

Free Methodists celebrate 150 years in St. Charles

By Dave Heun

If you had a lot of money through most of the 1800s, you could buy yourself a seat in the front pews of any Methodist Episcopal Church in the country.

A group of vigilant and vocal Methodists from St. Charles in 1859 spoke out against that practice because it favored the rich. They also decried the much larger issue of slavery, which many Methodists fundamentally supported.

When 21 members of the St. Charles Methodist Episcopal Church were expelled, it resulted in a revival led by John Wesley Redfield and the eventual formation of the Free Methodist Church in St. Charles in 1860.

That history is not lost on the 80 current members of the Free Methodist Church at 214 Walnut St., as they will gather Sunday to celebrate the congregation's 150th anniversary.

The Free Methodists can't claim to be the oldest congregation in St. Charles history, but they do meet in the oldest church building, which formerly housed the St. Charles Congregational Church.

"We bought that church building in 1998 after moving from our previous building, where Third Street Dance now operates, in 1996," said Free Methodist Pastor Derin Fowler. "And the Lazarus House homeless shelter found its home in our church after the Congregational Church moved to its new location out on LaFox Road because we had the extra space."

For nearly 18 months, from June 1996 to February 1998, the Free Methodist congregation shared the Walnut Street church with the Congregational parishioners.

"I see all of that movement during those two years as a part of a whole cooperative effort that allowed us to realize our vision," said Fowler, who has been pastor at the Free Methodist Church for 14 years. "We were at a point in 1994 where we were growing and had to find another building."

Fowler is proud of the Free Methodist mission and the fact that the St. Charles church was the second Free Methodist congregation in the country.

He also credited his predecessor, the Rev. Linda Adams, with the foresight to pursue the purchase of the Congregational Church when it became available.

"It was her vision and the leadership of the people before I arrived that led to the events that allowed us to have the space available so we could offer it to Lazarus House," Fowler said.

Liz Eakins, associate director of Lazarus House, said without the generosity of the Free Methodist Church, the shelter may not have been able to garner the community support it has enjoyed.

"It was just a wonderful invitation from this tiny church," Eakins said. "What a great thing that Pastor Derin would call and tell us he had space in the church he was not using."

"Pastor Derin sets the tone, but it always speaks to the community of St. Charles and how it has wrapped its arms around Lazarus House."

Fowler said outreach to community members in need is part of the Free Methodist vision, citing the fact that many Free Methodist members have gone on to start other meaningful congregations, including Christ Community Church on Randall Road.

"But that's part of our history," Fowler said. "In 1873 a woman named Rachel Bradley of St. Charles left the Free Methodist Church to start the Olive Branch Mission, which is still operating on the South Side of Chicago.

"In an interesting and ironic twist, Darlene Marcusson left Chicago in 1973 to come to St. Charles and eventually start the Lazarus House."

The congregation will celebrate the 150th anniversary by offering an "old-fashioned potluck" breakfast with free pancakes to the community at 8 a.m. Sunday, followed by the church service at 9:30 a.m.

A special appearance by a John Wesley Redfield re-enactor is also scheduled.