More than 3,000 members worship at Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church, one of Baton Rouge's most active black churches.

Heart of the Community

Since 1872, Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church has grown with Baton Rouge

BY CAROL ANNE BLITZER

To the more than 3,000 members of Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church, the church is their community. From our very care to ministry to the elderly, from scholarships to social services, from a federal credit union to a bargain center, life revolves around the church.

As Shiloh's pastor since 1962, the Rev. Charles T. Smith knows all too well that the church's prosperity and success have come only after a long, hard struggle. "African American churches in the early days were supported by monthly dues," Smith said. "At the time I was elected pastor, the dues were $1.50 a month." The church then had fewer than 300 members. "As a kid coming up, I was in church worship," Smith said. "I literally almost starved to death," said Smith, who took a second job as institutional counselor at the State Industrial School for Colored Youth, now the Louisiana Correctional Center for Youth. After several years, he quit his job to serve as full-time minister. "I decided that if the church was ever going to amount to anything, I had to give up that outside job," he said. "Smith still could not make ends meet as a pastor, so he took another job as adult education teacher and later supervisor for the WIN program administered by the Louisiana Department of Welfare.

In 1972, the congregation realized its dream and built its present sanctuary at a cost of $225,000. The building, designed by architect Louis Mason, faces 13th Street, now Eddie Robinson Drive. It is directly behind the old church.

Facing South 14th Street at the back of the present church is the congregation's third church, built in 1932. It now houses the church nursery.

As Rev. Mitchell grew older, he requested that Smith's father be ordained as an assistant. Dudley T. Smith served as assistant pastor from 1937 until he took the position of pastor when Mitchell retired in 1941. Two years later, the church built a $20,000 annex to the old building for a recreation center. "This was the first African American church in Baton Rouge that had a building for recreation or anything other than church worship," Smith said. The annex became the center of social life for the black community. "Every frame, every seminar all came to the Shiloh Annex," Smith said.

In 1947, the Rev. Jack Mitchell was called to the pastorate. During the 30 years he served the congregation, the church added a building on 14th Street. The original building was demolished and replaced with a new church in 1952. As Rev. Mitchell grew older, he requested that Smith's father be ordained as an assistant. Dudley T. Smith served as assistant pastor from 1937 until he took the position of pastor when Mitchell retired in 1941. Two years later, the church built a $20,000 annex to the old building for a recreation center. "This was the first African American church in Baton Rouge that had a building for recreation or anything other than church worship," Smith said. The annex became the center of social life for the black community. "Every frame, every seminar all came to the Shiloh Annex," Smith said.

The Rev. Dudley T. Smith served the church until his death in 1962. Later that year, the congregation called his son to the pastorate. The early years were tough. "I died of a heart attack at age 65," said Smith, who took a second job as institutional counselor at the State Industrial School for Colored Youth, now the Louisiana Correctional Center for Youth. After several years, he quit his job to serve as full-time minister. "I decided that if the church was ever going to amount to anything, I had to give up that outside job," he said. "Smith still could not make ends meet as a pastor, so he took another job as adult education teacher and later supervisor for the WIN program administered by the Louisiana Department of Welfare.

In 1972, the congregation realized its dream and built its present sanctuary at a cost of $225,000. The building, designed by architect Louis Mason, faces 13th Street, now Eddie Robinson Drive. It is directly behind the old church.

"The 14th Street property faced a warehouse, and my father at times thought that was a poor place for a church to face," Charles Smith said. "The 14th Street property housed a warehouse, and my father at times thought that was a poor place for a church to face."
Shiloh operates a bargain center where people in the community can purchase clothing at reasonable prices. **Shiloh**

**CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1C**

In 1973, Charles T. Smith was again urged by the congregation to quit his second job to become a full-time pastor. "The church had grown tremendously, and we had built the present sanctuary," he said. The membership was now in excess of 1,000.

After receiving guarantees from the members, he quit his second job. "It took a while to teach people about giving," Smith said. Even so, to make ends meet, Smith assumed a second position, the Donaldson Chapel Baptist Church, which he led for 27 years. "I would have been there at 8 and here at 11 and then alternate evening services," he said. "It was much simpler to pastor the church and then to do another job completely unrelated to the pastorate."

