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Planting a New Church in Lafayette

By Sophie Braccini



Pastor Ron and children of supporters during communion Photo Sophie Braccini

It's not everyday that someone sets out to start a new church. It takes faith and a solid business plan, and some financial backing. A young Lafayette family, Pastor Ronald Johnson, his wife Kimberley and 6-year old Micah, are embarking on this adventure. On March 14, supported by little more than their faith, they will celebrate the grand opening of a new non-denominational Christian church, named Refuge Community Church, at Veterans Memorial Building, 3780 Mt Diablo Boulevard in Lafayette.

Johnson thinks of himself as an ordinary man. As a teenager, playing hockey in a church group in Richmond, he heard a Youth Pastor talk. "He said that often people know a lot of things about the Bible, but they do not have a real relationship with God," remembers Johnson, "that sentence struck me; since then God has never left me, and I got increasingly excited about talking about Him." Johnson started out as a Youth Pastor at the Valley Bible Church in Hercules. "That is where I met the man who most influenced me, Pastor Phil Howard," he said. Listening to Howard, Johnson understood that focusing on things that were not good enough within himself was not relevant; "It is not about you," said Howard, and Johnson says he realized that what was important was to let God work through him.

Johnson says he then went back to school, first earning an undergraduate degree in Business and then a Master of Divinity through the Master's Seminary in Sun Valley, California. When he came back to the Bay Area, he looked for the right opportunity to start a church. "I learned that in Lafayette many churches have been established for a long time, but that there might be room for a congregation focusing on young families like ourselves."

Since the Johnsons made their decision, their path has been smooth. They sold their house in Hercules, and the equity provided them the little security they needed to start their venture. They rented a residence in Lafayette and found a place to open their church.

"The people (at the Veteran's Memorial Building) have been very supportive," said Johnson, "renting the facility on Sunday morning is not too expensive, and they've made a deal with us so we can have a room for the children."

Outside the community, they have been encouraged by Converge PacWest, a network of 75 autonomous churches that work together to start and strengthen Christian churches. "Both Ron and his wife have an authentic love for God and for people," says Paul Root, Associate Minister of Church Planting, "Ron has an incredible wealth of experience in bringing human, material, and spiritual resources together to serve under resourced people in our community. As he teaches the Bible, he's found that its message truly transforms peoples' lives, and gets people involved in serving people in need."

The Johnsons have started getting the word out about their work. They launched their web site in January at www.refugecommunity.org. It includes a vlog (video log) that interested parties posted on the progress of the church. Johnson said that more than 120 people have already joined the church's fan page on Facebook. "My cousin says that social media is word of mouth on steroids," says the Pastor, for whom these new ways of communicating are totally relevant for a modern church.

They have also started attending community meetings, such as those of the Lafayette Chamber of Commerce, and as a result people and businesses interested in the project have offered their help: Yogurt Shack has committed to offering free frozen yogurt immediately following the grand opening service, Lynds Photography will be photographing the event for next to nothing, and a local non-profit gave about \$500 worth of new toys to help stock the nursery.

"This local enthusiasm provides a glimpse of just some of the many things God has already done for and through Refuge," says Pastor Ron, "and we haven't opened our doors for public worship services yet."

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