

Healthy harvest

Fellowship Bible Church trains men how to plant churches that grow

BY HEATHER HAHN ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

For nearly a decade, central Arkansas' largest congregation — Fellowship Bible Church — has trained seminary graduates to develop congregations of their own.

Today, alumni of the Fellowship Associates program have launched 27 new evangelical churches across the country and one in Poland.

Altogether, the new churches boast a combined estimated weekly attendance of 7,000. That's more people than live in most Arkansas towns and about 40 percent more than the roughly 5,300 people who attend Fellowship Bible Church each week at its sites in Little Rock, Benton and Cabot.

Steve Snider, the president of Fellowship Associates, said the church plants are administratively and financially independent from his Little Rock-based nondenominational congregation. To the newly created flocks, Fellowship acts more like an encouraging coach than a mother church.

"We're not trying to build a denomination," Snider said. "We're not trying to build something we sit on top of. Our heart and our desire is [to] help leaders of churches win, and we believe that church planting is one of the best ways to reach unreached people with the gospel."

The new congregations are springing up all over the nation, including in Raleigh, N.C.; Ruston, La.; Philadelphia and Memphis.

Duke Revard, who grew up in Bentonville, is one of four residents in the Fellowship Associates program this year and plans to establish a church in Portland, Ore.

The most important lesson he's learning from the program, he said, is selfawareness.

"They are trying to help us understand who we are and who we are not," Revard said. "So that we don't head out there as a jack-of-alltrades and trying to operate in areas we are not gifted and burn out."

Most church plants fail to take root, Revard said. So the program encourages the residents to build a ministry team and have people already committed to support the new congregation before it even starts regularly holding worship services.

"I've heard time and again of planters from denominations who go out with \$250,000 and a pat on the back," he said. "Most of the time, it's a situation where the money runs out. There's not a church. There's just a church planter who was there for a while trying to reinvent the wheel, usually in isolation."

Fellowship Bible Church is one of an increasing number of large and medium-size congregations nationwide that mentor ministers to prevent such fruitless efforts, said Margaret Slusher, director of the Church Planting Leadership Community of the Leadership Network. The Dallas-based network works with large, often multi-site churches, including Fellowship Bible Church, to foster innovation.

Slusher attributes this trend in part to the size and wealth of megachurches such as Fellowship, which now have the financial and personnel resources to do for themselves what often required help from denominational structures in the past.

Among those with a "kingdom mind-set" to train church planters, Slusher lists Summit Church in Bonita Springs, Fla.; Northwood Church in Keller, Texas; New Heights Church in Vancouver, Wash., and Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York.

Some churches have grown frustrated with waiting for the approval and assistance from denominations, Slusher said.

"Many agencies created too many hoops, and it took too long for approval," she said. "Many churches are not only starting the churches by themselves, they are networking with other churches — within and across denominational lines — to plant churches."

She said churches also have discovered that new congregations often attract members more easily than older, established ones.

"A church that is 3 years old adds one convert per member per year," she said. "A church that is 7 years [old] adds one convert per seven members. At age 50, only one convert per 85 members."

The Little Rock-based congregation's elder board established Fellowship Associates in 1999 to help other churches grow. The ministry includes Men's Fraternity, a national men's ministry begun at Fellowship Bible Church. But Fellowship Associates mainly aims to provide would-be church founders with the leadership training, fund-raising advice and informational resources to make it on their own.

Snider said the program now gets between 30 and 40 applicants a year. Snider said he looks for men with a proven track record of leadership.

"We want the kind of leaders who are really gifted to think big picture," he said. "They are the kind of guys who see themselves as the team captain."

Even before the ministry's creation, Fellowship Bible Church had informally helped 15 churches get their start by giving them resource materials and advice, including Fellowship Northwest Arkansas in Rogers — the state's second largest Protestant congregation, with about 7,000 members.

But Fellowship Associates is a more deliberate and organized effort to start new congregations, said Bill Wellons, one of the church's founding pastors and Fellowship Associates' director of church planting.

"It's what you don't get in seminary," he said.

During the 10-month program, the residents attend elder board and other administrative meetings to see how church decisions are made.

They also meet weekly with Snider (a former lawyer with the Rose Law Firm in Little Rock), and with Wellons to discuss different leadership styles and the business aspects of starting a church. The residents learn about such practical matters as how to acquire nonprofit status and how to create a church budget. They also meet with ministers at Fellowship throughout the program to discuss a pastor's role in mission work and counseling.

Fellowship Associates has 10 full-time staff members, and the church pays a small salary to the four to six residents receiving training each year.

James Skinner, who attended the program from 2003 to 2004, said the experience showed him the real "nuts and bolts" of leading a church.

"You got to sit on the upperlevel management meetings, you got to see how they process things, and all that stuff was great," said Skinner, who now helps lead Crossroads Church in the northeastern Louisiana town of Ruston. "But I think the biggest thing I learned in the residency was their heart, vision and their attitude of wanting to give things away. We've carried that attitude out here."

His church, which about 220 adults attend, has adopted the town's sixth-grade school, buying gifts for the teachers and clothes for the students and even paying for some students to attend summer camp.

When a Dallas Theological Seminary student feels called to plant churches, the nondenominational seminary's president, Mark Bailey, often urges that student to head to Little Rock.

Bailey described the program as akin to a medical residency for ministers. "They see a real church doing real ministry with real challenges that is committed to planting churches."

So far, 21 of the program's 28 graduates have come from Dallas Theological Seminary. Revard, who grew up attending Fellowship Northwest Arkansas, is among the Dallas Theological graduates who learned of the program at the seminary.

Program residents also have come from, among other programs, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.; Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Chicago; and Regents College in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

Bailey said he learned of the program because a number of the church's graduates have served as ministers of Fellowship Bible Church over the years, including Tim Lundy, the church's directional leader.

Bailey, along with many of the program's graduates, stressed that what makes the Fellowship Associates program unique is its emphasis on team leadership rather than a senior pastor model.

Eric Mason, who completed the program in 2005, now leads an inner-city, multiracial flock about three blocks from Temple University in Philadelphia. Epiphany Fellowship has grown in the last two years from nine to 270 people, many from low-income homes.

Mason, another Dallas Theological Seminary graduate, acknowledged that his congregation has very different needs than the largely suburban parishioners at Fellowship Bible Church.

The minister, who goes by "Pastor E" at church, uses the hip-hop culture of the city's black and Hispanic youth to bring people to Christ.

Still, he said, his experience at Fellowship Associates put him 10 years ahead of other new pastors, providing his ministerial team with the resources and support they need to fulfill their vision.

No matter the church plants' location, they all share the same goal.

"Our desire," Mason said, "is to see people's lives saturated with the Gospel."



Churches planted by Fellowship Bible Church

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| 1. Portland, Ore. | 9. Memphis, Tenn. | 16. Kingsport, Tenn. |
| 2. Los Angeles | 10. Jackson, Tenn. | 17. Philadelphia, Pa. |
| 3. Long Beach, Calif. | 11. Nashville, Tenn. | 18. Boston |
| 4. Denver, Colo. | 12. Knoxville, Tenn. | 19. Cincinnati, Ohio |
| 5. Austin, Texas | 13. Oxford, Miss. | 20. Louisville, Ky. |
| 6. Ruston, La. | 14. Charlotte, N.C. | 21. Avon, Ind. |
| 7. Conway, Ark. | 15. Raleigh/Durham, N.C. | 22. Ann Arbor, Mich. |
| 8. Jonesboro, Ark. | | 23. Wroclaw, Poland |