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Shively church reaches out to youth teams

By Martha Elson

It could have been a quiet Friday evening at St. Stephen United Church of Christ in Shively.

Doors locked. Lights out.

Instead, a fast-paced West Louisville Warriors youth basketball practice was going on in the gym, while the Warriors' baseball team worked out on a newly improved field in back.

Coach Wesley Sellers, who lives seven doors down from the church on Famsley Road off Dixie Highway, used to struggle to pay \$30 a week to rent the gym in the church's family life center. But the church stopped charging him and also gave him keys to the building about 1½ years ago.

Now the 47-year-old church is home to both the basketball and baseball teams, and there's talk of starting wrestling, football and track teams.

"They just trust me," Sellers said. "They're trying to get the community involved with the church."

Sellers said he doubts that many "predominately older, white churches" would have opened their doors to the predominately African-American sports teams the way St. Stephen has — and that the church deserves recognition.

As he watched the basketball practice, Gary Leitner, coordinator for the family life center, said when Sellers first started bringing the team to the church, "We were so impressed with how he works with the boys," both on and off the court.

Basketball player Travis Dickerson, 12, said Sellers and the team's other coaches encourage the players to "always be the best we can be."

While most of the church's 300 or so members have moved away from the neighborhood and now commute to the site, the church is staying put and reaching out to people who have moved nearby, said the Rev. Jim Harper, the church's pastor.

When Harper came there 13 years ago, the neighborhood was predominately white, and it has since become predominately African American, he said. The church, which was built on a former truck farm field, resulted from the merger of two other churches.

The church also recently hired the Rev. Brenda Burney, "a person of color," as she described herself, who grew up in Shively and had most recently been pastor at a church in the Chicago suburb of Park Forest.

As she sees it, the church "sent out an SOS," signaling that it was in need of help to serve its community, and she accepted the call. As she prepared last week to be in the pulpit for the first time on Mother's Day, Burney said she planned to distribute a flier to the community to let people know she's there and invite them in.

A track around the top of the family life center also is open to community walkers from 6:15 a.m. to 2 p.m. weekdays and 6 to 8 p.m. Mondays through Thursdays.

Sellers' relationship with the church began about three years ago, when he was coaching in a Pleasure Ridge Park league and looking for a place for his basketball team to practice.

Both the basketball and baseball teams play in various leagues at different sites — including the West Louisville Sports Center in Shawnee Park for baseball and the Mid-America Sports Center in Jeffersontown for basketball.

Warriors baseball coach Duane Berry said he and others hope to raise money for more improvements to field, such as adding a scoreboard. Landscaping businessman John Korfhage recently did volunteer work to improve the infield.

The baseball team travels to Fort Knox; Owensboro; Cincinnati; Nashville, Tenn.; and other cities to play.

During a water break, baseball player Lamont Groves, 12, expressed thanks to the church for the use of the field. "I'm just glad because baseball's my favorite sport," he said.

All the new activity is benefiting the church too.

As Jesseka Sellers watched her son, Wesley Jr., play basketball in the gym, she said, "It's really a blessing that my husband found the church, and the church found him."
