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News Update

Church gets pastor after 20-month vacancy

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After 20 months of searching, praying and voting, The McKinney First Baptist Church has its voice again.

Rev. Louis Rosenthal has taken over the pulpit at the church, first established 130 years ago in McKinney, and he's hit the ground praying.

"To be a pastor, that's a calling from the Lord," said Rosenthal, who joined the church Dec. 31. "We believe we will get the direction for this church off our knees."

Such direction was somewhat in limbo until lately, dating back to April 2010 when the church's pastor of 17 years decided to step down. In a quickly growing city and immediate community, his vision didn't match his time-honored congregation.

"He was going in a direction that I believe he could see that the congregation did not want to go," said Charles Smith, a deacon at the church. "There was just starting to be a difference there, and I think he recognized that."

But the church wouldn't rush to find a replacement. Only the right person would do, even if that meant sending its plea across the country.

Several longtime members knew preachers who could help fill the vacancy on a week-to-week basis, but they soon realized the need for a single voice, Smith said. They formed a nine-member search committee and met with the congregation to establish a profile that fit the church's needs.

Their field of possibilities stretched beyond Texas, as they put out a national advertisement through National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., the nation's oldest and largest African American religious convention with which TMFBC has long been affiliated. By June 2010, the committee had more than 500 responses.

Phone interviews, on-site visits and the tedious whittling of candidates took time. Committee members reached out to local resources, including Dallas Theological Seminary and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth.



Submitted Photo - Rev. Louis Rosenthal preaches to the congregation on a recent Sunday morning at The McKinney First Baptist Church. Rosenthal was named the new pastor in December, after a nationwide search to find a replacement for the previous pastor who stepped down 20 months prior.

They deemed a patient process necessary, Smith said, but the hiatus temporarily turned away some congregation members.

"There was a lot of screening to see who met the criteria our church had decided on," he said. "After talking to about 50 people, we got down to a top three, and Reverend Rosenthal was one of them. Obviously he was the best fit or he wouldn't be here."

Rosenthal, previously the regional sales director for DirecTV, had been the Minister of Christian Education and Prayer at Westside Baptist Church in Lewisville since 2007. He's currently a student at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Aside from his emphasis on prayer and education, Rosenthal had a special connection to TMFBC -- he served as interim pastor at Westside while Senior Pastor Kenneth Blake took a six-week sabbatical after losing his mother. He knew the importance of a constant voice.

"It felt like God was really letting me know then that he was allowing me to be in that position because he had greater plans," Rosenthal said. "I believe during that period, God clearly was showing me that, at some point in time, a pastoralship that was earmarked for me was going to come about."

The committee presented Rosenthal and two other candidates before the 250-member congregation in early December. Members of the Northwestern District Association of Dallas oversaw a congregational vote to ensure integrity.

Rosenthal needed at least 66 percent of the vote; he got 75 percent on the first pass. "The rest is history, even though it's a brief history," Smith said.

The church's new foundation under Rosenthal is built on prayer, evidenced by the Sweet Hour of Prayer (S.H.O.P.) now held every Tuesday night, when members gather to pray for their community, city, state and country. Through an online "prayer line," they can submit prayer requests that Rosenthal and church leaders will relay to others through a "full-fledged prayer ministry."

A focus on education, equipping church members to better share their faith with others, sprouts from the prayer foundation, Rosenthal said. Evangelism of the community's youth and young adults is another immediate goal.

Direction seems to have returned to the longstanding church, a welcomed change after nearly two years of vacancy.

"Some left through this transition period, but we're starting to see members come back," said Melvin Morris, also a deacon at TMFBC. "Our pastor has a vision about what we need to do in this community. We have a lot of work to do, but it's going to be great work."

With a full-size gym, kitchen and lounge area, the church is poised to reach out to the surrounding youth, to show them that "there is a better way than the criminal way," Rosenthal said.

Most of the 25 percent who didn't vote for Rosenthal have quickly changed their tune, Smith said, since they've seen the positive changes taking place within their church.

For many, it's likely promising to again have a voice.

"I've felt totally supported and embraced by this church," Rosenthal said. "This is a God-ordained situation. It's a perfect fit."

The McKinney First Baptist Church is located at 401 W. Erwin Ave. in McKinney. For information about church services, visit www.tmfbc.com.

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