

THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL



Debbie Neal looks out over the water as she stands on a boardwalk that crosses the lake at Lichterman Nature Center before the start of the first service for Water Christian Church. An hour before service begins the congregation can stroll the grounds where Bible passages are set up to read and contemplate.



Pastor Patt Hardaway get a warm hug from Chuck Lesnick before the start of the first service at Water Christian Church held at Lichterman Nature Center. The new start up church will meet monthly, with the next service on December 23, until March when they hope to have a congregation large enough to begin meeting each Sunday.

A walk in the park: New Memphis church finds home at Lichterman Nature Center

Water Christian Church finds home in Lichterman Nature Center

By Timberly Moore

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When Rev. Patt Hardaway's mother learned her daughter was going to start a new church after leaving the ministry at Collierville Christian Church, she stared at her blankly, walked into the kitchen and asked Hardaway if she would like a cup of soup.

Hardaway, founding pastor of the new [Water Christian Church](#) inside [Lichterman Nature Center](#), said she was stunned by her mother's reaction, but in some ways expected it because disbelief had been the reaction she was getting from everyone else.

"I once heard someone say, 'The person that risks nothing, does nothing,'" she said to her new congregation at the church's first service Sunday.

After five years, Hardaway left Collierville Christian Church four months ago. She said it was due to creative differences.

"I felt like I couldn't dream there," she said. "It's easier to build a new church than to go in and remodel an existing one."

While walking through Shelby Farms after leaving her position as head pastor at Collierville, Hardaway looked around, realized she wanted to have her church near water, and began talks with the park to rent space.

"I just knew we were supposed to be at Shelby Farms, but at the last minute they sent me an e-mail saying that they didn't think Shelby Farms was the right venue for us," she said. "I was so down and out. I didn't want to talk to anybody, even God. "

Three weeks ago, Hardaway drove past Lichterman and went in to ask about opening her church there. Nature center officials agreed to rent space to the new church, and Hardaway met with her group to make things happen the next week.

The congregation of approximately 50 gathered in the Lowenberg Visitors Center on Sunday, with views of the property's lakes, on a clear day that dawned cool but warmed up before service ended.

Darline Robison, volunteer, said the crew had planned to start at a later date, but knew the weather might be too cold for morning prayer walks if they began in December, and people would miss the mood of the church. They planned the opening of the church and pulled it off in just two weeks.

"What better way to worship than to be among God's creation," Robison said. "Being here will slow you down and allow you to think about God and what he wants you to do."

Robison said Hardaway conceived of the church without building plans.

"Not paying for a building frees us up to reach out and invest in the community," Robison said. "We think that going to church should be a walk in the park. You should be stress free. We want to create a spiritual environment to let God come in. It's all about community and worship."

Linda Lesnick, church member, said she followed Hardaway.

"I loved her messages from the previous church," Lesnick said. "I like the idea of a church going from the bottom up."

A volunteer rang a cast-iron bell before service to let anyone on a nature walk know that the hour-long service was beginning. Others lit candles, adding to the ambiance of the still waters outside the worship area in the visitors center. In her sermon, Hardaway explained the church's purpose and why she founded the church by referencing a scripture where David said "sing unto the Lord a new song."

"We've got something new going on," Hardaway said. "This church is singing and writing a new song."

