

Charles Roesel Florida pastor leads church to ministry-based evangelism

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Charles Roesel served as the pastor of First Baptist Church, Leesburg, Fla., for almost 30 years. He retired in the spring of 2006. Under his leadership First Baptist, Leesburg, was in the top 1 percent of the nation in evangelism and mission giving. This church became a pioneer in this country for ministry-based evangelism, having over 50 major ministries which focus on meeting the needs of people in the community. These ministries include a drug rehabilitation center, a medical clinic, a women's care center, a pregnancy care center, a counseling center — the list goes on. Over 7,000 people have been baptized during the past 27 years as a result of this ministry -based evangelism. Dee Whitten, team leader of the Virginia Baptist Mission Board's empowering leaders team, interviewed him recently.

WHITTEN: Charles, tell us about ministry evangelism. How is this different or unique from a more traditional style of evangelism?

ROESEL: Ministry evangelism focuses on reaching the total person and reaching out to people at their point of need. After you have met their needs, then they are ready to listen to the message of Jesus. This is the most consistent way of doing evangelism. In the past 41 years of ministry, I have never baptized less than 100 people per year. Over 7,000 were baptized during my ministry at Leesburg. Most of these baptisms were a result of our ministry-based evangelism.

WHITTEN: How did First Baptist, Leesburg, get started with ministry evangelism?

ROESEL: Very reluctantly. In the beginning it took about five years to move from a “maintenance mentality” to a “ministry mentality” in the church. However, after the people saw the impact of ministry evangelism and saw the joy in the lives of the people who had been touched by our ministries, then church members began to be enthusiastic about this approach. In fact, it got to the point where I couldn't mention a new ministry possibility without the folks being all over it.

WHITTEN: What did you actually do in order to get this ministry evangelism started?

ROESEL: Expository preaching. I started preaching about Jesus and how he went about ministering to people in the world. Jesus spent most of his life doing good for people instead of just talking about ministry. In most churches, “after all is said and done, there is a lot more said than done.” Our first ministry was a rescue ministry for men which has now turned into a nation-wide drug rehabilitation center. Now there are over 70 active ministries, meeting needs of folks in the community.

WHITTEN: How did this ministry evangelism affect your relationship with the town of Leesburg and the surrounding area?

ROESEL: At first, the town resisted our ministry ventures because they didn't know what to expect. They had never experienced a church which had carried out ministry to the community on a major level. However, now that they see the results and the genuine care taking place, First Baptist, Leesburg, has become the recognized church in our region for doing ministry. The city, the state of Florida and the nation have provided a variety of awards to the church for our ministry efforts.

WHITTEN: Was it difficult to keep a healthy balance between meeting physical needs and meeting spiritual needs?

ROESEL: This is the real challenge in ministry evangelism. There is the danger of feeling so good about meeting physical needs that you can drift off into a “social gospel” which is really no gospel. So you must put energy into keeping the evangelism piece a major part of your emphasis. You don't drift “to” evangelism, you drift “from” it. So, you continually have to keep calling your church back to the critical importance of evangelism.

WHITTEN: How would you recommend that a smaller church get started with ministry evangelism?

ROESEL: The great thing about ministry evangelism is that it will work in any size church. A church with only five members can start a homebound ministry. Any church of any size and with any budget can find ways to meet specific needs of people in their community.

WHITTEN: What are some of the challenges involved in ministry evangelism?

ROESEL: First of all, we had a zoning problem with the city. Before the city understood the importance of our ministries to the welfare of the town, they resisted us with zoning regulations. Now that is not a problem. Also, some churches have a country club mentality where hurting people just don't fit in with the church crowd. It is very difficult for church people to move from being served to becoming servants. Instead of asking, “What's in it for me?” we need to ask, “What's in me for it?”

WHITTEN: What have been some of the most effective ministries at First Baptist, Leesburg?

ROESEL: Our drug rehabilitation center (rescue mission) was our first ministry and it has become one of our best. People from all over the country come to be treated at this center. Also, our medical clinic for people without insurance treats over 600 patients per month. We have volunteer doctors and nurses from the community. Also, our children's home is a key ministry. This past Sunday several children from our children's home gave their life to Christ. We provide emergency rescue for children in desperate home situations and we provide long-term care for children.

Evangelism should be natural for true Christians, Roesel says *Baptist Press*  
By Gary D. Myers, posted March 4, 2003

NEW ORLEANS (BP)—Evangelism is neither voluntary nor mandatory; it is inevitable for the true believer, Charles Roesel said during the Gurney Lectures on Evangelism at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary Feb. 25-27.

“If Jesus Christ is living in our hearts, he’s going to be in our talk,” he said. “If he’s not in our talk we need to question whether he is reigning in our hearts.”

Roesel, pastor at First Baptist Church in Leesburg, Fla., encourages his church members to be intentional about sharing the message of Christ with a hurting world. In turn, his church has become a leader in the area of ministry evangelism — witnessing through meeting the needs of people.

“First Baptist Church of Leesburg truly is one of the most outstanding and unusual churches in the Southern Baptist Convention,” said NOBTS President Chuck Kelley. “The church is organized around a very simple philosophy; when you meet people’s needs you can tell them about Christ, and Christ will transform them.”

