

## Bethel AME church marks 150 years with expansion

While the congregations of some older, established churches are shrinking, the flock at Marysville's Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, one of the city's oldest churches, is growing.

Bethel AME, which is celebrating its 150th anniversary this year, will soon open a new sanctuary that's being constructed on the east side of the church's building at 115 Fifth St. The first service in the new sanctuary is scheduled for the first Sunday in October.

The church was founded in 1854 by Marysville's first African American residents, including Jim Churchill, a freed slave from Kentucky who crossed the Sierra Nevadas in 1849 with a group that included eight of his brothers.

Churchill was a member of Bethel's board of trustees when the church erected its first building in 1864 at its current location on Fifth Street.

Al Shannon, the church's pro tem trustee, is in charge of the building project, which will add about 1,800 square feet to the church and increase sanctuary seating from 225 to 285. Membership stands at 250, including descendants of the founders.

Shannon, a church member for four years, attributed the expansion partly to the Rev. Dante L. Rome, whom he said has been attracting young people to the congregation since joining the church four years ago.



"We've got a young pastor with young, exciting ideas - and the older members are happy with it. These are things we haven't had before," Shannon said.

Rome, who is also a teacher in the Rio Linda Union School District in Sacramento County, said more activities for youth from 9 to 16 years old have been provided.

"Part of our goal was to draw this group to church so that they get a solid biblican foundation and do that in a socially conducive environment," Rome said.

Youth groups have traveled to Yosemite National Park and other locations "to foster stronger bonds," he said.



The church always has attracted African Americans serving at Beale Air Force Base. Many newer members moved to the area from Sacramento and San Francisco, Shannon said.

A parsonage was demolished to make way for the sanctuary, which will have Bethel's choir standing on tiers behind the pastor's lectern. On the top tier will be something new for the church - a baptismal font for full-immersion baptisms. The church now uses fonts at other churches, Shannon said.

The Hudspeth Corporation of Yuba City is in charge of the project, which also includes remodeling the first floor of the existing building. The first floor will include a full kitchen, choir room, remodeled restrooms and a pastor's office. The upstairs, which houses the old sanctuary, will be used for Sunday school and meeting space.

Bethel is perhaps best known for its gospel choir. The choir, under the direction of Zenovia Brokenbrough, performs at events both religious and secular - including this month's Brownsville Blues Festival.

"The words are different but the chords are the same," Shannon said about the similarity between blues and gospel.

Bethel actually has five different choirs made up of singers from 3 to 85 years old or over. Members of each join to form the mass choir heard at public events, Shannon said.