

Philippians 1:3-6
August 14, 2011

Hampton Baptist
Charles R. Smith

Dear HBC,

In my tenure as pastor of Hampton Baptist Church, I have written many letters. Some have been letters of recommendation for your children to enter college or gain scholarships; I have written other letters of recommendation for a variety of honors, positions, or new jobs. I have also written letters as sermons: some for baptismal candidates; some for deacon ordinations; some even for Parent-Child-Church Dedication Services. But this letter comes with a much different message and context. Today I come to eulogize our time together; it is time to bury my pastorate at Hampton Baptist Church. So, much like I have attempted to do in eulogies for church members, today, I would like to highlight our time together.

I certainly cannot address this tenure without mentioning the context into which I was called. Chester Brown had been pastor for 39 years; his predecessor John Garber had served for 37 years. As a young student at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Chester had been introduced to Hampton Baptist as a summer youth minister. Upon his graduation, he was called as Associate Pastor of this church.

A seamless transition ushered Chester from Associate Pastor to the position of Pastor. On December 31, 1961, he was Associate Pastor; on January 1, 1962, Chester became pastor. The interim process was a foreign concept to many at Hampton Baptist when Chester retired in 2001.

Just more than eight years ago, in early August 2003, Jennifer and I entered Hampton for the first time; that was the date of my first interview. I had been exchanging emails and phone calls with Paul Garber for the previous three weeks. Former professors of Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, Dan Bagby and Cecil Sherman, along with President Tom Graves, had sent my resume to your Pastor Search Committee.

My trial sermon weekend was a whirlwind experience. On Thursday evening, November 6, we enjoyed a dessert fellowship with the Pastor Search Committee, staff, and spouses. Friday morning was a breakfast with the staff; Friday afternoon included a reception at Tom Matthews' home with those in the music ministry; and on Friday night, there was a catered dinner at the Radisson for all deacons and spouses. The next morning, we began with breakfast with the youth and parents at Jay Russ' home; tea with the senior adults in the afternoon, and a covered dish supper for the congregation that night.

On November 9, 2003, I preached my trial sermon after leading a Sunday School Assembly for the entire congregation. The text of the sermon was Matthew 25, when Jesus discussed the last judgment in separating the sheep from the goats. It is the familiar passage that speaks of ministering to the least of these who are hungry, thirsty, in need of clothing, or imprisoned. Preaching about missions for a trial sermon intended to highlight my own personal interest. After the affirmative vote, we then adjourned to a reception which was already planned.

We are grateful to the Pastor Search Committee who put their reputations on the line by bringing us here: Chairman Paul Garber, Vice-chair Jane Austin, Nancy Forbes, Becky Glass, Frank Ranson, Steve Sandford, and Billy Trimble.

On the morning of December 31, 2003, we arrived at our new home. When we moved here, Ally was 11 and entered the sixth grade at Jones Magnet Middle School. Samuel was 8 and entered Armstrong Fundamental Elementary School. Jennifer began her employment at the Peninsula Pastoral Counseling Center in March.

The staff included Bill Hurt, who retired on his 70th birthday April 30, 2005 after 43 years of service as Minister of Education/Administration; Jay Russ, who resigned in October 2004 after 19 years and 9 months as Associate Pastor to become pastor of Stevens Memorial Baptist Church in Newport News; Sandra Bundick, who retired in December 2004 after serving as Administrative Assistant for 18 years; and Tom Matthews, who had been serving as Minister of Music/Organist since 1999.

You provided me with an elaborate Installation Service, which many of my colleagues still reference as the most dignified Installation Service they had ever attended. At the reception, Margaret Hatchett told me, "I am 84-years-old this year, and you are only my third pastor." I invited my dear friend and mentor Cecil Sherman to be the preacher for that afternoon service. That day he said, "If you stay twenty-five years here, they'll still consider you a short-timer." I spoke with him often about our church and sought his advice and counsel regularly. He continued to be my confidant until his death in 2010.

Also serving during my tenure include Administrative Assistants Angeli Chesson, Kacie Smith, and Sandra Bundick who came out of retirement to work with me for free for three months; Dan Tatum as Minister of Congregational Life; Becky Glass as Interim Associate Pastor of Education and Pastoral Care; my wife Jennifer who served as Interim Associate Pastor of Youth and Missions. David Crawford became our church's Sexton in 2006; Chris Kurtz began his service as Associate Pastor in August 2008; Crystal Caskie officially began her service as our Administrative Assistant in February 2009.

In my first year, I asked Mike Haywood to be the Team Leader to create a church-wide summer mission project. Virginia Baptists had entered a partnership with the Caribbean Baptist Fellowship, and I asked Mike to begin networking with his contacts. In July 2005, 45 people from HBC prayed away Hurricane Emily and went to Belize for a life-changing mission trip. Because of remarkable fund-raising efforts and tremendous congregational support, families of four paid \$250 to serve for the entire eight-day trip. That partnership has continued with some of our members returning to Belize; Pastor Lloyd Stanford coming to Hampton; the purchase of a school bus that was driven from here to Belize; and our Farm Fresh receipts which have purchased a laptop, printer, and keyboard for the ministry there.

