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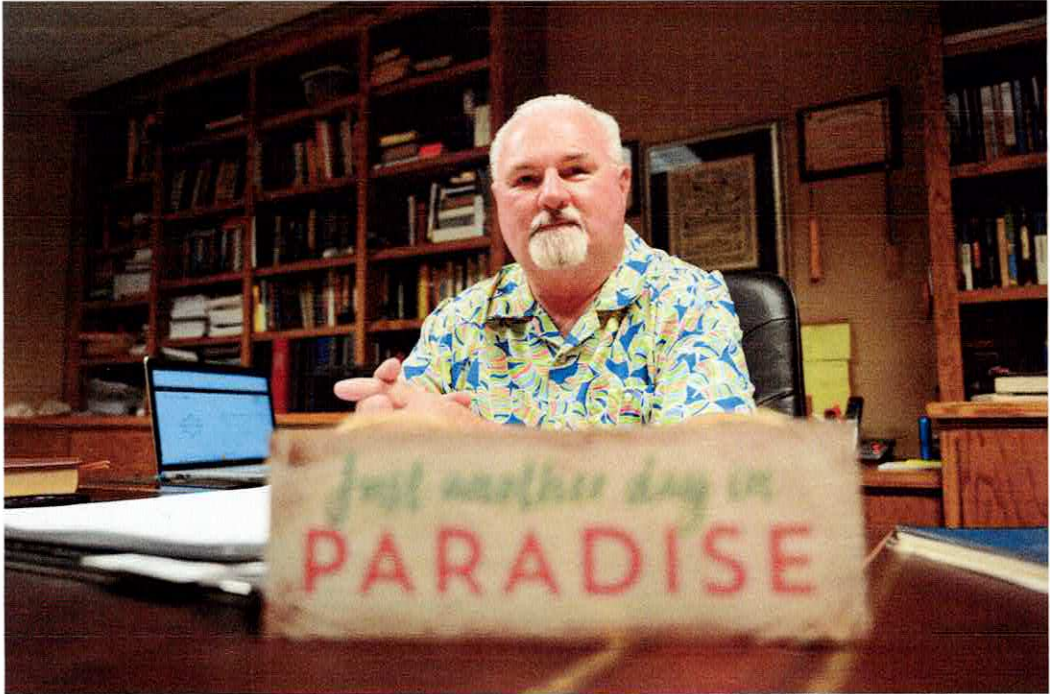
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Pastoring in paradise: David Laughner has been spiritual leader at Chapel by the Sea on Tybee Island for 3 decades



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David Laughner sits at his desk at Chapel by the Sea, a small sign declaring: "Just another day in paradise." (Index/Roger Alfory)



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By ROGER ALFORD, The Christian Index

TYBEE ISLAND, Ga. — This barrier island off Savannah's coast is billed as the place where time stands still.

It's a place where families walk barefoot in the sand, where palm branches sway in ocean breezes, where children delight in an abundance of seashells.

David Laughner arrived here to serve as pastor of Chapel by the Sea Baptist Church more than 30 years ago and never left. He ministers in an ocean paradise. He loves the pace of a beach community. He enjoys interacting with tourists. He thrives on not knowing who may show up at his charming church just a stone's throw from the ocean.

"In all the years I've been here, I've never preached to the same group on a Sunday morning," he said. "New faces appear weekly. That's the nature of pastoring on an island. We have no average attendance. From week to week, we could go from 50 to 125 people. There have been times we've had 200-plus. It just depends on the time of the year. While other preachers might find that to be a great challenge, I enjoy it."

Chapel by the Sea has had visitors from every state in the nation and beyond. They're drawn here in part by Savannah's southern charm, the city's rich history, and, of course, its proximity to the Atlantic.

"You just never know who's going to be here," said the 67-year-old Laughner who served churches in coastal Florida and inland Georgia before arriving on Tybee Island. "It could be large crowds. It could be small crowds. Last Sunday, we had visitors from eight different states."

