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ASHEVILLE CITIZEN-TIMES

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C1

New First Baptist minister focuses on unity

By Dale Neal
STAFF WRITER

ASHEVILLE — From his new pulpit at the First Baptist Church, the Rev. Guy Sayles Jr. sees possibilities to minister to the diverse downtown of Asheville.

"Part of what attracted me was the downtown location, and this church's history and heritage is a real strength," said Sayles.

"This church is committed to respond to the needs of the city, and there is a real commitment to being Baptist in a thoughtful and heartfelt way."

"It's all about Jesus and loving people in Jesus' name. I don't think that its possible to communicate that love in an angry, rejecting tone."

REV. GUY SAYLES JR.

Sayles, 44, will be installed as the 21st pastor of First Baptist in a special service at 4 p.m. Sunday.

He succeeds the Rev. Ron Crawford, who answered a call to a church in Florida.

"Being Baptist" to Sayles means freedom of conscience with members and churches responding to God according to their own individual consciences without any intervening creed or hierarchy — a doctrine also known as "the priesthood of the believer."

"That notion of freedom, First Baptist has always tried to promote, and historically it's at the core of a way of being a Baptist Christian."

Sayles has just finished a term on the board of the Co-operative Baptist Fellowship, a group of mainly mod-

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erate Baptists who have distanced themselves from the larger but more conservative Southern Baptist Convention.

The two sides have fought — often bitterly — about how to interpret the Bible, and more recently

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SPECIAL TO THE CITIZEN-TIMES

Rev. Guy Sayles Jr. will be installed as pastor of First Baptist Church in Asheville this Sunday.

MINISTER: Sayles has upbeat message

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over the role of women in the church.

First Baptist, with about 2,500 local members, has been a leading congregation among moderate Baptists, supporting the CBF missions while continuing a formal relationship with the SBC.

But the new pastor has no plans to emphasize the differences between Baptists, the nation's largest Protestant denomination.

"I'm not going to have denominational politics be the focus of the church. It's not healthy, and I don't think the average person who is thinking of making this a new church home would be attracted to a steady diet of denominational controversy."

Instead, Sayles favors "a reasonable, compassionate voice that reaches out in caring ways to people. It's all about Jesus and loving people in Jesus' name. I don't think that's its possible to communicate that love in an angry, rejecting tone."

Sayles says he prepares his sermons using scripture and scholarship as well as "listening to what's going on in contemporary culture." In that culture, Sayles senses a "a real hunger for mystery and transcendence, that

we are surrounded by something larger and greater than ourselves."

Many people may find that hunger satisfied in churches like First Baptist, he said.

He grew up near Atlanta and graduated from Georgia Southern University in 1978. He earned his masters of divinity from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1981, then earned his doctorate from the Candler School of Theology of Emory University.

He has pastored seven churches in Georgia, Maryland and Texas and has served as the senior pastor of Kirkwood Baptist Church in St. Louis since 1996. First Baptist had previously called the Rev. John Hewitt as its pastor from Kirkwood.

Sayles married Anita Plunkett in 1978. She has a B.A. from Agnes Scott College and a Masters degree in Religious Education from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. The Sayles have a daughter, Amanda, born in 1981, who attends Mars Hill College. Their son, Eliot, was born in 1984 and attends Asheville High School.

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