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# Faith

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## Holding onto the 'Rock'

# Heritage to celebrate with note-burning

By Dee Ann Campbell  
The Choctaw Sun

GILBERTOWN – “We acted on faith that God would see this through,” says Rev. Clovis Lewis, “and He has.”

For the members of Heritage Church of God in Gilbertown, the past 10 years have been a walk of faith. They have been evidence of that faith in action, and they have been a testament that God was at work in their church and in their community.

On Sunday, members will gather to celebrate the culmination of a vision that began in their hearts and minds a decade ago. It was a dream that included a small Barrytown church, a rock, an old school, and faith that God would provide.

In the early 1990's, the members of Barrytown Church of God felt God's guidance that it was time for a building project. But that project would not just mean a new facility. It would mean a move to a new location several miles away.

“In 1991, we decided to make the transition. We knew we would be relocating,” says Lewis, “and we wanted it to be in Gilbertown.”

Although the church sought property in the area for awhile, none was available. But in 1994, an unexpected door opened when the former Gilbertown Elementary School burned.

“When the school burned and they decided to sell the property, we decided to bid on it,” he says. “We just felt like this was the place God had for us.”

“From the onset, I've never seen a group more unified,” he continues. “We were together throughout this, and it was unanimous when we voted to purchase the property. It was unbelievable to see the unity and cooperation of the people

to work together on this project.”

The church submitted a bid to the Board of Education for the property and waited for an answer. In the meantime, church members gathered on Sunday afternoon for prayer on the property site to ask that God's will be done.

“There was a large circle of people there, and I told them to pick up something tangible to hold onto and pray that if it was God's will that we have the property, it would come to pass,” Lewis recalls. “Some picked up rocks, some got bags of dirt. I thought that if we did not get the property we would all bring back what we had taken and put it back here.”

On the day of the bid opening, a crowd of church members turned out to hear the result. But with several other bids on the table, it was unclear what that result would be.

“Just before they opened the bids, I realized I had not brought back my rock that I had taken,” Lewis says. “But a still, small voice said, ‘Don't worry, you won't need it.’”

When the bids were opened, the church was the high bidder for the nearly 20 acres of property in the heart of Gilbertown.

With membership at the former facility topping out at about 125, Lewis says that the decision to build a new church in Gilbertown was one that they didn't take lightly. But it was one that they felt was what God wanted them to do.

“The Lord gave us the assurance that there would be growth,” Lewis says. “We believe that it was His mission.”

“This is really a miracle from God,” adds church member Lavern Adams. “We did not outgrow our other facility. But we just felt like this move was what we needed to do.”



Choctaw Sun photo by Dee Ann Campbell  
Rev. and Mrs. Clovis Lewis stand inside the sanctuary of Heritage Church of God holding a rock that was taken from the property where the church was built 10 years ago.

Plans were drawn up to build a large, bi-level facility that would hold their present congregation with ample room to grow – and room for the community to use the facility for programs and events that would draw hundreds.

The unity that was present at the onset of the project continued throughout construction. Church members not only supported the project verbally, several large financial donations were made to the project, and many of the members also gave of their time to help with the actual construction of the building.

“Some church members worked on their off-days, on weekends –

whenever they could be here,” Lewis says. “There were some who were here 6 days a week through the whole project.”

In particular, Lewis touts the support of the elder members of the church during the building of the new facility.

“The elderly people were the key to this,” he says. “One of our oldest members who remembered when the other church building was built said that the Lord had provided a way back then, and he would now.”

“There was hardly a day when Brother Jack Adams wasn't here during the construction,” adds Rev. Lewis' wife Liz. “He

would bring his lawn chair and sit everyday while they were working.”

On the first Sunday in May, 1997, the church moved into their new 30,000 sq. ft. facility in Gilbertown. Since that day, the ministry of the church has flourished. Membership now stands at about 200, with a fluctuation of attendance from Sunday to Sunday.

But, Lewis emphasizes, the large building is not merely about bringing in large numbers of people just to fill the pews. Rather, it is about offering a place for worship so that God can work through them.

Today, the church has a wide range of ministries for all ages, from Sunday School to youth activities to a dynamic music ministry that is known through the county. The 35-member choir, led by Randy and Elaine McKee, is a focal point of the ministry, bringing in unparalleled talent to the church and the community.

From the beginning, Lewis says, the church hoped that the new facility would not only serve the church members themselves but also be a gathering place for the community as a whole.

“It was never supposed to be just for our congregation,” says music minister Randy McKee. “Part of the vision was for this church to be used by the community, and it has been.”

