Dr. Joel Jenkins to leave 1st Baptist

By Rose Post

Dr. Joel Jenkins, pastor of First Baptist Church since June 7, 1987, has resigned to accept the pulpit of First Baptist Church in Charlottesville, Va. His resignation becomes effective Dec. 31, and he assumes his new duties in Charlottesville the following day.

His new church, with a total membership of over 2,000 compared with 1,500 to 1,600 here, has been without a senior minister for about two years.

One of his first duties there will be to help fill two vacancies—those of associate pastor and director of children's ministries—to bring the ministerial staff to six. First Baptist in Salisbury has four.

But overall, Jenkins says, the church is comparable with the church here and he was not looking for a move.

"God has truly blessed us to allow us to serve with the First Baptist family during this time," he wrote in a letter of resignation to the congregation. "Without seeking any such move, God has clearly revealed that a move for us is indeed appropriate at this time."

"We really have loved Salisbury," he told The Post today. "We've been here 5½ years and we love it here. It's a great community, a great church."

The Charlottesville church, he said, approached him during the summer and made several other contacts.

"And I said I would at least pray about it," he said, and he felt he had to "at least go up and discuss their situation. The more I talked, the more I became convinced that was what I needed to do.

"I feel the time has come for me to be involved in a new challenge, and I'm certain the church here will move to ever greater heights."

"It's just been amazing the kind of activity that I have seen in this particular church in 5½ years. These people do anything you ask them to do and more."

Though he will begin work in Charlottesville in January, the family won't leave Salisbury immediately.

"We'll have to sell our house here," he said. "Before my wife and everybody will totally make the break." A "For Sale" sign has just gone up on their home at 105 Sharon Court in Corbin Hills and they have been offered the use of a furnished house there for six weeks or so.

During his time here Jenkins has been active in Rowan Helping Ministries and served on the search committee which brought Dianne Scott here as its executive director.

He has also served with the Family Abuse Crisis Council, worked with the local ministerial community and is a former member of the Salisbury Rotary Club.

Jenkins came to Salisbury from the First Baptist Church of Kings Mountain and had also served pastorates at Pleasant Ridge Baptist Church in Shelby and Momeyer Baptist Church in Nashville, N.C.

He received his bachelor's degree in 1972 from Gardner-Webb College in Boiling Springs, a master of divinity degree in 1975 from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary at Wake Forest, and a doctor of ministry degree from Drew University Theological School in Madison, N.J., in 1972.

He has been active in the Baptist State Convention and in the North Roanoke Baptist Association when he was in that area.

He and his wife, Donna, have three children, Joy, Jay and Jennifer.
KINGS MOUNTAIN — The Rev. Joel P. Jenkins Jr. has wrestled with the notions of commitment and departure more than once lately.

Last month, Dr. Jenkins, 37, announced his decision to resign as pastor of First Baptist Church, Kings Mountain, and accept the call to become pastor of First Baptist Church, Salisbury.

His last day preaching in Kings Mountain is Sunday.

As a person who values duty and devotion, Jenkins had some trouble with the idea of leaving the church that has been his home for the past four years.

“I have mixed feelings about leaving Cleveland County,” Jenkins said in an interview recently. “The people in this church have been very generous and loving. I thought when I came here that I’d be here for the long term. This particular move — I did not seek it.”

Indeed, Jenkins not only wasn’t looking for a new pastorate, it was the furthest thing from his mind when a search committee from the Salisbury church first approached him about the position in January.

Kings Mountain First Baptist Church was in the midst of a long-term capital gifts fund-raising program called “Continuing the Vision.” Jenkins was too busy to consider leaving.

“I said I couldn’t be considered until April or May, thinking they wouldn’t be back,” said Jenkins. Three months later, however, the committee returned — more convinced than ever that Jenkins was the right minister for their church.

The Rev. John Lawrence, a former pastor of Shelby First Baptist Church and currently the interim pastor at Salisbury First Baptist Church, said although members of the search committee interviewed several ministers, they “never considered anyone but Joel, really.”

Dr. Lawrence described the Salisbury church as a larger version of Kings Mountain First Baptist Church. “They have pretty much the same style,” he said.

