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HAPPY HOPPER

'Happy church' continues tradition of openness

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

With its modest brick storefront and glass doors facing Kansas Ave., the main thing that marks Faith Tabernacle as a church is its name on the building. As the nondenominational church celebrates its 40th anniversary this month, that public image is fitting: very little religion, but a whole lot of real life.

“Happy Hopper, the pastor who helped found the church, called it the ‘non-churchgoers church of Liberal,’” said pastor Rex Petty. “I guess I kind of tried to continue that approach. One time someone asked me what church I pastored, and I told them. They kind of shook their heads, and said, ‘Oh, THAT church, the one where they’ll let anybody come.’ I thought that was actually a compliment.”

Frank Hanna, one of the seven original deacons who helped establish the church, said an openminded attitude was a core value.

“That’s one of the reasons I got involved,” he said. “A lot of times churches will set up their rules and regulations, but this was a deal where we figured we can let the Lord convict us of what we should do. It’s not what you don’t do that makes you a Christian. It’s what you do.”



When it began, Faith Tabernacle was a group of about 100 Christian believers. They’d come from the Assembly of God, Methodist and Apostolic churches, and “there was a lot of excitement,” Hanna recalled. Initially, the group met in various places — the Mary Frame Park building, the old Holiday Inn, the Seward County fairgrounds ag building.

“Sometimes, businesses and local groups would have parties out at the ag building on Saturday nights, and we’d all go out at 5 or 6 a.m., clean up the mess from the party, the beer cans, and set up chairs so we could have church,” he said. Occasionally, the party debris offered a lesson in why a Christian life might be preferable.

“One time I mopped up a puddle of blood from the bathroom, and I found a tooth,” Hanna said. He chuckled, noting that even the committed churchgoers grappled with questions about what was permissible.

“Hopper always said, ‘God can clean his own fish.’ We were to be fishers of men, then let the Lord do his own cleaning. We knew one guy who had accepted the Lord, and he asked Hopper, ‘Can I still drink beer?’ Hopper said, ‘I don’t know, can you?’ So the guy said, ‘I can’t drink beer?’ and Hopper said, ‘Can’t you?’ The point was, you let the Lord do the talking.”

A young Rex Petty, home for the summer from college at Oral Roberts University in the early 1980s, began to attend services at Faith Tabernacle. He remembers hearing stories about the early days when the fledgling church decided to find a permanent home.

“Around 1976, they found this office building downtown, and they bought it and began to renovate it,” he said. That property is the site of the church today, just across the street from Memorial Library.

“It was a horrible mess,” said Hanna. “There were two stories through the whole thing, and we had to tear it apart to reconstruct it.”

The church hired a contractor, but members pitched in to help cut costs and speed the job. Hanna recalls longtime Liberal resident John Grover parking a truck inside the building, where the sanctuary now arches gracefully, two stories high:

“We were breaking apart a plaster ceiling and dust from the 1930s was trapped in there, just pouring down on us. We had to wear goggles and dust masks, and scoop all that dry dirt up and throw it out the window into the truck.”

To transform the run-down office property into a functioning church, “there was a lot of sacrifice by a lot of people,” Hanna said. “I remember one Easter Sunday, when women were all dressed up for church — and our ladies were having to walk on planks through sawdust, go up the stairs and pick their way to what we called the Upper Room, because it was the only part of the

building we could use at that point. Now, you enter the doors on Sunday morning and you don't think about it."

As the church's physical form took shape, Hopper's wife, Cecilia, focused on developing children's programs.

"She was the children's minister and she wrote 14 one-hour scripts for puppet shows and dramas," Hopper said. "We had actors, puppets, and this colorful set that we'd built and painted. It was kind of like Sesame Street." Once a month, the church offered free babysitting with a movie, snacks, games and a Bible program.

Meanwhile, the church's overall membership grew rapidly. Though the original 100 members dwindled at one point to 40 regulars, by 1977 the church experienced "a breakthrough," Hopper said, and grew back to 160 attendees. In 1985, 488 people attended Easter services, and the church averaged 326 at its regular Sunday services.

"It was moving, moving," Hopper said. He recalled a city-wide sense of revival in Liberal, bolstered by cooperative efforts between churches, particularly Emmanuel Southern Baptist, the First Southern Baptist Church and the United Methodist Church.

"I'd meet for coffee with men from those churches, and we had all these grand and glorious ideas that we were going to take the city for Jesus," he said. In a survey conducted by Emmanuel church, he recalled, "more than 1,000 people in Liberal called me their pastor. I said, 'My goodness, I'd like to see some of them.'"

Hopper recognizes he served as a pastor for many people who hadn't yet decided to make church a part of their everyday lives.

"During that survey, the Baptists visited one house where you could see they liked to party, and when they all claimed to 'go to Happy's church,' the Baptists asked if they were saved — Christians, you know. They answered, 'You're damn right, we are!'" Hopper rode with the police on Friday nights, and he became familiar with the bar regulars. One couple, whose van bore a

mural painted with the face of Jesus and a Faith Tabernacle bumper sticker, made the rounds at all the bars, Hopper said.

“You’d see that van parked everywhere, with our church name on it. Later, they started coming to church and told me they’d picked up a bumper sticker when they still liked the clubs and knew they weren’t living right. They promised each other that if they ever did go to church, they’d come to Faith Tabernacle — and they did.”

Decades later, Hopper has thought deeply about the challenge of unconditional love and acceptance, which worries many conservative Christians. They’re afraid it looks too much like condoning sinful behavior.

“Let me get very personal here. My son Christopher is gay and I’ve had some very intense prayers and conversations with God, where I said, ‘I don’t care what it says in this book, he will not go to hell,’ because he’s my son and I love him,” Hopper said. “I felt like God spoke to me and said, ‘I love him more than you do.’ What could I feel except, ‘Thank you, Jesus,’ so I just leave that alone now.”

When he’s confronted with hot-button issues like abortion, drug and alcohol use, out-of-wedlock births and the like, “if I just show kindness, that’s the way to develop a relationship, see? You protest and hold up signs and condemn people — my premise is this, you pretty well cut yourself off. Sometimes we’ve got to ignore that mess. I think we’re shooting ourselves in the foot.”

Like Hopper, the church he helped begin has absorbed the changes time brings.

From Hanna’s point of view, the church has “quieted way down,” from the days when speaking in tongues, interpretation of dreams and people praying for miracles of healing would fall to the floor, “slain in the Spirit” in a moment of intense emotion.

“There was a time when we were having two services, an exciting time. There was a lot happening in the 1970s in Liberal. God was moving,” Hanna said. “He don’t change, so I don’t

know what's different now."

"We're mostly older people, now, and I think our church has a ministry to meeting the needs of older people. You've got churches that are real active with youth, the movement is big, and I'd like to see that in ours, too, sure, but I keep thinking that every church in town that has born-again Christians is meeting the needs of people. We need to keep on trucking."

Petty, who began work in 1986 as Hopper's associate and eventually took on the role of pastor, said he's focused on community outreach as did his mentor.

"I've tried to keep going with that original vision of reaching people where they are, as they are," he said. The church hosts a Superbowl Sunday outreach every year, participates in Ministerial Alliance events, schedules visits to the Seward County Jail, and supports the crisis pregnancy center, homeless shelter, and missionaries in India, South America, Africa and the United States.

And every Sunday, in its quiet, unobtrusive way, the church opens its arms to the community.

"You can always come here as you are, and you don't have to get all dressed up or have your life completely together before coming," Petty said. "When I came here, the idea was, God loves you, we want you to come to church, and we'll love you. At Faith Tabernacle, you don't get a second chance, you get a standing chance."

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