

LIGHTHOUSE

A 'beacon of hope' in Chattanooga District

By Annette Bender

Outside, black walnuts are noisily falling on the roof. The Rev. Richard Richter is sitting inside the renovated farmhouse, explaining how his congregation plans to transform the old farm into a church.

"There's definite life and vitality here, but Lord, it's been a long journey," Richter says. The strain shows in the 43-year-old pastor's voice, despite his upbeat disposition. "I was ready to do something or die when we found this property. We have meandered so long."

Another walnut falls.

After five years of worshipping in a Seventh Day Adventist church, followed by a school building and two (unairconditioned) warehouses, Lighthouse United Methodist Church hopes that it has finally found a home. In May, Holston Conference paid \$368,000 for 16.79 acres to house the congregation. The property is located off Highway 58, near Ooltewah High School, in the Chattanooga District.

Richter drives the perimeter of the farmland in his truck, pointing out where the new church building will be located, and how the farmhouse will be used for his office and small-group meetings. The goal is to be worshipping onsite by Easter 2006.

"This is kind of like high school graduation, when you're like ..." Richter throws his head back in celebration. "But in reality, this is only the beginning. We're poised."

Now averaging 80 in worship attendance, the congregation has stuck together through the relocations, the struggle for property, and the transition to Richter from the first pastor, the Rev. Brian Rainwater.

Kelly Hicks' family was one of the first invited to join the Rainwaters in starting a new congregation.

"I was not attending church at that time, and the Rainwaters were my neighbors," she said. "They asked me to come to a Halloween party and then a couple of preview services. It was initially through their friendship that I came," says Hicks, age 37, raised in the Church of Christ. "But later it was pretty awesome to see that God had a place for us, to feel like we were part of something."

The congregation is comprised of about half who are new to the faith, Richter said – which gives them a fresh, eager interest in inviting others to join them in worship and in special events. "It's been amazing to see what people will lay down for this church and for the Kingdom," he said.

A congregational trademark – dubbed by Richter as "Lighthouse on Location" – is evangelistic



Photo by Annette Bender, The Call

Above: The Rev. Richard Richter stands where the new church building will be located on the 16.79-acre site. He's hoping for a nontraditional structure that could be up as soon as Easter 2006.



Photos courtesy of Lighthouse UMC

When farmland became available in the Lighthouse vicinity, the Committee on Congregational Development provided money for Lighthouse to buy the property. Above: Lighthouse member Michael Webb wins the bid at an auction. Right: Pastor Richard Richter celebrates with a bear hug.



outreach projects such as giving out balloons on the Fourth of July. Because the congregation was based in a trailer everyday but Sunday anyway, the portable outreach projects were natural to the congregation, Richter said. But even now that the congregation has a home, "we hope to keep that nomadic spirit in us. The church may be settling down, but we don't need to."

Lighthouse has its work cut out, with money to raise for development of the property as well as the new building, Richter said. But the congrega-

tion has already shown generosity by paying above and beyond the Fair Share apportionments set for them as a new church plant.

Becky Hall, chair of the Committee on Congregational Development, credits Richter for guiding the congregation beyond their "dropped start," when the conference found a growing area to "drop" a pastor, with the goal of creating a nucleus from which to grow.

"Richard appeals to a lot of people who feel intimidated or disenfranchised from the mainstream church," she said, citing Richter's creativity with computer graphics, worship visuals, and ministry projects. "He's reaching unchurched people in an unconventional way."

A former associate pastor of First Maryville UMC – "where everything was at your fingertips" – Richter admits he's been challenged during his two years at Lighthouse. "I'm only able to do this by the constant support of people – from my wife and children who endure me and point me the right way in the low times – to friends both at Lighthouse and outside who check on me and pray for me and this great endeavor regularly."

Richter didn't help choose the Lighthouse name, but he says he's come to see how Lighthouse has become known in the community as a "fresh and positive influence."

Consequently, "I constantly remind the congregation that we are to be called a beacon of hope and a place of peace." ■

