

The following interview allows Jim to put his 10th anniversary in perspective.

What was your experience of being called to First Baptist Church?

I was flattered to be contacted by First Baptist Church. Although I didn't know much about it at the time, I had been there once to assist with a funeral and was impressed by the place itself and by the people I met, including Dr. Jim Flamming, Senior Pastor. I agreed to a conversation with Michael Lipford, chair of the search team, and Susan Beach, vice-chair, and after that I was even more impressed. But I also had a strong sense that my work at First Baptist, DC, was not yet completed. So I said no. Five months later Michael Lipford called again, and it was on one of those days when my best efforts had been met with resistance. I said, "Your timing is perfect." So, we started talking again, and I agreed to come to Richmond and talk with the Pastor Search Team and the staff. And that did it. That's when I began to dream about what might be possible at Richmond's First Baptist Church and when I began to feel released from my previous call in order to pursue those dreams.

When did you first feel a part of the FBC family in a deep way?

That's a great question. I remember hearing the stories of how the church prayed for Jim Flamming's son, Dave, who had cancer. I recognized what a powerful bonding experience that was for pastor and church. When my wife, Christy, was diagnosed with breast cancer I remember standing in the fellowship hall on a Wednesday night, looking around that room, and thinking, "Now it may be my turn. Now I may need you more than you need me." Happily, Christy's cancer turned out to be very tiny and easily treatable, but I knew the church would have been there for me if I needed it, and I felt a connection and closeness that has only grown in the years since.

Please talk about the challenges and changes we've experienced during these past ten years.

Discussion about baptism and changes to our procedure:

When I came to First Baptist I didn't know that we re-baptized new members who hadn't been immersed. It had never come up in conversation with the search team. Assumptions were made on both sides. But I had strong feelings about it. I believed that Christians who had been disciplined in other ways (even ways that included infant baptism and confirmation at a later age) were still Christians, and didn't need to be immersed in order to become Baptist. Others in the church—many others—disagreed. So, we spent two years talking about that, and in the end we voted by a two-thirds majority to change our membership policy. Some people left the church. Most were able to stay. And in the end, I believe, we became a much more welcoming church without becoming any less Baptist.

Development of KOH2RVA, a mission statement that people remember and understand:

At some point in those early days I began to point out the priority of the Kingdom of God in the teaching of Jesus. In one way or another, the Kingdom is mentioned some 120 times in the Gospels. Obviously, establishing God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven was His primary focus.

And since it is His church, it should be the church's focus. I began to talk about the Kingdom, and about Richmond, and about establishing God's kingdom here, but it was Billy Burford, then Church Administrator, who first pronounced those immortal words in an offertory prayer. He said, "May these gifts help us bring the Kingdom of Heaven to Richmond, Virginia." It rolled off his tongue so beautifully I thought, "That's it! That's our mission!" But it was Bob Palmer and the members of the Ministry Planning Team who had the idea of reducing that mission statement to an acronym that would fit on a license plate, "KOH2RVA." In fact, that's the license plate on my car today!

Talkback with the Pastor and Pastor's Class:

Gene Owens, the former pastor of Myer's Park Baptist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, used to do something he called "Sermon Talkback." The summer schedule at that church began with worship followed by Sunday school. He used the Sunday school hour to field questions about the sermon many people had just heard, and it was refreshing. I thought I would try it here, especially since I was looking for a good way to connect with people more informally. After a year of "Talkback" in the Adams Room on Sunday mornings, I did the "2017 Talkback Tour," going from one Sunday school class to another to field questions and connect with class members. That was better, but after a year I found that many classes asked the same questions, mostly centered around "What happens when we die?" and "What's heaven like?" Those are good questions, but I had some other things I wanted to teach, so at the beginning of 2018 I started a Pastor's Class where I got to choose the curriculum, and it's been well-attended, with as many as fifty people present at a time.

Identifying and connecting with Friends of FBC:

"Friends of FBC" was an easy one. I always address my letters to the "Members and Friends of First Baptist Church," but I had never reached out to those people who watch our broadcast in any direct way. So, I recorded a brief invitation—on video—saying, "If this is your church, we'd like to know who you are." Since then well over a hundred people have written to add their names to the list of our friends, and our deacons have taken time to write to them and make sure they feel included. When we mailed our Friends a daily "Appointment with God" booklet recently, many of them sent back donations to cover the cost of printing—donations that far exceeded the cost! We've got some good friends out there, and I'm glad we have found a way to connect.

Use of the lectionary and the response to scripture reading with "Thanks be to God":

When I was just getting started as a pastor I used the denominational calendar of the Southern Baptist Convention to plan worship. There was a different emphasis for every Sunday. But in that first year, when the SBC calendar told me that Palm Sunday was "Start a Church Commitment Day," I knew I needed to find another way. A professor of worship at Southern Seminary suggested using the Revised Common Lectionary — a three-year cycle of Scripture readings that cover most of the major texts — and I tried it. I loved it. It was a way to get more

Scripture (not less) into worship, and to follow the life and teachings of Christ more closely. And I like saying, "This is the Word of the Lord," after we read a passage of Scripture, and hearing the church say, "Thanks be to God." The Bible is an absolute treasure. Should we not be thankful?

Reorganization of staff from the attractional to the missional guidelines:

When I came to First Baptist I asked the staff why we were here, that is, why First Baptist Church was here in the city of Richmond. They offered some good answers but in the end we searched the Scriptures for the clear commands of Christ and came up with five that stood out above all others: 1) Love God; 2) Love others; 3) Love one another; 4) Make disciples by baptizing; 5) Make disciples by teaching. From those five clear commands we came up with five ministry areas: 1) Worship; 2) Compassion; 3) Community; 4) Invitation; and 5) Formation. It only made sense to organize the ministry of the church around those clear commands, and fortunately we had good staff in place who were able to adapt their ministries to those areas. We did that in May, 2009, right around my first anniversary. We've been doing it that way ever since and a number of other churches across the country have adopted our "Missional Model."

How have you responded personally to these and other changes?

I believe our congregation is becoming more racially diverse; and that's a good thing. I believe it has become more welcoming and more inclusive, in part due to Ralph Starling's insistence on "Radical Hospitality." I'm saddened by the loss of long-time members through death or disassociation but I rejoice whenever someone comes forward to join the church. It's a vote of confidence in what we are doing, and where the mission is taking us. I know that we will have to keep on changing in order to connect with a changing world, and especially with younger generations who seem to have little need for the church these days. I pray that we will never stop trying to reach them.

Are there other changes still in your dream stage?

Some of my biggest dreams revolve around the way we make connections and create community in a digital age. The fact that more and more people are connecting with First Baptist through our webcast, our podcast, Facebook and live streaming suggest the possibility of becoming a global church, and not only a regional one (as we are through our TV broadcast). We really can reach the world with the Good News of Jesus. Why not?