

NEIGHBORHOOD STAR LIFE

KEEPING THE FAITH

Small congregation is diverse, dynamic



RENA FULKA

A small congregation thrives inside the large prairie-style edifice on Longwood Drive known as Morgan Park United Methodist Church.

The 90 members who worship on Sundays represent a mere fraction of the multitude that filled the pews in the 1920s.

Yet the legacy of service to God and community lives on.

"These people have big hearts for Jesus Christ and their neighbors," said the Rev. Eun-Hye Choi, pastor.

They cook for soup kitchens, donated to food pantries and maintain stewardship on their historic property by renting space to clubs, athletic groups, Council Oak Montessori School and Eternal Life Congregation, which worships in the chapel.

"Many nonprofit groups use our building," Choi said.

"We utilize our facility 100 percent."

Choi took the pulpit two years ago to lead a constituency she describes as diverse in race, culture and age.

"My vision is to grow as a congregation, but not to be a mega church," Choi said.

"This was a huge congregation in the past, but it's a comfortable size now. I want people to feel that a small church is OK."

Founded in 1887 when Morgan Park was a new development, the Chicago congregation built its facility in 1912.

When membership climbed to 1,000 worshippers in 1924, church leaders responded with a building expansion.

Though the Great Depression



The Rev. Eun-Hye Choi, pastor at Morgan Park United Methodist Church in Chicago, makes church announcements during a recent Sunday service. MARY COMPTON — SOUTHTOWNSTAR

brought financial hardship, the faithful focused on collecting clothing and funding coal and food purchases for the needy. The outreach continued as they weathered the storm during the war years.

In 1974, members encouraged integration by reaching out to their changing neighborhood.

"The people are very loving and have a long experience of living together as people of different cultures," said Choi, who brings Eastern Asian spirituality to the mix.

"I enjoy this culture of Chicago."

A South Korean native, Choi earned bachelor's and master's degrees in political science before emigrating to Chicago in 1988 to join her family and further her studies.

While working as a newspaper

reporter, she was assigned a story about a female pastor.

"I never saw a female minister in Korea," said Choi, who grew up in the Methodist tradition.

"I wrote about her and her church, and I couldn't forget about the possibility of being a minister."

Choi pursued master's degrees in Christian education and divinity from Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston and a doctorate in ministry from Claremont School of Theology in California.

"I've been ordained for 10 years and I'm really happy," the wife and mother said.

"I feel really blessed."

Her mission is to do God's work in this world, she said.

"In the (biblical) book of Reve-

FIND OUT MORE

Morgan Park United Methodist Church, 11030 S. Longwood Drive, Chicago, holds worship services at 10:45 a.m. Sundays. For more information, call (773) 238-2600 or visit morganparkumc.org.

lation, it tells of a countless multitude of people from all cultures and languages who come together and worship God," Choi said.

"If you want a taste of that worship experience, come to our church. It's not a big church, but it's very diverse and very dynamic."

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