

Mississippi, Dakota Baptists develop 'revolving door partnership'

By Chloe Newton
Staff Writer

A small, yet growing North Dakota church and Sand Hill Church in Ellisville recently partnered together. The two mission-minded churches have helped one another in reaching the lost in their respective communities.

Ian Harp was called from Northeast Florida in 2023 to pastor a church in Belfield, North Dakota. The congregation of Belfield Church desired to plant other churches. Not long after the new pastor's arrival, he was preaching his first sermon at The Church @ Dickinson, located 20 miles east of Belfield in an old, converted hospital.

Over 1,500 miles southeast, the Mississippi Baptist Convention Board (MBCB) and the North American Mission Board set out to plan future ministry in the Dakotas.

Justin Tyler, chairman of the missions committee for Sand Hill Church in Ellisville, participated in the vision trip and connected with Harp. Both leaders wanted to serve the other, thus a partnership was born.

From the beginning, Harp wanted to infuse the church plant with a Matthew 28:19 mindset. Being the head of missions mobilization for the Dakota Baptist Convention, Harp looked to connect with another church to serve alongside.

"We are all called to go. We have to be a part of the Kingdom's growth too. That was one of the things that I was adamant about during that vision tour was you're (Mississippi)

not just coming here. I want a revolving door partnership. We can minister together, we can learn from you, and you can learn from us. Because ultimately it's about the church, which is His church. It's not about The Church @ Dickinson, Belfield Baptist, or Sand Hill Baptist. It's about the kingdom," Harp said.

"It's always better to have more hands to help do the things. You constantly learn when you make partnerships with people in different contexts and learn how to do ministry differently," Tyler said.

Tyler and a group from Sand Hill Church traveled to North Dakota. While in Dickinson, the group engaged the community and experienced a different spiritual culture. It was an opportunity for the group to learn how ministry takes shape in a place where there are not churches on every corner.

"Most of the people we met have been hurt by churches, whether it's Lutheran, Catholic, Orthodox. Actually, there's a larger Orthodox population up there than I thought it would be... We also saw a lot of positive reactions with some people that had experienced Southern Baptist churches in the past, and were happy about the fact that there's going to be one in Dickinson," Tyler said.

In return, seven members from The Church @ Dickinson, including Harp and his family, helped with fair ministry at the South Mississippi Fair. The group's arrival occurred after a shooting, which took place on Saturday, Oct. 19. Despite the setback, the team joyfully came and participated in the Kingdom work, using the tragedy as a bridge to talk about the Gospel.

"And the one thing that I noticed with our people was, if something were to happen and we're doing God's work, what else would you want to be doing? I mean, I've got my 18-year-old daughter. She never batted an eye. She was like, 'let's go.'

It gave me two opportunities to share Jesus with people," Harp said.

The interstate cooperation has brought encouragement to both church bodies, probing hearts to desire being involved in missions.

"One of the biggest encouragements is seeing some of the older people in our church going on a trip like this. This is one of the first mission trips where it's engaging with the community, so [the church body] really enjoyed that," Tyler said.

"I'm thankful for the state of Mississippi and the hospitality. I'm thankful for Chad McCord (MBCB director of Missions Mobilization) because he's the one that kind of really began this partnership," Harp said.