

Churches / First Baptists
ELIZABETH

Religion

Baptists merge and flourish

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The First Baptist Church of Elizabeth/Cranford is unique in that, as far as is known, it is the first church to relocate from a suburban environment to an inner city site. The fact of it was born more of necessity than of choice and design.

Following a meeting composed of a council of eight churches, held on June 5, 1843, the Select School, on Union Street, Elizabeth, was purchased. It was dedicated as the First Baptist Church of Elizabeth on November 16 of that year. Within a year, its membership numbered 31 and a bible school was formed.

The present church, on Prince Street and Union Avenue, was built in 1868.

In 1981, members of the Baptist church of Cranford met with

those of the First Baptist of Elizabeth to address a situation which was of concern to each. It was a time in which churches were experiencing declining attendance. The two drew scarcely a combined total of 75 worshippers to their services. Retrenchment became necessary to survival. Out of their discussions came the decision to merge the two into one church with one congregation and but one pastor, thereby curtailing operating expenses.

In the autumn of 1982, the homogenization of the two congregations was completed and the Cranford church properties were disposed of.

Other benefits resulted from the merger of the two. A single choir was structured and the Sunday School grew to three times the size than either had theretofore known. Whereas in some mergers of churches, the

attendance reduced itself to the level of one or the other, in this instance, the congregation increased in its size, aided by the influx of new members. Indicators point to a continued growth.

Fed by the concern of one of the church membership, a program of serving hot meals to the needy in the church hall was inaugurated in March of 1983. Each Friday, an all-volunteer staff provides nutritious dinners to an average of seventy people.

Support for this program is building among other Baptist churches and those of like and differing denominations as well in an ecumenical show of Christian charity. When the need for a new freezer became dire, a Westfield church sponsored a special collection which netted \$2,200 to defray its cost.

Rev. Donald Brash, who joined the church as a youth

worker some four years ago, has since been installed as associate pastor. He continues to guide the youth activities which show signs of revitalization and, in addition, he preaches and assists with pastoral functions.

The congregation, as presently constituted, is a diverse mix of worshipers whose origins are rooted in Nigeria, Haiti, Latin America, Asia, the Deep South and locally.

The church hall is the site, two or three times yearly, of a meeting of Assamese who come from other locations in New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania and Connecticut, to celebrate their culture. It also makes its facilities available to various civic and retiree groups and to a chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous which has met in the church hall for more than 20 years.