

Nascent church on the North Side is 'great opportunity' to reach people

by LAKENDRA LEWIS

When the Rev. Josh de Koning came to the far North Side nearly a year ago to launch a church, he wasn't sure what to expect.

The senior pastor and ex-Austinite has started Harvest Bible Chapel-San Antonio in the cafeteria of Vineyard Ranch Elementary School, 16818 Huebner Road.

"It's a fantastic location," said de Koning. "There's visibility and accessibility. You can actually see the school as you go down (Loop) 1604."

Finding a site and raising the funds to plant a local Harvest Bible Chapel has been a labor of love for de Koning and the 75 members who have dedicated their time, money and talents for what they feel is a different kind of church.

"There are Christians who have been Christians for a long time — I know plenty of them — who aren't really involved in their churches or (teaching) others," said the pastor. "Our church is an opportunity to turn that around and contribute."

Unlike many ministries where pastors choose their messages based on a certain topic — a method known as topical preaching — Harvest Bible Chapel practices expository preaching, a style in which members are taken verse by verse through a passage of Scripture.

"Topical preaching is like medicine and expository preaching is like food. I believe you should be getting a lot more food than medicine," de Koning said.

A resident of Austin for 13 years, the married father of three was teaching Bible classes at another church when he was asked to join a core group in the process of starting a local Harvest Bible Chapel.

Initially declining, de Koning was drawn to Harvest's four-pillar approach of proclaiming God's word without apology and through worship, prayer and sharing the Gospel, he said.

Though de Koning never launched a church before, he became

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REV. JOSH DE KONING

In honor of the launch of a new Harvest Bible Chapel in San Antonio under the Rev. Josh de Koning, his brother Nate de Koning (left) and committee member James Lacevell (right) took part in a 110-mile bicycle trip from Austin to San Antonio. The 110 miles also symbolizes Harvest's 110 ministries. Photo by Roddy B. Ornelas

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increasingly convinced uniting with the team at Harvest was a good idea.

After joining Harvest, de Koning became an ordained minister and remained in Austin three more years until he was approached last February to move to San Antonio and establish an affiliate ministry.

Leaving the capital and familiar surroundings caused some anxiety; the family hardly knew anyone in San Antonio. They had no place to live, and no idea where they would begin a Harvest church or how to finance it.

"Planting a church can be scary. It's like building an airplane while you're flying it," de Koning said. "Sacrifice is the norm. You have to put yourself out there."

Their faith paid off. One week before arriving, the de Konings were offered a house to live in rent-free as they sought to get the word out about Harvest Bible Chapel. They quickly started meeting people and forming relationships with other San Antonians interested in becoming part of the church's core group.

After a chance encounter with the de Konings in a coffee shop, Tom and Jennie Seltzer were among the first aboard. Despite their initial reservations about leaving the church they had been attending, the Seltzer

family eventually joined the Harvest family.

"I'd been in churches 40 years where they talked about discipleship but no one was doing it," said Tom Seltzer. "For me, discipleship is key. It's been a lot of hard work, but my wife and I felt like this is where God was leading us."

The Seltzers donated their time and finances, helping de Koning set up and host meetings, scout locations and raise the \$65,000 needed to begin the church.

All Harvest Bible Chapels are self-sustaining and self-governed.

Shortly before the Stone Oak-area church held its first service, the team raised the entire amount needed for the launch, in addition to about \$20,000 in equipment, including projectors, trailers, sound equipment and instruments.

"It's hard to find a church that teaches Scripture line by line," Jennie Seltzer said. "I think this (church) is a great opportunity to reach people and provide a new facet to those searching for a place to hear the word of God on a deeper level."

Based in Chicago, Harvest Bible Chapel began in 1988 when 18 people formed a new church. By 2000, members started planting churches across the country under the umbrella of the Harvest Bible

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Elated by their 110-mile cycling trek from Austin to the North Side, Nate de Koning (left) and James Lacewell (right) celebrate the news of a new Harvest Bible Chapel in San Antonio. Photo by Rudy B. Ornelas

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Fellowship. The last 10 years has seen global expansion, sprouting more than 60 Harvest churches worldwide.

The newest addition in San Antonio marks Harvest's 110th ministry — in almost as many cities — and led to a special pilgrimage.

On the weekend before launching, the de Konings and a group of cyclists pedaled the 110-mile trek from Harvest Bible Chapel in Austin to the new location. Riders stopped to pray for each Harvest church planted, one church for each mile.

"We started out in our living

room, and it's amazing how God has met us," said de Koning, the church's only paid staff member.

The inaugural service kicked off Oct. 5. A sermon series on the book of Philippians was attended by 200 and included worshippers from Harvest churches in Austin, Houston, Iowa and Monterrey, Mexico.

Sunday service is 10 a.m., and a children's ministry offers music, teaching and discipleship time. An adult ministry is planned for January.

For more or to get involved, call 802-8616 or visit harvestsa.org.