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# Sun City Baptist Church provides model for serving seniors

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SUN CITY — Missions are the heart of Southern Baptists. And although a community of retirees, the First Southern Baptist Church of Sun City is no exception.

In fact the church at 11019 W. Peoria Ave. in Sun City itself began as a mission



of the First Baptist Church in Phoenix, says Pastor H. Eugene Virt Jr.

Rev. Virt says that among the 30,000 churches in the Southern Baptist Convention nationwide, the Sun City group was the first to serve exclusively the elderly and retired. Even today it provides a model of elder services to the rest of the denomination.

This includes Senior Adult Fellowship, a non-profit corporation of older members statewide devoted to senior activities, and Keeping In Touch, a loosely knit group of widows and widowers who meet

monthly in "cells" for emotional and spiritual encouragement.

Rev. Virt points to nearby Baptist Village as perhaps the prime accomplishment of this caring community and others like it.

The village is a retirement complex that includes independent living apartments, supervisory care rooms and most recently a 128-bed long-term care center.

The center, Cook Health Care facility, is in Youngtown a few blocks down Peoria Avenue from First Baptist of Sun City. Open just over one year the center has defied all predictions and is nearly fully occupied.

This particularly gratifies Virt who promoted the project and served as a catalyst in establishing the complex.

Although some said Arizona Southern Baptists in 1977 were 15 to 20 years away from building a retirement center, Virt and his colleagues shared a conviction that retirees needed alternative living opportunities. So they stepped out in faith.

Underlying their faith was the

belief that the government cared for the poor and the rich cared for themselves. And that there were those who weren't wealthy. Or poor. Yet these middle-class people owned too many assets to qualify for government assistance. And when they could no longer safely stay home they had nowhere to go. They either had no close relatives or lived too far away. So these were the people who were missed by the system. And when they grew too old to care for themselves they were alone.

Today Virt's conviction is more than a belief. He credits its existence first to God and then to giving people.

"The Lord's been good to us and given us people who could do."

One woman gave \$100,000 to buy land. One couple has donated land valued at more than \$2.2 million. And countless others have given the widow's mite. But it has all been used, he says.

Recently Truman and Eula Cook donated 17 acres to Baptist Village. Cook describes his reaction when first approached several

years ago about becoming a supporter:

"They asked me if I had any interest in assisting them. When I said 'No,' they asked me if I'd pray about it. That was my mistake!"

Because of their belief, missions motivate this congregation. In the past 21 years it has sponsored 7 locally. Virt says the most recent one in El Mirage receives about \$250 to \$350 each month for expenses.

In addition, he says more than one-third of the congregation's undesignated donations and \$10,000 of its designated annual contributions leave the church for use on mission projects.

"And we don't have any wealthy people," Virt says.

"But on the whole our members tithe. And this is the most loving congregation I've ever seen in my life.

For instance, Virt says, back in 1984 when long range plans were announced for constructing a new sanctuary, money began to trickle in. Since then even though there's never been a formal fund drive,

more than \$300,000 has been received toward paying off the debt of the new building. Unofficial estimates place the cost at around \$650,000.

Mission projects of the 275-member congregation aren't limited to just giving money. Boxes of food, homemade cookies, reading and teaching materials, eye glasses, cancelled stamps, food coupons, used and unused clothing and Christmas packages have made their way from this giving place.

A list of recipients of love from Sun City Baptists includes such diverse places as Baptist Children Services, St. Vincent dePaul Society, the Lions Club, Indians in Flagstaff and Phoenix, home and foreign missionaries, hospitals, retirement centers and shut-ins of their own congregation.

It all began in 1966 when a few determined members first met in the Deanne Drive home of the Wheeler Thompsons for Bible study, says a church history. Thompson had recently retired as state Sunday School secretary in Illinois. Working closely with the

Baptist Home Mission Board in Atlanta, Ga., he propelled the study group into a mission.

In spite of its southern ties, there aren't many southern accents to be found here. Most members joined the denomination while living in northern home states.

For instance, when Virt became a Christian back in the 40s, before he went off to college to earn a bachelors and then a masters degree, he enrolled in a Bible school in Decatur, Illinois, not Decatur, Georgia or Alabama.

An evangelical, fundamental and conservative message offers a cross cultural appeal.

"You've heard of Billy Graham, haven't you?" asks Virt. "Well, that's how we believe."

Virt says, "We believe in saving souls. We're not part of the National or World Council of Churches. We believe a person must have a born-again experience with God. Not church membership nor anything a person can do will take them to heaven."