

## Passing the Baton

***“So since we stand surrounded by all those who have gone before...let us run with endurance the long race set before us.” – Hebrews 12:1-2***

When I was in high school, I ran track, mostly sprints. I was always one of those runners who brought home the prize, only it was usually the ribbon for 6<sup>th</sup> place. I was valuable to the team in that a 6<sup>th</sup> place showing still earned points for the team, but I saw the back of a lot of jerseys and the bottom of a lot of spikes flashing in front of me, and I never felt what it was like to be the first to cross the finish line myself.

I did, however, win a few first place ribbons in my time – in the relays. I often ran the 880 yard relay. In that race, four runners ran 220 yards sequentially, each passing the baton to the next runner in a quest to win as a team. No single runner ran the entire race. Only the baton covered the distance. Each runner would pass the baton to the next runner. The exchange was crucial; the baton could not be dropped. If passed successfully, however, and carried victoriously, each of the runners could rejoice in the victory as a team. It didn't matter so much who ran the first leg or the last leg, only that the baton was passed and the victory won. I think our district churches and pastors ought to run our race more like that, and it is happening.

In October of 2006, our District Mission Strategy Team, led by Dr. Spruce and District Missionary Tim Young, challenged our pastors to lead “churches that plant churches.” Not many answered the call to the starting line. But Pana, led by Pastor Allen Ebber, stepped up to the starting line. Jerry Gravatt, who served at Pana, heard the call of Christ to help begin a NewStart church in nearby Vandalia. The vision took hold in the Pana congregation, who volunteered to launch the church with several service projects in the community. Soon, four families and several teens, numbering about 15-20, started meeting at the Old Lincoln Schoolhouse in Vandalia. Jerry and Dara Gravatt led this new congregation that soon began to celebrate with new faces and victories. Pana continued to support the work by helping financially.

Pastor Ebber explains, The more people we sent, the more people we had show up in Pana, and God provided financially as well.” The District also approved grants for equipment, and when a new building was found across the street from the high school, helped with the rental fees. Supporting the new congregation and the Gravatts became a team effort as well when the Shelbyville church began to provide financial support for nearly a year. Tables, kitchen and nursery equipment were donated from the Effingham facility, and the sound system was provided from the Abundant Life (Springfield) church.

Lessons of patience and trust were learned along the way. Allen and Jerry learned to work together to allow God to direct the new congregation as He chose—letting them find their own style of worship, and shape their community in their own way.

Over the last four years, Pana got to rejoice together with the Vandalia congregation by celebrating a combined baptismal service where six new Christians from Vandalia were baptized along with ten from the Pana church. The “Heaven's Gates / Hell's Flames” presentation, held at Pana, included several participants from the Vandalia congregation.

New ministries were beginning to reach out at Vandalia as well. When I visited the congregation last year, the worship service was suddenly invaded by nearly twenty Greenville College students, full of youth and enthusiasm for new opportunities to minister. Several folks from the congregation began going across the road to the high school to serve coffee and donuts to the parents and teens arriving for school in the morning. Pana had answered the call and began the race faithfully and God was blessing.

Last winter, however, God began to lead the Gravatts to make a change in their hectic lifestyle of living between two communities. Jerry felt released from his ministry at Vandalia and would resign early in the new year. Lila Chaplin, ordained elder from Pana, would serve during the interim. Pastor Ebber, freshly returned from a sabbatical rest, began with his leaders to reevaluate Pana's continued work at Vandalia.

Nick Briggs, a locally licensed minister at Casey, was approached about assuming the role of pastor in Vandalia. The Casey congregation “commissioned” them and sent them off with their blessings. Though 70 miles away, Nick and wife Melissa, began to make the weekly drive to Vandalia to preach and serve the young congregation. He was welcomed with open arms.

Last month, the Pana church made the difficult decision to release the Vandalia church from their sponsorship. But as they did, the Casey church began to consider how they could support the Briggs' new ministry at Vandalia. With the unanimous support of the Casey church board, Casey has begun to provide financial support. Last Sunday, Nick and Melissa returned to share reports of their new work in Vandalia, and the Casey congregation responded with great joy and promises of prayer and volunteer support as well.

Pastor Ebber and I see this as a “passing of the baton” from Pana to Casey. Pana will continue praying and supporting in various ways, while “sharing the blessings with Casey,” says Allen. “We feel like we've moved from being a parent church to being a sister church.” The relationship between Casey and Pana congregations will be strengthened as well.

Please join the District Mission Strategy Team in praying and supporting the Briggs and the congregation at Vandalia. The baton has been passed, the race continues, and all who have prayed and given will rejoice together at Christ's victory there.

In Jesus,  
Mark Copley  
District Missionary