

**Kingdom Work to Continue in Former Church’s Facility**

There were tears at Eastside Baptist’s last service held on Dec. 2, but most were tears of joy for how God has woven hope into the last chapter of the church’s story. The 64-year-old church in Forest Acres had dwindled to around 35 members when Pastor Dennis Letts reached out to the Columbia Metro Baptist Association for help in late summer 2018. At the same time God was preparing the heart of another congregation across town, to continue bringing the hope of the gospel to the community through Eastside’s property and facilities.

“Our last service had a tone of victory. We praised the Lord for letting our property continue to be used. Tears were shed, but it wasn’t a tearful time. We were thankful that we’d been serving the Lord, that souls came to Christ and Christians had matured in their walk there,” says Letts, Eastside’s pastor since 2008.

As Eastside members voted to dissolve the church, they gave permission for its property and assets to be given to NorthStar Christian Center in Columbia. Revitalization happens to be part of NorthStar’s own history, as it was formerly Forest Drive Baptist and thrived in a similar part of town to Eastside. Over the course of several years in the early 2000’s, NorthStar acquired 40 acres in a neighboring suburb and changed its name as it replanted there.

“Some of the Eastside members have been in the church a long time, and passing the baton is a hard thing to do. We are humbled by the gift and the trust Eastside has placed in us to carry on in ministry there,” says NorthStar Pastor Brian Thomas.

While future ministry specifics at the Eastside location aren’t concrete, Thomas describes his congregation as having a passion to reach families through needs-based ministries and that will drive their plans. The clothing and food closets Eastside have in place will be expanded, and additional ministries NorthStar already sponsors will be added in order to connect with the surrounding community.

“Because we desire to reach families, NorthStar has opened a daycare, afterschool academy, food and clothing closets, a summer feeding program and backpack program in our school district, Richland Two. Families are being affected by having practical needs met, and that gives us the opportunity to introduce Jesus to them,” Thomas says.

According to CMBA Director George Bullard, the result of the unusual agreement these churches have come to reflects the power of embracing the reality that people don’t “own” the church, God does.

“When they can allow God to open up doors for new ministry then wonderful things can happen. God inspired both congregations and then brought them together,” he says.

Thomas shared that God used his church’s burden for outreach to mobilize NorthStar for the new opportunity in the months leading up to the acquisition. The congregation pursued the purchase of a local church property in order to expand its ministries, but that sale did not go through. As NorthStar experienced strides in public school ministries, the church discussed untapped potential to reach the neighboring school district where Eastside Baptist is located.

“We’ve shared with Eastside about what we do and that we want to be a blessing to the community. It’s exciting to see that we have an opportunity to go back into the area of town where our church used to be. We know that when we begin reaching people with practical needs, a church will grow,” Thomas says.

Bullard also connected Eastside Baptist with Robert Grant, an administrative consultant experienced in assisting churches with every aspect of the dissolution process. There are specific civic and legal steps that must be taken before a church can formally close. Grant helps these churches obtain forms from the Secretary of State, properly dissolve articles of incorporation, educate remaining individuals of their membership options moving forward, and leads the formal voting processes that must take place.

Grant says the dissolution clause that Eastside Baptist had in its bylaws didn’t stipulate how assets would be handled, and this allowed them to be creative in the agreement with NorthStar. He also commends the church members for recognizing the situation they were facing and embracing the process God was leading them through.

“It’s a relief to a lot of churches when they can see Kingdom growth continue, whether it’s through a church like them, of another denomination, or other type of mission church. All of this is vision, purpose and priority driven,” Grant says.

For his part, Bullard says the partnership of Eastside and NorthStar is just one great example of the openness to God’s leadership making it possible for His mission to be enhanced. “We have other similar opportunities bubbling to the surface in our association. I am excited to see what else God will do.”

“God arranged it all, He gets all the glory. God’s already written the next chapter, I just haven’t read it yet. God can do this with other churches too, if they’ll look into it,” Letts says.