

HSC 1-21-06

New Orleans megachurch expanding to Atlanta

By JOHN BLAKE
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Bishop Paul Morton, one of the nation's most popular preachers and gospel singers, is bringing his New Orleans megachurch to Atlanta.

Morton is the senior pastor of Greater St.

Stephen Full Gospel Baptist Church, a 20,000-member church in New Orleans, and the presiding bishop of the Full Gospel Baptist Church

What: Opening service for Greater St. Stephen Full Gospel Baptist Church

When: 3 p.m. Jan. 29

Where: 4185 Snapfinger Woods Drive, Decatur

Fellowship, a group that encourages Baptists to embrace "gifts of the spirits" such as ecstatic worship and speaking in tongues.

Morton is scheduled to celebrate the grand opening of Greater St. Stephen Atlanta at 3 p.m. on Jan. 29 at the church's new sanctuary in Decatur. Morton says his expansion was prompted in part by Hurricane Katrina's devastation of New Orleans. Flooding destroyed one of Greater St. Stephen's three locations and forced at least 500 members to flee to Atlanta, Morton said.

"What God told me was that even though New Orleans would be downsized, he would not downsize me or my ministry," Morton said.

He also will keep his New Orleans church open and he and his wife, Debra, a church elder and co-pastor, will share preaching duties at both locations. He said he will be in Atlanta the first and third Sunday of each month and his wife will preach the remaining Sunday services at the new location.

The church is in a south DeKalb area that's become the Silicon Valley of megachurches. The location, in a former Kroger building just off of Wesley Chapel Road in Decatur, is near at least four megachurches in south DeKalb County that converge in the Candler and Wesley Chapel roads area.

Morton said he picked the location because they found a good deal. "I didn't even realize how close we were to other megachurches," he said.

His church emphasizes economic development along with "good preaching and good singing," he said.

"Of course, I'm a prosperity preacher, but there has to be more than that. We operate in a spirit of excellence. I see too many ministries run like a zoo and we blame it on God. Our services start on time and we move into a great flow."

Morton says he and his wife have already moved into a Buckhead townhome.

"I learned a great lesson from that experience," Morton said of Hurricane Katrina. "I'll never just live in one area. We didn't know what to do or where to go."

WEATHERING THE STORM

DeKalb Neighbor
1-25-06

New Orleans church builds campus in Decatur

By Erin Greer
DeKalb Neighbor Staff Writer

They're not stewing gumbo, boiling crawfish or mixing dirty rice, but Bishop Paul S. Morton and his wife, Elder Debra B. Morton, are bringing a bit of New Orleans flavor to DeKalb churchgoers.

"We have a unique flavor we bring. We're known for our flavor," Morton said.

"Our motto is 'Changing The Way We Do Church.' We're going to bring that same flavor here," Ms. Morton said.

From establishing the largest church on the shores of The Big Easy to the life-changing events which brought them to DeKalb, the Mortons discuss their journey through faith.

"I thought I was going to live and die in New Orleans, preach in New Orleans and stay in New Orleans. I thought that was it. But God said through Katrina, 'That's not it,'" Morton said.

When the hurricane destroyed the largest of the Morton's Greater St. Stephen Full Gospel Baptist Church buildings last year, the church's 20,000 congregation members scattered throughout the South. To keep their ministry alive and their congregation united, the Mortons began to travel neighboring states, bringing a message of hope to followers in Baton Rouge, Houston and Atlanta.

Now, after five months of operating from his brother Bishop James Morton's New Beginning Church in Decatur, Paul and Debra are opening a new location of Greater St. Stephen—not on the New Orleans shores, but in a shopping complex off of Snapfinger Road.

This Sunday, the Mortons will welcome visitors and more than 300 Katrina evacuees for the grand opening of Greater St. Stephen Full Gospel Baptist Church at 4185 Snapfinger Woods Drive in Decatur. The location will be the third for the church, which also has two buildings in full operation in New Orleans.

Construction on the new location began last month, and in a time span of about six weeks the interior—formerly a Big Lots store—has transformed to include a waterfall baptismal, three giant crosses representing the crucifixion at Golgotha, areas for two projection screens and space for 1,500 congregants.

Skip Foster, project manager with Covenant Services of Conyers, said the project has been "very fast paced" to provide a sanctuary for those who lost all in the hurricane.

"It's important to have [St. Stephen] in because not only were the Mortons displaced, but their congregants were displaced," he said.

Surveying the site of their future sanctuary, the Mortons dodge continuing construction. In less than one week, the bare walls and concrete floors must be transformed to accommodate St. Stephen's flock.

Though the church is largely unfinished, the couple remains nonplussed by the disarray—after all, they are accustomed to rising from the rubble.

"What a difference a day makes," Morton said.

"When you see everything here one day and gone the next—I'm bringing people a message of hope. I'm a living example that you can lose basically everything but still, God is able," he said.

Ms. Morton said, like Katrina, all people suffer storms in life. She said the approach of personal interaction and accessibility "broadens horizons" and "empowers people to take control of their lives."

"In the aftermath of our storm, we can see how the Lord brought us here. That is our message. You can come out of every situation. Lots of times God will use calamities to get you where he wants you and to bless you," she said.

As the couple exits the boardroom of a Decatur bank neighboring St. Stephen—the couple retreated to the boardroom to escape construction noise—they are recognized by a young woman in the lobby.

The woman, a Katrina evacuee and stranger to the couple, shakes their hands and thanks them for coming to Atlanta to provide "a little piece of home."

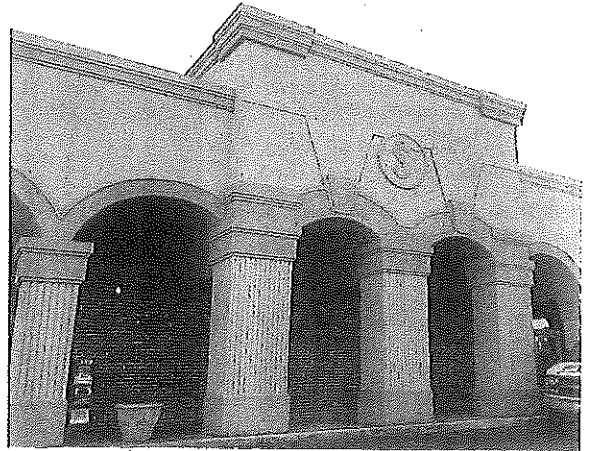
In the future, Morton said he hopes to continue that piece of home in Atlanta, as well as rebuild the Greater St. Stephen home in east New Orleans.

In addition, Morton said he hopes to expand St. Stephen's evangelism, outreach and school of ministry.

"Our hands are full as to what we want to do to help people," Morton said.

The grand opening will begin at 3 p.m. Jan. 29. Following the grand opening, the St. Stephen Full Gospel Baptist Church will meet at 10 a.m. each Sunday for worship. Bible study will be held each Wednesday at 7 p.m.

To handle the multiple services in two states, the Mortons will alternate weekends between cities, flying and preaching in a different city twice each month.



Top, the new sanctuary features a glass baptismal and a display of three crosses in tribute to the sacrifice at Golgotha. Bottom, guests at the grand opening of greater St. Stephen might not recognize the building, which was formerly a Big Lots. Below, Greater St. Stephen Full Gospel Baptist Church was damaged by Hurricane Katrina. Left, Co-Pastor Debra Morton and Sr. Pastor Bishop Paul Morton examine their future office spaces at the future site of Greater St. Stephen Baptist Church.

