



Preparing Souls To Serve The Lord

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River Road Congregation New Port Richey, Florida Forty-Fifth Anniversary May 2, 2004

By

Jackie M. Stearsman

In classes here, we emphasize that “we can not evangelize the world if we do not establish and stabilize congregations.” To students of the Bible, this is not difficult to demonstrate. The great commission of the Christ demands that the message of the gospel be taken to the world. When a record of this activity is consulted it will be seen that the early Christians under the direction of the Apostles planted churches in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the world. These congregations were not left alone, competent instructors were sought and developed. Letters (New Testament Epistles) were composed and distributed to the churches to be circulated among

them.

When I read and reflect upon the River Road brethren, I am reminded that it is possible today to do what was done in the beginning of the church.

Congregation Begins

From materials I received from brother Chris Steele, a graduate of the Florida School of Preaching and full time preacher for the River Road congregation since January 1981, the following excerpts are taken: “Several members of the Lord’s church had settled in New Port Richey, Florida by 1958. Cass Haag (former member in Pinellas Park), George and Maude Morris, and Lee and Nellie Patton were traveling to Tarpon Springs to

worship with the church there. Early in 1959 brother Haag approached the Pinellas Park elders to consider starting a congregation in New Port Richey.”

From an article in the local newspaper, brother Steele reproduces the following: “New Port Richey Press, May 2, 1959. Church Of Christ Will Be Organized In New Port Richey. A congregation of the Church of Christ is to be organized in New Port Richey. First services will be held Sunday May 3. The order of services will be Bible school from 10:00 a.m. to 10:45 a.m.; worship at 11:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. Services will be conducted temporarily in the VFW Hall, until a permanent building is construction on a yet to be

selected site.”

Stabilizing Preaching

In the material received, we are made aware of a number of faithful brethren who contributed to water and build upon what was begun.

The elders of Pinellas Park selected Gordon Hogan, one of the deacons at Pinellas Park, to take on the responsibility of preaching and teaching. Brother Steele writes of the contribution made by these brethren to stabilize the congregation:

“Several preachers traveled to New Port Richey to fill the pulpit on a temporary basis. Paul Hunt came up from Tarpons Springs, followed by B. V. Bolin of Largo. During this time the church installed both elders and deacons. Once the church was well established, Gordon Hogan and his family left for foreign mission fields, where they lived for many years.

“Through the years to follow the church was able to support several full-time preachers. The first was Weyman Meadows in 1968. The congregation continued to grow. Adjacent property was purchased and a 300-seat auditorium was built. Well-known preacher, G. K. Wallace of Tampa, came to speak at the dedication ceremonies on March 1, 1970. The old auditorium was converted into temporary classrooms.

“Later in 1970, Alfred Oswald came to preach. He worked with the congregation for three years. In February 1974, Paul Jergins began working with

the church. He continued for almost eight-years with the congregation. Paul had retired from secular work and recently graduated from the Preston Road School of Preaching in Texas. With the help of good, faithful brethren, brother Jergins was able to keep the congregation together through some turbulent times in the late seventies. Paul semi-retired from preaching in December, 1980. Chris Steele, graduate of the Florida School of Preaching, was asked to come and be the fourth full-time preacher of the New Port Richey Church of Christ, starting in January 1981.”

Growing Pains

As with any work, there are problems that arise that will test our dedication and character. Did not the Apostle Paul write the following to the church in Corinth? “For there must be also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you” (1 Cor. 11:19 KJV). And again, “Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; Every man’s work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man’s work of what sort it is” (1 Cor. 3:12-13 KJV).

Trouble comes from persons who would lead the church in a different direction from what God demands—the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4:3). If the faithful will remain true to God, in time

their cause will succeed, because God will not be defeated (Rom. 8:28). This has been seen in the toil of loyal brethren in New Port Richey. Yes, distractions have been created but we have lived to see them gone, and the congregation has realized solid and steady growth.

The building programs and additions reflect the steady development of the congregation.

In 1959 property was purchased and plans were underway to have their own meeting house. Chris writes, “Contributions from members of the Pinellas congregation helped the new work to be able to make the last payment on the property in October, 1959. Construction on a new building was in full swing by the spring of the following year. ... These diligent and determined Christians set the goal of finishing moving into their completed building on June 15, 1960.”

From meeting in the VFW Hall to having their own building, the congregation continued to expand. Adjacent property was purchased and a

The Harvesters

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TRAINING PREACHERS SINCE 1969

300 seat auditorium was built. Brother G. K. Wallace spoke at the dedication services in 1970.

