

Church of Nazarene pastor now looking for souls, not soles

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Rev. Robert Wheeler likes to joke that used to be in the business of selling soles and is now in the business of saving souls.

Wheeler has served as pastor at the Crescent City Church of the Nazarene for 18 years and will help usher in its 75th anniversary on Friday with a chili cook-off.

Wheeler said everyone is invited to attend the event, which starts at 5 p.m. at 224 F St., and they can even submit their own chili recipe for best-of judging. Church members regularly submit family recipes. “One year, I added wheat berry. I finished in last place. It didn’t work out,” Wheeler said.

What has worked out is the increase in attendance and membership at the Crescent City Church of the Nazarene since Wheeler and his wife, Lynn, arrived in 2011.

Longtime member Mel Thomas, 77, said the church today averages right around 50 who regularly attend Sunday service, with about 30 being full-time members.

“When you came in as pastor, we only had about 10 to 15 attending at that point. And they haven’t been drawn to you, they’ve been drawn to me. You see, they love us oldtimers,” Thomas joked to Wheeler.

Wheeler, 67, said that before he was called to be a pastor, he was a salesman for most of his life. He owned a furniture store for 10 years, sold Yellow Page and newspaper advertising, cars and, yes, shoes. “You name it, I sold it,” Wheeler said.

He said that by 1999, although he and his wife were living comfortably successful lives, he also felt an emptiness in his heart. “We had great jobs, were members of the country club, had a beautiful home. But we felt like we had nothing. We were poor in spirit,” he recalled.

So, they tried going back to church to fill that void. Lynn was Roman Catholic, he was Pentecostal, but neither felt comfortable in the other’s church, so they gave up and led secular lifestyles.

Then they found the Church of the Nazarene in San Ramon, Calif., in the Bay Area. Wheeler recalls a sermon about holiness. “I really liked that message about being all in with God,” he said.

While his wife committed first to going “all in” with the church’s activities, Wheeler said it took him a few more years before he listened to God’s call to be ordained.

His first assignment offered was Crescent City’s Church of the Nazarene. But even after guest preaching there in 2010, he was uncertain. “I told my wife, no way are we going. It’s too rainy, too cold, too far from family.”

But on the long drive back to the Bay Area, he warmed up to the idea. “I told her then we’d only go if the membership gave us a unanimous vote to be their pastor,” he said. “The district superintendent called the next day and said, ‘You know, this hardly ever happens. But they voted unanimously. They want you up there.’”

Wheeler said he was unable to ignore so many signs from God that Crescent City was part of his calling. “Not everyone is called to be a pastor, but you’re called to do something, to be faithful,” Wheeler said.

“That’s why this church has lasted so long,” added Thomas, who has been a member since he joined in 1956 with his mother when he was in the eighth grade, just 12 years after the church was founded.

“People that have been here have laid the groundwork. They have been faithful, and the ones that came in behind have been faithful.”

Wheeler said the Nazarene Church’s history came out of the Methodist movement of the 20th Century, when it split off from them around 1908.

“We were the original ‘Holy Rollers,’” Wheeler said.

He said the Church of the Nazarene actually shares more in common than not with Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal and Foursquare churches.

“We have pastor meetings and we pray together, a community Good Friday service, for many years long before I got here, where six to 10 churches participate in the service,” Wheeler said.

He added that the Church of the Nazarene works hand-in-hand with many of the other churches in town simply because they’re fellow Christians. But if someone is uncertain about which to join? “We’re friendly. Everybody that stays, came in a visitor.

“I’ve never had a church like this. They’re greeted going in the church, greeted going out of the church. To me, that’s basically it. We’re such a friendly group of people, we’re fellowshiping with everyone,” he said.

“You’re going to experience the love of Christ through the people in this church.”