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Foundations

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Liberty Crossings United Methodist Church

Birmingham, Alabama

By Jennifer Walker-Journey

The 35 acres just east of Birmingham, Alabama, was heavily populated with red pines and oak trees, and almost too perfect a site for the new church that aspired to serve as a spiritual retreat for its members.

Since chartering in September 2001, the members of Liberty Crossings United Methodist Church met at Vestavia Hills Elementary School in the affluent Liberty Park community. Pastor Keith Elder and his congregation were motivated to build a church home of their own. Their vision was clear.

"We wanted a quiet place set in His beautiful creation, where you may actually hear that still small voice and reclaim a bit of the 'shalom' – that sense of peace and well-being that only God intends for all of his children," he said.

Though the church had only 200 in numbers, members pulled together to commit substantial funding for the project.

"We have a 24/7 mentality here. We want it all and we want it now," Pastor Elder said.

As a result, Liberty Crossings became one of a few start-up United Methodist churches able to build such a large building for its first facility.

"It's nice, but it's one of the challenges that comes along with it. We are banking to a great degree on our natural growth," Paster Elder said. "And, we will be catching up financially over the next year and a half with a capital campaign."

Once finances were committed, before a location was even chosen, the church called on TurnerBatson Architects, P.C., to help create a master plan that would fulfill their vision. A third-generation firm based in Birmingham, TurnerBatson has designed more than 850 churches throughout the Southeast since it was founded in 1924. Churches make up about 50 percent of the firm's business.

The first step to meeting the vision of Liberty Crossings' members was finding the perfect grounds on which to build.

"We actually went to several sites," said Dave Reese of TurnerBatson, principal in charge of the project.

One site in particular exceeded their expectations.

"It's the prettiest piece of property I've ever been able to design on," Reese said.

The master plan included separate phases that would allow the facility to grow as its membership increased. The first phase was a 26,200-square-foot, two-story steel and wood frame structure that included a large, multi-purpose area that could accommodate up to 400 individuals for seated worship services or easily be converted for basketball games or other large gatherings. Also included were a large, eclectic youth room and a spacious nursery, as well as a second-floor elevated veranda leading to a fitness center.

Members took a serious interest not only in the structure, but its interior design, Reese said. The church's design committee selected bold terrazzo flooring that complements the concrete counters and modern lighting.

"It was a small committee, but they were very easy to deal with. And, they allowed us to make smart decisions," he said.

Generous natural lighting throughout the facility was allowed through gracious windows, which also provided stunning views of the beautifully wooded grounds. A retention pond was built on the site and easily complemented the landscape.

Taking advantage of the natural beauty of the site was not by accident.

"We knew what was in the church's heart, that they wanted to preserve the grounds as much as possible," Reese said. "We spent a lot of time at the site hugging trees and saying, 'Don't take this one down!'"

Last December, the building was completed in time for Christmas services, and already the church is reaping the




benefits of its new building. Members and visitors are lured by the winding drive through the woods to the church.

The vision of a nature retreat continues with future phases of the master plan. A larger sanctuary and other buildings eventually will surround the pond. Trails, benches, and even an amphitheater are in the works. The grounds, Pastor Elder said, “has ‘Eagle Scout project’ written all over it.”

Pastor Elder said the project was money well spent, as the members got exactly what they wanted – a church home that provides a comfortable setting for its worship service that blends traditional elements with contemporary praise. And, a church that challenges its members and visitors to “go off-road...literally and figuratively.”

“We are off the beaten path by choice,” Pastor Elder added. “We want people to be able to come here and put a comma in their life sentence, to let this be a retreat where they can get away and come back renewed.”

TurnerBatson Architects, P.C. provides master planning, architectural design, interior design, 3D computer animation and visualization, as well as other related services, www.turnerbatson.com.

In a Nutshell

Church: Liberty Crossings United Methodist Church

Location: Birmingham, Alabama

Congregation Size: 200 to 400 members

Project Goal: Build a quality facility that would serve as a retreat to its members

Size: 26,200 square feet

Cost: \$7.5 million

Challenge: Developing a master plan to grow with the newly formed church and financing the first phase

Solution: Affluent church and community members committed resources to make the new church a reality.