

'We've Faced This Before,' Pastor Says

Trinity CME Prepares Itself for Wrecker Ball

By Jan Gilarski

It's easy not to notice the small red brick church, sandwiched between a vacant clothing factory and a bank drive-up facility on the eastern fringes of downtown Decatur.

Standing in the shadow of its Catholic counterpart one block to the north, Trinity C.M.E. Church and parsonage, 345 N. Jackson St., is one of several buildings slated to be razed to make way for a parking lot for the proposed civic center.

Those plans have drawn fire from the Macon County Historical Society and the Decatur Historical and Architectural Sites Commission. Those two groups would like to see the church preserved.

The church, built in 1887 by Decatur's German Methodist settlers, is the oldest church in continuous use downtown.

After the German Methodist congregation began to dwindle, the church was sold in 1920 to the Colored (now Christian) Methodist Episcopal Church.

Rev. T. R. Johnson, pastor of Trinity C.M.E. for the past 16 years, remembers visiting the church shortly after it was bought.

He speaks easily of its history and proudly of the way in which the congregation has pulled together to finance several remodeling projects — a new roof, tuckpointing, new floor and air conditioning.

The modernizations do not detract from the rich darkness of the wooden pews and the altar rail, remnants of the first congregation which inscribed "Erbaut (built in) 1887" on the cornerstone.

"I feel good about seeing people wanting to save historic buildings — whether this church or other buildings," Rev. Johnson says.

Behind The News

He is not resentful toward the civic center project — in fact he says Decatur needs one.

"People call me and ask me 'Am I for the civic center?' I'm always for improvements in the city where I live."

"The taxpayers should be willing to support it," he said. "I've seen too many downtowns decay and die."

Rev. Johnson and his wife Kathryn note that proposals to tear down the church have come and gone over the past 16 years.

When the Johnsons came to Decatur, there was a proposal to raze the church to make way for a rerouted U.S. 36. Then there were plans to build an assembly hall for Stephen Decatur High School, followed by talk that the Sears Roebuck Co. store would take the location.

"I don't feel we've been picked on," Rev. Johnson said, although he noted a number of churches have "remained very comfortably" downtown.

"We have faced this situation in other cities," he said. "We have churches elsewhere that have had to move because of highways."

In those other cities, he said. "They always got a new church."

That is what Rev. Johnson would like to see in Decatur.

"I don't think it would be of any great value to sell this unless we get a new church and a new parsonage," he said.

A firm offer of compensation has not yet been made to the 255-person congregation, he said, and when it is made it will have to be reviewed by the

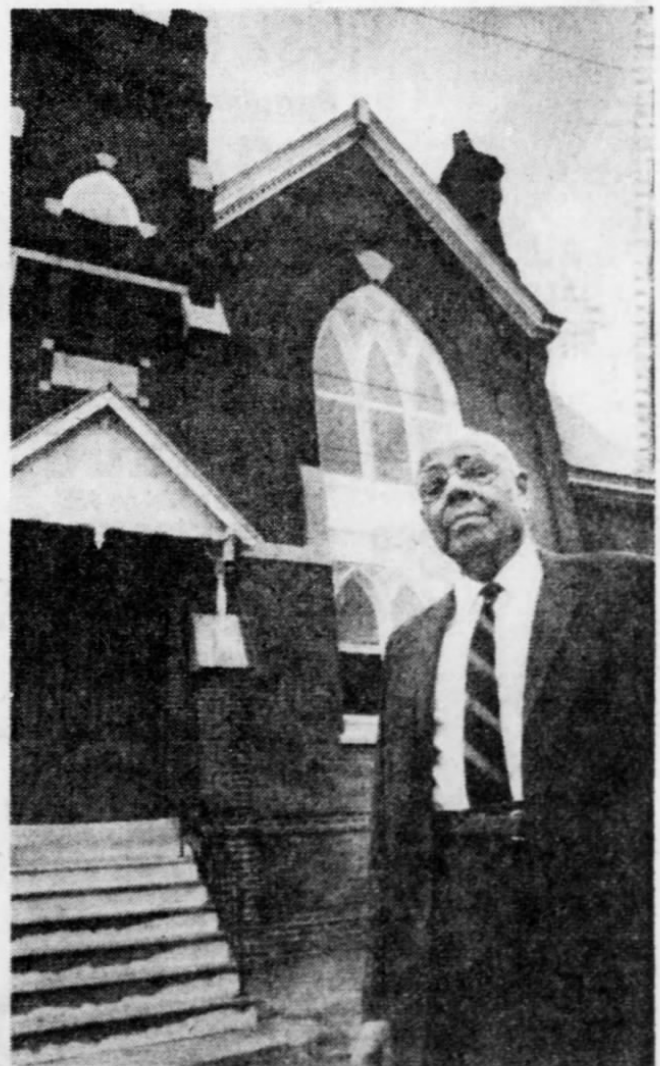
church trustees and the area bishop.

Rev. Johnson estimated the church needs about \$10,000 worth of rehabilitation work.

Local historical preservation experts say that unless a person or group comes up with a viable alternate use for the

church, backed by financial support, the small red brick church will face the wrecker's ball.

"If the majority of the trustees and the members of the church see fit to accept an offer, I wouldn't stand in the way of it," Rev. Johnson said.



Staff photo by Ron Ernst

Rev. Johnson stands before the 90-year-old church.