

Aging minister blessed through Servant Care

By Anita Davie



For more than 65 years, 85-year-old Tollie Cunningham preached as much as three times a week as pastor of a number of churches in a handful of states. He served faithfully until, as he says, “I couldn’t get physically in the pulpit anymore.”

Cunningham and his wife Delores have several health issues, some seriously affecting their mobility. A year ago, when Cunningham was still pastoring a church, he insisted on making hospital visits and visiting the frail aging in nursing homes despite navigating long hallways. He was faithful, attending every illness and every surgery – not only for church members, but their family members, too.

His daughter Debbie Shehan says, “I believe my father exemplifies the kind of servant’s heart found in many who have given selflessly of themselves in ministry for so many years.”

Shehan and her husband Ronnie are caregivers for her father and mother. She provides transportation to the store, doctor and pharmacy. Ronnie helps with the yard work and does the handyman chores around the house. The couple is doing a wonderful job and is glad they can help her parents remain in their home.

But with all that family caregivers like Cunninghams’ daughter and son-in-law do, most cannot do everything. Today, family caregivers are called on to provide more than 80% of the long-term care their elderly loved one may need to remain at home independently and safely. What about the other 20%? Those needs must be met elsewhere.

The Cunninghams attended a North Carolina Baptist Aging Ministry’s (NCBAM) Servant Care presentation for aging ministers where they shared their need for a wheelchair ramp. Servant Care offers enhanced services to aging North Carolina Baptist ministers ages 65 plus, their spouses or surviving spouses. Servant Care fosters opportunities for North Carolina Baptists to honor retired ministers and provide loving care.

NCBAM, Carolina Baptist Association, Balfour Baptist Church, and the NC Baptist Foundation partnered to help the Cunninghams. It's a partnership that continues to minister to their needs.

With NCBAM and Carolina Baptist Association advocating for the Cunninghams by making arrangements and connecting people, the men of Balfour Baptist Church, under the direction of Charles Allen, constructed the ramp on Saturday, September 1.

With his voice full of excitement, he shared, "All of this is so amazing. I've never had anything like this done for me before. It blessed my heart. It really touches me that they all care."

Cunningham was saved during a revival when he was 19-years-old. A short time after that, he began to feel a calling to the pastorate. "At first, I let it go. I couldn't see why anyone would want to listen to me. Well, eight years later, I gave in and said, 'Lord if you want me to preach, then I'll do the best I can.'"

Cunningham began supply preaching occasionally for three years and then became pastor of a small, rural mission church that he would drive 30 miles to one way every Sunday. Some weeks he was there nightly.

"I wouldn't change a thing," Cunningham says. "You serve the Lord and love His people. That's what being a minister is all about. It was my privilege."

Servant Care is for all ministers 65 or older. They may be retired, still serving, well or frail. Participation is not based on financial need.

Servant Care participants receive regular phone calls or emails and visits or correspondence from NCBAM and North Carolina Baptist volunteers.

Need assessments are made as necessary. When a need arises, participants will be connected with available resources. Some needs are met quickly; others may require financial assistance or volunteer support. A Servant Care relationship is ongoing and needs are monitored regularly.

"Servants are rarely served," director of church and community missions for Carolina Association Sam Gibbs says. "Through Servant Care, North Carolina Baptists can reach out and serve the needs of our aging ministers, reminding them of their continued worth to the church and to the Lord."

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