

# Church Converts Newspaper to Good News Center

by Rick Jordan | CBFNC Church Resources Coordinator



“A seven-day-a-week church” would be a fair description for First Baptist Church of Smithfield. The desire to serve is a part of the church’s DNA, according to the pastor, Lee Colbert. “Our driving question is ‘How can we make a difference for somebody else?’” says Lee, who should know, since he has been a minister at FBC since May, 1979 and pastor since 1985. Still, Lee was a bit nervous when the editor of the local newspaper asked for an appointment ten years ago. “That’s never good,” Lee laughed. “I wondered, ‘What have I done or said that is going to be put into the newspaper?’”

The editor had an offer. The newspaper’s offices and printing shop (21,000 square feet) were across the street from the church. Because of downturn in readership, the newspaper did not need the large space anymore. It was going to go up for sale, but the editor wanted the church to have the first option to purchase it. “The timing was right for us. We had wanted to expand our space for ministries, but had met several roadblocks. The buildings and land around us were too expensive to purchase or renovate. For years, we knew we wanted to grow, but were not sure how it could happen, so the people kept giving and waiting,” Lee said.

So, the church bought a newspaper office to extend its message of “good news.” The building was gutted and added to, with specific ministries in mind and also with the flexibility to grow new ministries. “We have a nice conference room that is used regularly by boards of non-profits,” Lee pointed out. “We have a large room with a kitchen, restrooms, and classroom space that is dedicated space for our Hispanic congregation. There is space for a clothing and household goods closet and more for meetings and for recreation. The industrial kitchen is used to feed the community.”

FBC has also learned to adapt its ministries. “For years, we hosted a Soup Kitchen. The Salvation Army has a meal for lunch and we provided a dinner meal. Over time, our attendance for that dropped. But we knew there were people in our community, particularly the elderly and families with very young children, who needed warm meals. So, now we go to them.” Anesha Johnson

and Lisa Gainey head up this ministry. Anesha explained, “We have four routes with volunteers who make or pack meals and drivers who take them to the persons’ homes. We now take numerous meals to persons each week; others come to church to get them.” Food is often donated from local restaurants and catering services. “We really never know where the food will come from. That was a primary concern as we began this ministry. But God said, ‘Start it and see.’ And God keeps supplying us in surprising ways every week.”

The church also has a backpack ministry which supplies food for school children over the weekends. Lee says, “A young

girl whose family is a part of our church told her parents and friends that she did not want presents for her birthday party. She wanted everyone to bring jars of peanut butter to be added to the backpacks. That is the giving nature of this church.”

One person who experienced FBC’s “good news” was a woman who had just completed her rehab treatment at a local treatment center. She was beginning a new life with nothing for herself or her two children. She came to the ministry center to get clothes and household items. She had reached her limit when she came back to the door, crying. One of the volunteers told her, “I’m sorry, but that’s all we can give to you today.” The woman said, “I don’t need anything more. I just need to tell you ‘thank you.’”

The church partners with many local churches and organizations. For example, Alcoholics Anonymous and Al-Anon use the ministry center every day. “Our attitude is, ‘how can we help you? If you need our space, it’s yours,” Lee says. “This is building is not for our exclusive use. It is to be used.”

Sometimes, persons are recipients or volunteers for ministries and then become part of the congregation. One lady has done that through the dress sewing ministry. “People may or may not join our church. Our hope is to build trust. If someone comes to our ministry center, it may take ten to twelve visits with us before they believe they can trust us. If we can build that trust and they start going to a church – any church – we have become partners in building the Kingdom,” Lee says.

