

# Churches Reflect Montbello Racial Blend

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Montbello isn't heaven, but it comes close to being a community that realizes the American dream of different races "living together in peace and harmony."

That is the opinion of the Rev. Steve Sprecher, pastor of the United Parish of Montbello, 4879 Crown Blvd.

Sprecher and other Montbello ministers were interviewed about the role of their churches in promoting a spirit of community pride and racial harmony.

Montbello, in northeast Denver, was annexed to the city in 1965. Its population is about 50 per cent white, 30 per cent black, 10 per cent Hispanic and 10 per cent other minorities, Sprecher said.

"RACIAL HARMONY is a major identifying part of the community," Sprecher said. "That's the American dream — everyone existing together. And Montbello is people living together harmoniously."

There sometimes are neighborhood squabbles in the planned community of about

18,000 residents, Sprecher conceded. But they "aren't racial conflicts with groups of one race opposing another."

Part of Montbello's success, he said, may lie in the fact that it always has been integrated. Because it is a new community, it didn't experience the "trauma" of integration. In older neighborhoods, he noted, integration most often occurs when blacks or other minorities move into the area.

MANY RESIDENTS move to Montbello because they choose to live in an integrated neighborhood, Sprecher said. Others find in Montbello the house they want, and they don't care whether their neighbors are black or white.

Another Montbello minister, the Rev. James F. McQuade, formerly of Montbello Roman Catholic Church, said the community's "relative geographic isolation has caused some difficulties, but also has provided a sense of independence."

McQuade, who recently was transferred to Boulder, said the isolation has caused Montbello to be a more distinct area, "which isn't as true in other parts of Denver, where neigh-

borhoods melt into one another."

"The Catholic parish was presented with a recruitment problem in that blacks haven't traditionally been active (in the Roman Catholic church)," he said. "But about 10 per cent of the parish is black. We are very conscious of racial harmony, and the diversity of the membership has been good for us."

THE UNITED PARISH reflects the makeup of the community, Sprecher said. About 60 per cent of the congregation is white. The other 40 per cent is black.

Sprecher said church attendance in Montbello appears to be lower than elsewhere. The community has four churches with buildings. Another four congregations meet in borrowed facilities.

Part of the reason for the apparent lower attendance may be that some Montbello residents attend church in Aurora and Denver, Sprecher said. Further, the area has a relatively young population, who may not be as likely to affiliate with a church as persons who are older.

Both McQuade and Sprecher said Montbello churches have gained steadily in membership. The Montbello Catholic parish started with two persons and \$23 in its treasury in 1971. It now has 380 families. United Parish, Sprecher's church, started similarly and now has about 70 families.

A THIRD MINISTER, the Rev. E. E. Keiper, said St. Andrew's Lutheran Church was started in 1968, when Montbello contained only a few scattered show homes. The church met in a local school. Today it has 125 families, and a day-care center and school for 190 children.

Keiper said he has seen a lot of growth, both spiritual and literal, in Montbello. "There is a sense of coming together," he said. "More and more people are becoming involved with issues. And the churches have been conduits for this involvement."

This opinion was echoed by Sprecher, who said he believes Montbello churches "have been a great institution for social change."

For example, Sprecher said, churchgoers are among the most active members of such groups as the Montbello Citizens Committee.

"While churches haven't initiated all changes, church members certainly have," Sprecher added.

One example of a significant effort by citizens, he said, was getting school board approval for a Montbello junior-senior high school. The facility is to open in January 1980.

THERE ARE NUMEROUS community activities sponsored

by churches working together, the ministers said. One of the more exciting events, McQuade said, is an annual Palm Sunday prayer walk.

"Members of the churches carry wooden crosses down three different paths," McQuade said. After the walk, there is a poverty meal symbolizing the sacrifices of Christ.

The churches also have a liturgical dance program, Sprecher said. Joint caroling parties, social events and rap sessions also are held.

FISH, another joint effort, is a fund for emergency food, lodging and shelter. Sprecher said hundreds of Montbello residents have been helped by FISH since the fund was set up four years ago.

While it might seem surprising that such help is needed in an apparently middle-class community, Sprecher said there are many occasions it is used.

"THERE ARE PEOPLE here of every income level," he said. FISH helps "people who are making it marginally." The need for assistance is particularly great, he added, in times when unemployment increases.

In one incident, a family was helped when it got down to "its last dollar" because the husband lost his job and wasn't yet receiving unemployment compensation, Sprecher said.

Montbello is a good example of a community in which the church "is no longer a place just to be seen every Sunday," Sprecher said. "It is a place to find a handle on life."

At church, he continued, race isn't an issue. The church is in-

terracial because the community is.

United Parish has had a unique problem in reaching residents, Sprecher added. Many people don't understand what is meant by an ecumenical church. United Parish was set up by four denominations: United Methodist Church, the United Presbyterian Church, the United Church of Christ and the Reformed Church of America.

United Parish, organized eight years ago, was the first in the nation to be formed by four denominations, Sprecher said. It grew out of discussions by the Colorado Council of Churches.

SPRECHER SEES his role "as an enabler — as trying to enable people to do things they want to, such as help their community."

"I still see myself as a teacher in a certain sense," he added. But that feeling isn't as strong as it was when he graduated six years ago from Union Theological Seminary in New York.

Actually having his own church has meant he is involved in many details that don't relate to teaching at all, Sprecher said. For example, he recently had to buy a new refrigerator for the church. Another recent job has been helping set up a day-care center at the church.

"Perhaps my ideal view of the church would be that the congregation, the people, do a little of everything," Sprecher said. "That would mean this church could go on if I weren't there. And I think this church could."