Additional church-wide mission trips included 49 people offering Hurricane Katrina relief in Gulfport and Pearlinton, Mississippi in 2006; 41 people working in Jefferson City, Tennessee in 2007; 35 individuals went to Washington, D.C. in 2008; 28 went to Raleigh/Durham, N.C. in 2009; and 24 went to Louisville, KY in 2011. I have appreciated the congregational support and enthusiasm for our church-wide summer mission projects. For the past two years, our church met our goal for the Offering of Global Missions through the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. We had fallen short in previous years; the receipts for the offering across our nation have fallen drastically. In a phone conversation back in May with CBF Executive Coordinator Daniel Vestal and Global Missions Coordinator Rob Nash, I was asked to encourage my church to give more this year to the annual Offering. Some of our missionaries may have to be asked to leave the mission field because of lack of funding. I encourage you to continue to ask what was different about the past two years which allowed Hampton Baptist to meet its goal for the Offering for Global Missions; do not let anything compete with this Offering, for without this funding some of the most neglected people groups of the world may never even hear the name Jesus. The missional church concept has been underscored numerous times through these efforts, but also through local missions and ministries.

The growth of our Soup Kitchen ministry has been rewarding. We feed more than 100 people

on the Mondays between Labor Day and Memorial Day. Some are homeless; others could be called "the working poor." I have personally appreciated the networking; the intentional desire to provide nutritional meals; the demeanor and witness of our volunteers; and the financial support that has flooded into this non-budgeted, entirely lay-led ministry.

Perhaps my favorite week of every year was A Night's Welcome. While it has produced stress for many, I enjoyed watching how our church members interacted with homeless people, and how so many participated in making a difference in the lives of our community's homeless. I saw this ministry grow stronger and more viable with every passing year. Positive energy became contagious as serving others became not only rewarding, but also anticipated.

In January 2005, Premises Committee Chairman Chuck Clemens presented a 30+ page paper at a Church Council retreat inviting more scrutiny and attention to our facility. This presentation eventually positioned our church to enter a values, visioning and strategic planning process. After numerous meetings, a Values and Vision Statement was presented and approved in January 2007; the Strategic Plan was rolled out later that spring. The Heating, Ventilation, and Air-conditioning System for the Sanctuary was completely replaced and paid in full before the stock market fell. A Building Fund was established for on-going building concerns.

I have truly enjoyed the opportunity to offer the weekly children's sermons. As somewhat of a kid at heart, I enjoy the conversations during this time of worship and have sought to establish personal relationships with our children. This has resulted in many taking a class I have offered every year for those who have become a Christian or for those thinking about it.

Perhaps my favorite worship services have been those with pastoral care overtones, such as Parent-Child-Church Dedications, where I would walk the aisles of the sanctuary while holding the baby; Deacon Ordination Services; and Baptism/First Communion Services where the new converts are served first and then serve the ministers. I've also had the privilege of being with many of you in the toughest of times for funerals of your spouses, parents, or other relatives.

In these 7.5 years, we welcomed 138 new members, including 43 baptisms. In order to help new members get acclimated, we initiated an Orientation Class called HBC 101. Unfortunately, we also experienced 91 deaths in these 91 ½ months; an additional 56 people transferred or dropped their memberships.

I encouraged financial integrity and transparency. Finance Planning Committee and Deacons trimmed our budgets dramatically during the global economic downturn so that we would/could live within our means. While I preached an annual stewardship sermon before we submitted our pledge cards, I also addressed our finances in sermons, newsletter articles, and meetings.

This letter is more than a conveying of facts and accomplishments. I wanted this letter to be "a story of us." Over and over, time and time again, I have hoped to convey that our relationship with Jesus Christ is to be our ultimate allegiance. I have taken a long stroll down memory lane, but detailing events in this letter is more than a historical record for me. Each event and circumstance has to do with individuals. In each full-color memory that I have recalled in the writing of this letter, there are faces.

We are not leaving, because we don't love you. This church is blessed with so many quality,

gifted, good people. We are not leaving so we can be closer to family. The choice to leave has nothing to do with you or my family; the choice has everything to do with following what we feel is God's call.

In our scripture today, Paul was writing his Epistle to the Church at Philippi. He wanted them to know how thankful he was for them. The Philippian church took good care of Paul, and he had many close friends there. Just as Paul wrote to the Philippians, I share those same words for you: "I thank my God for every remembrance of you, always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." God began a good work in the Hampton Baptist Church long before my family ever arrived, and God will continue that good work in you.

I do not work for Hampton Baptist Church; instead, I am a servant of the Kingdom of God. Hampton Baptist happens to be the branch or franchise where I have been assigned. Whether I am assigned to Hampton Baptist or another place is not my decision. I simply want to serve well in the Kingdom of God.

I was fortunate to serve as pastor of Kenbridge Baptist for almost 10 years; I loved those people. I was very happy there. I have been pastor of Hampton Baptist for 7.5 years, and while I love you, the people of Hampton Baptist, my loyalty is always going to be the Kingdom of God. My boss (the owner of the corporation) transferred me from Kenbridge to Hampton, and now my boss is transferring me to Madison Baptist Church. I simply want to serve where God wants me, which will always trump any unhappiness or happiness. While there is a by-product for me to be close to family in moving to Georgia, the primary reason we are moving is because we are called to Madison Baptist Church. The draw has more to do with God's call than personal preference or geography.

I have attempted to live a genuine, authentic Christianity, to be the individual and pastor whom God created me to be. I have tried, as author Parker Palmer wrote, to let my life speak. I encourage you to do the same. Focus on what lasts and in whose Kingdom we serve. Look at the big picture. Seek to serve God the very best way that you can, no matter what is transpiring around you. My hope and prayer is that you always place Jesus Christ as your number one priority. Thank you for the opportunity to serve alongside you for these 7.5 years. Know that we appreciate you, that we love you, and that we are going to miss you.

Love,

Charles