Black and white residents are fleeing inner-city Baton Rouge for the suburbs

By ADRIAN ANGELETTE

Each Sunday, the Rev. Fred Smith delivers a sermon to 350 members of his Greater Mount Carmel Baptist Church on Sora Street in Scotlandville. The sermon echoes off the solid, knotted pine church ceiling and breaks energy into the room while rows of choir members sing their praises to God, swaying and clapping, perfect union.

It's 50 minutes of joy for the devout, who get to visit with one another for five minutes or so during the ceremony.

For about 80 percent of the congregation, though, their time in church might make up most, if not all, of the time they spend in Scotlandville each week.

Smith and his neighbors cope with the prostitution, drug dealing and other crimes that have become a way of life for those who live in the community surrounding the church.

For many families, the want for safe neighborhoods and a better quality of life drives them away.

Those at Greater Mount Carmel are among thousands of former residents of the inner-city, north Baton Rouge and parts of Baker who have moved to the suburbs in the past decade, according to newly released results of Census 2000.

The suburbs of western Livingston and northern Ascension parishes and those in the southern, eastern and northwestern parts of East Baton Rouge Parish are the fastest growing regions in the greater Baton Rouge area.

The increases there are due primarily to a large increase in white residents. The biggest increase in black residents occurred in areas where whites have left since 1990.

In Scotlandville and other parts of the inner-city, Smith said, there are just too few job opportunities, virtually no new businesses and too much crime. Many of those who still live in Scotlandville are looking forward to the new Howell Crossing development on Harding Boulevard near Metro Airport.

Construction starts in two weeks on a 131-room Hilton Garden Inn and negotiations are under way for a Home Depot, Albertsons and other businesses, project developer Richard Press said.

Smith said even he has moved out of Scotlandville from his house in Southern Heights Subdivision, off Harding Boulevard, to Kenilworth, in south Baton Rouge between Perkins and Highland roads. It's a 20-minute drive away.

"My wife wishes it would take me a little longer," he said.

"I still feel very much a part of Scotlandville even though I don't lay my head down here every night," Smith said from his office at the Sora Street church. "I'm at the church every day.

But Smith said it's often easier to pick up and leave than to stay and fight.

In Smith's case, the 39-year-old said.

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The Rev. Fred Smith, pastor of Greater Mount Carmel Baptist Church on Sora Street in Scotlandville, said he and 40 percent of his congregation have moved from the area to the suburbs. They are among a broader sprawl of the population from the urban areas to the suburbs, such as the new Ascension Parish neighborhood in the background photograph.
he decided to leave in 1995 after thieves had broken into his home three times and his car once in a three-year period.

Another former Scotlandville resident said she would love to return home. But the man, Chico Grimes, said he lives in Dallas because it has more job opportunities and his $15 per hour pay as a telemarker is considerably higher than he can earn in East Baton Rouge Parish.

"Slowly, I think the neighborhood is getting wiped out," said Grimes, 33, who visits friends and family in Baton Rouge most weekends.

"There's nothing going on there," said Grimes.

Grimes said he thinks the forced busing of students to schools outside their neighborhood also has something to do with the movement away from Scotlandville.

"I was one of the first students bused to Central," Grimes said. He said that when he and others were exposed to how others lived in the parish, they began to think: "That's where I want to live."

But when they moved, they were improved and even routine chores - such as grocery shopping - were made easier, Grimes said, there would be hope for the area.

When asked if he thinks of returning to live in Scotlandville, Grimes replied slowly and deliberately:

"Every single day."

**A TYPICAL PATTERN**

The three census tracts generally covering Scotlandville lost 1,571 people from 1990 to 2000 - a drop from 11,404 residents in 1990 to 9,833 in 2000. Those tracts cover the area bounded by Airline and Scenic highways, and East and West Highway.

Scotlandville is not alone. Census 2000 data shows the inner-city neighborhoods surrounding Scotlandville also lost people while the suburbs grew.

That tracks the classic growth pattern of a sprawling city, said Steve Procopio, coordinator of land use and special studies for the East Baton Rouge Parish Planning Commission.

The pattern has people moving further and farther away from the inner city as soon as they can afford to do so. Procopio said that leaves behind the inner city more and more property that property values dip so low that developers or individual property owners cannot justify the cost of buying the land and revitalizing it. Most of the people left behind by the sprawl are either long-time residents or people without the means to move.

Smith said it's true in Scotlandville that young professionals are moving out.

In the parish, the only exception to the classic growth pattern from the center of the city is occurring downtown. Procopio said the census shows the downtown area has enjoyed a revitalization earlier in the pattern than other places. He attributed much of that to the efforts of the Downtown Development District and Plan Baton Rouge, which seek to pump more life into the district.

