

**Awaken Church Celebrates 10 Years of Loving the Community**

When Awaken Church was planted ten years ago in northeast Richland County, its members were committed to engaging the growing number of unreached people living there. In the years since its members have immersed themselves into the community, built relationships and regularly served local schools and neighbors. As the church celebrates its 10th anniversary Pastor Brad Whitelaw continues to look toward the future.

“Looking back should give us fuel to move forward. Anniversaries are like a compass. We look up and see God and praise God for all that He has done. We look back to celebrate how God has been so faithful and generous to us. We look ahead believing He is able to do immeasurably more than we could ever dream in the days and years to come. And then we bow down to submit and tell Him we absolutely need Him,” Whitelaw says.

Submission is an important part of Awaken Church’s story. When Jay Hardwick and his wife Lara Beth sensed the call to plant a church, Columbia wasn’t initially on the radar. Natives of northeast Richland County, the couple grew up at Spring Valley Baptist Church where Lara Beth’s father is pastor. In 2006, while they were serving a church plant in Greenville, Hardwick says they began identifying criteria for places with a great need for the gospel and an underserved area where folks weren’t engaged by any churches.

“The Awaken Church story is nothing anyone could have orchestrated beforehand. From start to finish and until now, this has all been clearly and obviously orchestrated by the Lord,” says Hardwick, currently serving as the associate executive director and chief strategist of the South Carolina Baptist Convention.

The Hardwicks prayed over a list of potential locations outside South Carolina as they talked to contacts already in those areas. While working from a coffee shop one day, Hardwick reached out to the convention’s church planting director to inquire about areas of possibility. As they continued the discussion in person the director mentioned a place Hardwick was very familiar with.

“The more we talked the more I sensed that God was in this. Lara Beth and I made a few trips to visit, learned that the underserved area was growing and that local pastors had been praying for new churches to be planted there. After more prayer we were convinced that God was calling us to return to our hometown to partner with existing churches to reach the vast numbers of people in northeast Columbia who were not in a church,” he recalls.

Before it ever had a name or a meeting place, the foundation of Awaken Church was assembled slowly and intentionally. Hardwick says they worked to raise funds, partner with local sending churches and became creatures of habit when they went out to eat, shopped and stopped for coffee. The goal was to meet and understand as many unchurched, unreached people as possible. Eventually they started a Bible study and invited their new friends and acquaintances.

“I met Ben at Starbucks. He was a proclaimed atheist, but we continued to meet for coffee. He came to our Bible study and, during the process, placed his faith in Jesus and was baptized in a backyard pool long before we had begun to meet as a church or had a church name. There are tens of thousands of more ‘Bens’ in northeast Columbia,” Hardwick says.

In the fall of 2008, the gatherings for Bible study and a meal became more formal, and the group began praying about starting a church together. In January 2009 they began meeting in the music room at Polo Road Elementary School and started casting a vision by defining fundamental concepts like the gospel and Church, what is leadership in the church, why do we worship and need small groups and what it means to live life on mission. Previously unreached people were bringing their friends to the gatherings and started to ask what they should call the group, a natural step toward settling on a name for the church’s launch team.

“Awaken Church is named from the passage in Ephesians that says, ‘awake, o sleeper, and arise from the dead.’ We wanted to see people far from God awakened to new life in Christ and a city awakened by the hope of the gospel,” Hardwick says, adding that they set a summertime goal that year to directly serve 5,000 people in Columbia through service projects and initiatives.

Awaken Church held its first formal service at Polo Road Elementary in August 2009. The church maintained an important partnership with the school, pledging to serve its faculty, staff and students. Hardwick remained as pastor until December 2011, when he and his family were called to serve a church in Rock Hill.

“The biggest thing we saw in those early days were the lives changed by the gospel. God answered our prayers that somehow a church would be planted and reach people who needed the gospel and that they’d find new life in Christ through this body called Awaken…and it happened. We saw over 100 people make a first-time decision to follow Christ and we baptized 75-80 people in those first two years of the church. It is exactly the kind of church we prayed for,” he says.

Whitelaw was introduced to Awaken Church in August 2012. The Toronto, Ontario native had pastored a church in Canada for 14 years before deciding to pursue a master’s degree at Columbia International University. He and his family lived by Polo Road Elementary School and were especially interested in Awaken Church because of their personal call to church planting. He served in various staff capacities before being called as pastor in February 2019, so he had a front-row view of an exciting season in the church’s life. Between the pastoral leadership of Jay Hardwick and Brad Whitelaw, Awaken was effectively led and experienced good growth while Matt Hahn served as pastor. Matt is now serving a church in Texas.

“In January 2014 we moved into our current building, the former Monkey Joe’s [a children’s indoor inflatable play area]. We had enough money to do basic renovations which included creating an auditorium with sound, stage and lighting, painting the vibrant colored walls and somewhat tidying up the lobby. Slowly and over the course of two or three years we have continued renovating, built two more kids’ environments, created a more functional and visually appealing lobby and created shared office spaces for our staff.

It was a blessing and a miracle from God when we began leasing this building because it was well out of our price range. I believe, due to prayer and God moving in our midst, the developer brought the asking lease down to a point where it still took faith but was within reach. Since then, we have bought the building and currently own it,” Whitelaw says.

Today, Awaken Church members describe themselves as “everyday people who live out an everyday mission” and believe church isn’t something they attend. Whitelaw says they clearly define the place where they meet as “the building,” or just “171,” and its people as the “church.”

“Church is us. We are the church every day. We celebrate the gospel every day. We love each other every day. We strive to be engaged in each other’s lives every day. Discipleship takes place every day,” he explains.

The mission of Awaken Church is to love God, serve others and make disciples daily. Whitelaw describes the church’s culture as one of celebration, constantly celebrating the gospel and what God has and is doing among the lives of people and throughout the city. Church members have a regular presence at Richland Northeast High School, a nearby apartment complex, and—in partnership with a local ministry—to boys from single parent homes. Awaken Church hosts the annual Serve Columbia Week with the secondary goal of encouraging members to continue loving and serving their neighbors year-round. The church sends mission teams to serve internationally each year, and small groups adopt a local service project together.

“We also hold multiplication in high regard. We strive to multiply ourselves as disciples of Jesus. We are also striving to multiply by planting other churches in our city and across our state and country,” Whitelaw adds.

To honor the 10th anniversary milestone Awaken Church members celebrated how God has been at work, while casting a new vision to reach one percent of Richland and Kershaw Counties – or 4,766 people – and see them transformed by the gospel. On September 1st they celebrated with a baptism and cookout fellowship.

“Our desire is the same since the beginning - we want to see northeast Columbia transformed by the gospel,” says Whitelaw.

Hardwick calls this a marker of Awaken Church’s DNA and what it needs to fuel ministries that will make an eternal difference.

“Awaken, as a body, is a living breathing testimony to God’s power and grace to change people, impact community, bring people together around His mission and use average ordinary people to make a big difference in an area of need. It continues to be in an unbelievably fast growing and diverse area that still needs the gospel. God’s not finished and has His hand on Awaken Church,” he says.