

New Name, New Vision, Renewed Purpose

By Janice Backer

Replant according to Webster's dictionary means: to plant again or anew. For Magna View Baptist Church (now Grace Point Baptist) it means a fresh start. Although the building and property will remain in the same location east of Jefferson City on 11E, the congregation has voted to replant the church—with a new name, a new vision and a rededication of its purpose to share the gospel of Christ and make disciples.

In the late 50s and early 60s, Jefferson County thrived with a Magnavox factory that in its heyday employed 15,000. In April 1965, Magna View Baptist Chapel started in a home near the factory. By October, the mission became a church called Magna View Baptist Church with 48 charter members. In March of the next year, the church purchased property and the first building was built in 1966 and part of the Nolachucky Baptist Association.

Unfortunately, like many older churches in America, Magna View reached a plateau and for various reasons membership began to decline. Pastor George Miller, along with a committee of members began exploring the possibility of replanting Magna View deciding to stay open and not become a grim statistic. According to the North American Mission Board (NAMB), on average, 17 Southern Baptist churches shut their doors for good every Sunday. More than 70 percent of SB churches have plateaued or are declining in number and ten to 15 percent are at risk of or near closing.

Since 2013, about well over 150 Southern Baptist churches have opted to replant across the United States says Bob Bickford, Associate Director of Replant for NAMB. He says that replanting a church does not mean failure.

“Failure would be doing nothing, watching the church close, its members scatter and the facility closed,” he said. “Regrettably, some churches choose to close rather than make the difficult decisions to see their church regain vitality . . . They reject change and refuse to endure.” NAMB along with the Tennessee Baptist Convention and local Baptist Associations are trying to work together to help local churches in this struggle. On the state level, the Tennessee Baptist Convention has a goal of revitalizing 500 churches by 2024, that are in danger of closing their doors.

Miller agrees that a replant is better than closing the church.

“We started the process of replanting by spending the three months of self-examination,” he said. “We discussed everything—the building, finances, worship, ministries and leadership.” It was not an easy task, he said, since some saw the need for change and some did not.

However, Miller said that there have been people who have helped and prayed for the church during the process. One person was Jimmy Inman, Teaching Pastor of True

Life Church in Jefferson City, who gave suggestions for the re-writing of the church constitution and by-laws.

“I was Pastor George’s friend and prayer partner,” Inman said. “Churches have life cycles and can sometimes come to a place of being in a downward spiral.”

David Hawkins, Director of Missions (DOM) for Nolachucky Association, also was another mentor. Hawkins believes that DOM’s should walk along side churches in this struggle.

“I have been involved in conversational meetings with leadership of two declining churches in hopes they would accept the reality—cannot continue doing the same thing and expect different results,” he said. Although the idea of “replanting” or ‘restarting” was offered as an option, to date both churches continue to remain plateaued or decline.” He said that the association and sister churches can assist a declining church through prayer, encouragement and partner with them in evangelism and missions.

Besides changing the church name to Grace Point, the church has begun some new ministries including an English as a Second Language class that meets every Tuesday night at 6:30pm for those seeking to learn how to read, speak and write English. This year the church “adopted” Talbott Elementary School with prayer walking the campus, providing teacher supplies and cakes for the Fall Festival. Throughout the year, cards of encouragement will be mailed to the staff. Another new ministry that may be started soon is a citizenship class to help refugees and immigrants to become American citizens. The property also will be refreshed. On the outside a revamped sign now displays the new name and the interior of the church building will get a face lift with new paint and some remodeling.

Bickford says that on average a replant can take between 3-7 years before the church becomes viable and vibrant. He says the main reason to replant is simply this: “What about a dying church brings glory to God?”

“The obvious answer is nothing—therefore we must replant churches rather than watch them close,” he said.

For that reason, Grace Point is poised for the future.

“While we’ve seen some signs of spiritual renewal at Grace Point, we’re not there yet. I know the physical things are important, but my heart is burdened for our spiritual need.” Miller said that he almost daily thinks about Psalm 127:1: “Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it . . .”

“We want a re-dedication of the church’s purpose to share the gospel of Christ and to make disciples who make disciples.”

SIDE BAR:

Thom S. Rainer, president and CEO of LifeWay Christian Resources, churches wrote “Autopsy of a Dead Church” that listed the reasons for a church’s death:

- **The church refused to look like the community
- **The church had no community-focused ministries
- **Members became more focused on memorials
- **The percentage of the budget for members’ needs kept increasing
- **There were no evangelistic emphases
- **The members had more and more arguments about what they wanted
- **With few exceptions, pastoral tenure grew shorter and shorter
- **The church rarely prayed together
- **The church had no clarity as to why it existed
- **The members idolized another era
- **The facilities continued deteriorated

Online resources to help replant churches:

- **Churchreplanters.com
- **www.namb.net/church-replanting/help-for-churches
- **Podcast: Revitalize and Replant with Thom Rainer