

**Forrester Called to FBC Ridgeway Following Church’s Revitalization Journey**

God is writing a new chapter in First Baptist Ridgeway’s story, and church members are ready for it. Following difficult years weathered in the historic community with one stoplight located just outside of Blythewood, CMBA leaders helped the church through a period of revitalization. The process included remaining members losing a pastor, facing difficult realities, and praying for a new vision from God.

“The members of First Baptist Ridgeway did what every church ought to do. They recognized their situation, they were honest about where they were, and they reached out for help. As a result, God responded to their humility and the willingness they responded with to make hard decisions that would help set them up to bring God more glory out of their congregation,” says Associational Missions Strategist Jamie Rogers, who served as interim pastor for the church during the summer of 2022 before coming to CMBA. “God truly blessed this congregation by giving them new life and by sending them a great young pastor and family to help them continue reaching out into the Ridgeway community. I’m so eager to see how God uses all of them together to point lost people to Jesus in their surrounding area.”

Established in 1886, Ridgeway has seen retirees and some younger families moving into the area, which is experiencing change and growth along with the neighboring Blythewood community. CMBA Advisory Team Member Phyllis Gutierrez says her congregation struggled for several years and had diminished to 16 members in 2019. When presented with the opportunity to go through revitalization by CMBA leadership and James Nugent of the South Carolina Baptist Convention, remaining members embraced the opportunity.

Army Chaplain Rev. Brandon Denning led the church as interim pastor through the COVID season until his military relocation, and Sunday worship attendance grew to over 40 people during this time. Under the leadership of Interim Pastor Joe Copeland beginning in August 2022, First Ridgeway completed the church-approved recommendations, which included physical improvements and renovations around the property.

When Copeland arrived, there were “no children in regular attendance and few young families, but the older members of the church were focused on reaching the community and trusting the Lord to help them reach non-believers in the Ridgeway area.” Copeland says the congregation’s willingness to be unified around the revitalization recommendations, belief that God still had a plan for their church, and sacrificial giving toward these efforts were key to their Kingdom successes during this season. It should be noted that members’ giving exceeded the 2022 and 2023 budgets.

“First Baptist Ridgeway members were a joy to work with. They were unified in believing that God was faithful and able to use them, and labored together to see the church become healthy again. They also showed a hopeful spirit, not giving up but continuing to do the ‘next right thing’ that God had for them,” Copeland says, noting that this included creating a new members’ discipleship class, developing an intentional care ministry in the absence of a deacon body, and community partnerships with a local elementary and Council of Aging.

The congregation was conducting a pastor search process and, on January 1, 2024, called Rev. Stephen Forrester as their new senior pastor. A graduate of the University of South Carolina and Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Forrester most recently served as associate pastor of Sanctuary Church in Greenville. He and his wife Lauren have five children aged five months to seven years old. Forrester recalls a pivotal moment in the process of being called to Ridgeway.

“In early September, prior to my interview, Lauren and I attended one of the church's worship gatherings and immediately realized how kind and hospitable the church was. I think half the church introduced themselves to us that day,” he says, noting the impact of a sincere plea that the couple join them again for worship. “I’m sure this member wasn’t aware at the time but, as we headed home, we had already begun praying that the Lord would bring us back - to stay. Thankfully, He did.”

Today, Forrester sees God at work in First Ridgeway first through the congregation’s understanding that revitalization occurred through their consistent, God-centered prayers. In fact, “I probably look forward to our prayer meetings as much as anything,” he says. Forrester also appreciates the unity his church has that is a direct result of its commitment to prayer.

For his part Copeland, who also serves as a Church Strategies Specialist with the SC Baptist Convention, says CMBA churches facing revitalization needs like First Ridgway have the same opportunities to discover God’s unique plan for their church’s future. He recommends exploring resources available through the association and state convention because “outside information can be very helpful to see things that we miss because of our closeness to the situation. The local church is autonomous, so recommendations are just that. The church prays and decides what recommendations they adopt and follow through on.”

As First Ridgeway continues its journey to become a healthy church with a strong gospel witness in the community, Forrester is aware that First Ridgeway’s story is unique among church revitalization stories. He is also quick to credit the assistance the church received for the building blocks of success from the SC Baptist Convention, CMBA, and partnership support from local churches.

“The congregation's willingness to listen to godly leaders from the outside and their recommendations for change was simply incredible. Every member had a hand in the process, whether through prayer, outreach in the community, renovating the church building and parsonage, or financial generosity,” Forrester says. “It showed me that they love God, they love one another, and they love what God intends to do through local churches who are committed to the Great Commission.”