Two Roanoke churches merge to reach their community

On January 3, Belmont Baptist Church in Roanoke will get a lot of new members after a special worship and communion service. Current members of Renovation, a three-year-old congregation, will walk down the aisle at the 115-year-old church as the two congregations merge into one.

About three years ago, Renovation grew as a congregation after a Salem church did missions work with young people in southeast Roanoke. They found much poverty, illness, and the effects of drug addiction and abuse, which led them to expand their weekend assistance and evolve into a church, according to Rev. Jon Laughinghouse, pastor of Renovation. Its members met in a house, then a rescue mission, and finally began leasing space at Belmont for its Sunday evening services when membership reached about 100.

Belmont, a congregation down to about 135 active members (compared to over 1,000 in the 1950s), was exploring ways to grow. Between an aging congregation and loss of members who moved from the area, the church faced challenges in being effective in its community and wanted to make a change.

Rev. Joe Elmore, pastor of Belmont, and Laughinghouse agree that the two congregations complement each other. Shortly after Renovation started leasing space from Belmont, a transition team of members from both churches began working toward a merger.
“The younger congregation encouraged us to look outside the box,” said Elmore, adding that a generational gap existed as older Belmont members began dying or moving away. Very few Belmont members still live in southeast Roanoke. Renovation, with its contemporary services and a “come as you are” atmosphere, is more representative of the low- and middle-income and middle-aged and older residents in the community surrounding Belmont Baptist Church.

Elmore, who came to Belmont in June 2014, and Laughinghouse will share preaching and other ministerial duties as the churches consolidate services and mission projects such as clothing closets and feeding programs.

In communications to members of both churches, Laughinghouse and Elmore wrote: “This is a time of great joy and celebration as God is at work among us and as we get to witness changed lives both in our community and right here in our pews! God’s work is springing up; he is making a way where there seems to be no way. We are so glad to be on this journey together and we look forward to what is ahead!”

This article was compiled from a previously published article, “Belmont Baptist, Renovation Church Prepare for Merger” by Joanne Poindexter, Roanoke Times, Friday, Nov. 6, 2015.