Chris writes of the name change as follows:

“Because of other congregations starting up in this fast-growing area of the county, the church felt the need to incorporate and to change the official name of the congregation to better identify themselves. Instead of the New Port Richey Church of Christ, they now would be known as the River Road Church of Christ.”

“As a whole, Florida was attracting younger families and many were moving into the New Port Richey area. With the increased number of children it was necessary to build on again. Three more classrooms, restrooms, a carport, and minister’s study were added to the north side of the auditorium in 1983. A new fellowship hall (also used as a small auditorium), kitchen, and additional restrooms were completed in 1998. With an average winter attendance of nearly 170 it was necessary to remodel the original auditorium (constructed in 1960) adding two permanent classrooms in 2000. Two more [are] planned for the near future.”

Scripturally Organized

The congregation at the present is overseen by two faithful elders, Chandler Clark and Roger Fortney. The congregation is served by six deacons and office secretary.

And as has been mentioned, Chris Steele with his family has faithfully served the congregation as evangelist since

1981.

Outreach

A current bulletin (April 4, 2004) lists supporting work in the following areas: Taiwan, Margate and Parish, FL, Scotland, Madagascar, Russia, Childhaven, Cullman, AL., and the Florida School of Preaching.

As we began these reflections we emphasized the need to start and stabilize congregations. These brethren are wonderful examples of this principle.

Their leadership over the years has realized that works are not begun and stabilized without having stable teaching on a regular basis. It is because of their recognition of this principle that they have generously supported the school, and have provided speaking opportunities for many of our men while they have been in training.

It makes our toil much easier having stable and generous congregations and brethren behind us.

It is my honored privilege to be asked to deliver lessons on the forty-fifth anniversary of the River Road church of Christ.

It has been said “we may be born a male, but we must grown into a man.” Strong Christians and churches are not born, they too must be nurtured and given time to mature.

Some fail to reach their true potential because they have their immediate expectation set too high—they feel they need large buildings, large working funds, modern transportation modeled after the latest US models, schools, large

benevolent program, et al.

Others fail to reach their potential because they expect very little from themselves and their brethren. Some want the recognition of service without serving. Some desire the joy of sacrificial giving, but have never learned to give sacrificially. With all resources expended on themselves, they never know the joy of seeing others grow and develop. How many individuals and/or congregations do you know that have no plans or history of helping to carry the gospel to the lost?

We are proud to have shared in the joys and blessings of the brethren at River Road in New Port Richey. What John wrote could be said of them:

“Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest **prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth**. For I rejoiced greatly, when the **brethren came and testified of the truth that is in thee, even as thou walkest in the truth**. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth. Beloved, **thou doest faithfully whatsoever thou doest** to the brethren, and to strangers; Which have borne witness of **thy charity before the church**: whom if thou bring forward on their journey after a godly sort, thou shalt do well: Because that for his name’s sake they went forth, taking nothing of the Gentiles. We therefore ought to receive such, that we might be **fellowhelpers** to the truth” (3 John 2-8 KJV). [Emphasis added, JMS]



Do You Know a Person Like This?

By
Gene Burgett

One of my primary goals as Director of Public Relations is to find men who would like to preach the gospel but need additional training. Preaching the gospel is like any other work worth doing well, it requires preparation. Jackie Stearsman said something during our January lectureship that has stuck with me. He said he had been preaching for sometime when he decided to go to school and get some training "because the brethren deserved better." Preparation is so very important.

The Florida School of Preaching is a place where men prepare themselves for the work of preaching the gospel. But the preparation really begins before entering school. While it is my job to search out men who would like to preach the gospel, this goal should never be mistaken as meaning we are simply looking for warm bodies to fill our classrooms. We are looking for men of character. One reason Paul wanted Timothy "to go on with him" was because "He was well spoken of by the brethren at Lystra and Iconium" (Acts 16:2-3). Timothy had a good reputation among those who knew him best.

Many of the men who apply to attend the Florida School of Preaching are men with whom we have no personal familiarity. In these situations we place great

emphasis on what the brethren from the man's home congregation think about his character. I sometimes receive calls from brethren suggesting I talk to an individual who has expressed an interest in preaching. Immediately I want to know the caller's opinion of that person's character.

Let me suggest an alternate method of identifying people as good candidates to preach the gospel. Rather than limit ourselves to those who express an interest in preaching, perhaps we should look to people who have already demonstrated a love for God, then approach them about being a gospel preacher. The Acts record doesn't say Timothy expressed an interest in preaching, rather Paul saw a young man of good character and he (Paul) expressed an interest in the young man preaching.

Perhaps you know a man you believe has the ability and character to preach the gospel. Don't be afraid to approach him about preaching, or don't hesitate to contact me and give me the opportunity to mention the possibility to him.

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