

White, Black Churches Unite Near Civil War Battlefield in Virginia

One pastor is white, one is black, and they share the pulpit now that they have merged their two congregations near Richmond

Nestled along the Appomattox River just 27 miles south of Richmond, Va., the former capital of the Confederacy, is Petersburg, Va., site of the longest siege of the Civil War. Petersburg's downfall forced Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee's retreat and, ultimately, his surrender—after which a divided nation began to heal.

More than a century later that healing continues. The evidence of it is found in a black pastor and a white pastor who share the same last name, have a common vision for racial unity, and who have proved their dedication to their dream by merging their congregations into one church and sharing the pastoral duties.

Last summer the predominantly black church of New Zion Fellowship in Dinwiddie, Va., joined the Rock Church of Petersburg, a multiracial church, to form “a more perfect union,” as spokespersons call it, by worshiping in racial harmony.

The foundation for their merger was established more than a decade ago when the Rock Church left the suburbs and moved

into the heart of the city to a site adjacent to Petersburg National Battlefield. The church quickly became multiracial. Today blacks, whites, Asians and Hispanics worship together, and other members hail from Africa, Haiti, Fiji, the Philippines and various European countries.

Having nurtured a hope for interracial harmony, the Rock Church witnessed a key moment of fulfillment of the dream last April during the church's 25th anniversary celebration. Rock Church pastor Gerald Davis reminded his congregation of the area's Civil War heritage.

"Slavery was ended, but prejudice was not," Davis said, telling his congregation that freedom from prejudice cannot be legislated but is a work of the Holy Spirit.

Attending the special service was the Rev. Leonard Davis (no relationship), pastor of New Zion Fellowship, who had come with his entire congregation. The Rock Church's commitment to diversity and foreign missions impressed Leonard Davis. He said the Holy Spirit had been drawing him to join the Rock Church for several months, but the service that day confirmed it for him.

Leonard Davis had been the pastor of an independent church and yearned for a spiritual father. "[A spiritual father] is exactly what the Lord provided in the Rev. Gerald Davis," he said.

"Throughout the years, the Lord has been knitting our hearts together," Gerald Davis said. "I love Brother Leonard, and I was happy with the relationship as it existed, but Brother Leonard felt strongly that the Lord wanted his church to join

ours.”

After much fasting and prayer, the merger was approved. During communion services last July, Leonard Davis and his entire church joined the Rock Church of Petersburg.

“God was laying a foundation at the Rock Church of Petersburg,” Leonard Davis said during the service. “But He had another site where He was preparing a group of people. Just as a master builder brings in components from other sites, the Lord has brought us into the Rock Church of Petersburg.”

Leonard Davis marvels at the way in which God unified the two churches on doctrinal matters before the two pastors met. When he was selecting a curriculum to teach foundational truths to his congregation, a member’s son gave him a First Principles book from the Rock Church of Virginia Beach, Va. He made completion of the course mandatory for membership, unaware that across town the Rock Church of Petersburg required the same course.

Although Gerald Davis is white, and Leonard Davis is black, they consider themselves spiritual brothers. They muse at how God ordered the details, even giving them the same last name. Leonard Davis said he is not concerned about titles and positions.

“Some people ask me how I can give up my church,” he said. “I have not given up my church. We are here, and we are building the Lord’s church together.”

He admits that he had to lay aside his personal wishes but

that he did so believing that God would work in the situation.

“A [church] merger is a marriage. It isn’t like a merger in the marketplace. It isn’t two companies coming together to maximize assets and gain a greater market share. The Holy Spirit is formulating a chemistry to break the strongholds He’s purposed to break,” he said.

He oversees evangelism for the church. “It is a key component to what God’s speaking in our heart. It is very significant that pastor [Gerald] Davis gave us that charge,” he said.

He says his pastoral experience gives him a broader view of evangelism. He is aware of the need to follow up outreach with discipleship. “We need to clean the fish we catch and help them find their stream of ministry,” he said.

“I believe there are going to be many more mergers. It may not be physical. God’s going to transcend denominational and organizational walls and bring leaders together with unity of spirit.”

He believes the result will be more of the Holy Spirit, broken strongholds and a community revival.

“It is an exciting time. I just really appreciate God placing us in a place where we can be truly nurtured and loved.”