

Grace Church Pastor to Step down to Become Ministry Teacher



The Rev. Bob Yandian, pastor for 32 years of Grace Church, one of Tulsa's largest churches, announced he will step down in one year and that his son will take over the church.

Yandian has deep roots in the Tulsa charismatic/Pentecostal community, where he has a reputation as an excellent Bible teacher.

"I'm not retiring from ministry. I'm retiring from pastoring Grace," Yandian said from the pulpit Sunday.

"God has placed on my heart a call to be a minister to ministers. I want

to teach young people. I want to teach in schools. I want to teach ministers in conferences and churches."

He said he and his wife, Loretta, will be based at Grace Church and will live in Tulsa.

"This is our church home. It's part of our DNA. We've been a part of it from the beginning."

Yandian said in an interview this week that he has known for about four years he would be leaving the pastorate and has been praying about a successor. Eventually, he was convinced it should be his son, Robb Yandian.

"I didn't want Robb to be the pastor of the church," he said.

"I was the son of a minister. I had fought going into the ministry. I didn't want the term nepotism thrown around. I'd seen sons be successful, and I'd seen sons not be successful."

After consulting other leaders nationwide, Grace Church leaders decided the younger Yandian will take over after a one-year transition period. Yandian said he postponed the announcement because he did not want to turn the church over to someone else during a difficult time.

"I didn't want it to look like I was deserting a sinking ship," he said.

Grace was plunged into a nearly decade-long period of challenges and difficulties in 1992 when one of its teachers was arrested for molesting young boys.

"It was the hardest time we've ever known as a church," Yandian said.

Aaron Thompson is serving a 25-year prison sentence for molesting nine boys over a five-year period.

"It was devastating," Yandian said. "He was the most popular teacher we had."

He said Thompson was raised in the church from age 5 and had held various positions of leadership over

the years. His parents were longtime, active, trusted members.

"I was naive. I was over-trusting. There are certain people that are just beyond suspicion," he said.

At a time when national attention was focused on the priest sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic Church, Grace Church faced an aggressive and sometimes hostile media and accusations from the community.

"It really hurt. We lost people. The offerings went down. A lot of people pulled back," Yandian said.

After the criminal trial, the church faced a series of civil lawsuits and paid damages to victims.

"We took responsibility. It did happen on our watch," Yandian said. "We've come through our hard times," he said. "If I'd known then what I know now, I would have done some things differently. But I acted to the best of my knowledge, and God brought us through."

As enrollment dropped in a down economy, Grace closed its high school in 2009, and its grade school last year. "It was very hard. A lot of emotion," he said.

Now, he said, attendance and giving are up, and the church is healthy.

Yandian's roots in the Tulsa charismatic/Pentecostal world go back six decades.

His parents were traveling to Enid in the 1940s when they ran out of gas and money in Tulsa. A couple who attended Beams of Light Tabernacle, one of Tulsa's most active Pentecostal churches at that time, offered his parents a place to stay in their basement. Out of courtesy to them, the young couple attended church, where both of them became born-again Christians, Yandian said. A few years later, his father, who flew B-17 combat missions over Germany in World War II, began to pastor in a fellowship of churches called Grace churches. Beams of Light was prominent in that fellowship.

Yandian was born in Tulsa in 1948, and made a commitment to Christ when he was 5 at a vacation Bible school at Beams of Light, he said.

After graduating from Hale High School in 1966, he attended Oklahoma State University, where he first felt called to the ministry. He left OSU to attend Bible school in Tulsa, and after graduation, began to teach at Sheridan Assembly, now called Sheridan Christian Center, a church where Rhema Bible Training Center, Victory Christian Center and other major Tulsa ministries got their start.

In late 1972, Sheridan Assembly associate minister Phil Johnson left to start a new church, Grace Fellowship. Yandian and his new wife, Loretta, were among the 52 people who met Dec. 10 at the club room of Villa Fontana Apartments.

The church grew quickly and moved several times. Within five years, it was Tulsa's largest church.

Yandian went to work for Kenneth Hagin Ministries and, eventually, taught at Hagin's Rhema Bible Training Center, and then became dean of the school.

He was asked to pastor Grace in 1980. The church grew to 3,000 members from 2,000 members in his first year and leveled off after that.

In 2006, the church changed its name from Grace Fellowship to Grace Church.