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Joppa Church 'a safe harbor' in life, history

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Pastor Roy Blizzard III stands near the relatively new sign for Joppa Church which can be seen behind.(Christine Bolaños Photo)

By Christine Bolaños

JOPPA — In a small town in Burnet County people still farm for a living, know most of their neighbors, help each other out and view their church as the anchor of their community.

The unincorporated community of Joppa is located on the north fork of the San Gabriel River, seven miles northeast of Bertram, and not far from Liberty Hill. The first settlers of the farming and ranching community arrived in 1874. By the late 1930s the community gathered for social functions at Joppa Church. Members of the church held annual picnics, Friday and Saturday night socials and Sunday night singings.

That ritual continues today with members of the community gathering at the fellowship hall on the second Sunday of each month for “dinner on the grounds.”

The church is almost like a “best kept secret” of sorts as not many people outside the community know about it or its historical significance.

“The church back then was the community center,” Pastor Roy Blizzard III explained. “Church and school, a lot of times, were combined and that’s what happened here.”

In many ways the church still serves as the community center for Joppa’s elderly residents. However, as in many areas throughout the country, fewer in younger generations are attending church regularly.

“It’s really only gone through one change and that was a major renovation about 20 years ago,” Blizzard said of the current facility. “They actually added indoor plumbing to the church and air conditioning so it made it a lot more comfortable.”

Blizzard’s father served as visiting church pastor when he was only a boy. But he never could have imagined that was the very spot he would end up in one day. Nor that he would even become a pastor for that matter.

“We ended up buying the farm here from the elders who lived across the street,” Blizzard recalled.

He soon learned from folks that their pastor unexpectedly left them leaving them without a spiritual leader for several months. They then asked him if he would step in.

Blizzard, who has a master’s degree in biblical studies, was unsure if he had the knack to be a pastor. He studied Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Aramaic, archeology and more at the University of Texas at Austin. But theology and practice are two different things.

“I really didn’t have any inclination of being a pastor,” he said. “I had a religious degree, but I was mainly a researcher.”

But destiny led him to Joppa Church.

“My father and my grandfather and my uncle were preachers in non-denominational Christian church,” Blizzard shared. “They (the community) asked me so I prayed about it for three months and finally decided to be a preacher.”

He not only filled the role of spiritual leader, but helped improve the condition of the church.

“(I) came up here and fixed all the stuff for them because I was a contractor,” Blizzard said. “I upgraded the air conditioning system and lighting and basically got their electric bill down to \$200-250 a month in savings.”

Preaching quickly became more than just a job for Blizzard. It became a way of life.

“I kind of love the people and the community out here,” he expressed. “I’ve been out here for almost three years now.”

The church members are an extended family to Blizzard.

“I’ve had to learn how to focus on a much larger extended family where before it was just my wife, my three girls and granddaughter — (and soon a grandson) — and now I have a lot of extra family members that I have to worry about and make sure they’re okay,” Blizzard said. “If they’re in the hospital I figure out what do I need to do. I enjoy doing it because I’m fairly concerned with people’s lives anyway.”

There are about 30 active members of the church. They mostly represent some of the older generations. Youth tend to gravitate toward churches that have the resources to offer more programs oriented toward their age group. And some youth don’t attend church.

“Right now the church has between 20-30 people who are kind of members,” Blizzard stated.

Joppa Church offers Sunday morning service from 11 a.m. to noon.

“It’s about the only regularly scheduled meeting we have,” Blizzard said. “I would like us to start having other meetings.”

Blizzard envisions quarterly meetings where people can gather to talk about medical issues and awareness.

“Because I worked in health and nutrition for 30 years I know a lot about helping others,” he added.

Church members also enjoy performing Christmas Carols and putting out decorations on the bridge across from the church and fellowship hall buildings. It is reportedly one of the oldest bridges in the county.

“The bridge and its sister bridge are the oldest bridges in the county,” Blizzard shared. “They’re iron-riveted bridges that are still being used when I came back here in the late 60s, early 70s.”

Joppa Church seats about 100 people. The fellowship hall is located next to the church and is about 1,000 square feet. It features a main dining area, two bathrooms, a nursery, recreational area and full kitchen.

“The other thing we have are weddings,” Blizzard said. “A lot of people like the quaintness of the facility. It’s a really nice facility. On the side are the original pews from when it was built.”

The church and fellowship center are what remain of Joppa’s pioneer settlement making them historically significant.

“It’s kind of a touchstone for (church members),” Blizzard said. “Where many of them have been here for generations because their parents and grandparents settled out here.”

Those generations want to keep the church’s legacy alive.

“They’ve all told me they’d hate to see a church like this die because you hate to see heritage pass without any reason,” Blizzard explained. “This is a nice church with nice facilities and people don’t really go to church anymore

unfortunately.”

The Joppa school house hosted church services until 1913. That year the Joppa Baptist Church congregation established a meeting house across the road from the school. Now, simply called Joppa Church, the congregation continues to hold weekly services. The church has evolved from a Baptist to a non-denominational congregation.

“(It’s) focus is on teaching the word of God while focusing on the power of prayer,” Blizzard said. “After church on the second Sunday of each month, a potluck meal is provided in the fellowship hall.”

Blizzard studied and traveled in Israel and wrote “The Gospel of John, An Actual Translation.” According to the pastor, it is the only true Hebrew translation of the Gospel of John.

He and Joppa’s church members invite anyone interested to come out for worship Sundays at 11 a.m. The church is located at the intersection of CR 210 and CR 200 north of Bertram.