

New churches aim to win souls with individuality

In June 2001 the Holston Annual Conference appointed three young pastors to plant new churches in diverse areas. Here are progress updates on each.

■ The Rock — Johnson City, Tenn.

In the early 1990s, the congregation at East Pine Grove Park UMC considered installing a fence to separate itself from unsightly low-income rental properties. Instead, they built a \$12,000 playground for the kids who lived in those homes.

By summer 2001, the playground had evolved into a clothes closet followed by a full-time ministry, Coalition for Kids, with 11 staff members and a \$250,000 budget. In addition to an after-school program for 100 children, the ministry offers a place where neighboring families can come for fellowship and prayer in a 10,000-square-foot warehouse building.

"The Coalition was doing five days a week what the church ought to be doing anyway," says the Rev. Randy Hensley, age 37, Coalition for Kids director and pastor for the new church. "The only thing that was missing was a worship service."

As of July 15, residents of the east

Johnson City inner-city community have a worship service, too. Funded by the Holston Conference for three years, The Rock is already averaging 46 in worship attendance in the Coalition for Kids building. Worshipers are offered a contemporary-style service that's short on liturgy and long on music from a band and a donated \$8,000 sound system. Three children have been baptized and three Bible study groups are ongoing. A new Saturday-night youth ministry, complete with loud dance music and strobe lights, drew 50 kids on the first night.

Located 100 yards away, The Rock is considered to be a second worship service of East Pine Grove Park, pastored by the Rev. Hagan McClellan. East Pine Grove's average worship attendance: 104. "That's another miracle part of this story, that such big ministries have come out of a small church," said Hensley.



Randy Hensley



Stephen DeFur

■ Soulworx — Knoxville, Tenn.

Weathering bad press and a downtown business community that doesn't necessarily want them, leaders of a new church in Knoxville's Old City are just days away from kicking off a project that's been more than two years in the making.

On Nov. 9, Soulworx will launch a Friday night worship service designed to appeal to the 20s crowd, with a video wall and music the Rev. Stephen DeFur calls "loud and hard-driving." Located in a downtown city block, Soulworx is only steps away from biker bars, trendy restaurants and antique stores characterizing the "Old City" section of Knoxville.

The 31-year-old associate pastor at Cokesbury UMC, Soulworx's mother church, DeFur had his first vision of a "new way of doing ministry" in the late 1990s. Before long, the pastor had pulled together a group of 20-somethings who plunged into creating something unique and "ultra high tech."

Cokesbury Senior Pastor Steve Sallee and Holston Conference leaders were intrigued. Downtown business owners were not.

The fear was that a Christian organization would attract the homeless and other "unsavory" groups. Local TV crews played up the criticism. The deposit that Soulworx put down on a lease was returned; the owner said he sold the building.

With the promise of three full years of conference funding and a new site that's nearly ready for the November launch, DeFur isn't looking back. "We're here now," he said, holding a paintbrush. While it's true the upper floor of the Soulworx building will soon host Alcoholics Anonymous and single-mother groups, "I wish people would understand that we're going to be good neighbors," he said. "There are a lot people down here who need help. We want to be a positive influence."

■ Blount County Church Plant — Maryville, Tenn.

"We don't have a name, and we don't have a place," says the Rev. Jeff Wadley, age 37. But the church plant sponsored by Fairview UMC and the Holston Conference does have a start on developing the small group ministry that will ultimately build a new congregation.

With a church-plant team of 29 adults, Wadley already has a family base of (with children included) 51 people. Groups have been formed to recruit a band, find a meeting place, develop a children's ministry, invite new people, and set up communications and finances. Monthly "preview" worship services for team members and friends may start in January 2002. The official worship launch won't occur until after Labor Day 2002.

Wadley says the book of Nehemiah has been key in helping his team cast a vision and seeing it through to reality. The fledgling church has even experienced its first baptism; of nine-year-old Will Hooper, son of a church member.

"In my 12 years of ministry, I never dreamed that I would be doing a church plant," said Wadley, who worked with youth at Fairview for nine years. "It's been amazing how God has placed people and things in my path to lead me in this direction. I'm just holding on for the ride."



Jeff Wadley (right) with Jay and Will Hooper

Breaking

Continued from front page

experts, unchurched people are more likely to join new congregations rather than long-established ones. For existing churches, moving a short distance to a growing population center or to a site with room to grow could be an investment in a promising future.

U.S. Census Bureau findings indicate that Holston's communities are flush with opportunity. Of 65 counties comprising the Holston Conference, 59 had population increases during the 1990s. Over all, people within conference boundaries increased from 1.7 million in 1990 to 2 million in 2000. At the same time, the percentage of United Methodists among this population dropped from 5.2 percent to 4.6 percent.

Rapid urbanization is significant in the changing population landscape, Ripley said. Bledsoe County, near Chattanooga, grew by nearly 30 percent for an increase of 2,698 from 1990 to 2000. Knox County, Tenn., increased its population size by almost 14 percent for an increase of 46,283 people.

Consequently, it's no accident that many of Holston's new and relocating congregations are putting down roots in urban areas. They're also thinking out of the box, adapting to their surroundings and situations, as the accompanying articles in this issue of *The Call* will show.

"We don't have a mold that we try to get churches to fit," Ripley said. "Every church's setting — and who they are — affects their approach to ministry."

Planting new churches and relocating existing churches might generate growth in some areas, but in other communities, conference leaders encourage smaller churches to consider mergers with other churches. Real estate acquisitions and building additions are further down on the conference's priority list for grants and loans, but are important nonetheless. Grant requests from 17 churches, ranging in amounts from \$25,000 to \$200,000, are currently being reviewed or have been approved by the conference Committee on Church Extensions and Parish Development.

"The money is going where people have a vision to grow," Ripley said. In most cases that means going where the population is going, and using the circumstances God provides to create ministries that reach people.

"Isaiah says that 'God is doing a new thing,'" said Ripley. "If we don't get involved with what God is doing, God is going to find someone else to do it."

The Rev. John Ripley, Holston's director of new church development, may be contacted at (865) 690-4080 or johnripley@Holston.org.



John Ripley

Upcoming Events

The Holston Conference offers two informational workshops on new church development. Clergy and laity are encouraged to attend.

✓ A Percept workshop on Oct. 30 teaches church leaders how to use a demographic information service subscribed to by the Holston Conference. Lead by Percept Regional Manager Chuck Salter, the workshop includes lunch, free of charge. Place: Cokesbury Center, Knoxville. Hours: noon to 3 p.m. To register, contact Sue Weber at (865) 690-4080 or suweber@holston.org.

In the meantime, Holston ministers can immediately begin to access information about the population living in their zip codes. Log on at www.link2lead.com and click on the "Register" button at left of screen. Follow instructions to obtain "10 Basic Facts" about people in your area.

✓ The Bishop's Conference on New Church Development, on Jan. 24-25, will gather conference leaders to develop commitment and strategies for beginning new churches. Scheduled to appear is Steve Compton, North Carolina Conference director of congregational development and Dick Freeman, North Alabama Conference director of congregational development. The event will be held in Pigeon Forge, Tenn.; plans are ongoing. To pre-register, call or email Sue Weber at the number or address above.