

Historic church finds new energy in missions commitment

September 3, 2009

FRANKFORT, Ky. (ABP)—When churches fall on hard economic times, some congregations reduce the amount they give to missions. A Kentucky Baptist pastor believes they should do the opposite.

“I think churches are in a survival mentality right now, and it is harming the spread of the gospel,” said David Hinson, pastor of First Baptist Church in Frankfort, Ky. “We have got to trust that the Lord will provide for our future, and we can be practical in our economic decisions but faithful in trusting that God will give us a vision for helping people in need at the same time.”

Hinson came to the historic downtown Frankfort church in 1998 and led the congregation to develop a strategic plan that included a strong missions component.

“We really wanted to have a strategy that moved outside the walls of the church,” he said. “That was very critical for us, because a church can just sometimes look inward, and they become so concerned about themselves they forget that their call to Christ is a call to lose yourself in the needs of others.”

One result was Mission Frankfort, a comprehensive mission enterprise encompassing local, state, national and international ministry partnerships.

The key component of Mission Frankfort is funding. First Baptist Church does not include missions in its annual operating budget of \$574,000. Instead, it assigns a separate budget for Mission Frankfort that is 100 percent designated line items for community and statewide ministries and

global relationships, including the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the Baptist World Alliance and a school in Liberia.

Designated funding is the biggest obstacle for most Baptists Hinson knows who are familiar with the strategy, he said. Raised in a era of unified denominational work where dollars are pooled and divided like a pie between church and mission programs, they fear that given the choice, many church members would support missions but neglect other costs associated with running a church.

Hinson's experience has been the opposite. One Sunday after challenging the congregation to divide the day's offering 50/50 between the church budget and missions, he said, the church responded with a large offering. After the service, several members told him they supported missions, but they also didn't want to see other areas of the church suffer.

Members of the church have taken the challenge. When Hinson first came, they were budgeting \$35,000 for cooperative missions, about 7 percent of its total receipts. Today, more than one dollar out of every three dropped in the offering plate is designated for missions.

"We have had 11 consecutive years of increase in percentage as well as dollar gifts toward missions, which I think is fairly remarkable," Hinson said.

In 2005, the church paid \$85,000 for a vacant motel in eastern Kentucky to remodel for use as a dormitory for volunteer mission teams. Today the Emma Quire Mission Center in Owsley County is filled up every summer with church groups from all over the country. The mission center is 110 miles from the church, so the decision to buy and remodel a facility that hadn't been renovated in 40 years was "a leap of faith" on the part of First Baptist Church, Hinson said.

More recently, the congregation paid \$50,000 for 88 acres of mountain

land not far from the Emma Quire center called Hope Mountain. Now Hinson is looking for other churches interested in partnering with First Baptist to develop the property into a Habitat for Humanity-style community on the banks of the Kentucky River.

Hinson promotes the Mission Frankfort model with an evangelist's zeal.

"I believe every town needs to have 'Mission Your Town,' and from your church in your town you need to develop a global missions initiative," he said. "The idea has been that I can't help everybody, but I can help one person. If every Christian can recognize that we have an individual responsibility to allow God's Spirit to work in us in a manner where we can impact a person's life, then we need to be about that task."

Baptists need new models to prosper in the 21st century, and First Baptist has been intentional about developing one model for downtown county seat churches, Hinson said.

"What I've tried to do is take a church of 500 members and say 'What can we do to change the world?' And that's what we try to do here.

"There are churches far bigger than us who could accomplish similar goals if they chose to do so."

Hinson acknowledged Frankfort hasn't been hit as hard by the economy as some communities dependent on manufacturing that have seen major employers close, but his church is also doing more than less. He said he is not trying to make other churches feel guilty, but simply offering a model that has worked for him.

"This church has not been afraid to fail," Hinson said. "They have given themselves enough rope to hang themselves many, many times over again, but we have discovered that we're on a pathway to help people. That has brought great hope to me."

“I have people come into my office on a regular basis, ‘Thank you, you’re keeping me alive.’ How can you not help but be moved by that?”