

## Interim pastor hopes to revive Weare Bible Baptist Church

*By SUSAN DOUCET / Monitor staff*

When the Rev. Cal Fuller and his wife, Melba, arrived in Weare in June, they were welcomed by the entire congregation of the Weare Bible Baptist Church. But that greeting party was a small one, because the congregation was just two people.

“We help churches by coming in and being an interim pastor,” Fuller said. “Usually it takes about a year (to) build the congregation back up.”

Since Fuller’s arrival, the size of the congregation has increased exponentially. On Sunday, 23 people came to a service. By June, he hopes to have a congregation of 50.

Fuller is the founder of Winning New England for Eternity, a ministry that assists struggling churches by providing an interim pastor, helping pastors find churches, and preaching at conferences and special services. Fuller started his ministry in 2005, after resigning as pastor of Victory Baptist Church in Londonderry, which he founded in 1980.

“I’ve been the pastor of eight churches in the last eight years,” he said.

Choosing this church to dedicate a year to was not a simple decision for Fuller.

“I prayed about three months on this one because I knew that (it) was down to just a couple of people,” he said. “But there’s life now. People are happy, laughing. There’s a lot of singing.”

Mike Mudge, who has lived in Weare for most of his life, said he has attended the nearly 200-year-old church “off and on” since the 1970s. He said he’s back for good this time.

“They’ve got a new pastor that’s lighting the church on fire,” Mudge said. “People just seem to be a lot happier toward the church and toward their own faith.”

Fuller and church members are trying to inform the community of his mission by going door to door, distributing service cards and sharing information on Weare’s public access channel.

The building on North Stark Highway can seat about 170 people. And at one time, the church didn’t have enough space for its congregation.

“Back in the ’70s, there was Sundays where this place was full and they had to put folding chairs out here,” Mudge said. “For one reason or another, it just dwindled and dwindled and dwindled. . . . We’re going to get it back hopefully.”

The congregation has been small for a few years. Jennifer Bohl, who has also attended the church off and on since the 1970s, said that for the past five years, one to three people were at the weekly services. But services were always held, no matter how many congregants there were, she said.

The Weare Bible Baptist Church is one of two Baptist churches in town. There are five or six churches of various denominations in the town of about 9,800 people.

The Rev. Andrew Dean is the pastor at Village Chapel Baptist Church on Twin Bridge Road, about 6 miles from Fuller's church.

Village Chapel Baptist Church, founded in 2002, has a congregation of about 115, Dean said.

"I've had more conversations with Pastor Fuller in the past two weeks than I ever had with the previous pastor," he said.

The Rev. Lee Quimby was the previous pastor at Weare Bible Baptist Church, where he preached for about three decades. Quimby suffered a stroke last year but kept preaching until this spring, when a former congregant called Fuller looking for help.

By June, Fuller hopes to have a permanent pastor at the church.

"We'll bring in a young man, wife, children. . . . (someone who has) the energy," he said. "And then after that, after this one gets settled, we'll move on, find another one."

Cal and Melba Fuller, who have been married for 50 years, live in Hudson and only travel to churches within three hours of their home.

In January 2011, they arrived at Bryant Pond Baptist Church in Bryant Pond, Maine. When Fuller first began preaching there, between 35 and 45 people came to worship on an average Sunday. The Rev. Matthew Jones succeeded Fuller in November 2011, and the congregation has grown to 50, sometimes up to 60.

"The church really does seem to be doing really well," he said.

Fuller first met Jones in 2008 at Church Hill Baptist Church in Augusta, Maine, before Jones was a preacher.

"That first day I met him . . . he looked at me after the service and said, 'God wants you to be a preacher,' " Jones said. "He doesn't even remember saying it."

One of the churches Fuller recently worked at was Twin Mountain Baptist Church in Twin Mountain, a community within the town of Carroll. Fuller brought the Rev. Fred Laughman to the congregation of about 40 or 50 in 2012.

“They were without a pastor for a little,” Laughman said. “It certainly is a needed ministry.”

In its nine-year history, Fuller said Winning New England for Eternity has only had success.

“Every pastor that we dealt with is still there,” Fuller said. “We have not lost any ground we’ve gained.”

If Fuller were not able to increase the congregation of a church as much as he hoped, he would be willing to accept that.

“I’ve not had to have that experience yet,” he said. “But it could be, if that’s God’s will.”

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