

Two Church Congregations Merge in Blue Ridge

Sixteen years ago this month, my wife Nicole and I moved to Blue Ridge from Pensacola, FL in order to begin Highland Baptist Tabernacle. We joined our friends, Bryon and Aly Ethington, and a small core group of Christians in prayer throughout the summer, and Highland began meeting on September 7, 2003. An independent Baptist congregation, Highland grew over the years to be a loving, growing group of Christ-followers intent on sharing the Gospel of Jesus to the Blue Ridge community. Over the years, we have blessed the community in Jesus' name with services at the nursing home, the Fall Kids Carnival, S.A.L.T. Saturdays (Serving and Loving Together), firewood for the elderly, assisting a number of other Christian organizations in town, and generally sharing the good news that Jesus can save from sin and give eternal life.

One thing that has always concerned me about my background, our church, and churches in general, was the seclusion to which we tend to resort. For many Christians church is only about their church, the locale in which they travel to and worship in every Sunday. But this is not all there is to the Church. As a matter of fact, the idea of having fifty plus different church congregations is totally foreign to the Bible, and I tend to believe would be shocking to the Apostles of Jesus two thousand years after the beginning. Years ago, I began to seek unity with other congregations, and even other *evangelical denominations, because I felt like that was what Christ wanted for His Church.

After fifteen years of prayer, reaching out, working, and preaching, God has called us to do something uncommon in the Church today but not unheard of. Pastor Bob Richardson, of Blue Ridge First Baptist Church, and I began praying about the congregations of Highland and First Baptist Church coming together in a church merge well over a year ago with the intentional purposes of:

1. Displaying unity in the Church of Jesus Christ.

Jesus said in John 15:35, "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples if ye have love one for another." This church merge is a radical step to show the Blue Ridge community that our church signs, our church buildings, our church agendas, our church monies, and our church names, though necessary, are really not the most important part of the Church; our love for Christ and for each other is.

2. Strengthening the work of Christ's Kingdom here in our community.

Though we all can understand the concept of strength in numbers, Solomon reminds us in Ecclesiastes 4: 9-12, "Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up. Again, if two lie together, then they have heat: but how can one be warm alone? And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken." Yes, there is strength walking together in Christ's Church.

By the leadership of the Lord Jesus and in the Spirit of these two purposes, after months of planning, meeting, and praying our two congregations came together for the first time on April 7, and the weeks of worship and service since then have been blessed.

Some have asked me if I miss Highland. The answer, obviously, is yes, I do miss some things. I miss the closeness of our small congregation, the location after fifteen years, and some (not all) of the responsibilities that I had there at Highland; but the blessings of being together with our Highland congregation at First Baptist far outweigh the things I miss. Christ is doing a great work in His Church, and not just at Highland Baptist, or just at First Baptist, but in His Church wherever they meet in Blue Ridge and around the globe. I'm thankful that I have the opportunity to see the day when Christ is reviving His Church and reconciling His Church back to one another in love, unity, knowledge and service. May it be that the days of church splits and splinters are over, and the days of Church reunification and regeneration are upon us. May it be that the spirit of competition among God's people be at an end, and the spirit of compassion emerge as never before.

Almighty God, by our Lord Jesus Christ and in the power of His Holy Spirit, accomplish this for Your everlasting glory and others' eternal good.

*Evangelical is a term used to describe the belief that salvation from sin and hell can only be had through faith in Jesus Christ alone.