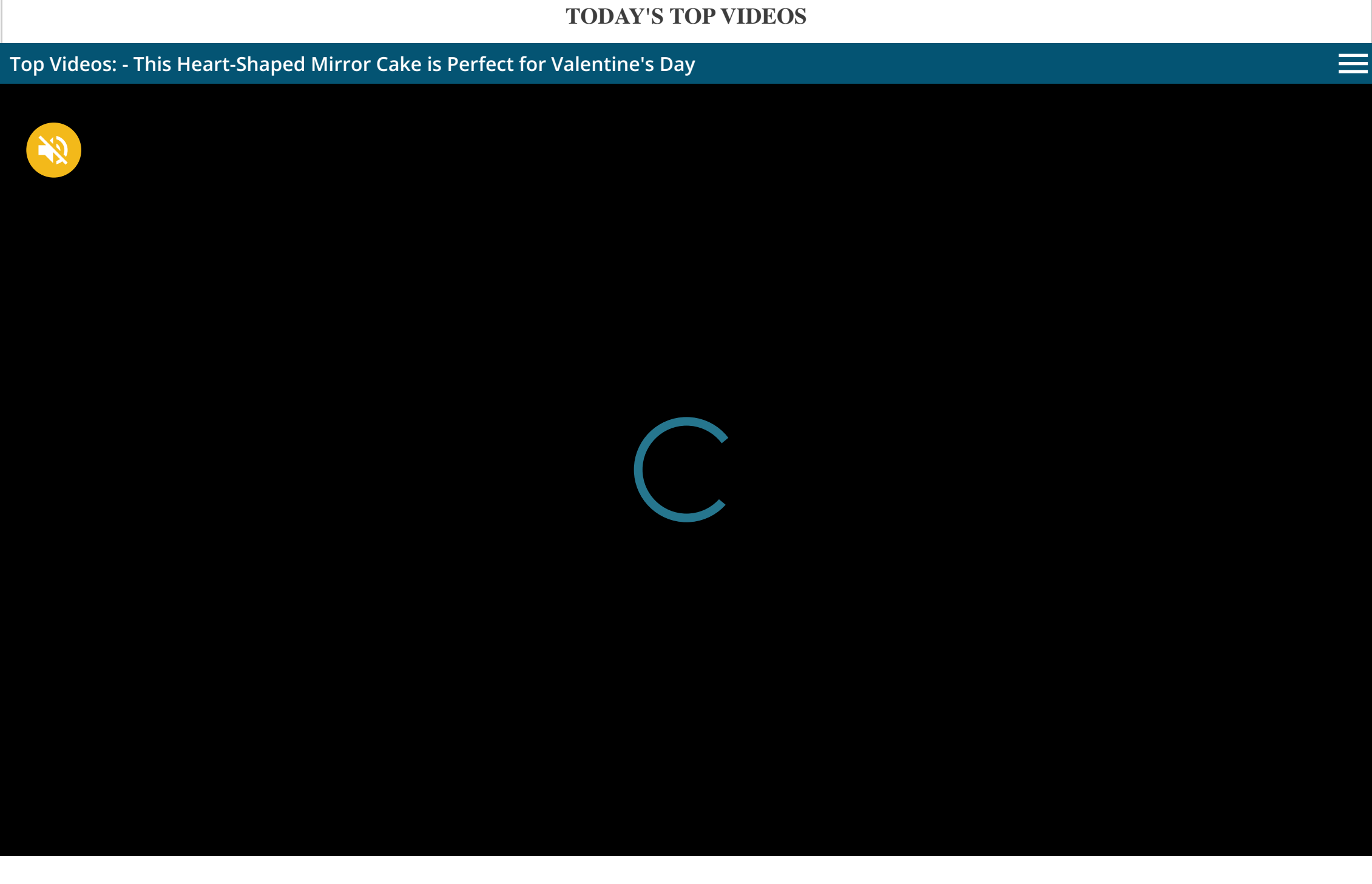


NEWS

A church regenerates Thriving: Tiny Basil AME in Cockeysville prepares to begin a new century of worship with a growing congregation.

By Suzanne Loudermilk
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When Anita Foote Wilkins returned to tiny Basil AME Church in Cockeysville three years ago, she found the church that time forgot.

Not much had changed since she went there decades ago while visiting her grandparents' farm. There was no water, no sewer service or indoor lavatories at the picturesque country chapel on winding Sherwood Road, about a mile off York Road.

"There was the outhouse -- the same one I went to as a child," said Wilkins, 68, a New York resident who retired to Cockeysville. "All those years, my aunts and uncles contributed to a building fund. There was never enough money."

