

First Church Aberdeen adopts Community of Grace Church

*By Tony Martin
Editor*

In what could be a model for other churches, First Church Aberdeen adopted Community of Grace Church in Aberdeen, with their first official service taking place on November 12.

Pastor James Clardy came to First Aberdeen in the fall of 2019. Originally serving as an interim pastor, the church asked him to stay on permanently after three months.

“I was at the church when Covid hit and shut everything down,” Clardy said. “That was different – being a new pastor trying to get to know your people and now you can’t because you can’t even get to their houses.”

The church didn’t meet in person for two months, opting instead for online services. They then shifted to drive-in services for a month before resuming in-person meetings in the summer of 2020.

Soon afterwards, Clardy had a visit from Mark Thornton, the pastor of Community of Grace Church in the area.

“Mark came by one day, introduced himself, and told me a little bit about himself and his story, his life and his ministry as pastor of Community of Grace,” Clardy said. “We’d be at associational meetings and we’d talk about theology, the church, things of that nature. We just became kindred spirits, theologically, biblically... we’re 95% on board with the same stuff. So it’s sort of scary sometimes, like, wow, this guy’s thinking my thoughts. We began to meet for lunch.”

Clardy was aware that First Aberdeen needed revitalization.

The church had experienced fluctuations over the past 15 years, with people leaving the community.

“Providence put Mark in my life,” Clardy said. “He asked, ‘What do you think about Community of Grace joining and our churches becoming one?’” Thornton broached this subject in 2020.

Clardy pointed out that several churches in the Monroe Association had congregations of 20 members or fewer. “Trajectory is the word we’ve been using a lot,” he said. “We were seeing decline everywhere. I’m open to anything that’s biblical and that Christ wants us to do. We want Christ’s Kingdom first. We talked for almost a year. Mark had a connection with a professor at Southern Seminary named Denny Burke.” Burke is a professor of biblical studies at Boyce College, the undergraduate arm of Southern Seminary.

“Aberdeen is a declining community,” Thornton noted. “We’re halfway between Tupelo and Columbus, and there is a lot of racial stress and tension. But I knew God had brought me to Aberdeen.”

Thornton’s previous church went through a split, resulting in about 40 people leaving and forming Community of Grace Church with Thornton as pastor. The church was constituted about 10 months later.

They were given rent-free facilities for worship. However, while the church was growing spiritually, it struggled to reach the lost and the wider community.

Conversations with Burke, who had experience with church mergers, provided valuable insight.

“We were very deliberate when Community of Grace constituted,” Thornton said. “We really began to emphasize meaningful membership, covenant membership, and church discipline. When we talked to Denny, James was in the process of implementing

similar reforms at First Baptist. James had talked to his leaders, and we felt it was best to press pause.”

Burke advised the pastors to align their doctrines and ensure their confession of faith was sound. The two churches adhered to the Baptist Faith and Message of 2000.

“It was clear we needed to pause,” said Clardy. “You’ve always heard that leadership is about making the right decisions in the right way, but it’s also about timing. I needed to be at the church for a while to build equity, to marry and visit and love.

“I brought up the possibility of a merger with our officers, pastors, and deacons, and asked them to pray and seek God’s will,” he added.

In fall of 2022, Clardy experienced a medical incident that resembled a stroke during a service and was out of preaching and teaching for nearly a month.

Thornton suggested his church of about 15 members start attending First Church. He also supplied preaching regularly. “God dictated the timing,” Clardy said.

Relationships were built, and people started inquiring about a merger.

“In February, I also had a health issue,” Thornton said. “They discovered I had a Texas grapefruit-sized mass in my abdomen. It’s non-cancerous, it’s not growing. We’ve known about it for eight months, and they’re just going to leave it. So it was our weakness, our frailty that accelerated the need for us to come together.”

In April, Clardy announced to the church the possibility of merging with Community of Grace. A series of town hall-style meetings ensued.

Speaking about Community of Grace Church, Thornton noted that

“We were grieving. This was not what we’d envisioned when we started 12 years ago. People were crying because something is ending that we love.”

Both men agreed that the whole process had to be transparent. While there were many questions and concerns voiced, when the vote to merge was finally taken, the majority was enough to continue with the merge. The two groups had their first official worship service November 12.

“This was more of an adoption than a classic merger,” said Thornton. “We didn’t create a new thing – this is still First Baptist.”

“We’ve been the talk of the town,” Clardy said. “I’ve been in restaurants and people who don’t know who I am are talking about what we’ve done.”