

Childhood friends reconnect for small-town witness

By SHAREN HALE
Pastor, Gene Autry UMC

In the town of Gene Autry, there are two churches: First United Methodist and First Baptist. When I began ministering there, I realized the First Baptist pastor and I had gone to school together as children. We began talking about community building.

We wanted to help people understand that, although our churches are of separate denominations, we are all Christians and can work together to offer the hand of Christ to others.

We started by joining for fifth-Sunday singing, at alternating churches. We held a joint outdoor program on Main Street. I preached at First Baptist on an Easter morning, and in turn, Pastor David Colaw has preached at First UMC.

First Baptist has permitted me to baptize 10 new Christians in its baptistry.

In pairs, Baptist and United Methodist churchgoers have delivered potatoes door-to-door, telling each home's occupants, "God loves you."

Especially memorable was a community-wide service at the United Methodist church. The population of Gene Autry is 119; more than 100 people attended the service. We filled the church with pottery of many colors, shapes, and sizes. I preached on the brokenness of community and how only God can put us back together. I asked each person in the audience to come forward, choose a piece of pottery, and break it with a hammer.

Vacation Bible School followed that event. Our young people, ages 8 months to 17 years, took those broken pottery pieces and attached them to a cross that was built by one of the adult church members. Each time

they placed a piece of pottery on the cross, the youths prayed for someone in the community.

Then during a fifth-Sunday singalong, at First UMC, we presented that cross to Rev. Colaw, and it was placed in First Baptist's multipurpose center, where community dinners are held each month. There it will represent to all the healing God alone can do and is doing in our community.

We are not competing; we are just letting the community know we are both available, to be Jesus to others.

It is no mistake that God sent me to Gene Autry in Ardmore District. The friendship that we two pastors formed in our youth became a strong foundation for trust between our churches. The people know that because we trust each other, they can trust, too.



Photo by Sherry Dvorak

The symbolism of a cross covered in broken pottery is explained by Sharen Hale, left, pastor at Gene Autry's First United Methodist Church, and David Colaw, pastor at First Baptist.

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