Through the years, the building has been used for programs that have drawn in people from all parts of the county and beyond. From Relay for Life events to large-scale children's programs and youth events to community-wide interdenominational worship services to non-church related events, the building has been that focal point for the community that its members envisioned a decade ago.

To bring that vision to fruition, the church had

borrowed a total of \$750,000 for the purchase of the property and the construction of the facility. Walking on faith, they had opted to take out a balloon note with a bulk payment due after 5 years.

When that 5 years was over, the church was able to refinance the remaining balance at low interest rates and agreed to pay a higher payment than before in order to pay the debt off early.

This week, the church is doing just that. After 10 years, Heritage will be celebrating the end of their debt on the building. On Sunday morning, beginning at 10 a.m., the church will hold a special note-burning ceremony in celebration of the event.

The celebration, say church members, is not about what they have done, or about the large facility that they now enjoy. Rather, it is a celebration of what God has done within his church.

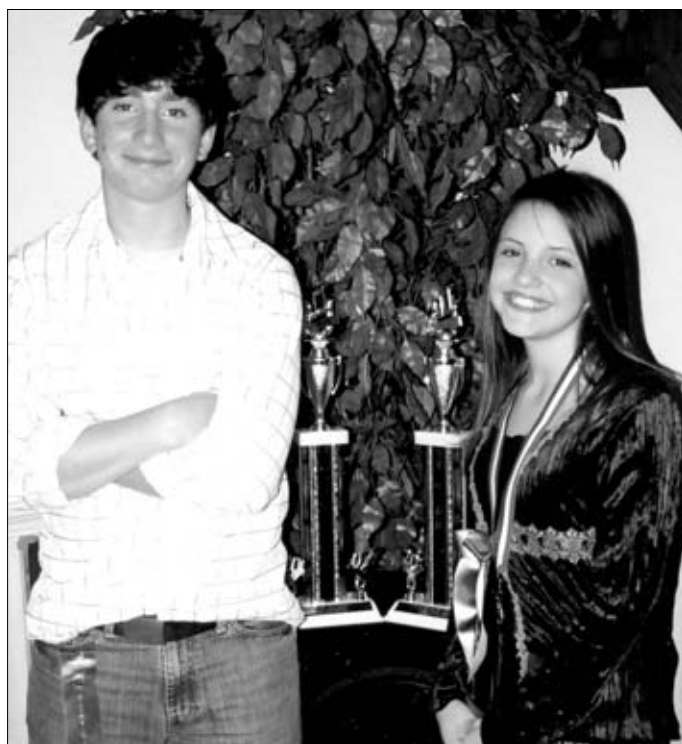
“This is not about us,” Lewis says. “This is about God and what He had done.”

The note-burning, says Lewis, will not be the end of building projects at Heritage. The gymnasium remains unfinished and other renovations and projects are also in the works.

But the pastor adds that the most vital project the Lord has given them to do today is to bring people to the church in order to bring them to Christ.

“We've still got our work to do,” says Lewis. “There are more unchurched people in this county than ever. Our greatest challenge is ahead. Our goal is to fill this place up.”

“There was never a doubt that God would provide a way for us to pay for this building,” he adds, holding on to the small rock he had taken from the property 10 years ago. “This is His church. He gets all the glory for it.”



AT LEFT: Zack Phillips and Ashton Lewis represented Heritage Church of God at the Alabama Regional Junior/Teen Talent Competition in Mobile. Both brought home winning trophies.

Submitted photo

## Two Heritage youth win at Alabama Regional Jr/Teen Talent competition

GILBERTOWN – Two youth from Heritage Church of God in Gilbertown took top honors at the denomination's Southwest Alabama Regional Junior/Teen Talent competition. On Saturday, March 3, Ashton Lewis and Zack Phillips traveled to Mobile to compete in their respective divisions for the event.

Ashton competed in the Female Vocal Solo Junior Division, bringing home the Winner's Trophy and a Superior Score Medallion.

Ashton, who is the 12-year-old daughter of Dwight and Renee Lewis of Silas, will travel to Oasis of Praise in Bessemer on March 24 to compete in the state competition.

Zack competed in the Male Vocal Solo Teen Divi-

sion and was awarded the Winner's Trophy. Since the teen divisions competed at the Regional Level only this year, Zack will not compete at state level. But winners in his

division will be able to advance to the state level next year.

Zack is the 14-year-old son of Tony and Robin Phillips of Gilbertown.

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