During the lectures, Roesel noted how well the early church shared their faith despite the many obstacles they faced. Led by uneducated fishermen, the first Christians were serious about the task of leading others to faith in Christ. Each day many people came into the kingdom of God.

Today outreach is different. The church has many material and financial resources at its fingertips and enjoys more freedom than the early church. More church leaders are being trained today than at any other time in history. Unlike the early church, Christians are not reaching many people, Roesel said.

“Something is drastically missing. We’ve got the programs, we’ve got the easy ways to do it but it isn’t being done,” he said. “Never has there been a time when we have failed so miserably in evangelism as we are doing today.”

Roesel pointed to a disturbing trend in the Southern Baptist Convention. Last year, 11,000 churches reported no baptisms and another 11,000 churches reported three or less.

First Baptist, Leesburg baptizes more than 200 people per year. More than 100 elderly people were saved last year, some of whom were not able to be baptized because of medical problems. The church is bucking the national trend in the area of evangelism.

Roesel reaches out to the mentally challenged, prostitutes, elderly, AIDS patients, the needy and the homeless. Many churches view these people as unreachable and focus their attention in other directions. Roesel believes that “anybody is reachable in the name of Jesus,” and God is blessing the efforts of this church.

“We are not going to reach a world for Christ ... unless we have the love of Christ flowing through our lives as we love all kinds of people,” Roesel said. “In our church we celebrate everybody who comes. When someone walks the aisle, our entire church breaks out in applause of celebration.”

“When I see someone come to saving knowledge of Jesus I get excited,” he said. “If you ever get to a point that you don’t get excited about people being saved you are in trouble.”

Because of the types of people the church ministers to, many would think Leesburg is located in a metropolitan area. Not true. Leesburg is a town of 15,000. The problems that once plagued only large cities have come to small towns.

When he came to Leesburg in 1976, the town had 90 churches and First Baptist had about 200 members. During the past 27 years, God has brought dynamic growth. More than 6,000 members now worship and serve at First Baptist, Leesburg. Roesel is often asked why he believes God has so richly blessed the church in Leesburg.

“God wanted the most ordinary place and most ordinary preacher so everyone would have to say that is a God thing,” Roesel said. “I had no idea what God had in mind when went there, but I knew where God wanted me to be.”

Roesel’s church has started many ministries in order to reach out to more people who need to hear the gospel. They have a ministry village, which includes a rescue mission, women’s shelter, two children’s homes, a pregnancy care center, clothes closet, food pantry, medical center, AIDS clinic, counseling center and a day care center.

Their heart for ministry and evangelism does not stop within the borders of this country. First Baptist, Leesburg has built more than 70 churches and children’s homes in Romania, Brazil and Africa.

Roesel realizes that ministry evangelism is not for everyone, but the cost should not be the determining factor. People commonly ask Roesel about the expenses related to ministry-based evangelism. He said that seeking God’s will is more important than costs.

“The question is not, ‘Can we afford it?’” he said. “‘Is this God’s will?’ is the question. I’ve got good news, if it is his will, he can afford it.”

In the lectures, Roesel applied the Lord’s Prayer to the task of evangelism. He said that the prayer reveals the heart Christ had from his Father and for other people.

“In this prayer the Lord reveals the attitude that must be in our hearts if we are going to have a passion for taking this world for Jesus Christ,” Roesel said. “I want to pray everyday that I will have the heart of God, that I will have concern about the things that concern him, hurt about the things that hurt him and that I will learn to pray.”

The Gurney Lectures on Evangelism were established by Thomas Gurney, a Baptist layman from Orlando, Fla. Gurney, a lawyer and member of First Baptist Church in Orlando, was a committed witness who boldly shared his faith. He gave an endowment in order to fund a lecture series on evangelism at NOBTS each spring.

NOBTS students will have the opportunity to see ministry evangelism in action at First Baptist Church of Leesburg, Fla. The course EVAN 6399 Ministry Evangelism/CESW 6364 Church and Community Ministries will be offered at the church July 14-18. For additional information, contact Perry Hancock, (504) 282-4455, ext. 3327; or Loretta Rivers, (504) 282-4455, ext. 3211. The registration deadline for the workshop is June 13.

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## First Baptist Of Zephyrhills Has New Pastor

ZEPHYRHILLS (Special)

— The Rev. Charles Roesel of New Smyrna Beach has accepted a call to the pastorate of First Baptist. He will succeed the Rev. B. A. Oswald who, with his family, moved recently to Jacksonville to become associate pastor of that city's



First Baptist Church.

The new minister and his family will move to Zephyrhills during the first week in January.

Reared in Coleman, the Rev. Mr. Roesel was graduated from Wildwood High School, attended University of Florida for a year then entered Stetson University, graduating with the Bachelor of Arts degree in 1958. He subsequently studied at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Ky., graduating with the Bachelor of Divinity degree in 1961.

He held student pastorates while attending the Seminary, had psychiatric training at the Norton Psychiatric Infirmary and worked with juvenile delinquents at Ormsby Village, both in Louisville.

He is married to the former Miss Edna Pate of Wildwood, who attended Tift College at Forsythe Ga. They have three children, Charles Lewis Jr., 4; Cathy Lynn, 2½; and Carey Lance, 18 months.