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Churches to Watch

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Midtown Valley UMC

Oak Ridge District



Pastor:
Rev. Richard Tallent

District Superintendent:
Rev. Ken Henderlight

Superintendent's comments: "Under the effective leadership of the Rev. Richard Tallent, Midtown Valley has grown from 39 members in 2000 to 83 members in 2006, with 21 coming by profession of faith. The church had only two youth in 2000, but now has more than 30 who participate in worship and in a mid-week Bible study. Plans are on the drawing board to build a new Christian life center to accommodate this rapidly growing congregation."

The story: It's a sight to see. Teenagers with black trench coats and black hair are playing drums and an electric bass alongside a group of older choir members. The music is "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms," straight out of the hymnbook, and somehow, the rock twang combined with traditional warbling is beautiful.

Following worship, the youth gather downstairs to prepare a luncheon fundraiser. Some have piercings in their noses, eyebrows, tongues. Many have hairstyles and clothing in the dark style known as "goth." They're excited to be together – and anxious to share how this church accepts them when others have not.

"It is different than any church I have ever been to," says Katrina Hunter, 16. "They give us respect, and when adults



Midtown Valley UMC hopes to build a Christian life center in the future.



Photos by Annette Spence, The Call

Midtown Valley youth serve up a Sunday luncheon to raise money for Resurrection and other retreats.

respect you, it makes you want to respect them."

"We don't turn anyone down because they want to wear black clothes and black hair," said Allen Rose, 13.

"I know someone who said that black resembles darkness, so black must reflect what's in my heart," said Cassie Johnson, 13. "That's not true."

In the last five years, average worship attendance at Midtown has increased from 30 to 65. About half of those are teenagers, and most didn't have a church home before friends invited them to Midtown, says Pastor Richard Tallent.

Six months ago, Lay Leader Charles Miligan started a Wednesday-night Bible study for youth. When attendance shot up to 30, Miligan had to divide the group into two classes.

"I can't say we did anything different than any other church has done," says Tallent, a former Southern Baptist preacher who has served Holston Conference since 1994. "But I can't overemphasize the acceptance of these older people. They just want these young people to be in church."

In turn, some older church members talk about the vitality the teenagers brought to last year's Christmas play and how inspiring it

is to send big groups to Resurrection. In March, Midtown sent *three* youth to Discovery, Holston's spiritual event for young people considering the call to ministry.

At Midtown, youth are regularly included in worship. Once a year, they plan the entire service for Children's and Youth Sabbath. When the teens have ideas, they're seriously considered, members say. Some boundaries have been set – for example, clothing with demonic themes is not permitted – but church leaders think hard before establishing too many rules. Instead, they talk to the young people about showing respect for the older people.

"Since the 1950s, I have not seen kids this devoted," says Jean Penley. "We know some of them don't dress appropriately, but we don't judge. The way they are willing to show their faith – that will always stand out more."

Andrew Tallent, 18, confesses to being a non-believer before he came to Midtown. He was the first goth youth in the church. Today, he's sharing the Gospel with his non-believer friends.

"We're going to the places where mainstream Christianity won't go," he says. "We've found a way to find God – a God who doesn't want to limit you." ■

"I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

— John 20:11-18 (NRSV)