

First Church, Wiggins, embraces small town community

By Chloe Newton

Staff Writer

Neil Tullos, Senior Pastor of First Church, Wiggins, joined "Around the Table" podcast hosts Tanner Cade, MBCB Director of Communication Services, and Jon Martin, MBCB Chief Strategy Officer. Tullos shared his knowledge on transitioning between pastoral roles and working in a small town church culture.

At sixteen, Neil Tullos had a clear call to ministry from God after being shepherded by his own youth minister. After wearing several different hats in ministry, God revealed to Tullos how ministry callings play out in a variety of ways.

"My assumption was God was calling me to pastor," said Tullos. "I didn't really know God called people to other roles. I knew God called pastors and missionaries. But second chair youth roles and music roles – I just thought that's what someone did. It was really those years at Beulah [Memorial Church], I ended up working alongside those parents and students that God gave me a heart for ministry and redirected my life."

After working in youth ministry for several years, Tullos' wife, Amanda, sensed God moving her husband's life in a different direction. First Church, Wiggins, reached out to Tullos, and he began serving as the Senior Pastor in June, 2022. Transitioning from student ministry to Senior Pastor meant that Tullos would experience a new side of ministry. Adults in the church sought his wisdom and viewed him as an opinion leader.



First Church, Wiggins, Senior Pastor Neil Tullos (right) greets a church member. (Photo credit: First Church, Wiggins)

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Tullos' new role also required an adjustment to the small town of Wiggins, uniquely situated in Stone County between coastal Mississippi and fast-paced Hattiesburg. In the past several years, Wiggins has undergone an increase in population but a decrease in religious affiliation. Ministry efforts are directed towards inviting locals into the church community.

"Wednesday nights are really big here for us, reaching kids and students," said Tullos. "Those types of ministries are really effective. Sunday school still works at First Wiggins. While we are growing as a community, a lot of people have been here for generations, so Sunday morning almost feels like a homecoming in many ways for our people that have been here for a while. One of the things that works for us is just inviting people into a community. You went to high school together, you've grown up together. It makes for an easy ask [for people] to get reconnected. That's a church family."

The sanctuary at First Church, Wiggins, has remained a cultural landmark since it was built in 1958. The community holds a special place in its heart for the room enveloped in stained-glass and filled with fond memories.

"People have not only gathered to worship there," said Tullos. "It's where they had their weddings. They saw their children marry there, and they may have seen their grandchildren marry there. They've seen baptisms take place there, baby dedications there. So not only have they had really significant encounters with the Lord there, it's also just been central to their life. Where they have seen God work in their life is tied to a place. We know the church isn't a place, but the place is really important to them."

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