

The Gathering Place

Staff and seniors pay tribute to Loretta Conway

By Loraine McClish

When the curtain came down on "Musical Madness" in Mercy Center Saturday, a basket of about 350 personal messages was presented to Loretta Conway in tribute to the woman who founded The Gathering Place.

The notes, written on stationery shaped as a heart, were heartfelt messages spelling out personal experiences. Writers were expressing the enjoyment they derived from frequenting the area's center for senior adults.

The notes came from present and former members of the staff, the senior adults, a host of persons who have been volunteers at The Gathering

Place, and those who have interned there working for degrees in gerontology.

"Musical Madness" was the seniors' first full-scale musical production, and it gave promise of being the first of many. It was like a dream come true for the woman who had founded the center in October 1974.

Her dream of staging the musical was based on her awareness of the multiple talents she discovered among the area's seniors, and she felt those talents needed showcasing.

Her original script made room for a cast of about 75, displaying talents, she discovered, that in some cases had been hidden for years.

THE GATHERING Place now lures about 150 senior adults through the green doors at Mercy Center every weekday.

It got its start with Ms. Conway, a small staff of volunteers, and a budget that came from the proceeds of a coffee machine in American Legion Hall.

It was open two days a week. One visitor came a week, a librarian who brought a cart of books. Periodically a nurse or a social worker would come in for a talk.

Arts and crafts classes were added. Then the Farmington Arts Foundation set up oil painting classes.

The number of participants kept growing, but the big jump in numbers

came when Ms. Conway brought in the nutrition program, offering hot lunches five days a week.

Another big jump in numbers came one summer a few years ago during a grandparent-grandchild picnic. Ms. Conway had arranged. When the heads were counted, the usual summer drop-off in numbers had not occurred that year.

"SHE HAS worked night and day programming regular classes, special events, getting the seniors on trips and getting things planned for them to do on weekends," said Yvonne Singer, who is now a paid staff member. Ms. Singer heads up The Gathering Place's arts

and crafts activities.

"I think if there was an eighth day in the week she would devote that, too, to this program."

Ms. Conway gives credit to Michigan State Rep. Sandy Brotherton (R-Farm) for aiding her in a number of instances. Rep. Brotherton pushed for grants, larger quarters, and cutting through red tape for more services to senior adults.

She has also had the steady help of attorney Dale Winnie, a regular speaker in The Gathering Place, who answers questions and does out legal advise on a volunteer basis.

(Continued on page 5B)

Farmington Observer

Suburban Life

Monday, December 10, 1979

(F1B)

Breaking out of the mold

Forest Park: called 'A church in the process of becoming'

By LORAIN McCLISH

Joe Hall celebrated his first anniversary as pastor of Forest Park Baptist Church the same month that the congregation moved its quarters from a small plot on Shawnee and Inkster to the center of Farmington Hills.

Forest Park's new buildings and grounds, appraised at \$1.3 million and the former site of University Hills Christian Reform, are on Farmington Road just south of I-496.

Speaking from the sanctuary of his new church, Hall said, "It certainly is not Baptist, is it?"

"There is no Baptism tank. No pews. No choir loft. It just doesn't fit the mold. But I like the idea of breaking out of that mold. I like the theatre-in-the-round effect. I like the idea of not separating the clergy from the church family with a high altar."

The mold to which he refers is a concept "Southern Baptists have brought upon themselves. They brought their philosophies to the north and it doesn't fit," he said.

"What we should be doing is taking what we have to offer and molding the message of Christ to reach the metropolitan areas."

To this effort, Hall describes Forest Park Baptist, as "A church in the process of becoming."

THE FORMER University Hills Christian Center was put up for sale at the same time the Forest Park Baptist congregation was concluding a study on its future goals.

"Roughly," Hall said, "the conclusion was that with limited space and land, we were going to be limited to any real growth. Moving from a corner of town into the center of Farmington Hills will help that growth."

But the final decision to purchase the new property, Hall believes, is the educational building, directly adjacent to the church proper.

"If the original architects had known our Christian Education Program and our family concept of studying, they could never have designed that building better," Hall said.

About 150 persons attend Forest Park Bible study sessions every week and services draw about 180.

"So it is not a large congregation and the move might prove difficult, financially, for us for a little while, though we are all excited about the total potential," Hall said.

All money gifts to the church are volunteered.

"WE BELIEVE in tithing, but I don't ask how much you made last year and I don't know who gives what. Nobody gets dunned. We do not have sales or bazaars or any fund-raisers," Hall said.

When Hall was asked if he was morally opposed to fund raising, he answered, "I think there is a good, better and best way of doing things and I think best in this case is free will offerings."

As money is given voluntarily, so is time. Forest

Park Baptist works with a paid minister, a paid part-time secretary and a custodian, Larry Kent is the church's minister of music.

