

Southern Baptists and Pentecostals unite in Tennessee

Pastors in Shelbyville, Tenn., say a citywide revival is emerging that overshadows denominational differences

A continuing revival at a charismatic Southern Baptist church in southern Tennessee is drawing denominations together, including a group of Pentecostals who have long been at odds with other Christians.

Soon after it began last November, members of the United Pentecostal Church (UPC) started attending twice-weekly services at Shelbyville First Baptist Church, which is part of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC).

The meetings were sparked by nearly 250 salvations during a four-day crusade led by Texas-based evangelist Ken Freeman. Soon after, he returned to lead ongoing meetings. The UPC participation has fostered a close friendship between Pentecostal pastor Bryan Nerren and Drew Hayes, pastor of First Baptist.

Pentecostals, Baptists and members of other denominations are meeting regularly now for prayer. Pastors are coming together, too. About 10 were to hold a three-day retreat recently to pray for the city of 17,000.

This cooperation shatters denominational barriers that have existed for nearly a century. The UPC has clashed bitterly with other Christians over its "Oneness" theology. But both

pastors say the division is more about terminology than beliefs.

“We discovered most of the differences we had on major issues, such as salvation and the oneness of God, had to do with the words we use rather than the meaning of those doctrines,” Hayes said. “The Pentecostals were surprised to find out the Baptists didn’t believe in three Gods. The Baptists were surprised to find out the Pentecostals believe in the eternal deity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”

Approximately 450 people accepted Christ as Savior during the first eight months of services. Nearly 3,000 came to repent or to share prayer needs. The meetings are now being held periodically. Freeman will return in October and charismatic teacher Jack Taylor is slated to speak in November.

An invitation has also been extended to well-known UPC leader T.F. Tenney, district superintendent for Louisiana. The July speaker was his son, Tommy Tenney. Ironically, the younger Tenney’s books were removed from SBC-owned LifeWay Christian Stores last year for alleged doctrinal problems.

Churches from more than 75 denominations and more than 30 pastors came to hear Tenney, which Nerren called a sign that the revival is growing. Tenney said Shelbyville’s churches exhibited a refreshing lack of competition. He calls this gathering something that he has long hoped to see—a true move of God involving a whole city.

“If we ever start trying to pastor our city and stop just pastoring our church, then God becomes as big as the city and bigger than our church,” Tenney said. “This is starting to

happen all over. God is erasing the lines.”

The night Tenney spoke on servanthood, he called shoe shining the modern-day equivalent of Jesus’ washing the disciples’ feet. Afterward, he invited a group of pastors to the stage and shined their shoes. “The presence of God was so strong, all the pastors were on their faces on the floor,” Nerren said. “People got out of their seats and were polishing each other’s shoes with tears.”

John Bell, pastor of First United Methodist Church in Shelbyville, said the revival has stirred him to return to a more active ministry. Although praying regularly for others’ healing after he received the baptism of the Holy Spirit in 1973, Bell said he had settled into a comfortable routine.

“I’ve been in ministry for 28 years, but this is the first time where all the pastors of the major churches have been of one heart,” he said.

Like most revivals, this one has its critics. Some have sneered that the leaders are “Bapticoastal,” and a few families have left First Baptist. Others have questioned the need for change or the vibrant music because they dislike raised hands, clapping and exuberant worship practices.

Hayes said some questions raised need to be addressed, such as how much of Pentecostal and charismatic doctrine Baptists should embrace. “Some are asking, ‘Can you believe in a second blessing and still be a Baptist?’” he said. “I think the answer is, ‘Absolutely,’ but we have to answer that.”

Nerren sees the most important thing to emerge from the

revival as the unity of believers, which Jesus prayed for in John 17.

“We have differences and biases and prejudices, but that’s not as important as the kingdom of God going forward,” he said.

-Ken Walker