

Pastor puts beard on the line for Peru mission project

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HEMPSTEAD—What began as a joke made in front of a rural Texas congregation ended with a gift of more than \$26,000 contributed to enable Texas Baptist Men and their ministry partners to drill new water wells in Peru.

Tim Smith presents the weekly announcements during worship services at First Baptist Church in Hempstead, northwest of Houston.

One Sunday in October, he told the congregation Pastor John Brandt might shave off his beard if the church gave a certain amount of money for this year's annual statewide Royal Ambassadors mission project—drilling water wells in Peru.

Good-hearted pressure began to build on the pastor to set an amount.



Pastor John Brandt agreed to shave off his beard if First Baptist Church raised at least \$20,000 for a mission project in Peru. The church gave \$26,000—more than enough to drill

two water wells. (Courtesy Photo)

Brandt said he decided to play along by setting a price for the shaving of his beard—one he thought would be too high to reach. The price for his shave was \$20,000.

The church had never known their pastor without a beard. Brandt started as worship pastor in 2015 and became pastor in 2017. His children had not seen him without a beard for nine years.

Smith said he checked with Brandt's wife, Amanda, about the challenge, as well.

"She was good natured about it, too," Smith said.

Children in the church started raising money for the mission project associated with the annual RA Campout and Missions Mania event, which was Nov. 10-12 this year.

All the church's children participated

First Baptist in Hempstead has both an RA chapter and a Girls in Action group, so all children involved in missions programs at the church were involved in the fund-raising project, Brandt said.

The children began the fundraising effort by using empty water bottles to collect coins, Smith said. Then they brought bottles to the Wednesday night and Sunday morning services so adults could contribute.

The total slowly climbed in the hundreds.

"By the end, we had about 10 bottles sitting there, some completely full," Smith said. "One couple came in with rolls of pennies."



Barber Adam Gessner (right) helped Pastor John Brandt fulfill his pledge to shave his beard if his church gave at least \$20,000 to a mission project. (Courtesy Photo)

But still people gave, and Smith, the chair of deacons, and others kept the rising total under wraps.

As the RA boys were “getting in the van to go to Missions Mania,” a church member “pulled up and wanted to make sure his gift got in” on time, Smith said.

They did not announce the total of more than \$26,000 until the Sunday after returning from Missions Mania.

“We came back and announced the total,” Smith said. “John had a surprised look on his face. ... You never thought it was going to be as big as it was, but then it was.”

Brandt went to his barber Nov. 28 and said goodbye to all of his facial hair except a mustache.

“I noticed as soon as they finished shaving that my face was colder,” the pastor said. “Now I’m shocked every time I look in the mirror.”

Smith said the church “just thought this would be a fun thing to do. It became sort of a running joke for about a month. ... We had a lot of great people step up.”

The beard cutting made the effort fun for the congregation, but the pastor said it really wasn't about facial hair.

“Everybody in our church knows about water wells in Peru now,” Brandt said.

Stressing the importance of Christian mission

First Baptist in Hempstead emphasizes awareness about the importance of Christian mission, the pastor said. He used the singular “mission” to stress that all Christians are to be on mission.

“We've continued to press into RAs and GAs, to emphasize the importance of raising our children to be on mission. ... We are constantly pushing mission with our kids.”

The congregation is now getting its first look at their pastor without a beard, but it's not a new look for Brandt. Before arriving in Hempstead, he served 11 years in the U.S. Army Honor Guard.

“Every Monday we got a fresh haircut, ... no mustaches.” He was “clean shaven all the time.”

But Brandt grew up in a house with a dad who had a beard. So, he grew his own beard after leaving the Army.

The beard-cutting promoted awareness about the needs in Peru and pointed toward a specific way to address it through TBM. The \$26,000 will

cover more than the cost of drilling two wells.

There is still some debate in the church as to whether the mustache was exempted from the shave. Smith laughed and said they are reviewing business meeting minutes to see if the pastor has fully complied.

There is already talk of an additional \$5,000 bounty on the mustache, Smith said.

The pastor is not sure of the timing, but he said the beard will return.

As for the church, Brandt said, being on mission is still the key.

“Now we’re looking for what we’re going to do next,” he said. “Who knows?”