



NEWS

# Revival reignites Lancaster church, community

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*Photo by Mike Ellis, The Greenville News*

By Jessica Brodie

LANCASTER—What do you do when the pandemic’s far-reaching effects have claimed a good chunk of your church’s members, you’re struggling with finances and you’re eager for a bold path forward in ministry?

If you’re Hopewell United Methodist Church, in Lancaster, South Carolina, you listen to the Holy Spirit—and host a revival that breathes a fresh wind of connection and diversity

across your community and congregation.

That's what happened in the small community of Lancaster in April when an older, mostly White historical congregation decided to bring back a multiday revival service that hadn't been organized in years.

Hopewell used to be known for its revivals, but the services had paused for some time. This year, organizers decided they needed to embrace a decidedly diverse approach. Not only did they invite dynamic speaker the Rev. Sh'Kur Francis to preach all four nights of the April 16-19 revival, but they also were intentional about inviting everyone in the surrounding community.

What they got was a packed house of attendees that crossed racial, generational and denominational lines. Sixty to 80 people attended each night of all races and ages, from Baptist, United Methodist, Presbyterian and African Methodist Episcopal attendees to some without a church home.

"It was like fresh air," their pastor, the Rev. Renee Garrison, told the Advocate.

While offerings were collected every night, all funds were given to local nonprofits and ministry organizations, furthering the outward-focused theme of their undertaking.

Francis, a United Methodist pastor who is also the new director of the federally funded organization Lancaster Promise Neighborhood, said he was extraordinarily impressed with the church's efforts. Not only was it an incredibly diverse, interdenominational revival, but the fact that every penny raised went to others was especially inspiring.

"What I saw was a church trying to find its way out of the pandemic, dealing with loss and death, but instead of focusing on themselves, they've turned their eyes to their neighbor and community. I saw people being disciples of the Kingdom and good citizens and neighbors," Francis said. "That to me was just amazing."

Garrison has only been Hopewell's pastor for a year, and she said that's exactly what endeared her to the people of Hopewell right away: their outward emphasis.

Not only did Hopewell members go out of their way to invite the whole community, fostering a time of refreshment and spiritual renewal deigned to connect brothers and

sisters in Christ through meaningful worship, but they contributed to a different group each night, from the musicians' music ministry to the social services organization HOPE in Lancaster to Lancaster Promise Neighborhood.

"They're a very missional-focused church," Garrison said. "It's like breathing for them, and the youth are involved, too. They were just ready to go."

Margaret Page is the choir director at Hopewell, and she served on the committee to organize the event, led by Larry Stroud. A retired schoolteacher, Page has been a member of Hopewell for more than 30 years, and she saw firsthand how hard the pandemic hit the church.

"It was such a struggle to get people back in church instead of comfortable at home watching it virtually," Page said.

Methodist churches were among the last to reopen during COVID, so many members switched to other denominations and never returned.

Not only was Hopewell struggling with membership numbers but financial ones, too—and all of this doesn't even take into consideration the disaffiliation strife the denomination is experiencing.

Yet not only did Hopewell persist with a revival, but they engaged a dynamic African-American speaker who genuinely appreciated what Hopewell was doing.

"Sh'Kur is a person with a deep, abiding faith, a love for Christ burning in his heart and deep compassion for building coalitions and community. Our church needed his transformative energy," Page said.

During the revival, Page said, she witnessed the Word brought to life as the Holy Spirit moved powerfully among the people there.

She thinks part of it was the fact that so many different types of people attended.

"I sit back and wonder why the church is the last place to integrate, but it has been," Page said. "A lot of that is just worship style maybe, but it's great to have different races and people coming together."

“We are all God’s children.”

That interracial aspect resonated with Garrison, too. On the last night of the revival, she said, there was an African-American man who attended who grew up in the surrounding community. The church is two miles from his home, yet he’d never stepped foot in Hopewell until the night of the revival.

The man told Garrison he plans to come back, bring his music group and start a relationship with the church.

“Every night we saw that, all these different people coming and participating because they heard this revival wasn’t about the church but about reviving the community,” Francis said.

That is what Christianity is all about at its heart, he said.

Walter McGriff Tillman, an African-American member of St. Paul AME, Lancaster, is one of those who attended the revival. She came one night with a former coworker and said she genuinely appreciated the dynamic preaching and authentic fellowship.

“It was a glorious revival, a glorious occasion with good singing and good preaching,” Tillman said.

Steve Eubanks, Hopewell’s lay leader, said much the same. Eubanks had nothing to do with organizing the revival but simply attended each night—and thoroughly enjoyed it.

“You could feel the Holy Spirit each night,” Eubanks said. “The way things are in our world today, it was refreshing to see that many people come together and worship together. No one was in a hurry to leave, either. People just stood around talking after. We need more of that in the world, where people can come together and speak and communicate.

“It’s good to know we’re not alone.”

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