

Marks of a Healthy New Church

“Hampton Roads Fellowship is a church seeking, by God’s grace, to display the character of God, through the people of God, ultimately to the glory of God.”

That is what you’ll hear as you worship with the folks at **Hampton Roads Fellowship** (HRF). This young church was planted five years ago under the leadership of Pastor Miguel Davilla. The desire to plant a church where people can hear the Gospel and experience the Gospel’s power has been a long-time burden for Davilla and many of the members of HRF. The leaders have labored to ensure the church is characterized by Gospel faithfulness and Gospel reality. Regarding Gospel faithfulness, the focus has been on clear and accurate Gospel proclamation. Regarding Gospel reality, they have focused on experiencing the beauty of the Gospel in relationships.

SBCV church planters are taught that the foundational building blocks of vision, mission, and values are important in setting the direction and culture of a healthy, new church. When the direction and culture of the church are focused on God and His mission and are adhered to with intentionality, a healthy church can emerge. Such is the story of Hampton Roads Fellowship.

When asked about the hallmarks of health at HRF, associate pastor Tony Shepherd points first to the Gospel. “When both Gospel faithfulness and Gospel reality come together, you end up with Gospel culture. Gospel culture is a critical part of displaying the character of God. And that culture makes possible an environment in which the Gospel is experienced and seen as it begins to shape the way we relate to one another. A Gospel culture is a compelling picture to the world that God has come down to us in the person and work of Jesus, and that He reconciles guilty sinners to Himself and to one another.”

The leaders and members of HRF have intentionally made the Gospel that which shapes who they are. Shepherd continues, “The Gospel culture of HRF is summed up in three words: Gospel + safety + time. It is lots of good news for bad people + a non-accusing environment to confess sins together + unrushed time to grow in grace. The church should be the safest place for

sinners who need a Savior. It should be the safest place for weary people who need rest. It should be the most encouraging place for the downtrodden who need hope.”

Church membership is the second hallmark Pastor Shepherd identifies. He explains that guarding the Gospel culture established at the church requires the effort of all of the members. Every member takes an active role in overseeing each other’s discipleship. Members are encouraged and assisted in forming discipling relationships, caring for one another, taking responsibility for each other, and in living their lives in community with others. Pastor Davilla often reminds the body, “The most important role in the church is not the elders or the deacons, but the members.”

Shepherd identifies the third hallmark of HRF as its leadership. At the church’s recent fifth anniversary, the church family selected three additional elders to serve alongside Pastors Davilla and Shepherd. “These are men chosen by the members themselves—men who have already been doing the work of eldering. The congregation had a chance to affirm them as those they are willing to follow,” says Shepherd. “It’s good to have men who have been serving the church well as members for years affirmed by the congregation that they have led by example and fit the qualifications for elders.”

In addition to these elders, HRF also has nine deacons who serve in a variety of places in the life of the church. They were also affirmed by way of congregational votes, just like the



elders. Shepherd reports, “These are people whom the congregation itself sees as fitting the requirements and loving the family well. The Lord is giving us all of the spiritual gifts of service we need to love [the body] well, honor the Lord, and do good to our neighbors.”

A fourth hallmark of health is that HRF is a sending church. They seek to obey the Great Commission by making disciples through proclaiming the Gospel to the ends of the earth. “We’ve had a few members resign recently to go to another church to serve the needs they see there,” Shepherd explains. “We have had others leave us to start new churches, and we are excited about the idea that God may use us to bless other churches as we continue to be blessed by others!”

“Hampton Roads Fellowship is driven by one main thing—to make God’s character visible to a watching world,” says Shepherd. “We are learning so much and are eager to see the Lord continue to honor His name through us and other churches as well.”

