

SYCAMORE TREE

Housed in a former construction company building, Sycamore Tree UMC is led by 41-year-old Jeff Wadley.

Photo by Annette Bender, *The Call*



Photo courtesy of Sycamore Tree UMC



success stories,” said the Rev. Bill Kilday, director of congregational development.

“They’ve obviously been a shining star, and hopefully we will lift that up,” said Becky Hall, chair of the Committee on Congregational Development. “Starting new churches through the parenting-church model, like Fairview has done, seems to be more successful.”

Wadley is proud that after the two-year commitment period, 14 of Fairview’s 40-member church-start team elected to stay at Sycamore Tree. The team began praying, studying, and inviting others to join them in summer 2001. They moved from place to place to worship – first in homes, then a bank, car dealership, funeral home, school, and library.

Finally, in December 2002 the congregation bought and moved into the former construction company’s building. The facility was attractive because it was new and reasonably priced – the casualty of a business decline following 9/11.

Wandering from place to place like the “children of Israel,” says Wadley, actually led the congregation to be widely based, from all over the Maryville area. About one-third of the congrega-

tion has never participated in a church prior to Sycamore Tree.

Melinda Potter moved to Maryville from Ohio in 2002. She heard about Sycamore Tree and visited it in February 2003.

“The people were the nicest I have ever met,” says Potter, age 29. On her first visit, she was greeted by a woman who immediately took her phone number and invited her to a chocolate festival.

“I had never been to a Bible study, but I went because someone invited me,” she said. “I was

sick, and people I didn’t even know brought me meals. This church is one of my favorite places on earth.”

Sycamore Tree doesn’t have Sunday school, says Wadley, because they started with small groups in homes – and continued with small groups because they were successful.

Guests are invited to these small groups as well as to events such as the periodic “catfish derby” in the pond behind the church. New ministries, such as the teenage-mother program led by Potter, also draw in newcomers.

A favorite feature of the church is the frequent baptismal services held in the river near Camp Wesley Woods. A bulletin board features photos of the numerous new members who have been baptized there. Wadley points to each of them, happily telling stories about how they came to Sycamore, how they came to Christ.

The people applaud wildly whenever he announces during worship, “We’re going to the river!” Wadley says.

Because they know that new lives have been won for Christ. ■

A ‘new place to see Jesus’ in Maryville District

By Annette Bender

The worship area in Sycamore Tree United Methodist Church’s building seats 180. Worship attendance is already up to 155. It’s a good problem to have, especially for a five-year-old church that doesn’t do advertising – and is located in an industrial area, with only one sign.

The Rev. Jeff Wadley smiles. “We don’t have to advertise. This church is growing by 100 percent word of mouth.”

The congregation is big on inviting, he explains. “They believe God is already drawing people in. They believe that all they have to do is make themselves available and invite people in.”

Located in Maryville, Sycamore Tree was parented by Fairview UMC.

Wadley served as associate pastor at Fairview for nine years, ministering to the youth. In 1999, he felt a strong calling to plant a new church. He shared his calling with his senior pastor, the Rev. Jerry Russell, and a Wednesday-night prayer group was enlisted to pray about the new church for a year.

There are no flip charts and visioning meetings in this church, Wadley explains. Every step of Sycamore Tree’s journey has been preceded by weeks, months, years of prayer. “But you will put that in this article and people will skip over it, because it sounds so churchy,”

he said. “But it’s true. Everything we’ve done is based on prayer.”

Wadley tells the story of how the church went for years without a name, waiting for God to reveal one. One night in September 2002, Wadley was reading the Bible aloud to parishioners, the story of Zacchaeus, when he was struck by a revelation.

“How did Zachaeus see Jesus?” he asked. His parishioners answered, “In the sycamore tree.” At the conclusion of their prayers that night, “it was obvious to us that our name was to be Sycamore Tree, a new place to see Jesus,” says Wadley.

Now housed in a former construction company building, Sycamore Tree has been assisted by Holston Conference with salary support for Wadley. The congregation is paying for the \$550,000 building as well as \$76,000 in renovation costs.

Fairview committed to providing a core group of church members to help start the new congregation, as well as other assistance over the years.

At the end of 2005, Wadley will no longer receive conference support for his salary. But Wadley and conference leaders are confident in the Maryville District church’s continued progress.

“Sycamore Tree is really one of our most pleasing

