

Back Together

Southminster, Shades Valley Presbyterian Churches Merge

BY RUBIN E. GRANT

*God moves in a mysterious way,
His wonders to perform.*

The opening line of William Cowper's well-known poem that became a hymn could be applied to the recent merger of Shades Valley Presbyterian Church and Southminster Presbyterian Church.

The merged congregations held their first service June 5, Pentecost Sunday, with the official merger taking place Oct. 2.

Two unlikely things occurred, leading to the congregations becoming one church community. The first was a broken air conditioning unit and the other was a columbarium.

According to the Rev. Tom Bryson, who will serve as co-pastor of the merged church along with the Rev. Leanne Pearce Reed, two years ago the air conditioner broke down on the main part of Shades Valley Presbyterian's campus on Montevallo Road in Mountain Brook.

Shades Valley Presbyterian initiated a capital campaign to raise funds for the needed repairs.

"They raised the funds and were ready to go, but right before they accepted a bid for the repairs, they asked themselves if it was the most faithful thing to do with the resources," said Bryson, who has been pastor of Southminster since 2018. "They did an honest assessment and decided they didn't really want to spend a half-million dollars to replace an air conditioning unit, that the money could be put to better use."

At that point, Shades Valley Presbyterian leaders decided they could move to a new location and use the funds the church had raised for ministry. But there was one issue that needed be resolved: What to do about the columbarium in the church's courtyard with 75 of its dear members interred?

Reed, who had been pastor at Shades Valley Presbyterian since 2017, reached out to Southminster to



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see if those members could be interred in their columbarium.

As it turned out, Southminster was in the process of considering a new columbarium for the north end of its campus in Vestavia Hills. The project had been financed already and the church had just accepted a bid for it.

Reed wanted to know if the columbarium could be expanded to hold its 75 members.

"We were able to expand by one more tower," Bryson said. "The tower on the east is almost completely filled with Shades Valley members."

With that issue resolved, the conversation turned to how each church conducted ministry, with four members from each congregation meeting to discuss the matter.

The Same DNA

"We discovered that we did similar things as it relates to Christian education, worship, outreach and the Session," Bryson said. "We were so

much alike, but that shouldn't have come as a surprise because Shades Valley actually planted Southminster with 50 or 60 families in Vestavia. So those families brought the DNA of Shades Valley with them."

Shades Valley was founded in 1947 and Southminster was established in 1957.

"All the fingerprints of Shades Valley stayed with us," Bryson said. "Everything in both churches were almost exactly the same, except the pulpit in our sanctuary was different."

During the summer of 2021, the two churches began exploring the idea of a merger. They formed a committee with representatives from both churches that met via Zoom, discussing the pros and cons and potential deal breakers.

In December last year, they had worked out whatever differences there were, including maintaining staff from both churches, and decided

to merge, settling on June 5 as their first Sunday to worship together.

In a church newsletter leading up to their first Sunday together, Reed wrote:

"After many months of praying and planning, Shades Valley and Southminster take an important step in the process of becoming one church community. This summer will be a time of transition on our way toward 'official' merger in the fall. We will share many aspects of community life, including worship, learning, fellowship, congregational care, and outreach.

"In other areas, the congregations will remain distinct for now, with separate Sessions, operating budgets and finances. ... For all of us, worship will seem a bit different in the coming weeks. We'll see new faces and hear voices we haven't heard before. We'll use paraments and communion ware from both congregations. The bulletin will have a new look. At times, we might feel uncomfortable and think, 'This isn't what I'm used to!' We hope that sharing in communion each week will serve as an important reminder for us: at the table, Christ makes us one body."

Shades Valley's property has been sold and the contents, such as pews, baptismal font, hymnals and Bibles, distributed to other churches in the region. Some legal details still have to be ironed out before the merger is final.

Bryson and Reed will share preaching duties.

"We have very complementary gifts," Bryson said. "Leanne is very detail-oriented, which I wish I was better at, and I have a large, broad stroke."

On their first Sunday worshipping together, the brass crosses from both churches were displayed and marched in, and members from both churches gathered in small groups in Southminster's Grace Hall during the Sunday School hour prior to worship.

"It resembled a long-delayed family reunion of cousins, aunts and uncles getting reacquainted once again," said Kent Howard, a member.

Sue Westfall, executive at Presbytery of Sheppards and Lapsley, delivered the sermon, recognizing the efforts of both congregations for creating the opportunity for the two churches to merge.