Derward Poole, pastor of Sand Hill Baptist Church outside Savannah, said Laughner and Chapel by the Sea have built an effective ministry to the island community.

"It's a special place," Poole said of the church. "It's a unique place."

Chapel by the Sea is serving an island that isn't commercialized. Don't look for high-rise hotels here because there are none. Families cruise around on golf carts. Kids ride scooters. Flipflops are the shoes of choice.

The church building itself is just as laid back as the community it serves. It has no towering steeple. Even so, when people draw near, it is still eye-catching with its brilliant blue-green walls.

The popularity of Tybee Island has grown in recent years among tourists looking for a more relaxed pace than they find in some of the better-known coastal destinations. For Laughner, that translates into more people in the pews to hear his expositional sermons.

Retired school administrator Susan Off, who started attending Chapel by the Sea in 1992, said Laughner's Bible teaching is a big draw. Off said Laughner, a former professor who holds master's and doctoral degrees in theology, digs deeply into the Scriptures.

"I like the small church atmosphere, the family atmosphere, the kindness, the supportive church members," she said. "But it's David's messages that keep me coming back. He's not afraid to get into the meat of the matter. He teaches the tough stuff that some pastors may not get into."

The church has always been a huge supporter of the Southern Baptist Convention's Cooperative Program, which funds state, national and global missions.

Records kept by the Georgia Baptist Mission Board shows the church typically gives between 10 percent and 20 percent of its undesignated receipts through the Cooperative Program, plus that much and more to the Lottie Moon offering that supports missionaries serving through the International Mission Board.

Mission giving tends to be an accurate barometer of a congregation's commitment to fulfilling the Great Commission to take the gospel to the world. Chapel by the Sea measures among Georgia's top churches on that barometer in terms of percentage of giving.

Vacationers who come to Chapel by the Sea are the kind of people who really love being in church — so much so that they're willing to leave the beach and enter the sanctuary.

"I get the cream of the crop," Laughner said. "People who come to this island come on vacation. How many people go to church on their vacations? So, I meet some of the best people you could ever imagine."

A good many return to Tybee Island and Chapel by the Sea every year.

"We're a part of their vacation experience," Laughner said. "What better compliment could you get than that?"

In Laughner's church, people sing from hymnals in what would appear to be a traditional worship style, but, he said, that can change on a dime.

"Our tradition is that we have no tradition," he said.

The church's core group is made up of about 75 Southern Baptists who make every visitor feel welcome.

People from a wide spectrum of religious backgrounds file in each Sunday. They may be Amish or Apostolic, Catholic or charismatic, Presbyterian or Pentecostal, Methodist or Mennonite.

"We've pretty much had them all," Laughner said. "I'll get emails and cards from people around the country, and they'll say, 'we want to thank you for making us feel so welcome; we felt like we were at our own church.' Now, that's what you want to hear."

Laughner is a gregarious pastor who has never met a stranger and who stands out in the crowd thanks to his varied wardrobe.

"I like color," he said. "My people love to see me in my colorful suits. I've got purple. I've got red. I've got white. I can get away with that because I'm on the beach. A lot of times, I will wear Hawaiian shirts."

Laughner said his congregation recognizes that ministering on Tybee Island can require some out-of-the-box approaches to sharing the gospel.

"I've never had someone come to me and say, 'Preacher, we've never done it that way before,'" Laughner said. "You never know what's going to happen at Chapel. God made me for this kind of ministry. I thrive on the not knowing who will be here, the surprise element. I feel like a little boy in a candy store."

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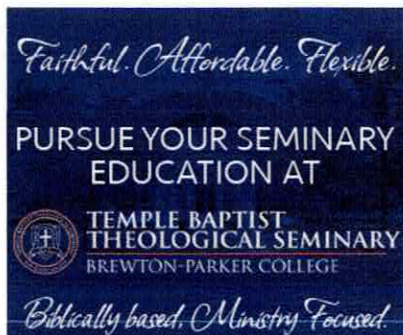
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