

by Jackie Perrone

Paul Bishop

When you need a L.I.F.T., call Paul Bishop at First Baptist Church of Lexington.



No, that's not a ride-sharing service. It's a ministry of support for all who need help, whether with addiction or relationships or grief or any other of life's obstacles.

At First Baptist, L.I.F.T. stands for Listening, Inspiring, Facilitating, and Transforming. Pastor Paul Bishop arrived at First Baptist in 2003 and established the counseling service, which now offers six counselors and a wide variety of support groups open to everyone.

He took a circuitous route to get here. This transplanted South Carolinian grew up in Japan, the son of missionaries who divided their time between Japan and state-side locations, in four- to eight-year segments. His mother was from New Jersey, his father from Texas, and his education spanned New Jersey, North Carolina, and, finally, permanently, South Carolina.

"My education centered on religious education, bachelor's and master's at Bible colleges," he says. "I earned the master's in cultural studies and counseling at Columbia International University and spent some time in private practice at Palmetto Counseling Associates. Then, First Baptist called me, and the counseling program here has been growing steadily ever since it started 16 years ago. We have been housed in the Fellowship Hall building at the church, but this year in May we are opening a new building across Barr Road, which will provide the meeting space and facilities we need."

This new building, named "Bridge of Hope," provides seven offices, along with meeting rooms and kitchen facilities, for the support groups and counseling sessions, which are attended by up to 90 persons every week. Pastor Bishop likens it to the steps programs of AA and of Rick Warren's worldwide ministry. "We offer a faith-based program with steps of recovery, including Jesus as the higher power. A large gathering may break up into small groups for discussion and sharing. The step study centers on hang-ups and habits; identifying the issues and seeking changes in lifestyle." He's seen the change that can come from taking these positive steps.

Saturdays find the counselors offering a breakfast for the First Responders they consider their partners. Many volunteers give their time to make these programs possible.

In March, Pastor Bishop led a team of seven young people on a missionary trip to Japan, where they visited near the site of the 2011 earthquake and tsunami, which brought much devastation to the area. These trips offer friendship, music, and a helping hand in the name of Christianity.

Paul and his wife Susan, an art teacher in the Midlands, have three adult children: Joel, who joined the mission trip, daughter Kayla who is earning her doctorate in physical therapy, and Jeremy, graduating from Auburn University with a major in geology. ■

