

Not a traditional groundbreaking



Gregory Harris/Daily News-Sun

Pastor Ray Lauren Miller addresses members of the Sun City Church of Christ Sunday prior to the ceremony marking the groundbreaking for a new wing. A drill, foreground, was used instead of the traditional groundbreaking shovel. Approximately 120 additional seats will result from the construction, which should be completed in March.

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Church of Christ maps expansion

By JOHN NICK
News-Sun staff

PEORIA — The Sun City Church of Christ is one of the faster growing churches in Maricopa County.

Figures supplied by the Center for Church Growth in Houston show that the Sun City Church of Christ's membership has increased 184 percent since October 1981. That is an annual increase of 23 percent.

During last month's Easter services, 215 people participated in the celebration.

"We are one of the fastest-growing churches of all denominations," says Tom Phelps, minister of Sun City Church of Christ.

That growth is forcing the church to expand its building to seat 711 worshippers. The expansion also will include 17 classrooms, a kitchen, a nursery and a fellowship hall that will seat 325 members.

"We are growing so fast that we can't keep up with the building," Phelps says.

Groundbreaking on the estimated \$335,000 expansion project will be in eight weeks and the work should be completed in the fall, he says.

"One of the reasons that we are growing is because we are a serving church," Phelps says. "The members of this church have a wonderful attitude. They are tremendously friendly, caring people."

The Church of Christ in Sun City was organized in November 1978. In January

1979, the congregation began meeting in the Merabank conference room in La Ronde Center.

Bill Blakemore was the first minister of the church. He was followed by Bill Hunt in August 1980. Phelps and his wife, Betty, came to work with the congregation on Oct. 18, 1981, and Phelps has been serving as minister since that time.

The Church of Christ sprang out of the Restoration movement in the 19th century, Phelps says.

"We are a very conservative church," he says. "If it isn't in the Bible we don't teach it."

An objective of the church is to restore it to the ways followed during the first century of its existence.

Because of this restoration, Phelps does not wear clerical clothing and he is not referred to as reverend.

In the Church of Christ, music is never played and statues and crucifixes are not placed on the walls.

Church guidelines are based on the New Testament and baptism is performed by total immersion.

Communion is the central feature of the Sunday worship, Phelps says. It includes unleavened bread, which represents the body of Christ, and grape juice, which is the actual

fruit of the vine, as stated in the Bible, Phelps says.

"We treat every Sunday as Easter Sunday," he says. "Communion is a memorial of the death, burial and resurrection of Christ."

The Sun City Church of Christ is an independent congregation. It does not answer to a central leader. Instead, five elders help Phelps with running the church.

Even though the church is named the Sun City Church of Christ, the building itself is on 5.34 acres in Peoria.

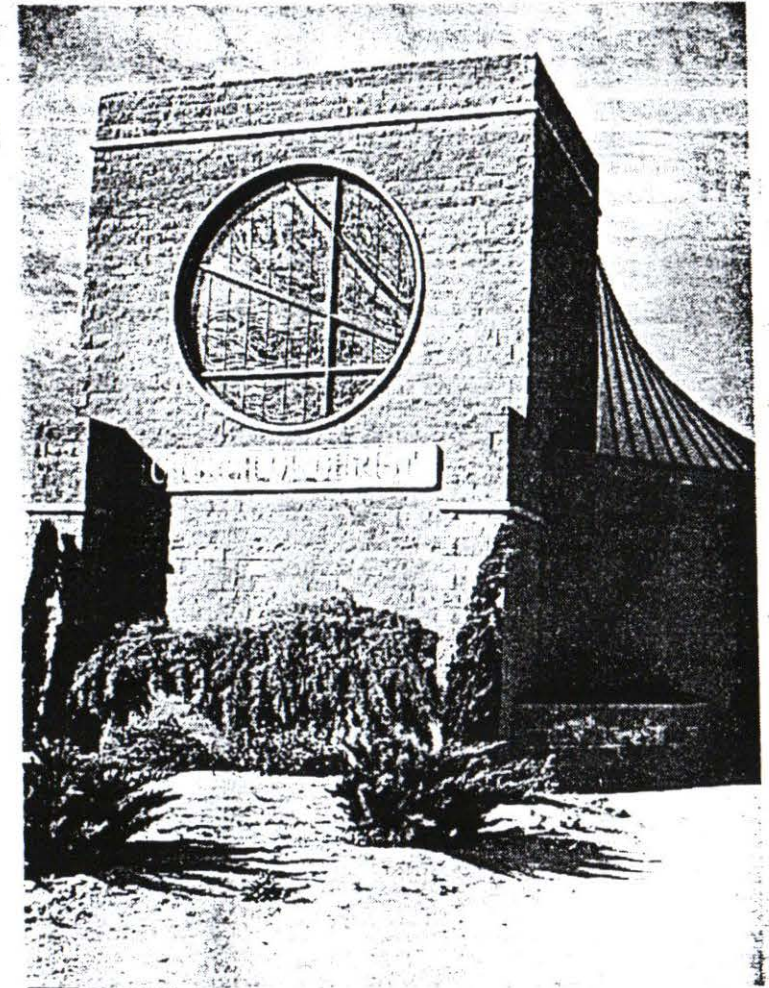
Phelps says that the majority of financial support comes from Sun Citians, but the membership includes a large number of younger people.

"I'm glad we are in Peoria," Phelps says. "We are especially interested in the young people of the surrounding areas. Some of our members come from as far away as Luke Air Force Base."

Currently, the Sun City Church of Christ has two Sunday morning worship services — at 8 and 10:15 — and one Sunday evening service at 6.

With the continued growth in the church, Phelps says he expects to add another morning service soon.

There are also Bible study classes at 9:15 a.m. on Sunday, at 7 p.m. on Wednesday and a women's Bible class at 10 a.m. on Tuesday.



Sun City Church of Christ where there are three services each Sunday. (News-Sun photo)