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Englewood's new Fellowship Church is growing by Leaps and Bounds - By KARA CHALMERS

Englewood pastor Garry Clark said that the day his mother died was the worst day of his life.

But, he said, it was also the best.

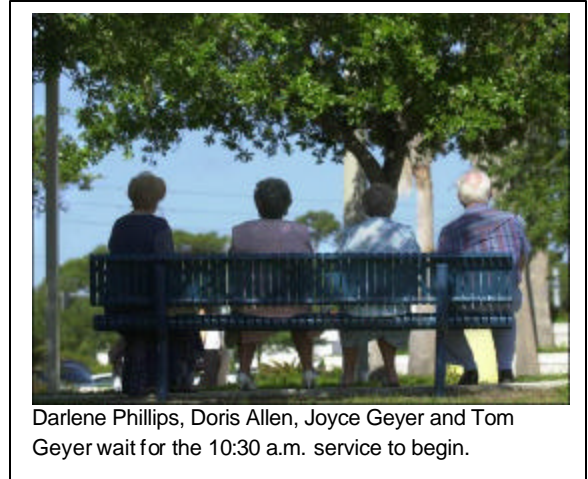
The night before Thanksgiving, 91/2 years ago, Ann Clark Riley, 60, was shot to death. The killer was her husband and Clark's stepfather, T.A. Riley, who then turned the gun on himself.

It was the kind of devastating loss that would make many people at least question their faith, if not lose it entirely.

But Clark, who by then had already lost his beloved father, said his faith in God became even more firm because he felt God's spirit comforting him.

"I was OK," he said. "I knew she was in heaven, with Jesus."

Clark's mother still plays a large role in his life. Clark, the pastor of the Fellowship Church, talks about her often during his sermons and he sings about her in his songs. It was she who was responsible for Clark's "finding God" in the first place.



Fellowship Church of Englewood Pastor Garry Clark

Fellowship Church began in November. Services are at 9 and 10:30 a.m. every Sunday in Lemon Bay High School's performing arts center. And while Clark is Baptist, Fellowship is a non-denominational Christian church.

"Anybody can come to Fellowship," Clark says.

Many of its members are seniors. But Clark calls the church "progressive" and says it also appeals to a younger crowd.

Many members of the church cite the music -- a large component of the services -- as an attraction. Clark and his son Mitchell, 15, are soloists. The songs are a mix of traditional and contemporary Christian music.

For 17 years, Clark was assistant pastor at Englewood's Calvary Baptist Church. His wife, Joy, is the daughter of the late Wallis Metts, the popular former Calvary Baptist pastor who died unexpectedly of heart failure in August.

Before Metts died, Clark and his family were planning to move out of state to start a new church. In fact, he resigned from Calvary Baptist two weeks before Metts' death.

But the death changed everything.

"It was almost supernatural," Joy Clark said. "We felt like we were called to stay."

But while Clark said he offered to take over as Calvary Baptist's senior pastor, a church committee instead chose the Rev. Robert McQueary, who most recently was assistant pastor and a school administrator at Temple Heights Baptist Church in Tampa.

So Clark decided to start something new. His project, Fellowship Church, has grown by leaps and bounds.

Clark said total attendance for both Sunday services in November averaged 252. By February, it was 486. Twice, the crowd was 500 or greater. But Clark said he expects attendance to taper off as more people head north for the summer.

Clark, who said he was shocked at the popularity of the church, is already planning for the future. He said the church has \$40,000 in donations to its land fund, and that he plans to build in East Englewood or its surroundings. He said he has no plans to leave Englewood.

While Clark said he hasn't encouraged anyone to do so, many Calvary Baptist church-goers followed him to the Fellowship Church. Clark estimates the number is less than half of the total members.



Christye Casanova holds her 5-year old son David's hand as she and her son head to the nursery before the start of the 10:30am service at Fellowship Church.

One such member is Mary Thompson, 67, who has been attending the church since its first day.

"I wouldn't miss it for anything," Thompson said about the service. "To me, he's like another Billy Graham."

Scott DeRock, 32, travels from Fort Myers every Sunday to attend Fellowship Church and hear Clark's sermon.



The nondenominational Fellowship Church meets at the Lemon Bay High School's Fine Arts Center.

"He's the reason," DeRock said.

Other Fellowship members, including Jim and Dianne Rice, said they heard about the new church and came to the first service out of curiosity. They liked it so much they kept coming.

"I like being part of something new," Jim Rice said.

The Rices said they like that the Fellowship services are less regimented than others. They also said they've felt welcome.

"Everybody's so friendly," said Dianne Rice. "You just have a feeling of fellowship around here."

That's exactly the feel Clark said he's been going for.

"We want to be warm and friendly," he said.

A tall and muscular man, "Pastor Garry" is an animated, energetic preacher who likes to sing, both alone and with the congregation. Clark's sermons are down-home and he describes himself as "a little bit country." In the middle of a recent service, Clark mentioned an upcoming cookout featuring ribs.

"It pays to be country," said Clark, a Rockingham, N.C., native.

Joy Clark credits part of Fellowship's success to its outreach effort. For one thing, free Starbucks Coffee and Krispy Kreme donuts are offered between the two Sunday services, in a place called the "Hospitality Center." The church also has "Welcome Centers" by its front doors where people can pick up literature about the church.

Joy Clark, who is experienced in graphic design, creates worship guides for each week's service.

Anyone who's been in Englewood in recent months is likely to have noticed the oval, red "Fellowship" signs taped up around town.

The Clarks say they have benefitted from the advice of their friend Lawrence Swicegood, who directs media relations for a large Baptist church in Dallas.

Garry Clark said his goal is to reach the "unchurched" in Englewood -- people who have moved to the community but haven't joined a church. He wants to also reach those who have never gone to church.

When he was nearly 16, Clark thought only freaks went to church, he said. He also said he was a bully, and used foul language all the time. He said he was bitter and angry that his family was poor.



"I wasn't a choir boy," he said.

He recalls that one night he found his mother drunk, surrounded by empty Pabst Blue Ribbon beer cans and watching the Rev. Billy Graham on television.

His mother, who had divorced his father when Clark was 11, was raising her son alone. He was the youngest of six children and the only one left at home.

His mother slurred, "We're going to church in the morning," Clark said. The next day, the two set off on foot and stopped at the first church they encountered, which turned out to be Baptist. Clark said he hadn't wanted to go to church at all, and thought his mother was a fool. He said he went that first Sunday to protect his mother, "to keep some preacher from stealing our last dollar," he said.

But the two came back the next Sunday, and the Sunday after that. They were eventually baptized together.

On the third Sunday, they openly declared they were Christians. Clark's alcoholic mother never drank another drop of alcohol.

But she had another demon to contend with -- her husband. Clark said that, just before she found religion, his mother had married the man who would eventually kill her. The man resented the fact that she had changed. He was jealous, or insane, or he just didn't like that the "partier" was gone, Clark said.

The man abused his mother but she stayed with him, Clark said. He said he is now comforted by the thought that she is safe and not still suffering.

Clark says he changed after the murder-suicide. He had been close to his mother and he grieved for her, he said. But while he was hurt by the loss, he relied upon his faith and found the positive side, being better able to relate to others who were suffering. He also said he found a stronger appreciation for his wife and for women in general. "It gave me more compassion," he said.