

Spotlight on Mars Hill

Baptist in the early 80s, after ten years of dutifully paying the monthly mortgage on Mars Hill Baptist Church, Reverend Isaac Smith received a phone call from the Episcopal Diocese, the mortgage holder. The church had been having heating problems and Reverend Smith had been keeping the diocese up to date. Still, he was unprepared:

Reverend Smith, are you standing up or sitting down?," like that. And I said, "Well, I'm standing right now." And he said, "Well, sit down. We've decided ... to give you the church free of debt (so that you don't have) this second burden on your hands." I said, Repeat what you just said," and he repeated it, and I said "Boy..." Just like that. With that call, Mars Hill was no longer financially indebted to the Episcopal Diocese. A mortgage-burning ceremony followed, attended by a church packed with members of Mars Hill and Monumental Baptist Church, where Reverend Smith received his calling to ministry. A soft-spoken man whose voice has the lilting quality of someone raised in the South, he counts that event as "one of the greatest hours of my life." But Reverend Smith has other reasons to be proud. In the neighborhood around Ninth and Lehigh in North Philadelphia, with many disadvantaged youth, with drugs sold on street corners, and with recreation centers that can't fulfill the needs of the community, Mars Hill offers an alternative. Their after-school program offers tutoring, arts and crafts, reading, self-esteem building, panel discussions, talent and fashion shows, youth bazaars, field trips, and spiritual guidance, not to mention the intangible benefits of giving children and parents an alternative to hanging out on the street or at home alone.

The church's feeding program helps approximately 400 people weekly by providing a free hot meal on Tuesday afternoons. Food is supplied by the Philadelphia Food Bank and the state, with additional funds coming from the church coffers. In addition to its social ministry, Mars Hill struggles to keep up with the daily maintenance of its 107-year-old structure. Designed by Frank Rushmore Watson and built in 1891, Mars Hill is an enormous U-shaped complex of three adjoining buildings, including a parish house and school. The Gothic-style church is sheathed in rock-cut gray schist and adorned with smooth-cut limestone trim. Most of the historic building, including memorials and leaded glass windows, remains intact. The congregation currently uses only the first floor of the parish house, but plans to renovate and use the upper floors, parts of which are already divided into numerous rooms and are perfect for classes. The second floor has a large room with a built-in stage, handy for youth performances. The basement, a rabbit's warren of rooms, even houses a sunken basketball court, complete with sideline bleachers. Before these plans can be realized, though, the church must get some structural problems corrected. Water is a constant presence on rainy days, when puddles from leaky ceilings appear throughout various parts of the building. The bell tower is somehow staying up, despite a plethora of rotting wood support beams. The exterior masonry has some large, open gaps and there are missing gutters and downspouts.

Help has come in different forms. Grants from the Historic Religious Properties Program have helped to stabilize key areas of the building, including a rear stone wall behind the kitchen and the front of the parish hall. Michael Stern, director of the Historic Religious Properties Program, offers technical advice on a variety of subjects and is working with the church to produce a prioritized repair plan, helping the church focus its resources in the right direction. Having the biggest daily impact is Cecil Lewis, a congregation member who lives across the street. Lewis has done a "tremendous job," says Reverend Smith. "If it starts to rain now, we... find, like, two or three places where leaks come in. I go over and get him... and he comes right over." Although the building may not be in the best condition, Reverend Smith is undaunted by that fact and adamant about the programs being the focus of his ministry. "If we could get (programs like a summer day camp and computer classes) started, they would help us to complete the repairs of the building," he insists. "The building is a priority," he continues, but only in terms of what it can ultimately do for the community.

As Reverend Smith sees it, if he were to focus primarily on the building, keeping the social programs even a close second, he would be missing something. "The building is not falling down on us. I see the results (of the social programs). I see the improvement of our people, and that we are beginning to reach out to a lot of young people in the neighborhood. I feel very strongly about that."

It's very clear that Reverend Smith finds daily inspiration in his church. "When I walk in here, I come into a good feeling. When I leave this place, I go out with a good feeling. I've been doing that now for 20 years and every day I see something here to inspire me...to keep going on," he insists.

As Jermaine Quick, a leader of the youth outreach program, says, "It's...love just working around him because (there's) a bunch of energy and it makes you want to do more." While the long-term future of Mars Hill Baptist may seem a little uncertain, one thing is crystal clear. Reverend Smith and his staff will continue to offer help to the congregation and the community around them, carefully balancing the needs of the building with those of the people it serves. At this "church where everyone counts," those who need will always receive.