The church’s former pastor, Fenton Moorehead, left last June to become the...
Jenkins leaves Kings

“Joel is a very creative person,” said Borders. “I’m constantly amazed at the amount of creative energy he has, apparently without any undue stress.”

Jenkins describes his ministry as “people-oriented and people-based,” taking its cue from the depiction of Jesus’ life in the New Testament. He quotes D.T. Niles, an Indian theologian, in describing his ministerial philosophy: “One beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.”

A native of Greenville, S.C., Jenkins is a third-generation preacher. His grandfather, John Henry Jenkins, was a Baptist minister in rural South Carolina for 40 years. His father, Joel P. Jenkins Sr., was pastor of New Hope Baptist Church in Earl, among others.

The senior Jenkins and his wife, Joyce, are still at it, ministering to American military personnel and their families in the Azores, a chain of islands off the coast of Portugal.

Speaking of his family’s legacy in the ministry, Jenkins said, “I think that influence has been very positive on my life. I think it prepared me and gave me some advantages growing up in a pastor’s home.”

Like most other preachers’ children, however, Jenkins went through a period in which the ministry was the last thing he wanted to do. “I saw him (Joel Jenkins Sr.) leave home too often,” he said. “I saw the stress.”

As a ninth-grader at the new Crest High School, Jenkins made it clear to his classmates that, despite what his daddy did, he wasn’t going to be a goody two-shoes.

“I wasn’t a bad kid as such,” he said, “but I did find myself never walking away from a fight and maybe starting a few myself.”

Jenkins’ father was called to the principal’s office more than once to find that his son had gotten into trouble. “I think I was trying to disassociate myself from the typical life of a P.K. (preacher’s kid),” said Jenkins.

Upon entering Gardner-Webb College in 1968, he decided to pursue a career in psychology.

“I thought to myself I would...
Mountain reluctantly go into counseling and do the kinds of things a minister would do without the demands of a minister,” said Jenkins, adding, “It was sort of to soothe my conscience.”

Soon, however, he began to recognize the spirituality that had been stirring within him. In his junior year, Jenkins accepted God’s call to the ministry.

“At that point, I sort of decided there was a direction in my life that was becoming clearer and clearer for me,” he said. “I think when you have a sense of call, it’s almost inevitable.”

Jenkins gives credit to his father for not trying to influence his decision. “He was very careful to not, in any way, try to lead me or push me in that direction,” he said. “I know I would have wondered whether it was his call or God’s.”

In his senior year at Gardner-Webb, Jenkins married Donna Horne of High Point, a nursing student. After graduating in 1972, he entered Southeastern Theological Seminary in Wake Forest.

In 1974, Jenkins became the pastor of a small Baptist church in the Rocky Mount area of the state. In 1979, he returned to Cleveland County to become the pastor of Pleasant Ridge Baptist Church near Lattimore.

In 1982, he began work on his doctorate of ministry through a correspondence program at Drew University in Madison, N.J. In 1983, the congregation of Kings Mountain First Baptist called him to become their pastor.

Since then, the church has gained an additional 150 members for a total of 1,000. Jenkins, however, is quick to deny credit for these statistics. “I just happened to have my hand on the rudder at the time the ship was taking on passengers,” he said.

Jenkins prefers to talk about the ministries that have flourished at the church. These include serving a local Laotian population, the mentally handicapped, out-of-town people who are hospitalized locally, nursing home residents and kidney dialysis patients.

“This is a very ministry-oriented group of people,” he said. “They have a real peace in their hearts. They feel free to help others when they understand what’s most important in their life.”

Jenkins said leaving these people will be the hardest part about moving. He has high hopes, however, that the congregation will become more involved in the church as a result of his departure.

“I hope they’ll become more self-reliant and reliant on God,” he said. “As the church looks within, I think they’ll become less dependent on the church leadership.”

As for his own family, Jenkins expects to form new friendships. “You find what you’re looking for in life,” he said. “We’ll find friendly people in Salisbury, because we’ve found them everywhere we’ve been.”

Looking back on the experience of his father, who came back to New Hope Baptist Church after a time away, Jenkins has not ruled out a return to Kings Mountain First Baptist Church one day.

“You never can tell,” he said. “I don’t want to burn my bridges.”