

# Neighboring church becomes champion for declining congregation

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SPRING—When [Fellowship of Champions Church](#) needed a champion, a nearby congregation provided help to get the congregation back on track.

Charles Culpepper arrived in Spring in 1989 to start Fellowship of Champions.



“We built the church around the conversion of adults and saw some real success, but we never really got past 200 people, and that’s a real critical benchmark,” Culpepper said. “But the last 10 years, the church had declined to 104 people. That became a difficult situation financially.”

Since most of the people who joined Fellowship of Champions were new Christians, the congregation’s composition brought challenges.

“I called us a M.A.S.H. church. I saw our purpose as staying on the front lines where the lost people were, winning them to Christ and then turning them around as quickly as possible to allow them to bring other lost people

to Christ. We were successful at that, but they also bring a lot of baggage with them,” he said. Unfortunately, he added, they didn’t bring “a concept of servanthood or a lot of money.”

Decline coincided with the beginning of Culpepper’s heart problems in 2001, and it accelerated in 2010 when a large Methodist church moved across the street.

“I don’t blame the megachurch—that was just the dynamic. We were responsible to do what God wanted and to do our best, and Christianity survives and thrives in adverse circumstances. No blame goes to them—in fact, they prayed for us all the time,” he said.

### **Finances deteriorated**

Finances deteriorated so much it became apparent the church had to change. Congregational leaders considered options—a change in pastoral leadership, merging with another church and meeting in homes, among other possibilities.

Since Culpepper was the only pastor most of the congregation ever had known, members were reluctant to consider his departure. They also wanted to continue to be a grace-filled, accepting congregation that welcomed people who still had some rough edges, he said.



Dustin Nelson became pastor of Fellowship of Champions Church in December. Change for Fellowship of Champions began when David Huffines, whose mother-in-law attended the church, felt God leading him to use his landscaping crew to cut the congregation's grass without charge. Culpepper never had met Huffines, a layman at nearby [Champion Forest Baptist Church](#), but they soon became friends.

"He soon began to take me out to lunch every Friday to try and encourage me," Culpepper recalled.

Servanthood, encouragement, generosity and devotion to Christ marked Huffines' life, he said. As an example, he pointed to uniform shirts Huffines' landscaping crews wore—standard khaki workshirts adorned only with a logo of a man carrying a cross.

"All his workers wore one. The shirts didn't have the name of the company or any name on the shirt—just that logo of a man carrying a cross," Culpepper said.

After a while, Huffines began inviting other men from Champion Forest to their Friday lunches, so Culpepper could describe to them what was happening at Fellowship at Champions.

## **Champion Forest lends a hand**

One day, Huffines brought David Fleming, pastor of Champion Forest Baptist Church, to lunch with Culpepper. At the end of that lunch, Fleming said he would pray about how his church could help.

Over the next few months, Fleming met with the leaders of Fellowship of Champions as they developed a plan for how the congregations could work together.

Although they considered a merger as one possibility, Fleming said he respected Fellowship of Champions longstanding ability to reach adults and wanted to preserve that ministry.

In the end, they decided Stephen Trammell, an associate pastor at Champion Forest, would serve as interim pastor until Fellowship of Champions could call a new pastor, allowing Culpepper to retire and restore his health. Also, after Fellowship of Champions called a pastor, Champion Forest would pay his first year's salary—"which was so generous it's unbelievable," Culpepper said.

## **How to search for a pastor**

Since no one at Fellowship of Champions knew how to search for a pastor, leaders from Champion Forest helped them with that, as well.

"They didn't control the process at all, but showed them how to go about the process," Culpepper said.

"Champion Forest offered careful guidance, provided an interim pastor, but made it clear: 'We're just here temporarily. We want you to feel good about yourselves and carry on your mission. But whatever needs you have, we've got your back.' It was totally amazing."

Last December, Fellowship of Champions Church called Dustin Nelson as

its new pastor, and the congregation shows evidence of new life, Culpepper said. The church not only is growing numerically, but also maturing spiritually, Nelson said. The church is averaging about 50 more people this July than last and is beginning to reach out to the community more, including a ministry to a nearby apartment complex.

“We couldn’t be happier with the way God is working here,” Nelson said.

He especially is grateful for the contribution Champion Forest continues to make to the congregation.

### **Continuing involvement**

“Their investment here is so much larger than financial. They continue to touch base to encourage me and just to see if there is any other way they can help. I constantly remind our congregation of Champion Forest’s example and encourage them to look to the day when we will offer our help to someone else to further the growth of the kingdom,” Nelson said.

Culpepper is glad to see the congregation he started 25 years ago still reaching people for Christ.

“We devoted our whole lives to that. It was my dream come true. I have absolutely no regrets. To me, it was all clearly in God’s plan, and it’s an act of God’s miraculous grace that I was able to step aside before it did something terribly damaging to my health,” he said.

Culpepper had only one regret. Huffines did not live to see the church flourish.

“He was the man God used to put his finger in the dike to save our church,” he said.