Smith said he believes the general movement from the inner city to the suburbs is happening because of economic, not racial, reasons.

"As Development of the central city area where they don't feel safe," Smith said. "It's not just the white community that now feels safe in Scotlandville.

**TRADING PLACES**

### Census data shows three areas in East Baton Rouge Parish that have had the largest increases in black residents and corresponding decreases in white residents:

- The area along Airline Highway from between Lake and Prescott roads. 

- The area along Airport Highway from between the Illinois Central Railroad and Greenwell Springs Road.

- The area on the east side of the Highway from between Lake and the Illinois Central Railroad.

In 2000, the area had 5,210 black residents and 1,141 white residents. The area from Airline Highway eastward to North Flannery Road, between the Illinois Central Railroad and Greenwell Springs Road. On the eastern end, it dips down to Florida Boulevard between North Sherwood Forest Boulevard and Airline Highway.

The census shows the area population of black residents dropped from 7,193 in 1990 to 5,210 in 2000, a decrease of 1,141. The census shows the area population of white residents dropped from 19,304 in 1990 to 12,893 in 2000, a decrease of 6,411.

### Changes in white and black population, 1990 - 2000

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Change in White Population</th>
<th>Change in Black Population</th>
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<td>1.</td>
<td>2,833 decrease</td>
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These are among the areas where the black population is growing the fastest in East Baton Rouge Parish, and where the white population is dropping the quickest.

1. Across Airline Highway from Earl K. Long Medical Center, between Plank and Prescott roads. 
2. Between the railroad along Baker Road to Plank Road, and between Lavey Lane and Groom Road. 
3. Between Greenwell Springs Road and Illinois Central Railroad, from Airline Highway to North Flannery Road. Also from the railroad south to Florida Boulevard, between North Sherwood Forest and North Flannery.

### Changes in black population, 1990 - 2000

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<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Change in Population</th>
<th>% Change</th>
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The Rev. Jennifer Jones, executive director of the Working Interfaith Network, said that in some communities, white residents move out when black families move in because of a negative perception some whites have about blacks. She said that perception is enough to cause some people to leave their homes even before they meet the individual black family who's moving in.

People need to take time to get to know one another," said the leader of WIN, an interdenominational civic group active mainly in North Baton Rouge. "You have those myths out there and people will act not because of the reality, but because of perceptions.

Smith said she thinks the reasons whites move out when blacks arrive are both economic and racial. Smith said many whites leave because they fear their property values will plummet.

"Once the first 'For Sale' sign goes up, you see five or six more immediately," Smith said.

Other white residents leave because they feel a loss of community, he said.

There are places in East Baton Rouge Parish that are designed to be in the southeast, and its been spreading into Ascension and Livingston parishes, which were the second and third-fastest growing parishes in the state in the 1990s.

According to the Census Bureau, the Livingston population grew 30 percent to 91,814 people and the Ascension population grew 32 percent to 76,827 people.

Livingston is now the 13th most populous parish and Ascension is the 16th. East Baton Rouge is still the largest parish, but it grew just 9 percent during the 1990s.

Allison Dill, 26, said she and her husband have been in their Ascension Parish home on La. 73 for less than a year and have already witnessed "phenomenal" growth nearby.

The Dills moved from a Highland Road condominium to their Ascension Parish home, minutes off Interstate 10, because it was between her job and school in Baton Rouge and his work in Donaldsonville.

She said her husband, Jay, is already president of the neighborhood homeowners association there. They've launched a petition drive to stop the development of open land across 73 feet to their home area.

"We're trying to fight to keep the country atmosphere," Dill said.

But there are some conveniences, too, due to their subdivision, that Dill is excited about. A new D'Angelo's restaurant and a fitness club are slated to move in soon, and she welcomes the new Home Depot.

Dill said she already knows that new change is in the wind.

"We're behind a 6-foot tall wood fence so back of the Dill's yard is a cow pasture. "Not long ago they took the cows out," Dill said with a nervous laugh, "but I'm not long in the future, she will be looking into someone's backyard when she peeks over her fence."

Despite the rapid growth in Ascension Parish, people are choosing East Baton Rouge Parish as the place to live.

Mayer Bobby Simpson told the Rotary Club of Baton Rouge that East Baton Rouge Parish is growing very strong, despite gains in neighboring parishes.

As an example, Simpson noted that East Baton Rouge Parish had 987 new housing starts in 1999 that was more than the 853 in Livingston and 801 in Ascension, although in terms of population, those two parishes are much smaller.

In Maloney, the Planning Commission's coordinator of economic and demographic research, said people have not moved to East Baton Rouge Parish at the same rate as to the east because of traffic congestion on the Interstate 10 bridge over the Mississippi River.

Its population grew 31 percent during the 1990s, to 216,601 people.