



Bristol Dilemma

What's a local church to do when 150,000 race fans clog the highways around Bristol Motor Speedway on a Sunday morning?

2002 Photo by Annette Bender, The Call

Some congregations would rather fight (the traffic) than switch their regular worship services to a more travel-friendly time. Others seem to feel that if you can't beat 'em, you might as well do some good.

By Annette Bender

Such was the case for three Holston churches and other denominations when Palm Sunday occurred simultaneously with the Food City 500 in Bristol, Tenn., on March 24. Each year during the annual spring Winston Cup race, thousands of fans descend on the town, overwhelming roadways for miles around.

Located within earshot of the massive racetrack, First Bristol UMC held worship services on March 24 as usual. When the church's Council on Ministries first realized that race day coincided with worship, "they did not even flinch," says the Rev. David St. Clair, but challenged members to "pack the pews on Palm Sunday."

"When I think of the traffic on Volunteer Parkway that will occur on March 24," St. Clair wrote in a pre-race newsletter editorial, "I think of another busy time in another town, long ago and far away, and I am grateful to God that on Sunday Jesus Christ our Lord did not determine that the traffic was too great for him to get into the city and to the house of worship."



ABOVE: Elizabeth Chapel members collected \$8,000 in donations for parking cars and shuttling fans to the racetrack.



RIGHT: Rev. Walter Simmerman and his wife, Nita, relax at Elizabeth Chapel's parsonage, where pastors have rented campground space to race fans for years. "It's considered to be one of the perks, I guess," says Simmerman, who makes coffee for his guests on race mornings.

2002 Photo by Jason R. Davis/Bristol Herald Courier

Thanks to Alice, Long-Time Renters Are Now Homeowners



2002 Photo by Tim Barber, Chattanooga Times Free Press

▲ Retired Chattanooga city employee Ruth Thomas is all smiles now that she owns the house she used to rent.

CHATTANOOGA, Tenn. — Ruth Thomas opened the newspaper on a late November morning and saw the obituary of her landlady and friend, Alice Foust Cooper. Moments later, the phone rang.

The caller asked if Thomas, who had rented her house on Scruggs Street from Cooper for 31 years, had sent in her December rent check.

"She hadn't even been buried," Thomas remembered thinking. "But I had never had a problem with my rent — never."

Then the caller, from the office of Cooper's attorney, told Thomas not to send in the rent check. The home Thomas had rented all those years was now hers.

"Please don't play with me," Thomas told the caller. In her will, the 95-year-old Cooper, a childless widow, made property owners of her longtime renters and gave large sums of money to other individuals and charitable organizations from her nearly \$5 million estate.

Similar calls were made to 18 other astonished renters, most of them in the neighborhood off Rossville Boulevard, just south of Interstate 24.

"I never remember anything like this happening, and I've been here 14 years," said Cheryl Hudson, probate deputy for Hamilton County. "It's neat. It's a first."

David Fowler, Cooper's attorney, said his client had a tender heart for everybody, but especially for people who were economically disadvantaged.

"That sense of Christian charity, compassion and faithfulness was borne out in the way in which she decided to leave the estate," he said.

Cooper, a former teacher at Clifton Hills Elementary School, had inherited most of the property from her father and brother, Fowler said.

"Most of the tenants had been there many years," he said. "A number of them were single women, most of them senior citizens on fixed incomes. She realized these tenants needed a place to stay and could not

afford higher rent. For their faithfulness and consistency, knowing they could be displaced if the homes were rented at a fair market value, she wanted them to have a place to live."

The Rev. Lurone Jennings, executive director of the Bethlehem Center, knew Cooper had remembered his organization in her will.

"She knew about us," he said. "It's a blessing we were one of the charities she chose to give to. We're very grateful."

Other nonprofit organizations that will benefit from Cooper's largesse are First-Centenary United Methodist

Church, Chattanooga Church, the Community Kitchen, Habitat for Humanity, the American Red Cross, First Call for Help, Family and Children's Services, Newton Child Development Center, The Salvation Army, Little Miss Mag Child Care Center and Inner-City Ministries.

The Rev. David Harr, minister of congregational care at First-Centenary United Methodist Church, where Cooper was a member, said Cooper did not live her life as if she were wealthy.

"She was not a pretentious person," he said. "She didn't talk about herself. You'd have to pull it out of her. She wanted to hear about you and about other folks."

Fowler, who knew Cooper through First-Centenary when he was a member there, has been her attorney since 1983.

"She was unassuming and lived a very common lifestyle," he said. "She lived pretty simply, particularly for a person of her means."

Fowler said one incident epitomizes Cooper's concern for others. Just days before her death, he said, Cooper suggested that Alexander go by her Brainerd home and get her silver baby cup off the bookcase. She wanted the cup to be a gift for Alexander's grandson, he said.

"Though she had no children of her own," Fowler said, "lots of children, hopefully, over the course of several years, will benefit from her kindness." ■

Clint Cooper is a member of First-Centenary UMC. Reprinted with permission, Chattanooga Times Free Press.

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Chattanooga Times Free Press

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