“Here’s the Church; Here’s the Steeple”

The well-known children’s rhyme asserts “Here’s the church; Here’s the steeple. Open the doors to see all of the people.” While reciting this verse, one’s hands are fashioned such that the index fingers form the church’s steeple while the other fingers are tucked inside to represent the people. The rhyme continues, “Close the door, hear them pray. Open the doors and they all run away.” Smiles and giggles of delight often accompany this exercise when young children attempt to coordinate their hand motions with the rhyme that signifies the church gathering for worship and scattering for ministry beyond the walls of the building.

Smiles and giggles of delight aren’t always present, however, when congregations are faced with the difficult choices related to disbanding their church. Such decisions confront churches for a variety of reasons including dwindling membership and governmental action. Regardless of the reasons, every decision to disband involves significant change for the church. The challenges associated with such change may involve an exchange of ministry and the accompanying decision to rearrange the focus of ministry by channeling resources in perpetual fashion toward other mission and ministry opportunities.

This edition of Foundation News is designed to encourage churches faced with the prospects of disbanding by illustrating how other churches have embraced the future with the joy of knowing that the Kingdom principles and goals upon which their church was established can continue even after the weekly gatherings for worship, Bible study, and fellowship cease.

Daniel Hall
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The late Albert McQueen envisioned opening the doors of a new church building and seeing crowds of people gather for worship, Bible study, and fellowship. In pursuit of this divinely-appointed goal, Mr. McQueen offered fifty cents in a fruit jar to jumpstart the building program of the Santa Rosa Baptist Church.

Beginning as a mission on November 21, 1947, a small band of believers met in the old Aaron Academy under the leadership of Rev. Olyn Sims. Though located in Hancock County, the mission was accepted into the Pearl River Baptist Association on October 2, 1949. On the occasion of the church’s first Vacation Bible School following the completion of a new educational building in 1953, Mrs. McQueen declared “There has been an exceptionally fine spirit among the students and faculty.” A decade later, however, the winds of change blew across the region as the church was forced to disband in 1963 when the federal government determined that the property on which the church facilities were located was needed for the N.A.S.A test site.

Although the government compensated the church for the land, the congregation was in a quandary concerning the use of the funds. The fervent prayer of each member was “Lord, show us what to do.” The answer to this prayer came through a former pastor, the Rev. Richard Luebbert, who encouraged the church to invest the money in Kingdom ministry. In response to this challenge, the “Santa Rosa Memorial Trust Fund” was established with the Mississippi Baptist Foundation with the annual earnings designated for the Cooperative Program. Since the memorial fund was established, the Foundation has distributed over $150,000 in earnings to the Cooperative Program. During the past fiscal year alone (July 2007 – June 2008), over $3,200 was distributed for the benefit of the Cooperative Program from the “Santa Rosa Memorial Trust Fund.”

Interestingly enough, the amount distributed from the memorial trust during the twelve months ending June 30, 2008 represents a larger contribution to the Cooperative Program than the CP contributions of approximately one-third of the Southern Baptist churches in Mississippi. In other words, over 700 churches that meet regularly for worship, Bible study, and fellowship gave less to the Cooperative Program than a church that no longer exists. Truly, Santa Rosa is a church which died yet lives on due to a group of committed Christians whose foresight and initiative included the ministry of the Mississippi Baptist Foundation to extend the witness of the Santa Rosa Baptist Church throughout Pearl River county and around the world.

Although the membership of the Santa Rosa Baptist Church scattered across Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama following the disbandment in 1963, a reunion continues to be held annually on the second Sunday in November. Less than two weeks ago, several of the church’s early members assembled at the First Baptist Church of Nicholson, MS for their forty-fifth gathering with Irma Frierson presiding over the occasion. Mrs. Frierson read a letter from Dr. Franklin Atkinson, a former pastor of the Santa Rosa church, who stated “I delight in the Cooperative Program report each year and have had occasions to use it to stimulate others.” Though the reunion had few participants, an exceptionally fine spirit was evident among all those present.

These ladies are some of the earliest members of SRBC:
Eloise Burrell, Irma Frierson, Vera Beech, Carolyn Raby, Dr. Daniel Hall -MBF
West Jackson Baptist Church was established shortly after World War II under the leadership of Rev. J.F. Sullivan and sixteen charter members. During the lengthy ministry of the Rev. Jack Nazzary, hundreds of new members enjoyed the facilities that were constructed during this growing period of the church’s history.

Following nearly fifty years of vibrant ministry in Jackson, however, the congregants of the West Jackson Baptist Church were confronted with the challenging reality that the majority of the membership that once lived in proximity to the church facilities had dispersed toward the Jackson suburbs of Clinton and Madison. Many of those who remained in the local ministry area were moving rapidly toward retirement and fixed incomes. According to pastor Larry Dunlap, the church realized that the situation could not go unaddressed so “we were all praying for the direction God would lead us” because “we knew we had to do something.” The church’s leaders sought a feasible approach for maintaining a viable ministry presence in the community. Relocation was explored but quickly dismissed as an unsuitable option.

In the absence of a workable plan for West Jackson’s continued operation, the church elected representatives to begin the process of dissolving the church and dispensing the assets. Paul Haynes was elected as the president of the executive committee charged with handling the dissolution process.

During the time that the active membership of West Jackson Baptist Church was dwindling, the congregation of the Emmanual Missionary Baptist Church was experiencing robust growth which left their own facilities insufficient for continued expansion. In answer to the West Jackson’s prayers for God’s leadership and direction, the Rev. Jesse Horton of EMBC inquired about the availability of the West Jackson Baptist Church facilities. Horton’s initial inquiry started a sequence of discussions, prayer gatherings, and other meetings that led to the eventual decision by West Jackson Baptist Church to sell their buildings and property to Emmanual Baptist Church.

