

Through 17 pastors, numerous floods that swamped their shanties, and the persistent denial of jobs and housing for parishioners, St. Mark Christian Methodist Episcopal Church always had **Mattie Reynolds**.

So on Sunday, the oldest African-American congregation in Eugene commemorated the start of its 55th year by naming a prayer room in **Reynolds'** honor. At 84, **Reynolds** is the only one of the nine founding members who remains.

About 75 people packed the small, wood-framed church on a street named for her late husband, Sam **Reynolds**, who helped build the church.

Roy Lee Samuels, an elder in the ministry at Bethel Temple Faith Ministries in Eugene, was one of several church members who described how the woman, affectionately known as "Mother" **Reynolds**, touched their lives.

Samuels, who grew up across the street from **Reynolds**, explained how she has held the church together through tough times.

"She's like the rock of Gibraltar. The floods came. She remained. It means something to stand for something. Thanks, Mother **Reynolds**, for staying," he said.

Clutching a microphone at the front of the church, Lylle Parker, **Reynolds'** daughter, told parishioners of a time when she strayed from the church only to have her mother reign her back in.

"She slapped Jesus right back into me," she said. "I'm blessed and honored to call her my mother. We thank God for the matriarch of our church," she said.

When the Rev. Carolyn Thomas, St. Mark's pastor, arrived from Tacoma last August to give her first sermon, the congregation that day consisted of one person - **Mattie Reynolds**, she said.

At that time, the church was in a state of flux after a pastor was suspended amid concerns about fund-raising efforts, financial improprieties and church administration.

"Fifty-five years, the Lord has blessed us. It's been a long road, but bless her heart, **Mattie** has been here," Rev. Thomas said from the pulpit.

Dressed in a turquoise dress with a blue hat brimmed with white, **Reynolds** was seated in the front row surrounded by three of her sons and several grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Parishioners fanned themselves in the sweltering church. But as always, they made the best of discomfort.

"It's hot in here, but it's a lot hotter in the other place," Thomas quipped.

The hardest part in organizing Sunday's event was keeping it a secret from **Reynolds**, who was surprised by the gesture.

"This is the most secret present I have ever received. No one mentioned this to me," **Reynolds** told church members following the service. She commended her children, grandchildren and countless other relatives for not revealing what surprise was in store for her on Sunday.

Church members had converted the congregation's nursery into the **Mattie M. Reynolds** Prayer Room, featuring lilac-colored walls, cherub-themed borders around a window facing into the church, a small sofa, a walnut and marble coffee table and a framed photo of **Reynolds**.

"I would never dream I would have a prayer room named after me," she said.

The church got its start in July 1949 when a Colored Methodist Episcopal bishop bought a small plot of land on the western edge of town. Many of the city's black residents relocated to the low-lying area after bulldozers destroyed Eugene's shantytown on the north bank of the Willamette River to make way for the new Ferry Street Bridge.

The winter of 1949-50 was a bad flood season. Water from the swollen Amazon Creek rolled through the West 11th Avenue settlement, through doors of the rundown houses, through the new shacks that had been erected.

Sam and **Mattie Reynolds** arrived from Shreveport, La., in 1943 and settled briefly near Oakridge, where Sam worked on a railroad crew. After a trip to the city, he accepted a job at a sawmill. The owner also arranged an apartment for the family, but when they showed up to move in, the landlord said he couldn't rent to them.

For several years, finding stable housing was a constant struggle; they rarely had homes with

running water, and in 1948 they wound up in the rickety, flood-prone tent city near the north edge of the Ferry Street Bridge.

In the fall of 1966, **Reynolds**, then a 47-year-old homemaker, made a run for Eugene City Council, becoming the first black candidate for public office in Lane County.

She lost, but remained active in local politics. She became a member of the local chapter of the Congress for Racial Equality, or CORE, which challenged the housing and job discrimination she and her family had felt so keenly in Eugene.

"We'd hear about a job, and we'd have a black apply for it and be told it's filled. We'd send a white person in and he'd get hired. And that was the same way with housing," **Reynolds** said.

Through it all, the black community always had St. Mark's, she said.

"Our doors have never closed," **Reynolds** said.

#### CITATION (MLA STYLE)

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