

Hatcher's Memorial—historic Brentsville church is growing with the community

By GAIL WILLIAMS
Observer staff

Nestled within Brentsville's Historic District is a small church that doesn't stand out like the old brick courthouse or the Presbyterian church because it sets back off the road, across the street, behind a small house. In addition, along this and other stretches of Bristow Road, motorists have to beware of dips and curves on the narrow two-lane rural thoroughfare that eventually leads to Dumfries. Yet, Hatcher's Memorial Baptist Church has been in existence since the 1860s, making it one of the oldest in Prince William County.

The congregation of Hatcher's is welcoming and active. According to Anne Keaton, whom this reporter contacted before visiting the church, "It is a wonderful, loving church. Everyone is welcomed. No one has ever been turned down."

Indeed, if one visits the church for the service at 11 each Sunday morning, her words ring true. There are children scurrying around, taking a few minutes to themselves after Sunday School and before service. Adults move about quickly in preparation for service or the fellowship luncheon afterward. Everyone pauses to greet the newcomer. The pastor appears suddenly to welcome the visitor, and, for a few moments, make him feel like the most important per-



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Gail Williams / the Bull Run Observer

Teacher and the Hatcher's representative in the Potomac Baptist Association. This summer, in their first exposure to mission work, three of his students and 15 from another church will partner in a mission to the Cochise Baptist Association,

early morning service, which they call "Sonrise" service. Mother's Day will also be Parent-Child Dedication Day and children will receive New Testaments.

Hatcher's Memorial Baptist Church, one of the oldest in the

especially the stone attic and the roof's construction. None of the roof support trusses are spliced and there is no rotting, despite some occasional leakage.

A few feet to the right of the entrance is a plaque in the ground. "This

Some five years ago, the church received five stained-glass windows, made and donated by member Nancy Lee Thompson. According to Short, the previous spaces had metal louvres and no storm windows. All beautifully crafted, the windows on the right wall depict a crown, Bible and loaf of bread, while the left two windows show a dove and a church.

Obviously old on the outside, the church sanctuary is surprisingly bright and roomy. The walls are painted white and the five stained-glass windows remove a potential starkness and provides a source of comfortable light. There are two rows of 10 pews, each with a small brass plaque with a donor's name.

Personal and phone interviews and observation provide answers as to why the members seem to love their church.

Carmel and Frankie Short have attended Hatcher's since 1965, after moving from West Virginia. Short has been on the Board of Deacons for 25 years and on the Grounds Committee for a few. He built the steeple about 12 years ago, to his knowledge the first the church has had. The Shorts enjoy worshipping with a small congregation.

Annie Schaeffer was accompanied by a third generation member, her grandson. When she moved from Falls Church in 1969, a friend invited her to attend.

son there. There is an air of family among the small congregation.

Service begins and interim Pastor Sam Letson seems very relaxed and pianist Vicky Arnett doesn't miss a beat as they lead in song, some with difficult notes. Nobody seems to mind a neighbor's occasional off-key, high or low notes reminiscent of some in the National Anthem.

Letson introduces the visitors, who remain seated while the members approach to welcome them. Then come special prayer requests for: a boss who just lost his young son; an appendectomy that discovers cancer; a mother who's back home after six months in the hospital. A group consisting of four guitarists and a male vocalist takes over the pulpit for a few minutes of two country-style songs. "Fallen leaves" and "It's Me Again, Lord."

Throughout the service, Letson barely glances as notes, even during his sermon which encourages members to outreach to bring in new people. Fellowship follows the service, where the congregation can meet in the kitchen area, whose table made one or two of the five classrooms only 90 minutes earlier.

According to Argie Andes, who teaches Sunday School ages 3 through kindergarten, there are about 20, ranging from infancy through 18.

"The children are the future of the church," she says.

On this day, there is a planning meeting for events through the spring and everyone is welcomed to participate. It is going to be a busy few months for Hatcher's.

Stephen Keaton is the Youth

near the Arizona-Mexico border.

Will Hummel, a sophomore at Brentsville District High School, may be a special asset to the Hatcher's group; he's a third-year Spanish student and his grandfather has for decades taught Spanish and worked in South America.

Keaton will also be Hatcher's lead on "True Love Waits," a Baptist movement which helps teens commit to abstinence with support from parents. TLW runs over five weeks, with a kickoff banquet for parents and teens on Feb. 22.

There are many other events to plan. Rebecca Meredith is organizing Vacation Bible School, the church's major outreach to the community. The Activity Committee will sponsor a lock-in in April, complete with game room; music and an egg hunt.

Nodding his agreement with that program, Letson says, "One thing about church and children, give children good memories."

There will be two Easter Services in traditional coordination with Brentsville Presbyterian Church across the road, including Hatcher's

county, was established in 1866. The original brown stone building, however, was constructed in 1847, 27 years after Brentsville was founded and later became the county seat. It was an Episcopal, then a Brethren church. During the Civil War, the building was used as a hospital and barracks and most of the church, except the stone walls, was destroyed.

The Baptist Church was organized in 1866 under the leadership of Rev. B. P. Dulin, who remained pastor for 25 years. The church suffered a severe blow and four-year decline after the county seat moved to Manassas in 1893. However, under the leadership of Dr. W. E. Hatcher, the membership bought the church when the property was put up for sale. Eventually, the membership roll began to advance; today, there are about 100 members, according to various persons interviewed.

Between 1964 and 1971, Hatcher's underwent a complete restoration, including the addition of an education wing. Carmel Short, a carpenter by trade, is impressed with the structure of the original building,

stone covers a time capsule buried December 19, 1976, to be opened in 99 years on July 4, 2075, by the tricentennial committee of the Hatcher's Memorial Baptist Church or if Christ comes first, He shall prevail."

Two members who've belonged for more than 30 years, Carmel Short and Annie Schaeffer, provided some information about this time capsule. While Rev. John Reynolds served as pastor, Howell and Fanny Wesley conceived the idea of the time capsule and the Sunday School placed it in the ground. Made by Johnson Tool and Die Company at Lake Jackson, the capsule is about two feet by four feet. Contents include news of the time and pictures and items provided by various members.

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