

125-Year-Old Prince William County Church To Yield to Progress

Story and Photo
By BRUCE MARTIN

WOODBRIDGE— An "ancient" Prince William County landmark will totter and tumble into memory this summer with an assist from a wrecking crew, leaving only a small congregation of towering oaks to grace the confluence of Smoketown and Davis Ford Roads.

The oaks, too, will probably join the razing of the 125-year-old Bethel United Methodist church structure, a white

steepleless wood-frame building in the direct path of an extension of Smoketown Road. The new tarmac will run through Bethel's present sanctuary to provide main access to Rollingwood Village, a development scheduled to begin construction this summer with expectations of housing several hundred families.

Most of Bethel's growing congregation of some 210 members regard the demolition of their church's

structure not as the end of an age, but the beginning of the mid-point in Bethel's lengthy history. They foresee a new facility which will better meet the needs of all segments in the congregation and the surrounding community.

Newcomers to Bethel, mostly from Dale City and Lake Ridge, are aware of—and sympathetic to—those in the congregation whose membership and support pre-date development of the

surrounding suburban communities and who are hesitant at thoughts of leaving the old church.

Most of these newer member admit that it is Bethel's rustic "down-home" look, "just-right" mix of the ages (one octogenarian has attended Bethel for 76 years), and different occupations of church members that attracted them. Those factors, coupled with active and viable leadership from the top down, have made

Bethel a rapidly expanding body.

Some of Bethel's members of long standing are, however, finding it difficult to understand that the structure—in which they've worshiped, married off their children and grandchildren, and buried kith and kin for more years than the average man lives—is soon coming down. By the time Bethel's 126th anniversary and annual homecoming rolls around this September, the traditional

celebration will be held at a temporary worship site yet to be chosen. Life-long members will then undoubtedly mourn the loss of Bethel as they now know it.

For them, it will mean a sort of bittersweet acceptance of the fact that, though the present structure with its limited capacity must go, it will be replaced with a more modern facility that will comfortably seat 186 people in the sanctuary. That is twice the number which

can now be seated without chairs in the narrow center aisle. And, the new Bethel building will be not much more than 150 yards from the present structure's site.

Though the congregation has been informed, many of Bethel's members don't fully realize that the present building and sixth-tenth of an acre on which it sets are no longer church property.

The land and building were sold to developers Paul C. Kincheloe Jr. and Herbert

Aman in a transaction completed last May. The was duly reported to congregation, along with facts that developer Kincheloe and Aman had to the Virginia Conference the United Methodist Church an adjacent four-acre. Additionally, the developer gave the Conference another two acres, netting the church more than seven times original acreage of church frontage.

To Be Continued