But Basil's fortunes have since changed -- thanks to a mutual need for services by the church, county and private industry. Now, the 122-year-old church -- named after Wilkins' great-grandfather Basil Foote -- has plumbing, two new restrooms and ambitious plans for the future.

Bazil is one of the smallest African Methodist Episcopal congregations in Maryland, tiny compared with giants like Bethel AME Church in West Baltimore, with 11,000 members. Yet, since 1995, membership has crept upward from a stalwart band of seven to 47 people.

On a recent Sunday, several generations of families and other church members sat in the 13 well-worn, wooden pews, joining hands, hugging and carrying on a religious heritage celebrated by more than 3 million African Methodist Episcopal members around the world. The weekly service resounds with joyous voices singing a toe-tapping "Lord, Lord, You've Been Blessing Me."

"I like the smallness," said Deneen Toney of Pikesville, who brings her sons Franklin, 2, and Paul Jr., 5, to Bazil. "It's more homey, more personal."

Despite previous efforts by the congregation and former pastors, the historic church once seemed destined to enter the next century without basic amenities.

"It was a challenge," said the Rev. Rodrecus M. Johnson Sr., who arrived at Bazil in 1995 with the goal of shepherding in more souls and running water. "There was a need for this work from the day I walked into the church."

But there was no money, said longtime parishioner Cattie Bailey, who lives on nearby Powers Avenue. "The congregation has been very small and not in a position to put a well in."

Development of the area's pristine acreage, however, provided the impetus for change.

Builders of Abbey at Sherwood, an upscale housing development across from the white clapboard church, needed utilities for their project. To speed the county approval process, the developer agreed to donate an acre to the county for a water tower.

While the location of the 60-foot-high tower has been an irritant to many new homeowners and old-timers, new utility lines made it more affordable for Bazil to hook up to water and sewer services two years ago.

The church's delayed entrance into the 20th century was complemented by a much-needed renovation that added a pastor's study, an updated kitchen, the restrooms, a gravel parking lot and a heating and cooling system that eliminated the potbellied stove.

Parishioners revel in their spruced-up surroundings.

"It's lovely now," Wilkins said. "It's great camaraderie in there."

Years ago, when Wilkins and her six siblings arrived en masse from New York City to visit their grandparents during summer vacations, Sundays meant dressing up and walking about a half-mile along the dirt footpath that now is paved Sherwood Road to Bazil Church.

"I always loved Cockeysville so much," Wilkins said. "Growing up, you don't lose it. I wanted to come back to my roots."

After all, her ancestors settled the wooded enclave around the church that's still called Foote's Hill. Early records are sparse, but the 1850 census shows that Bazil Foote and his wife, Elizabeth, were living in the isolated, rural setting in pre-Civil War days.

Oral history passed down by the family indicates that Bazil was a white Pennsylvania farmer who was banished by his family when he married Elizabeth Smith, a black American Indian who was called Eliza. Settling in Cockeysville, Bazil and Eliza tended to dozens of acres and seven children, relatives say. Other families also were drawn to Foote's Hill.

Seeking a place to worship, the growing community soon began gathering in the Footes' parlor.

Bazil Foote -- who some relatives say was tired of having so many people in his house -- donated four acres for a church.

Two years after Bazil Chapel opened its doors in 1876, Bazil died at age 67. He is buried in the vine-choked cemetery next to the church. "We want to get the graveyard cleared out," said descendant Maurice Bailey, who lives with his wife, Cattie, in the old family homestead. "Our next project is to clear the trees."

The church building also needs more work, said Johnson, a dynamic first-time pastor who served in the ministry at Bethel AME for five years and then at Waters AME on Aisquith Street as associate pastor.

"It has a long way to go," said Johnson, 40, who is an NSA engineer and lives in Randallstown. "Presently, we're seeking assistance from the community and local businesses because of lack of funds."

Johnson, who often receives no compensation from his struggling congregation, has brought his family into the Bazil fold. His wife, Robin, leads the choir. Their son, Rodrecus Jr., 17, plays the organ, and daughter Amanda, 11, sings in the children's group. An older daughter, Cykeithia, 23, lives in Atlanta.

"Our pastor is just down to earth," said Cattie Riddick, mother of Cattie Bailey and great-grandmother of 2-month-old Quiera Bailey, whom she cuddled after a recent service. "He's the hero of my life and his church."

Eventually, Johnson would like to build a multipurpose center on land where a decrepit parsonage sits. He talks enthusiastically about having a larger church school, bigger congregation and more community programs someday.

"I'm looking to make it better for the future," Johnson said. "I thank God I'm part of the history that has been made at this church."

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