Shiloh continued to grow as did the Donaldson Chapel, which had fewer than 100 members when Smith arrived and more than 1,000 when he left.

In 1980, Shiloh built educational and social centers at a cost of $418,000. In 1988, the congregation retired all $18,000, and left a $418,000 balance, largely because of the work of its treasurer and dedicated philanthropist, Charles T. Smith.

Smith now has a team of missionaries working in his debt. The Rev. Mary Moss is a full-time minister of Christian education. The Rev. Doug Dobbs is full-time minister of evangelism. The Rev. Gloria Harrison ministers to the sick, shut-ins, and the Rev. David Jackson is minister to the Children's Church.

"We also have 14 other associate ministers who serve as pulpit assistants as needed in various other capacities," Smith said. "The church's annual budget has grown from $18,000 that first year to $2 million."

On May 17, 1998, Shiloh dedicated a new $1.5 million social, educational, fellowship and office complex containing 18 classrooms, five offices and a greatly enlarged fellowship hall/gymnasium. A library in the building is named in honor of local attorney Walter C. Dumas, church treasurer and dedicated philanthropist.

In addition to the traditional ministries, Shiloh has several very unique ministries including a federal credit union with more than 700 members. "We stress systematic saving and make loans to our members at the lowest possible rates of interest, far below normal rates," Smith said.

The church operates a social service ministry with a full-time caseworker. "We give assistance to persons for the payment of rent, utility bills, groceries, whatever their financial needs might be," Smith said.

Shiloh stresses the importance of education through its scholarship ministry, which awards $35,000 in scholarships annually to members based on economic need, academic performance, general character, church participation, involvement with Sunday school and Bible study and participation in extracurricular activities.

"It would be very simple to give everyone some financial assistance," Smith said. "But I don't believe in that. Our goal is to motivate young people to perform on the highest level that they can.

Through the children's incentive program and the youth incentive program, the church gives cash awards to every student for every A, B and C as long as the student maintains a B average in conduct. "We're trying to show them the relationship between academic performance and behavior," Smith said. The program is completely voluntary, and students must sign up with their parents to participate.

Through the church's summer youth enrichment program, young people are placed in businesses of their vocational choice. The church pays them minimum wage while they learn. "The idea here is not only to keep them involved in meaningful activities in the summer, but to expose them to the real world of work," Smith said. "They have the opportunity to see if what they say they want to do is what they really want to do.

The church's anti-drug program, Project Lifeline, brings people who live in high-risk areas into the church environment for recreation and moral support. "They are given the opportunity to function in an alternative lifestyle," Smith said. More than 95 percent of the participants are not church members.

The late Walter Williams, a well-known local electrician, gave the church a building several blocks away on Edison Robinson Drive. The church uses the facility to operate a bargain center, where very good clothing is sold to needy people at low prices.

Williams, who was not a member of the church, also gave Shiloh an old motel, in which the church operates a halfway house.

Through a program with Our Lady of the Lake Regional Medical Center, a nurse remains at the church for 20 hours a week providing wellness care and information to the members.

But more than all of the programs, it's the child-care program with a day-care center and nursery that brings young families into the church. More than 150 children are cared for by 20 full-time employees, who provide meals, snacks and loving care. The old church on 14th Street now serves as the nursery.

Often on Sunday, Shiloh is packed to its capacity of 600 seats downstairs and 110 in the balcony. Traditions are important in the church, where a sign on the altar reads, "Our Roots Run Deep." But it is also important to Smith to appeal to all segments of the congregation, young and old.

One challenge is the music. "Music is a sensitive area in churches because people have such different tastes," Smith said. "Church music has to be broad-based enough to satisfy the various age categories and social economic differences. As a result we have music ranging from gospel to spirituals to semiclassical."

In April 2002, Smith celebrated his 40th anniversary as pastor of Shiloh. In the commemorative booklet marking the occasion, the Rev. Fred Jeff Smith related a story about his father.

After the 1980 building dedication, Charles T. Smith told his son, "This is the last thing I'm going to build." Fred Jeff Smith recalled. He added that his father said it same thing after the 1998 building project. "You said that a couple times before," Fred Jeff Smith to his father. "Maybe you should wait until God says it's the last time you will build something."