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## Heritage matters

*By understanding his congregation's story, a new pastor is able to help its members move beyond their church's difficult beginning.*

by [Bob Wells](#)



Photo courtesy Heritage Baptist Fellowship

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July 21, 2009

It would be easy to drive past Heritage Baptist Fellowship in Canton, Ga., and never see it. Set back from Highway 104, in the foothills of north Georgia, the church is partially hidden behind a screen of trees.

But if you slowed down, you'd see a handsome new church building: a classic "here's the church, here's the steeple" sanctuary, solid red-brick with a drive-through portico out front and a white spire on top. Built just 10 years ago, it looks like countless other Protestant churches across the rural South.

But it's not, said the pastor, the Rev. Jake Hall. Heritage is unique, its story far more complex than any visitor could ever know. The church was founded 14 years ago by a small group who split from the area's oldest and largest Southern Baptist church, disenchanted by its growing fundamentalism. Many had grown up in that other church, a place where their families had worshipped for generations. For most, Heritage was -- and at its current 150 members, still is -- the smallest church they had ever attended.

"To rightly offer pastoral leadership here, you have to understand not just the 14-year history of this church, but the 167-year history of the church they came from," said Hall, who was called as pastor three years ago, his first pastoral appointment. "Their leaving was an act of risk and trust, and they brought with them all the pain and brokenness that comes with almost a sense of divorce."

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After meeting in borrowed space for three years, church members broke ground on their sanctuary in 1997, doing as much of the construction work as possible. The wainscoting lining the fellowship hall was sawed and planed from trees cleared for the building site.

For years, the members defined themselves primarily in reaction to the church they left: They were the “Not-First-Baptist-Church Baptist Church.” In some ways it was a useful corrective, Hall said, but it was not a basis for ministry: “At times, I joked whether we should have indoor plumbing since First Baptist had indoor plumbing.”

In many ways, his two predecessors at Heritage Baptist had to pastor in the shadow of ghosts from the other church, Hall said. But they did a masterful job starting the healing process, introducing a more ecumenical vision of Christianity and leading the church to affiliate with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

But some wounds were still apparent. Hall felt the congregation rebuffed most of his early efforts to exert leadership, pointing out to him that Heritage was a lay-led congregation.

“I hate to use this analogy, but it was like someone who has come out of a really bad marriage, swearing they will never be put in that situation again,” Hall said. “Later, when they remarry, they interpret any gesture of love as something that isn’t to be trusted.”

Hall knew better than to push back. Though he was in his first call, it wasn’t his first time seeing pastoral ministry up close. Before coming to Heritage, he spent two years as a pastoral resident at Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, funded by Lilly Endowment Inc.’s Transition Into Ministry program.

Based on that experience, Hall knew his first task at Heritage was to listen to their stories, individually and as a congregation. It’s a primary job for any pastor, he said.

“I tried to be very careful the first two years and not push too hard,” he said. “I knew I needed to build up trust and to spend my time learning about them. I knew I needed to pull back and be an observer and ethnographer or student of this congregation.”

Again and again, as he worked to “exegete,” or understand, the congregation, Hall heard stories of loss and pain stemming from the split. But he also heard stories of pride in what they had accomplished. The new building and the work that people did to build it was a powerful symbol. People loved to talk about a wall they painted, the wallboard they taped or the wainscoting they had helped install.

Slowly, as he gained the congregation’s trust, Hall began using his knowledge to shape his preaching and ministry, helping Heritage Baptist find a deeper identity. However stormy its beginning, the church’s real identity is rooted in the gospel, Hall told them, in the proclamation that wherever two or more are gathered, Christ is among them.

They had been shipwrecked, Hall preached in an anniversary service in 2007. They had experienced a voyage abruptly ended, with feelings of loss and abandonment, but they had survived, found gifts in one another, and together built and outfitted a new and grand ship with their own hands.

But ships are meant to sail, not to rest in harbor, and now it was time to push out of the shallows and head off to sea.

“Three years in, we’re now in a place to move forward and define who we are as a congregation,” he said. “Who are we to be now?”

As he and the people of Heritage Baptist answer that question, Hall will continue his work of congregational exegesis. It’s not a one-time task, completed and done, but a never-ending process.

“Congregations really are as fascinating as the text,” he said. “This is what I love to do. Everything is fodder for interpretation.”

Take the line of trees that screens the church from the highway.

“I’ve always wondered if that is some sort of manifestation of a deep-seated need, kind of a statement that ‘We need this place for ourselves for now,’” Hall said.

In fact, for much of its history, Heritage Baptist was a refuge for people in pain. But it is beginning to reach out more to the community, with a growing sense of evangelism and mission.

“The interesting thing is that there has been some talk about cutting those trees down, maybe grading and opening up that space,” he said. “The underbrush has already been cleared, and we are beginning to see the road more clearly -- in more ways than one.”