

'We are stronger together'

By Karen O. Allen
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Different name, same legacy for a revitalized Kentucky church

Early in 2020 two Kentucky congregations met to consider joining forces to more powerfully further God's kingdom. Last fall, they saw that vision become reality.

Scottsville Road Baptist Church in Bowling Green voted later that year to become a "legacy congregation" as a campus of Living Hope Baptist Church, one of the largest Baptist congregations in Kentucky.

Despite Scottsville Road's optimal location, the church found its membership slipping until it could no longer sustain a full-time pastor. After more than a decade of continuous decline, membership dropped to nine, all seniors with limited income. John Mark Toby, director of missions for the Warren Association of Baptists in Kentucky, stepped in to serve as transitional pastor, helping boost membership to 27. Then COVID-19 hit.

In February 2020, Toby met with the remaining members of Scottsville Road, church planters from Kentucky Baptist Convention and a local pastor to determine next steps. Since a call for a full-time or bivocational pastor was not feasible, the only viable option was to partner with a sister church. In August 2020, Scottsville Road Baptist Church voted unanimously to become a campus of Living Hope Baptist called Living Hope Scottsville Road. The two churches merged, with the leadership role going to Living Hope.

"The reason we decided to merge with Living Hope was that they wanted to accept our church and work with us," said Scottsville charter member Linda Basham. "It won't be the same, but we are open to whatever will make a continuance of this work here."



Photo by Pam Henderson/The Baptist Paper

Staff members of Living Hope Baptist Church in Bowling Green, Kentucky, and the church's new Scottsville Road campus unload chairs in preparation for the legacy church's launch in fall 2021.

Scottsville Road isn't the first church in Bowling Green to merge with Living Hope. Five years earlier Redeemer Church became a Living Hope campus and now is thriving.

'Keep the light burning'

Benny Stofer, Living Hope's local impact pastor and coordinator with Toby on the merge, agreed with Basham: "Living Hope brings revisions and adds all of the proven methods and resources and people to come to Scottsville Road, then forms a new congregation that can keep the light burning here in this area and beyond."

One of the advantages of the merge is tapping into the potential of the strong, growing community, whose church affiliation is approximately 14%.

The "new" church will remain in the same location, but the legacy of

Scottsville Road Baptist will be re-focused and "reinvested."

Toby said, "They will be better able to serve the community by releasing what God has entrusted with them through the years and leaving the legacy to position that church to move forward in the future."

Scottsville Road Baptist was planted in 1981 when eight families moved to Kentucky from St. Louis, Missouri. They began worshipping in homes, and over the next 40 years the church moved to its current location, had eight pastors, started a Christian preschool and reached a membership high of 113. Throughout its life, the church "experienced strong biblical preaching, dedicated discipleship and creative outreach," as noted in the Legacy Celebration service bulletin.

Creative outreach continues, as members participated in a "30 Days

in the Harvest" event, where for 30 straight days they knocked on doors and made more than 2,000 visits.

Before the harvest initiative, the congregation spent 21 days in fasting and prayer.

Will Burnham, the new campus pastor of Living Hope Scottsville Road, knows a thing or two about evangelism, having served as a missionary along with his wife, Laura, on two different continents.

While on the mission field in Athens, Burnham was contacted by a friend, Jason Pettus, senior pastor of Living Hope Baptist. Burnham and his wife were praying about their future, and Pettus suggested they take a leave of absence from the International Mission Board and return to the States to consider helping with the Scottsville campus and other missions strategies.

Burnham said he implements some of the same strategies he used overseas.

The first service of the merged congregation was May 2, 2021, with renovation of the facilities following soon. More than 100 attended a "new campus launch" Sept. 12.

"The decision to merge has been a positive move for everyone involved," Burnham said. "I'm excited to work with Living Hope to see this church blossom."

Advice for those struggling

Burnham offered advice for struggling churches. "Being part of the [Southern Baptist Convention], you are not alone. There's always somebody out there that's ready to help. It's just being willing to ask for help and to know that we are stronger together.

"That's the beating heart of the SBC, isn't it? To cooperate together, to advance the Kingdom," he said.