

Ted Haggard Starts New Church in Colorado

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More than three years after stepping down as pastor of the 14,000-member congregation he founded in Colorado Springs, Colo., Ted Haggard announced that he is starting a new church in the same city even though he once agreed not to start a church within 100 miles.

Flanked by his wife, Gayle, and their four children, Haggard said there will be a "launch party" Sunday at his house for the newly formed St. James Church, which will seek to help people "go through the difficult times in their lives."

"Though many believe that I am not qualified nor will I ever be qualified again to be a pastor ... because of what we have been through I may be qualified to help other people in need," Haggard said Wednesday at a press conference outside his Colorado Springs home.

Haggard founded New Life Church in 1984 and led it for more than 20 years. The church had grown to more than 14,000 members when Haggard resigned in November 2006 after confessing to sexual immorality with a male prostitute.

New Life agreed to pay Haggard's salary through December 2007, provided he move away from Colorado and participate in a restoration process. Haggard also was prohibited from opening a church within a 100-mile radius of Colorado Springs.

Haggard was released from those requirements in 2008, the year his formal ties with New Life Church ended. At that time, New Life leaders released a statement saying Haggard's restoration

process was “incomplete.”

The Haggards have been traveling in ministry since the HBO documentary *The Trials of Ted Haggard* aired in January 2009. The couple began hosting a prayer meeting at their home last November and in May they incorporated the name St. James to track reimbursement of ministry travel costs.

In a statement Wednesday, New Life pastor Brady Boyd said the church wishes the Haggards well. “New Life Church will always be grateful for the many years of dedicated leadership from Ted and Gayle Haggard and we wish their family only the best,” Boyd said.

Haggard said he wants St. James to “be a blessing” to his former congregation and complimented the leadership at New Life Church. He said he and Gayle waited to start a congregation until New Life was healthy and strong.

Gayle Haggard said she and her husband were launching St. James in Colorado Springs because they felt they needed to return to the city where they started “to finish their story.”

She said after spending 22 years “investing our lives in an amazing church and serving people we love ... I wasn’t willing to let the scandal be the final chapter.”

The couple said they were returning to pastoral ministry with greater compassion after having been broken as a result of the scandal. Ted Haggard said the church would be open to all “Democrat, Republican, Independent, gay, straight, tall, short.”

“I believe Jesus’ arms are open to everybody,” he said. “And I believe in your darkest hour, that is when the Lord draws closest. ... We’ve really had a baptism of love, and we think judgment is the opposite of love. We don’t want to hate anybody, but we want to give people an open hand.”

After the launch party Sunday, a second planning service will be held June 13 to determine where the fledgling congregation will meet. The first official church service will be held June 20, when Haggard said he will preach from the book of Hebrews.

"I think the emphasis will be family and how to ... go through life without divorcing members," Haggard said of the church. "How to let a part of the body get a little sick and still be able to heal."

Haggard, who also resigned as president of the 30 million-member National Association of Evangelicals when the scandal broke, said his goal is not to make the church political.

"We want to be helpful to people wrestling with issues in society, but I don't want to be a political activist," he said. "I want to do what it takes to help people. That's what we're committed to."

Responding to a question about gay marriage, Haggard said the church would support marriage between one man and one woman as God's ideal for marriage. But he said "as for society wrestling with that question, that is a totally different question."

"Inside the church we discuss God's ideal, but the discussion about public policy is a different issue," he added.

Haggard said he didn't know how large St. James would become but said he and Gayle were "ready to get to work." During the press conference, he invited couples with marital or other difficulties to contact them for counseling.