



Out of the ashes

By RaeAnn Slaybaugh

For Tulsa’s Memorial Drive Church of Christ, connecting as a church family was never a problem — but the facilities told a less inspiring story.

Built in 1963, this mid-century modern church features a tent-like parabolic roof, with additions in 1973 and 1977. While the church design surely had its admirers from afar, it left a lot to be desired up close.

For long-time member Laura McCall, the discouragement began in 2014 with the state of the nursing mother’s room. Meanwhile, it was common for a leaky roof to invade Sunday morning classes.

Even so, Memorial was her home. “I love this place,” Laura says. “I love these people.”

Five years later, she took matters into her own hands, intent on redecorating the cry room. Her first call was to Sheila Cheatham, interior decorator and wife of elder Larry Cheatham. They were in full agreement — and so was Sheila’s husband, who was nearby when they spoke.

Shortly after, the elders held potluck meetings with the congregation, from Millennials to lifelong members. “Overall, they were in favor of remodeling,” Larry says. But, many were also worried about how the church would pay for this work.

Though funding was undetermined, Laura got the elders’ permission to call similar churches, ask questions about the remodeling process, and get professional recommendations. She also came across an article about Millennial-friendly church design, which resonated with her in a way nothing else had.

Laura was surprised and delighted when one church called her back and recommended none other than the article’s author: Rodney James, a pastor who’d transitioned into church building. In fact, Rodney — President & Founder of Master’s Plan Church Design & Construction [www.mpchurchdesignbuild.com] — had been *that* church’s pastor.

So, her next call was to Rodney himself. He was out of town speaking at a conference but called her back that afternoon.

“As we spoke, I could feel the Spirit moving through our words and hearts,” she says.

Laura recommended an introduction with the elders. By day’s end, a lunch meeting was planned. When they met, both Laura and Larry say Rodney struck them as experienced, knowledgeable, passionate and compassionate.

“His years spent pastoring a church allow him to see the whole picture,” Laura says.

“God’s hand has been all over this”

Before parting ways, Rodney mentioned a local news story airing the following Thursday. He’d been interviewed about designing space to help churches better minister to families who have children and adults with special needs. Memorial has a very large ministry to these families.

On the following Wednesday — July 24, 2019 — Memorial caught fire, burning for hours and rendering the entire 50,000-square-foot building uninhabitable.

While the church family mourned the loss of their facilities, Laura says that having Rodney already in their corner seemed “like a blessing directly from God.”



On that day, story after story on the church fire aired on local news — but so did the story in which Rodney spoke about creating space to help families with children with special needs worship.

“The timing was weird,” Laura remembers. “And we ‘watch for God in the weird.’”

Picking up the pieces

The day of the fire, Larry Cheatham felt perplexed and fearful. He didn’t know how to respond to members’ questions. It helped immensely when the elders and the ministers met that night to pray and ensure the upcoming Sunday morning worship went on, uninterrupted. Thankfully, earlier that day, nearby Eastside Christian Church called to offer its building (for sale at the time) as a temporary worship and Bible classes space. Memorial continues to lease the building.

To house operations staff, office space was offered up by a member / business owner and his business partner.

At the individual ministry level, each leader found alternative places to host their events. Some didn’t even have to look; a number of faith-based organizations called right away to volunteer their buildings. Except for the food pantry, every ministry continued as if the fire never happened. It wasn’t long before a partner of many years, Community Food Bank of Eastern Oklahoma, helped in finding the food pantry a home, as well.

For the long term, elders organized a building committee — for which Larry is the chair — and a building finance committee. They are working with Rodney and his team on preliminary plans for a remodeled / replacement physical home. Each ministry leader has been interviewed, and their input is reflected in a schematic floor plan.

Though official plans are on hold pending the church’s insurance settlement, one option is to retain the space under the tell-tale parabolic roof, if the structure is deemed safe by the engineer and insurer. If a complete tear-down is required, the committee will aim to incorporate some of the old structure’s elements into the new building as an homage to the church’s history.

But Larry and the rest of the church know that the outcome isn’t entirely in their hands.

“We’re focused on waiting for God to lead us,” he says. “All of us look forward to moving into a new home here in Tulsa, and to the opportunities God is preparing for us to meet.” **CE**