to live their religion," said Boyd. "We're involved in the lives of people, and that's really what it's all about."

Vernon Boyd, minister of Oakland Church of Christ in Southfield, holds Rob Skeens of Southfield and Eddie Davis of Detroit in the church sanctuary.



Staff photos by
Jerry Zolynsky

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