Help for moving day came from the congregation, and members can still be seen at the church every day doing odd-job chores during the settling-in period.

With the new space, Hall envisions a day care center with a Christian perspective and other possibilities — such as Eastern Michigan University using the facilities for its outreach programs; art classes offered to the community at no cost other than materials; and offering classes in moral concepts to the students across the street on Oakland Community College's Orchard Ridge Campus.

"I DISAGREE with those who believe the pulpit is only for the word of Jesus," Hall said.

"I think we have something wonderful to offer and our need now is to get involved with everything from what the city council is up to, to ministries for our senior citizens and if those citizens are being fed."

Father of three children, Hall says that he and his wife are in perfect agreement that their home is a place to live in, and not a showcase.

"And so with the church," he said. "It should be practical and functional. Not an object that you must worship."

"If I have anything to say about it, we will never have pews here. The mobility of moving chairs is too good of a concept to give up. It makes it a place for a real church to meet."

Hall described Forest Park Baptist as "being only loosely affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention. For the large part, we act autonomously."

Forest Park Baptist congregation meets for coffee and fellowship every Sunday morning at 9:30 a.m. This is followed by Family Bible Study at 9:45 a.m.

"Family Bible Study would be comparable to Sunday School, but our Sunday School is not just for kids," Hall said.

Worship service is at 11 a.m.

Church training in Christian living is scheduled every Sunday at 6 p.m.

This Hall described as "a step beyond Sunday School."

Sunday evening worship service is at 7 p.m.

Wednesday evening activities Hall described as "something for everybody, running simultaneously from 5:30 p.m. on."

This includes Bible study, music study, music rehearsals and missionary works with something scheduled for all age groups and special interests.

Taping the Sunday worship services for shut-ins is an on-going practice. These are available by calling the church office at 476-0080.

while waiting for its new edifice to be built on 12 Mile Road.

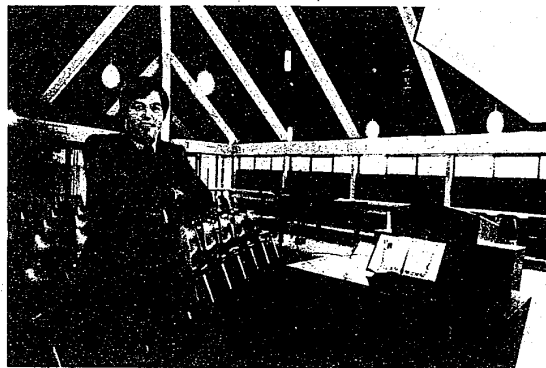
Hope Church still uses the building for worship services, though construction is going well enough on the new property to give promise that Christmas services will be given there.

UNIVERSITY Hills Christian Reform congregation remains on the property for its worship services with an agreement with the new owners.

"With worship services and Bible studies and Sunday School and choir practices, somehow we fit it all in," said Pastor Joe Hall, of Forest Park Baptist Church.

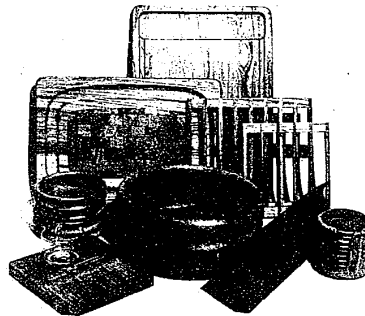
"On Sundays alone, some service or another is running from 8:30 a.m. until noon."

As Forest Park Baptist is still in the throes of getting settled into University Hills Christian Center, the Salvation Army is in the throes of getting settled into Forest Park's former building, on the corner of Shawnee and Inkster.



Joe Hall, a minister for 10 years and now completing his first year as pastor for Forest Park Baptist Church, talks from the sanctuary of the congregation's new church about his personal feelings and philosophies. The church's greatest growth has come about in the past four years, and with the purchase of a much larger church and grounds, he expects greater growth ahead. (Staff photo by Randy Borst)

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Old signs still applicable on new owner's property

In the seven years since University Hills Christian Reform Church first started building on the grounds at Farmington Road, south of I-496, the plot has had a rather complex history.

Even now, after the site has been purchased by Forest Park Baptist Church, passersby may be confused by the two signs facing Farmington Road. One reads "University Hills Christian Center." The other reads "Hope Lutheran Church."

Not long after the original church was built, John Wesley College, a Christian college near Owosso, leased a portion of the land from University Hills Christian Reform to build an education building on the property for use in its outreach program.

When this was opened to the community for classes, the complex became known as University Hills Christian Center.

Hope Lutheran Church, made up of a congregation that once belonged to Peace Lutheran Church, came to use the church sanctuary for its services