

Its history, heritage and plans-- for the future

OUR CHURCHES- Yesterday and Today

By Bob Palm

(For thousands of years men have stepped forward to act as God's intermediary to mankind. Why they chose that honorable calling only they and God can answer. Often they said God called them, and directed them to go forward in his name like Jonah. Obviously all of them were not called by God, but, of course, they and God have to settle that on Judgement day. In the black community, the called-ones are known as preachers, ministers, and there is no doubt about the positive effect they have on the people. They were in the forefront in the fight for blacks' freedom and justice, but in return for their services, they have to live in fishbowls and glasshouses. Everything they do and say are scrutinized by their congregations and the public at large. In many regards that is not fair because sometime they are expected to be better than the man in the street, and when they prove, sometime, that they too have feet of clay, they are often judged too harshly. In the next few weeks the Las Vegas Sentinel-Voice will take its place alongside the general public, and look at the ministers in their fishbowl existence, and in some cases, although no harm will be meant other than an attempt to look at the preachers and ministers on all sides of the fishbowl, one will throw a few rocks at their glass houses, because obviously there is a darkside to them just like there is in all human and professions.)

Religion is the biggest business in the black community, accounting for the salaries and bread of hundreds of people.

It is said that there are approximately 103 churches in the black community, ranging in decor from storefronts to palatial structures such as Zion

Methodist, Evergreen Baptist, the Pentecostal Temple of Bishop Ernest Webb, Bethel Baptist, Vegas View Pentecostal, Second Baptist and Victory Baptist and others.

There are no accurate figures on the combined membership of the churches, but the larger churches have

seating capacities of at least 300 to 400 people, and have a much larger number of people on their membership roles. It is reported that 500 to 600 people attend Second Baptist every Sunday, but it has a membership roll of about 1,200 people.

Those churches serve the 36,000 people in the Westside community proper, and many of the other near 30,000 blacks, who live outside the community, attend churches in the area.

The strength and viability of the churches can be seen in their expansion programs and their weekly deposits at local banks.

Victory Baptist recently completed a more than \$1 million expansion project, and Second Baptist has a \$1.8 million expansion project on the drawing board.

It has been estimated that the combined deposits of the

churches each Monday morning at local banks amount to at least \$500,000, but ironically those same banks refuse to loan money to the churches for their building projects, sources say.

Figures from the Clark County Comprehensive Planning Department place

them eligible to take communion.

Jefferson was later kicked out of the church after he was arrested in the desert by Metro Police officers, and charged with the rape of his young granddaughter. The charges were later dropped.

In addition to their regular tithing, some congregations

One community member said if anyone is getting over in the black community, it is the pastors.

In many instances, the pastors live like kings ruling over in palatial structures valued at between \$500,000 and \$2 million. The churches own land and other properties such as buses,



Pilgrim Church of Christ

the aggregate income of West Las Vegas at \$100 million a year, and an additional \$200 million in entitlements such as welfare, foodstamps, ADC and other social programs.

Sources say \$26 million of that goes to the churches each year in the form of tithing. Of course, the congregations are not forced to tithe, but when the Rev. Joseph Jefferson was pastor of Pilgrim Rest Missionary Baptist Church, it was said that he had a teller's window where his congregation could pay their tithes, which made

occasionally honor their pastors by holding special collections like on the church's anniversary.

It is a well known fact that it is nothing for Bishop Webb's congregation to drop \$20,000 into the collection plate on a good Sunday, and the congregation of Second Baptist often collects \$10,000 on a Sunday for its pastor, the Rev. Willie Davis.

In addition to the special collections, pastors also receive other perks from their congregations in the form of suits, shoes and other luxury items.

vans and automobiles.

The salaries, along with their other perks, allow the preachers to accumulate vast wealth for themselves. For example, the Second Baptist church owns land in front of it, a half of block on the westside of it, and land in front of Hamburger Heaven.

The churches also buy their pastors homes and other items. Second Baptist bought Rev. Davis his brick home on Gold Avenue, and pays all his bills, in addition to having members of the congregation clean his house.

Rev. Bennett's congregation purchased him a 3,000-square-foot home in Bonanza Village, and Bishop Webb lives next door in the same size home; it was also bought by his congregation.

Pastors of the larger churches are paid salaries between \$25,000 and \$50,000 a year. That's in addition to their perks. Many of the pastors also have side jobs. That enables them to increase their own wealth by buying property. Webb owns five lots around his church. Each lot is worth about \$10,000. It is reported that Rev. Bennett has about \$2 million in

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