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'UNDER THE SHADE TREES'

In the early 1940s, the nearest Presbyterian Church to the Grier Heights neighborhood was on Sharon Amity Road.

James Polk, who was a teenager then, said the drive is short today, but back then the walk could get long.

"People in this community felt that they needed to build a church in the community so they wouldn't have to go so far to worship," said Polk, who's still a member of Grier Heights Presbyterian.

The first group met on Sundays "under the shade trees" in Grier Heights, which was once a rural, African American neighborhood. They soon moved to the old Billingsville School, where they held Sunday services.

Ministers from Johnson C. Smith Theological Seminary helped out.

In 1943, the Presbytery of Catawba established Grier Heights Presbyterian. Many congregants, including Polk's father, who was a bricklayer, helped with the construction of the church building.

The Rev. Elo Henderson became the church's first pastor. Today Grier Heights Presbyterian will celebrate its 65th anniversary with a special service and luncheon.

COMMUNITY ROOTS: Polk said the church began with a focus on the community, and he remembers a time when everyone in Grier Heights not only knew everyone's names, but also their pets' names.

"There was a closeness there, and relationships you don't have in a lot of places," Polk said.

Grier Heights Presbyterian has always reflected that commitment to the community with a dedication to helping people who live in the neighborhood.

"One of the things is to make people in the community know that they're invited to be part of the church," Polk said.

The church has housed programs such as Headstart, hot lunches for senior citizens, a child-care center and summer youth programs.

It also has sponsored tutorial programs, health clinics, money management courses, healthy eating programs and a clothing closet.

CELEBRATING 65 YEARS: The congregation will celebrate Grier Heights Presbyterian's anniversary today with a special Sunday service at 11 a.m.

The theme of the celebration is *"Unified for God to be Glorified."* The Rev. Antonia Lawrence will be the guest preacher, and Polk and other congregants will talk about the history of the church.

The community is invited to join the church for the service and a luncheon afterward.

Polk said the church is working with partnerships with other churches in Charlotte, such as Myers Park Presbyterian, to deepen its work in the neighborhood.

Polk said a group meets every Monday morning to talk about ways to better the community, and groups are working on affordable housing and helping out at Billingsville Elementary. They've studied how churches and community organizations have worked together in other cities.

"It's a good relationship, and we are working together to make some good things happen," Polk said.

Grier Heights Presbyterian Church
65th anniversary celebration

WHEN: 11 a.m. today (Sunday, June 29, 2008)

WHERE: 325 Skyland Ave.

PHONE: 704-332-3000.

WEB SITE: www.ghpchurch.org

PASTOR: The Rev. Larry James.

CAPTION: 1. The Rev. Larry James, pastor of Grier Heights Presbyterian, and his wife, Patricia James.

COURTESY OF GRIER HEIGHTS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH