

## **A Case Study of Gary Furr and Vestavia Hills Baptist Church**

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#### **Biography of Gary Furr**

Gary Furr was born in Concord, North Carolina on August 27, 1954, the eldest of four children. He came from ordinary working people in the Piedmont region of North Carolina, many of whom worked in the textile mills and on farms in that area. Members of his generation, like many, were the first in their families to go to college.

His was a musical family. His grandfather was a volunteer worship leader in churches and sang on the radio in the 1940s and 1950s. His father and his family, sons of a carpenter and skilled tradesmen themselves, were bluegrass and country musicians. His father performed occasionally on the radio as a teen.

He grew up going to Baptist churches. When he was seven, his father began a rapid rise to success in retail management that also moved his young family all over the Midwest and South. From 1963 until 1968, they lived in Tennessee, two cities in Ohio, Wisconsin, and Dallas, Texas. This took Gary to a succession of different cultural situations and churches.

He became a Christian at the age of nine in the small Southern Baptist church they had joined in Delaware, Ohio. In Wisconsin, their family, along with one other, actually started a Southern Baptist congregation that still flourishes today. In Texas they belonged to one of the early versions of the mega-church, with over a thousand members. During that time, Gary's own passion was about basketball and music. Church was more perfunctory.

That changed with the next family move, in the spring of 1970 to Dayton, Ohio, where he would finish high school. While in Dayton, he became deeply involved in his church's youth group. This was during both the height of the Viet Nam war and protests and the beginnings of the Jesus Movement. Southern Ohio experienced the turbulence of both. Gary remembers fellow students who came to school after having participated in antiwar protests. Kent State was nearby when he was in high school, and the anxieties of war were everywhere.

At the same time, there was great spiritual awakening throughout the nation. Cincinnati, nearby, was a center of converted hippies who came to Christ and began to spread the gospel in the region through churches, coffee houses, concerts and contemporary music. It made a great

impression on many young people, and it was also quite controversial in the traditional church.

His youth group was dynamic and life-changing for many. Many ministers, deacons, missionaries and ministers of music came out of that church. His music and youth minister, Rev. Greg Hochstettler, himself only in his mid-twenties, was a powerful influence on Gary. Their youth group grew dramatically and involved many young people who were not part of the church. It was highly connected to Campus Crusade and other evangelical groups in the area.

During those years, Gary began to struggle with what he was singing and doing in the group. He was drawn to make a deeper commitment of his life to God. He and a close friend spent their entire spring break one year on vacation walking down the beach in South Carolina witnessing for Jesus and having Bible studies for those who would come.

Finally, during his junior year of high school, he felt a deep sense of call to the ministry that culminated after several months in a silent observation of communion on Palm Sunday in which he came to a decision about his life's vocation. He felt God calling him in the silence to give his life to ministry. He talked with his family and pastor that week. On the following Easter Sunday, in 1971, at the age of 16, he made public his decision to the whole church.

The next year was one of great turbulence. A new pastor came and the church split. Longtime differences over the unorthodox methods of the music and youth minister led to his resignation and the dissipation of the youth group. The new pastor was divisive and abrasive and was gone in less than two years. His church was in profound turmoil.

So it was that Gary left Dayton, Ohio in a sense of pain. His church was in conflict, his friends divided, and at Christmas of his freshman year, his parents transferred to Denver, Colorado. It was a time of rebuilding personally.

Following many in his youth group, he decided to attend Carson-Newman College in Jefferson City, Tennessee and major in Religion. He met his future wife, Vickie, on the third day there. They fell in love and married during their sophomore year at ages 19 and 18, at Christmas. Fourteen months later, they had their first of three daughters, Heather. It was a challenging time, balancing marriage, school, and work. At times Gary held three jobs and went to school.

During that time he worked in construction work as a carpenter, which he would do off and on for the next six years. He also worked as a jailer his senior year for the city police department. These opportunities gave him experiences and insights into worlds he had never been part of and he

attributes them to his comfort in being with all kinds of people. He also held a part-time position in a Methodist Church during this time, working with youth.

Gary went next to get his M. Div. at Southeastern Baptist Seminary in 1979, serving as a minister of music and youth during that time at a blue collar church in Dunn, N.C. Vickie worked at Campbell College (now University) as a Head Resident and Gary commuted a hundred miles a day for three years to go to school.

During this time he considered that he might be called to teaching, so he applied and was accepted at Baylor University where he completed a Ph. D. in religion in 1985. During that time he served two congregations as pastor, the second of which was full time. During his seven years at Baylor, he came to enjoy the interplay between heady academic study and the gritty practical realities of the local parish.

During this time, the profound conflicts that would ultimately begin to unravel the synthesis between moderates and conservatives in the Southern Baptist Convention made direct impact on Gary's generation in graduate school. They were the pool of likely future teachers, but in the hostile and often anti-intellectual politics of that time, they faced great uncertainty about the teaching profession. During this time, Gary attended and was involved as a moderate participant the most painful and divisive of those fateful meetings.

After graduation, after much deliberation, he decided to go to another pastorate rather than a career in academia. A former teacher from Carson-Newman days, Dr. Walter B. Shurden, sent Gary's name to the pulpit committee of First Baptist Church of Blakely, Georgia. He was called served as their pastor in August of 1986 and remained there for seven years.

Blakely was different from any place he had ever served. A small, rural town of 6,000 in the peanut farming region of the old plantation belt region, he lived amid a community with a deep, difficult history and one that faced terrible economic challenges. While his church was well-educated and relatively prosperous members, the larger area suffered from the struggles of all farm-based economies. Its population had declined more or less constantly since the 1920s. It still carried many racial struggles from its history. Only 48% of adults over age twenty-five had graduated from high school. The children of the middle and upper classes moved away after college. The poorest remained.

The seven years of ministry in that place were a great challenge, but also exciting. Vickie

worked for three years creating a welfare reform program from the ground up. They worked together on literacy, poverty and racial reconciliation and found receptivity and response in the community. Gary taught black pastors and laypeople on Saturdays for several years.

It was also during a difficult time in Southern Baptist life. Gary felt more and more disillusioned by the widening rift in his denomination. An intellectual and moderate thinker and a political progressive, particularly on issues such as women in ministry and racial reconciliation, Gary chose his direction early. When a meeting was called in Atlanta in 1991 that eventuated in the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, he became involved and has continued to be an active participant and leader in the movement.

During this same time, he also became involved in two other important directions in his life. First, he began a personal pilgrimage in Christian spirituality. He was drawn to discover the life of prayer and personal spiritual formation. He undertook a personal retreat under an Episcopal minister's direction in Birmingham that was life changing for him. He began to read and write about the life of prayer and to grow in his knowledge of that aspect of Christianity.

In 1991-92 he participated in a two year program through the Upper Room Ministries of the General Board of Discipleship of the United Methodist Church called The Academy of Spiritual Formation. It was an intensive experiential, study and communal program in Christian Spirituality. It brought him into wider ecumenical contacts with other Protestant Christians, as well as the Catholic and Orthodox branches of Christian faith. His concept of the faith widened even as his sense of the personal nature of that faith intensified.

A second formative experience was being invited to be a member of the Trinity Group, a gathering of professors and pastors, all with Ph. D. degrees in theology. It included Dr. Fisher Humphreys of Beeson, who became a close friend and mentor to Gary. He grew theologically through this group, which met 2-3 times per year to read, study, and think about the Christian faith. He also began to write and publish during this time on a wide variety of topics—preaching, pastoral work and counseling, prayer, worship and rural ministry.

The years at First Baptist Church in Blakely, Georgia were seven of the most productive and life changing years of his life. In 1993, he sensed that God was calling him to something new. It was then that he was recommended by a friend to the search committee of Vestavia Hills Baptist Church. After a time of mutual deliberation, he was called to become pastor of the church.

During his tenure he has faced three major leadership challenges. The first was to help heal a church in the aftermath of a division over worship style. The second was to lead the church through a strategic planning process and a major building program. The third was to help the church rebuild after a tornado struck their property in 2000.

He also began occasional work as an adjunct professor at Samford University during this time. He is now fifty-two years old, having been at Vestavia church for nearly fourteen years. He says of his self-understanding, “I would have to say that I have clarified my calling as one who is a pastor-theologian-teacher. I love living out the teaching vocation in the local church. I have also pursued greatly my interests in worship leadership and spirituality while here.”

By all accounts, both he and the church believe that they have found an unusual match of pastor and congregational temperament in this relationship. Their years have been meaningful and times of growth. The church, after the conflicts that came during his predecessor’s time, had lost some 286 members and considerable budget giving. The church had dropped to 592 members when he arrived in 1993.

The next years were rebuilding years. Today, after years of steady growth, the congregation has 851 members. While many of the older generation has died in recent years, younger leaders are coming in to take their place. It has completed more than \$6 million dollars in new facilities. Under his leadership VHBC has undertaken the most ambitious missions efforts in its history, with more than a hundred members yearly participating in hands-on mission efforts. As the church heads toward a fiftieth anniversary celebration this year, it is a time of satisfaction for him and for the church as they look at where they have come together.

The church faces some challenges, of course. It is a smaller competitor amid a very high number of very aggressive mega-churches vying for members. It is a moderate and progressive Baptist congregation that has a high number of intellectuals and professors as well as middle class professionals amid a community that is basically politically, socially and religiously conservative. Its growth has slowed in the last few years, even as mission activity has exploded. They are looking at finding a direction for a new time. These questions, however, come amid a basically healthy time.

## **History of the Congregation**

We live in an age where many churches feel a need to write out vision and mission statements and have it recited over and over again, so that individuals have a sense of being “Purpose Driven”. If you were to ask the leadership at Vestavia Hills Baptist Church their philosophy of what is the nature of the church? You would hear that the church is becoming... never having yet achieved. This philosophy has allowed them to foster an atmosphere of being “open”.

This foundational concept, “the church becoming,” can be viewed as being paradoxical. On the one hand, this philosophy is ambiguous and enigmatic because it does not distinctly articulate what the church is, or what it will become. This equivocal view does not express the dimensions or functions of the church, whether it is a missionary church, an ecumenical church, a political church, a Bible-teaching church, or something else.

However, on the other hand, this philosophy is profound and progressive. This concept advocates that the church has latitude, and that it is always becoming what God desires it to be. The church has various dimensions and functions, but it must always elucidate its objective. Jurgen Moltmann, the German theologian, speaks about the church in a similar fashion:

“At every period the church has a duty to be clear about its commission, its situation and its goal... For the church will give an account of itself at all times to the God who has called it into being, liberated it and gathered it. It is therefore before the divine forum that it will reflect upon its life and the forms that life takes, what it says and what it does not say, what it does and what it neglects to do.”<sup>1</sup>

This philosophy is indicative of the Vestavia Hills Baptist Church, which has various dimensions and functions.

## **The Beginning**

Vestavia Hills Baptist Church is a church with a strong, solid, and stable history Vestavia Hills Baptist Church is a relatively young congregation at 50 years compared to the 134 years of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. A lot of the members at Vestavia Hills work at Samford University, as chaplains, as denominational professionals, and there are many mid-level professionals. Vestavia Hills Baptist Church has never been the community church; yet, the

church continues to thrive. The history of the church can be told in chapters based on the number of pastors (there have been four).

The year was 1957. The United States was generally a complacent nation. For White America, the post-war decade had been one of unparalleled prosperity, prestige and pride.

In 1957, Dwight Eisenhower was President. Dr. Martin Luther King founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Montgomery. The Dodgers finally beat the Yankees in the World Series; and, the Soviet's launched Sputnik into outer space. Also in 1957, the Missions Committee of the Birmingham Baptist Association surveyed the Vestavia community and determined that there was sufficient interest to establish a new congregation. Readers of the *Shades Valley Sun* in late March read about a meeting on March 31 for people interested in starting a new Baptist church in Vestavia. The meeting was convened by Dr. Lamar Jackson, Missions Committee Chairman of the Birmingham Baptist Association at City Hall. Oley Kidd, Director of Missions, and other ministers attended, along with an interested group of people. A committee was formed to go ahead with forward planning.

The committee recommended that an option be taken on land at the corner of U. S. 31 and Shades Crest Road, and Oley Kidd led the Birmingham Baptist Association to exercise that option with a deposit of \$1,000.

A first worship service was planned and announced to be held at Vestavia Elementary School, now known as Vestavia Elementary - East. Oley Kidd led the service on Sunday, April 28.

Everyone was invited to attend a follow-up meeting on Wednesday, May 1, for the purpose of forming a Council empowered to constitute a new church, to be named Vestavia Hills Baptist Church. At that meeting on May 1st, twenty-seven people requested membership in the new church.

The new church was born in Vestavia Hills on May 1, 1957. But many questions arose. Where would it meet? Who would lead the church? Could it afford to pay a pastor?

Arrangements were made for the church to meet at the Vestavia Hills City Hall. The first Worship service took place at City Hall on May 12, 1957.

In only three weeks the church voted to call John Wiley as pastor, who at that time was Assistant Pastor at Southside Baptist Church in Birmingham. He had served in the Marine Corps in World War II,

graduated from Howard College (now Samford University) and Andover-Newton Theological Seminary, Newton, Massachusetts.

John Wiley led the first worship service as pastor on July 21, 1957, to an overflow crowd of 62, and accepted sixteen new members that day. Church membership grew quickly under the leadership of the new pastor, John Wiley. By October of 1957 there were 121 new members. With the rapid increase in membership, it was imperative for the church to find a permanent location. A committee's search eventually led to the Vestavia Temple and its spacious grounds. The temple was a round four-story structure with a stone façade and columns. It had been built in the 1920s by George Ward, Birmingham's mayor. He was fascinated by Roman history, and had built his home to replicate the Roman temple to Vesta. On the grounds near the home he had built an additional structure to replicate the Sibyl Temple.

Vestavia Temple and its surrounding gardens had been a major tourist attraction for Birmingham. Having fallen into disrepair after Mr. Ward's death, it was restored as a restaurant and tearoom in 1948. The restaurant had closed by the time of the church's formation, and the property was offered for sale. The church voted to buy the beautiful property from its owner, Charles Byrd, for \$140,000.

The deed for the church's permanent home was signed in March of 1958. The overwhelming job of preparing the temple as a house of worship began, along with the financial challenge of the new debt. This was considered a giant leap of faith, for the 160 members and an annual budget of \$57,000.

The young church quickly adapted to its new home in Vestavia Temple in 1958. Membership growth continued, and after four years the church decided to have a committee investigate the possibilities of building an education building for needed religious education space. It was recommended that the church begin such plans as soon as possible.

In only five years, Vestavia Hills Baptist Church had continued its pilgrimage as it was led by the Lord to purchase the Vestavia Temple property, a parsonage, and now a new educational building. These facilities were dedicated to the glory of God "in providing a house of prayer, a fellowship of Christian learning and a congregation for human service." After eleven years of progressive pastoral leadership, John Wiley resigned as pastor in September, 1968, to establish a pastoral counseling center in Birmingham.

In August of 1969 the church voted unanimously to call Otis Brooks as its second pastor. Otis Brooks and his family moved from Monroe, Louisiana in 1969 to begin his pastorate in Vestavia. Besides meeting the church members and learning the church's priorities, he began assembling a support staff. The fifteenth anniversary of the Vestavia Hills Baptist Church, on May 7, 1972, marked the dedication of another new building. The celebration included a prayer of dedication professing that the



church would be...

“for those who are free,  
those who are confused and baffled,  
those who are sick in mind and body,  
those who are stabbed by the guilt of sin,  
those who worship as a family, the young, the parents,  
worshiping by singing and in prayer,  
so that all may know the oneness of Christ.”

Vestavia Hills Baptist Church, still in its teen-aged years, was worshiping in a new and beautiful house of God and opening its doors to all who would come! With Otis Brooks' leadership and hard work from the congregation, an extraordinary time of new challenges and opportunities emerged throughout the 1970s. This was a decade of extraordinary energy and innovation, one in which church began to establish its identity as a caring, welcoming fellowship focused on missions, meeting community needs, study, and worship.

Other decisions made by the church stood against the culture of the time, and gave an early indication of the courage and character of the young congregation. They welcomed the first African-American member demonstrating that their openness to all who wished to worship was more than just words. And they revised the church bylaws to state unequivocally that women held equal status in the church with men, and could be ordained to serve as deacons or ministers.

Vestavia Hills Baptist Church began to establish her identity as a congregation who had a faith that protested social injustices. Its spiritual and ethical obligation was to unquestionably execute Christ's mission: to preach the gospel to the poor, proclaim release for captives, recovery of sight for the blind, and to set free the oppressed (see Luke. 4:18)

Vestavia Hills was effectively practicing what Walter Rauschenbusch calls the social gospel. This social reformer made the social gospel popular with such phrases as “The church must either condemn the world and seek to change it, or tolerate the world and conform to it.” Vestavia Hills Baptist Church was an agent of change. It was condemning segregation, the oppression of women, and any other institution that hindered liberty for all.

Vestavia Hills Baptist Church became a visionary church seeking the “beloved community.” It was searching for a kingdom or a city or a community which would have pleased God, and its people had hope that it would be actualized within history.”

During the 1970s the church staff also grew and changed, but the consistent pastoral leadership of Otis Brooks during the first ten years of his tenure ensured that the church would accomplish a great deal, and that members would continue to grow in their spiritual pilgrimage.

Strong pastoral and lay leadership assured that as the church continued to grow in numbers, its spiritual life was also deepening and its character was being shaped. The warm fellowship, common purpose, and gentleness of spirit characteristic of that time remain at the church's core today.

Vestavia Hills could never be accused of being stagnant, for on many occasions it was a paradigm for other churches by fighting for freedom of its members and community as well as liberty of its members and community. Vestavia Hills would challenge institutionalized sin until God's judgment would run down as water, and righteousness as a mighty stream (Amos 5:24).

The productive nineteen-year pastorate of Otis Brooks came to an end when he chose to retire in 1988. Dr. William E. Hull, Provost at Samford University, was asked to serve as Interim Minister of Preaching. He was widely known and respected as a pastor, teacher, preacher, and author, and he and his wife, Wylodine, were active members of VHBC. The lay leaders and staff of the church joined Dr. Hull in providing the needed leadership during the interim period.

William H. Elder, III, accepted the church's call to become its third pastor on the 32<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of its founding. Dr. Elder led the church to consider undertaking newer, more contemporary styles of worship, in an effort to attract new members. Many church leaders responded positively, and the church realized some rapid membership growth. But the new members were never assimilated into the existing congregation. This pastor did a lot of experimentation with the worship (which did not fit the congregation's identity). A new minister of music was hired also during this time who was charismatic and did a lot of 'Praise and Worship' kinds of things. The challenge of providing two different worship hours proved to be difficult for the staff and congregation, and Dr. Elder resigned in 1992 to form a new non-denominational church, based on the contemporary worship model. His work in building that church, now known as Mountaintop Community Church, has been fruitful, and his time spent at VHBC helped its congregation to make positive determinations about its identity.

Dr. Paul Basden, Minister to Samford University, was called to be Interim Minister of Preaching while the church entered another search for a pastor. Once again the staff and lay-leadership of VHBC demonstrated their grace, commitment, and wisdom as the church sought to move through challenging days in a positive way.

In 1992, while Dr. Paul Basden was still serving as Interim Minister of Preaching, a search committee chaired by Charles Goodson began seeking a new pastor to lead the church.

After several months of careful work defining the church's needs, reviewing numerous resumes, and narrowing down the list of candidates, the search committee decided to visit the First Baptist Church of a small town named Blakely in the southwest corner of the state of Georgia. The church's young pastor was named Gary Furr. After hearing Dr. Furr preach and talking with him at length, the committee was certain that God had led them to the right person.

Gary had a solid undergraduate and theological education, including a B. A. from Carson-Newman College, an M. Div. from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, and a Ph. D. from Baylor University. He had pastored two churches in Texas before coming to Blakely, where he had served for six years. He and his wife, Vickie, had married while students at Carson-Newman, and now had three daughters.

The committee invited Gary Furr to preach at VHBC on June 20, 1993. On the same day, the church voted unanimously to extend him a call. God led him to accept, and he agreed to begin his ministry in Vestavia Hills in August of that same year.

When he arrived, Dr. Furr told his new congregation that he had two immediate goals: first, *to get to know* his new church family, and then to *love* his new church family. He initiated a time of listening, calling on a diverse group known as the Curriculum Task Force to help him understand both the church's past and also its vision for the future.

As his pastorate unfolded, listening and learning led to affirmation and healing. After a time of listening and consensus-building initiated by Gary Furr early in his pastorate at VHBC, the church was ready to make ambitious plans for the future.

In 1995 a Strategic Planning Committee chaired by Clark Watson developed a comprehensive strategic plan. Called "Building Bridges to the Future," it defined the church's objectives, and included the recommendation to establish a Space Planning Committee to develop a master plan for expansion of church buildings. Soon a Capital Stewardship Campaign was launched. Members pledged almost \$3 million toward the total building program cost of \$5.9 million. A Commitment Service was held on March 19, 2000, and the church was ready for work to begin.

On April 4, plans changed abruptly. An afternoon tornado raked across the crest of Shades Mountain, with the church directly in its path. Church and Child Development Center staff worked quickly to follow safety plans when the warning came, making sure that the 65 pre-school children under the church's care were all safe on the lower level. Damage to the sanctuary and offices was severe, the pipe organ chamber was soaked with rainwater, and more than sixty trees lay torn or uprooted. Damages to the facilities and grounds were estimated at over \$1 million.

The storm and its aftermath disrupted church operations for a time and also forced a reordering of construction priorities. Expansion of the sanctuary could now be accomplished along with repair of tornado damage. Similarly, the church office suite could be redesigned and expanded as it was being repaired.

As those projects began to unfold, it became clear that while the tornado's damage had forced the church to take a slightly different path, it was still moving forward to realize its vision. An experience no one would have chosen to go through had taught valuable spiritual lessons: Things are transient. Life is fragile and precious. Loss is painful, but often brings new opportunities. And a setback, even one in the form of a violent storm, can be turned into a bridge -- to the future.

Following the April 2000 tornado, the church had to overcome many obstacles and inconveniences. The damaged sanctuary, library, and offices were unusable for months. The staff worked from temporary office space on Columbiana Road. The church worshipped first at Reid Chapel on the Samford campus, then moved to the more informal setting of Fellowship Hall, where folding chairs substituted for pews and the piano accompanied hymn singing.

Plans were modified and adjusted, and the church moved ahead under the Lord's leadership. Ministries, Bible study, missions support, and outreach programs continued energetically. New members joined. Repairs proceeded. Fundraising continued. After some months, the staff moved into its new and larger office suite, and the renovated and enlarged sanctuary, including the rebuilt pipe organ, was ready for Sunday worship.

During this time, reprioritized building plans also moved ahead. Over the next three years, the church would complete the most ambitious building program in its history. A new music suite was completed first. Next came a much-needed new children's building, a new student building and new adult classrooms. Carefully planned landscaping added a beautiful grassy park with amphitheater and walking path near the front entrance drive. Through gifts to the church, several new gardens were added. Paved parking areas were enlarged. Soon new playgrounds would be constructed.

Ministries, mission projects, and a variety of mission trips continued. By 2006, over 100 members annually were directly involved in dozens of missions projects, and the church continued its strong support of cooperative giving programs, while also giving over \$90,000 to designated missions projects and offerings.

The music ministry flourished under the leadership of Terre Johnson, who came as full-time Minister of Music in 2005, following the retirement of Milburn Price, who had laid a strong foundation of growth.

Throughout its history, Vestavia Hills Baptist Church has been blessed with dedicated, capable and skilled ministerial leadership. It has also enjoyed unusual staff continuity.

### **The Leadership of Dr. Gary Furr**

From its inception, the church has not been without its share of challenges. Most of the writings of Paul dealt with the conflicts and challenges within the churches of his day. No church in Paul's day or in ours, can escape the unenviable task of dealing with these conflicts and challenges as they arise. The ability to do so effectively requires sound leadership.

Like most churches, Vestavia Hills Baptist Church has faced its share of challenges. When Dr. Gary Furr became the pastor in 1993 the church had lost 300 members and a few hundred thousand dollars from its budget. Gary had to provide sound leadership to help this church to heal. A sound leader is one who is in a right relationship with God, family, church, and the world. A sound leader as described by the leadership of Vestavia Hills Baptist Church is someone with moral authority, who understands what is going on, someone with integrity, who is able to inspire. They also feel that a leader has to build consensus. They also feel that a sound leader is developed through various experiences.

Their definition of leadership is based on what has been modeled in front of them in the person of Dr. Gary Furr. Gary believes that a pastor's leadership style should combine active personal leadership with team building. The pastor must lead and act in the church because the church is looking to him for leadership. According to Gary, the pastor who practices active leadership should take an active role in the processes of the church. This active leadership should also focus on leading by example. Gary places a strong emphasis on leading the local church in decision making through consensus building. Through consensus building, the pastor can more easily start programs deemed necessary and can understand and adjust to situations with less difficulty. Consensus building works because through it, the pastor can avoid problems with a certain idea and also has a team ready to promote what is going on. Gary also spoke about the power of preaching on certain things that need to be done within the church. He pointed out that the pulpit should not be used as a bully pulpit for the pastor to try and get whatever he wants, but is a powerful tool for leadership. A spirit filled pastor generally does not avoid sermons that offend and convict the congregation. For the pastor who walks with God has confidence that the

message, regardless of its forcefulness, will be proclaimed in God's love.

Gary views leadership as both a natural gift and something that is learned. When asked about how these things worked together he said, "Extremely strong and influential leadership is a gift that comes naturally, but good leadership can be learned through books, study, and modeling influential leaders." As a pastor, there may be some natural ability to lead, but unless this gift is cultivated, studied, and worked on it will be tough to lead to well.

Gary acknowledges that a variety of people and sources has shaped his leadership. He first mentioned his biblical and theological training received in college and seminary. This training helped him greatly by providing an education that became the basis for leadership. Second, he referred to his college Pastor and teacher Walter Shurden, this man provided a lot of insight and personal help for leading in the ministry. Third, he mentioned that many of his friends and the peer relationships forged there have formed his leadership style. He mentioned that a lot of ideas and help for certain situations can come from these relationships. As ministers get together as peers and bounce ideas or problems off of each other, learning takes place. Finally, he mentioned that his work on community boards has helped shape his leadership. He told me that he has often been able to learn people skills from many of these community leaders. While the exact leadership responsibilities differed, the principles involved in leading people are very similar.

Through my interview with the leadership of Vestavia Hills Baptist Church, and Gary, I also learned that a good leader will have several good traits. They mentioned openness, a good sense of humor, intelligence, and vision as key traits a leader will have. These things are important because they provide a balanced scale of leadership. If a leader has these traits he will be able to relate to people, manage the parts of the church that need administration, and lead a church into the future. Gary particularly underlined the need for vision in a good leader, he felt that if the leader does not have a good vision the church will flounder, dwindle, and die.

Another important component of sound leadership was the importance of communication. Gary said that communication is one of the most important things in leadership. When it is used properly it will eliminate or diminish many of the problems and confusing situations that occur within the church. Leadership, with people following and believing in the leader can only take place when good communication has taken place. Poor communication will leave church staff,

church leaders, and parishioners frustrated, confused, and aggravated. Communication is absolutely essential to good leadership in the local church.

Another key principle to proper communication is to find key influencers in the congregation. Each church has someone that has tremendous influence among the people. These people talk to lots of people and usually have a lot of power over how a group of people will think about an issue. If the pastor can get his message across to this person or group of people, the work of communicating can often be much easier.

Another aspect that Gary emphasized concerning communication involved communicating during change. He pointed out that when looking to do something new or instituting change the pastor should first communicate with the staff. By sounding out the idea before them the pastor can get important feedback and work out any kinks in the plan before taking it before the church. As the pastor communicates the vision with these people, they in turn can branch out and communicate the vision with others. By doing this, the pastor will have many voices, who understand the pastor's position, speaking in favor of the new change. It enables the pastor effectively communicate during times of change.

Gary has mastered the art of conflict resolution within the church. He said that this is frequently a task of pastoral care. He said that key things to remember in conflict resolution are stability, building trust among the people, and being able to understand the situation. Stability is important because the people need to be able to trust the pastor, without this trust the pastor will not be able to lead through the conflict well. People need to know that the pastor will be strong and will not waver back and forth but will be consistent in his leadership. The pastor must be able to hold the people's trust. Gary pointed out that especially if the pastor is new and coming into a situation he must take the time to build trust before he can lead them out of the conflict. The last part of conflict resolution involves being able to understand the situation the pastor is in. He emphasized that the pastor needs to allow for the process of healing to take place before things can go back to normal. If healing is not allowed to take place, the issues that people are struggling with will reappear in the future.

Gary expressed that his greatest frustration in his role of leadership is the multiple dimensions of the job. So much is expected of the pastor. He must preach and teach well, visit the sick and shut-ins, handle financial situations, lead several boards, manage and lead a staff,

organize the worship services, deal with church problems, and counsel people. While this goes on, the pastor must still cultivate a strong family life and maintain a strong personal relationship with the Lord. While none of these things are bad, the sheer bulk of responsibility can be overwhelming. Gary is such a giving individual that sometimes he becomes exhausted from being pulled in multiple directions. Gary is trying to create balance between the task side and the ministry side of his leadership.

Gary is at a different place in his ministry than I. Gary's experiences have been a great help for me. He lets me know that there are several ways one can be an effective leader. Peter was different than John; yet both experienced success. Paul was different than Barnabas; yet, both were successful. And, as a result that taught Paul to become an encourager to Timothy. Gary has indeed encouraged my view of pastoral leadership.

### **Serious Realities and Challenges Left**

The location of Vestavia Hills Baptist Church is its strength, but it also poses a serious reality. The neighborhood gives the perception that they are a "country club" church. It is also the second most conservative voting district in the U.S. Members don't want church to be like everything else, they want the freedom to speak their minds and disagree.

A strength for Vestavia Hills is its long staff tenure. Gary has been the Pastor for nearly 14 years, Children's Minister for 15 years, Minister of Education for 20 years, Youth Minister for 4 years, and Minister of Music for 2 years. This is, indeed, a strength, but the serious reality is that long tenure is often equated with the inability to be flexible. The seven last words of a traditional church are, "We've Never Done It That Way Before", and "We're Not Willing To Try!"

Vestavia Hills has a traditional worship style and the membership is comfortable with it. They know and understand their identity. However, the serious reality is that this style of worship doesn't appeal to most people in the culture. There are lots of people in the area surrounding the church. This actually puts limitations on the numerical growth of the church because it is located in the middle of a neighborhood. If they reach more than 1,200 members or so, they plan to begin to plant churches intentionally. Most of the people that attend Vestavia Hills have dual careers with kids. Their lives are stressful and child-focused. There is a high



need for real community. The ironic thing is that they have 900 members and they see themselves as a small church because there are so many mega churches within five miles. Gary worries about 20 years down the road and their survival as a mid-sized church. There is a great tension between small church and large church dynamics. Vestavia Hills wants the programs of a large church, but the high touch, personal connection of a small church. This will lead to higher staff costs than they have at present. There is a wealth of talent in the leadership pool of its church members. There are 27 seminary graduates, Beeson students, Samford faculty members, 12 lawyers, a lot of scientists, as well as mid-level executives.

Vestavia Hills sees itself as a teaching church where they are mentoring a good number of young ministers. It is a staff-led church with strong lay influences which doesn't depend on clergy. There are few people of color that attend Vestavia Hills, but the ones that do are mostly professionals. Money protects the church from much criticism by the Birmingham Baptist Association, however, the congregation doesn't care about Baptist politics.

All in all the church continues to grow even with all of the challenges and conflicts that it has faced. Steady, stable, and solid leadership will continue to keep Vestavia Hill Baptist Church as a viable community of faith in the years to come.