

Jarrell church grows through community involvement

February 20, 2009

JARRELL—Relationships form the bedrock of the growth that is happening at Sonterra Fellowship in Jarrell—spiritual growth as well as numerical.

Pastor Bill Gravell leads a relational congregation because he recognizes the importance of relationships. He came to faith in Christ through a relationship a youth minister established with him—not in a church, but in a drug rehabilitation center.

“It was in that drug rehab center that I first heard of Christ,” Gravell said. And at First Baptist Church in Round Rock, he made a profession of faith in Christ. He knows relationships formed outside the church lead to life-changing relationships within the church.

As Pastor Bill Gravell speaks each Sunday at Sonterra Fellowship in Jarrell, a large rock rests on a table beside him. “That’s a reminder of one of our core values: We don’t throw rocks at one another, and we don’t throw rocks at other churches,” he explained. (PHOTO/George Henson)

After graduating from the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor, he was youth minister at First Baptist Church in Cameron. He also spoke in 46 states and a dozen countries to more than 2 million people, primarily in youth evangelism venues.

In 2006, however, he began looking at places to start a church, and he felt God placed Jarrell on his heart.

“Jarrell reminded me of what it was like growing up in Round Rock. It has grown so much from when I was there as a child. When I looked around Jarrell, I envisioned great things for this community,” Gravell said.

Sonterra Fellowship was birthed with backing from Crestview Baptist Church in Georgetown, New Church in Georgetown, Williamson Baptist Association and the Baptist General Convention of Texas. While it is almost self-supporting now, the two Georgetown churches still provide some support.

After growing from Gravell’s home to a storefront, Sonterra Fellowship moved into its own building in January, having grown to about 300 participants each Sunday, with about 400 people calling Sonterra their home church.

The church has baptized about 50 people—more than 40 of them adults.

“Our No. 1 goal is to reach the unchurched and the dechurched—those people who once attended church but haven’t for one reason or another for a long time,” Gravell said.

The desire to reach people outside the church is the reason the congregation does not have the word “Baptist” written anywhere.

“What we found on the basis of our research is that if you have these seven words in your name, (all denominational names), people from outside the

church won't come. So, why would you put that in there?" he asked.

"We're not ashamed of our heritage. We're probably more biblically based than any church I've ever been a part of, and we have to be when we have so many new believers," Gravell said.

The congregation hasn't grown through mass mailings or going door-to-door, Gravell said, but through building relationships with people in the community.

"Fellowship is a big deal here," he said. "That's why we have Starbucks coffee and Round Rock doughnuts. We purpose to connect with people on a relational level.

"We don't do door-to-door evangelism, and that's a philosophical choice. We believe a better model is to care. We've seen success by going out and being involved in the community."

While the church has Sunday school for children, there are no adult Sunday school classes on the Sonterra property. However, Bible study groups meet in homes throughout the week and accomplish much of that purpose while at the same time reinforcing community.

"We're about relationships, not about religion. We're about knowing Christ, not denominationalism," Gravell said.

The home-style auditorium seats about 160 for each of the two Sunday morning services. The individual wooden chairs are arced around a barstool where Gravell delivers his conversational messages. While Gravell generally does all the talking, the idea is to communicate a relaxed atmosphere. "I literally walk up with my Bible and a cup of coffee," he said.

On a table next to Gravell is a potato-sized rock. "That's a reminder of one of our core values: We don't throw rocks at one another, and we don't

throw rocks at other churches," he said.

On each side of the room are kneeling benches for worshippers who wish to pray.

"If you want to get up and pray during the service, go and do it. If you want to go and get a doughnut and another cup of coffee, do it. We don't have a lot of hard-and-fast rules here," he said.

There are no altar calls and no one passes a plate for offerings. People who want to receive Christ as Savior talk with Gravell individually. Most of the people who accept Christ at Sonterra Fellowship do so in the living room of his home, he said.

People deposit their offerings in one of the two treasure boxes by the door.

While the routine may be a little different, it may be just that difference that has allowed Christ to change the lives of some people who have not attended other more conventional churches.

Gravell told the story of a man who came one Sunday morning reeking of stale alcohol.

"He asked me what the cover charge was," Gravell recalled. "So, I asked him what he usually paid. He told me \$10 to \$20, so I told him the cover charge was \$10. He said, 'What if I don't like the talk?' I told him if he didn't like the talk, he could have his cover charge back."

The man returned week after week, each time standing near the treasure box until he caught Gravell's eye before he left.

"He wanted me to see if he took his cover charge back," Gravell said with a grin. The visitor has moved but is now a member of a church in Austin.

Gravell has many stories of lives changed through the relationships they

have found in Christ. And each started with someone who cared enough to be a friend.

Church members are encouraged to be mentors in the schools, be active in civic organizations and any place they can interact with others to show the love of Christ. Gravell has been active in Lions Club and was president of the homeowners' association.

"The biggest mistake we can make is to build a building and then ask everyone to come. We have to get out there and be active in their lives," he said.

He has had parties for the community with inflatables for children filling his yard and coffee for their parents in his driveway.

Sonterra will hold a community Easter egg hunt between its morning services on Easter Sunday.

"Some say that's sacrilegious, but we try to look at what is attractive to nonbelievers. We've taken criticism, but it's overwhelmingly from other Christians, not nonbelievers," Gravell said. "Our biggest struggle is to keep up with the growth."