Despite the sadness of ending their own ministry in the area, the members of West Jackson were keenly aware of God’s obvious involvement with the transfer of the WJBC property to Emmanual. With the statement, “God was preparing another group to carry on His work,” Paul Haynes affirmed West Jackson’s recognition of God’s involvement.

With the exchange of ministry from West Jackson to Emmanual and the sale of the accompanying property to EBMC, the proceeds derived from this transfer were invested with the Mississippi Baptist Foundation through the establishment of the “West Jackson Baptist Church Trust.” The earnings stemming from the investment of the fund’s corpus provides perpetual benefit for several Baptist causes including the Baptist Children’s Village, the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering, for International Missions, the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering for North American Missions, and the Margaret Lackey State Missions Offering. Since the creation of this endowment in August 1995, over $200,000 has been distributed to these designated causes.

Former members of the West Jackson Baptist Church gather once or twice each year to share fellowship and memories. The most recent reunion took place last Saturday at the Western Sizzlin’ in Ridgeland with over forty people participating. Included in this group were West Jackson Baptist Church pastors Jack Nazzary and Malcomb Massey as well as Bill Jones who served the church as interim pastor.

Robinson Street Baptist Church

With a history similar to West Jackson Baptist, the Robinson Street Baptist Church ministered to their community and throughout the city of Jackson from their home base located on the corner of Ellis Avenue and Robinson Street for thirty-seven years beginning in 1950. During the formative years of the church, facilities were built as the membership grew and ministries expanded.

After less than 20 years, however, the community surrounding the church’s worship and ministry site began to shift from a high-growth to a transitional area. Although the church continued serving despite a decline in membership, the congregation began to recognize that they weren’t postured to minister in the community to the extent and with the effectiveness that was needed. In 1987, the church made the difficult decision to discontinue ministering as the Robinson Street Baptist Church and sold the church property and facilities to an African-American congregation.

The proceeds from the sale of the church property were invested with the Mississippi Baptist Foundation as an endowment for missions and ministry. The trust documentation that established the “Robinson Street Baptist Church Trust” calls for several Baptist ministries to receive a portion of the annual earnings. Included among these ministries are the Baptist Children’s Village, Collegiate Ministry (BSU) in Mississippi, Mississippi College, and the Metro Baptist Association.

While the Robinson Street Baptist Church no longer meets as a congregation of believers on the corner of Ellis Avenue and Robinson Street, the trust fund administered by the Foundation continues to perpetuate the memory and ministry of the church as nearly $900,000 has been distributed for the advancement of Kingdom endeavors since the inception of the trust fund.
Where Faith Abounds: Faith Baptist Church

Change, Exchange, and Rearrange define the nearly 10-year ministry of the Faith Baptist Church in north Jackson. When the Broadmoor Baptist Church made the decision in the late 90s to relocate their ministry base from Northside Drive in the capitol city to Madison, the church made a ministry exchange of sorts by selling the Broadmoor facilities and property to the Wesley Biblical Seminary. In the midst of this change and exchange, a portion of Broadmoor’s membership remained in the local area and established Faith Baptist Church.

Initially, the congregation met at Chastain Jr. High School located on Northside Drive across from Broadmoor’s former campus. Eventually, however, the group returned to a more intimate and familiar setting as they began leasing the chapel from Wesley Seminary for worship. For several years, the church focused on mission and ministry in their community.

Toward the end of 2007, the church was faced with the decision to rearrange their focus as the church’s lease arrangement with the seminary was not scheduled to be renewed. Confronted with the prospect of no longer having a ministry home for the church, some of Faith’s leadership began exploring the possibility of merging with another area church. In the end, the congregation voted to disband. The church determined further to rearrange their ministry in a perpetual fashion through the establishment of a trust fund with the Mississippi Baptist Foundation.

Holding their last official services in January, 2008, the church presented a check for $100,000 to the Foundation for the “Faith Baptist Church Mission Trust.” The annual earnings from this trust are designated for equal distribution to the International Mission Board and the North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention for the planting of new churches. Only eternity will register the untold numbers of people across the globe that will receive and accept the gospel message by faith because of a small group of faithful servants known as Faith Baptist Church.

Opening New Doors: McDowell Road Baptist Church

Following a stellar ministry that began in South Jackson in 1954, the McDowell Road Baptist Church decided to close their doors and disband in late 2005. For years, the church had been confronted with a transitional ministry area and an aging membership. These, and other factors, contributed to a continual decline in the number of worshipers meeting in a sizeable facility.

Upon reaching the decision to disband, the congregation voted to establish the “McDowell Baptist Church Mission Trust” with the Mississippi Baptist Foundation as a perpetual reminder of the manner in which God used MRBC to provide a source of blessing in South Jackson and around the world. The purposes for which the annual earnings are designated include the Baptist Children’s Village, MBCB Disaster Relief, and Baptist Homes/Son Valley. Although this mission trust is slated to receive primary funding following the disposition of the church facilities, a number of McDowell Road Baptist Church members make regular contributions to this mission trust.

Certainly, churches don’t intend on disbanding when first started but sometimes congregations determine to move in other directions for a variety of reasons. The new direction may result in a complete Change, an Exchange of ministry, or even a Rearrange. Regardless of the circumstances or sequence of events that led to the decision to disband, a church can continue to encourage Baptist ministries through a perpetual endowment with the Mississippi Baptist Foundation. As “laborers together with God,” we can achieve Kingdom goal of bringing Mississippi and the world to Jesus.