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Two Methodist churches form cooperative parish

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By [Blair Ames](#)

After 17 years as pastor at Centennial Memorial United Methodist Church in Frederick, George Earle will start anew as he joins a congregation in West Virginia.

The congregation he's leaving will be entering new territory as well.

On July 1, 2010, Centennial became a cooperative parish with Calvary United Methodist Church, one block away on West Second Street.

Trying to fund the salaries of two pastors became a financial strain on Centennial, said Ken Dunnington, pastor at Calvary.

On May 23, members of Calvary will vote on a proposal to approve the structure of the cooperative parish with Centennial. Members of Centennial have already voted to approve the cooperative.

Becoming the Calvary-Centennial Memorial Cooperative Parish puts the churches on the path to merge if they ultimately decide to. But for now, each congregation will continue to worship separately as Dunnington serves both congregations -- whose combined membership totals about 1,800.

"To combine the emphases of the two churches, it will really have the ideal offering of what a church can be in the community," Earle said.

The proposal allows each congregation to have its own council along with a joint parish council, which reports to a cooperative parish charge conference. Although worship will be held separately, church ministries will be combined and all church office duties will be handled at Calvary.

Each congregation will handle its own finances and will have its own board of trustees and lay leaders.

Earle said several factors contributed to the church's decision to form a cooperative partnership, but funding for the Saturday-night ministry led by Pastor Mike Albro was dwindling.

Albro's contemporary service attracts many new Christians, some who were homeless, recovering addicts or living in poverty.

As of Dec. 31, there were no funds left to fund Albro's contract.

"Mike's salary was a sacrifice of love," Earle said. "It got to the point where we realized we couldn't do it anymore."

Since Jan. 1, funds provided by Calvary and augmented by Centennial have covered Albro's salary. After July 1, what would have been Earle's salary will fund Centennial's Saturday night ministry.

Despite the Saturday night ministry being in jeopardy, Albro said he wasn't worried because worrying wouldn't



Photo by Adam Fried

Pastor Ken Dunnington, left, of Calvary United Methodist Church, will soon preside over Centennial Memorial United Methodist Church as well, as the two churches become a cooperative parish. George Earle, right, will leave Centennial after 17 years as pastor.

have solved anything.

"If I'm going to trust in Jesus Christ for eternal life and I'm not going to trust him for a paycheck, maybe I should do something else," he said. "I'll worry about the people he sent me to serve."

Although Centennial couldn't supply Albro's salary, Earle said the church co-op formed because of programming desires, not financial concerns. Centennial had the outreach ministry; Calvary could provide Christian education classes because it had more age groups represented.

The churches recently joined to form the Lord's Laundry ministry where members of the congregation wash the clothes of the poor involved in Centennial's Wednesday night Celebrate Recovery ministry. Church members collect clothing at the Saturday night ministry. Those items are then picked up Sunday and the clean clothes returned on Wednesday. Celebrate Recovery is a 12-step recovery program for former addicts.

It was the first joint venture for the two congregations.

The idea to form a cooperative stemmed from a casual conversation about a year and a half ago between Dunnington and Earle regarding sharing space at Centennial while Calvary was looking for more room.

Dunnington said the first priority in the short term is to find funding for Centennial's Saturday ministry in such a way that it doesn't become a worry for either congregation.

"I don't know of anyone else in this city who has the ear of the needy and who is as much an advocate for them as Mike," he said. "I find him just a very incredible person."

As for the long term, a merger between the two congregations is a possibility, but it would be up to the congregations to approve the merger with a vote.

Dunnington said this year will offer both congregations a time of discernment and assessment to decide if they should merge or if they need more time.

"It's a possibility, but right now we're going to give it at least a year," he said.

Earle believes the church will continue to be a cooperative parish for the next few years, but also that a merger will eventually happen.

Dunnington will preach at Centennial once a month while Associate Pastor Sarah Schlieckert, the retired Rev. Harry Cole, and other lay leaders will rotate to fill in every other Sunday morning for services at Centennial.

Although the churches are less than a block apart, until about 18 months ago, there wasn't much interaction between the two.

Originally, Centennial was a Evangelical United Brethren Church, but in 1968 Evangelical United Brethren Church and the Methodist Church merged to form the United Methodist Church.

At the time, Calvary was a Methodist Episcopal Church before merging as well.

Earle's last day at Centennial will be June 19. He was appointed to Hedgesville United Methodist Church in Hedgesville, W.Va., by Bishop John Schol of the Baltimore-Washington Conference after the decision to pursue a cooperative parish was made in April 2010.

A pastor for 36 years, he said it was difficult to leave a congregation that he has led for almost half of his career, but he said he believes church members are in great hands with Dunnington and Albro.

"They've been my heart," he said. "I'm going to miss them terribly."

After Albro was hired in December 2001, Centennial held its first contemporary service in January 2002. Second Street and Hope -- a nonprofit formed by members to offer a homeless ministry that includes dinners on

Wednesdays and Saturdays -- was founded in 2003.

For Albro, losing Earle is like losing a father figure. Without Earle's leadership style, Centennial's outreach ministries may not have gotten off the ground, he said.

"George is a relational pastor," he said. "People today, especially the poor, do not trust institutional anything."

In his second appointment as pastor, Dunnington led a two-point charge in south Baltimore for two churches about five minutes apart.

After 40 years in the ministry, he said he didn't expect to be leading two congregations again, but he sees the potential the opportunity brings for each congregation.

"I want to make this work in whatever final shape it has," he said. "I really see the hand of God in this as bringing the two congregations together."

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