

Port Arthur churches with shared history soon will share a facility

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PORT ARTHUR—Two Southeast Texas churches that split 75 years ago soon will share a common facility.

[Procter Baptist Church in Port Arthur](#) invited First Baptist Church, which sold its facility on Port Arthur's Gulfway Drive, to share its building until First Baptist can find its own property—however long it takes.

✘ Procter Baptist Church Pastor Rick Erwin “They have been so nice and gracious to us. I don't know too many Baptist churches that are so nice to each other, where there's no spirit of competition,” said Kyle Morton, pastor of First Baptist Church. “It's one for the history books.”

When Morton arrived at First Baptist four years ago, he recognized the challenges the church faced. Located in a transitional neighborhood, the aging membership did not reflect the surrounding area. The church drew about 125 worshippers “on a great Sunday when everybody showed up at the same time” to a sanctuary that could seat 1,200.

“I had no desire to move the church,” he said. Twice before, the church considered relocation. Both times—in the 1980s and around 2000—church members decided to stay in their longtime location.

However, efforts to reach the neighborhood around the church proved unsuccessful. Attendance and finances continued to decline.

“I reached out to anybody and everybody who could help me,” said Morton,

who serves on the Baptist General Convention of Texas Executive Board.

He consulted with the state convention's church architecture staff regarding facility usage and sought the counsel of other BGCT staff, fellow pastors and leaders of [Golden Triangle Baptist Association](#).

Formed a study committee

Heeding their recommendations, Morton led the church to form a study committee to consider its options. After that committee presented its findings, the church formed a long-range planning committee to determine next steps to recommend to the congregation.

Eventually, the committees recommended selling the 70,000-square-foot building and the 6.78 acres on which it is located.

"It's a God thing that happened," Morton said. The motion to sell passed 55-3.

✘ Proctor Baptist Church in Port Arthur will be host to two congregations until First Baptist Church can find a new home. Then the church experienced another "God thing," when it placed the property on the market, he noted. When First Baptist listed its property, leaders fully expected the process to take up to 18 months, and Morton confessed he would have been happy if the church cleared \$800,000.

Within three months, the church had two offers. First Baptist sold its property for \$1.7 million.

But vacating the premises right away meant First Baptist needed a temporary home. Then Pastor Rick Erwin at Proctor Baptist Church contacted Morton. Proctor Baptist offered to let First Baptist use its facilities for worship and Bible study at mutually agreeable times on Sunday and grant First Baptist office space during the week.

“I just felt led of the Lord. We have all this room, and they didn’t need to deal with the worry of having to rent a building,” Erwin said.

First Baptist eagerly accepted and offered to pay half of the utilities for the building the two congregations would share.

A godly thing

“It was nice of them to offer, but as far as we’re concerned, if we charged them rent, then it would be a business deal, not a godly thing,” Erwin said. “We just wanted to open our doors and let them worship here.”

He noted Procter Baptist formed 75 years ago when it split from First Baptist. “And believe it or not, there are still some people here who remember that,” he said. “But the spirit and attitude is totally different now.”

While the churches will function independently, they already have shared fellowship times together.

“They even did the Baptist thing and fed us,” Morton said.

He told First Baptist’s long-range planning committee to enjoy their Christmas holiday, because he wants them to hit the ground running in January. Morton hopes the church will find suitable land to purchase within a year, and then complete the building process and relocation within another couple of years.

No rush, as far as Procter Baptist is concerned, Erwin said.

“Our people are not worried about it one bit. We welcome them with open arms,” he said. “I just wish it would be an example to others. ... Churches ought to help each other.”