

Dear Sharon Church Family,

It is with both excitement and sadness that I share with you today that I am resigning from my role as lead/senior pastor and discipleship here at Sharon Baptist Church. It has been my joy and pleasure to serve you and the community of Ola and Henry County for the last 23 years, literally nearly one-half of my life. During that time, I have served in just about every capacity imaginable, and my wife has partnered with me in nearly every ministry here as well. I distinctly remember in the early days when a elementary aged kid saw me changing light bulbs in the chapel and exclaimed, "I always wondered what your real job was Mr. Gary and now I know." We have seen seasons of growth as well as those where the attendance dropped through a vast array of experiences and challenges, and through it all, God has grown Sharon from a 100+ year old struggling church looking backwards at a great heritage and a very indefinite future, to a church of incredible people that is making a profound impact in lives around the globe today. It is difficult to believe that the little church of 50+ people who had essentially given up following a church split 18-months before our arrival in 1991 has become a church where 700-1,000 people participate on weekends with an intentional desire to reach those on its campus, in its community, and all around the globe. All I can say is, "Yea God!"

TAKE A LOOK BACK

Twenty-three years ago, my journey at Sharon began with a phone conversation with a man who was a deacon and the leader of the pastoral search team for our church. My name was discovered by the search team when Sharon's interim pastor was handed my resume during a lunch meeting by a friend of my dad's in Alpharetta, Georgia. Later, the search team from Sharon came to hear me speak during a seminary break in the June 1991, and following a meeting at a local Shoney's, they invited me to come to speak in view of a call. Following an 86-0 vote in favor of me becoming pastor (first unanimous vote per Mrs. JoAnn Sims, the long-time church historian), I accepted the call with 58 returning the next Sunday. When asked, those who voted and chose not to return informed me they would see me during Christmas, Easter, and for all important church votes.

Now that we know how it all started, let's take a moment and reflect on many of the things God has done as we have all partnered together with Him in twenty-three years of ministry. There is no way to cover all that has been done but here is a taste of how good God has been to us:

- We helped this traditional church to become a relevant body of believers striving to know Jesus Christ and serve Him in our local community, state, and world, where unbelieving and unchurched people now feel comfortable to come to check out the claims of God and His Son .
- We partnered with other local churches in launching 5 new local church plants in the southern part of metropolitan Atlanta, many of which are thriving today.
- We partnered with national churches in launching 3 international church plants in the nations of Jamaica and Nicaragua.
- Our congregation grew from 50 attendees to 700-1000 individuals attending on weekends.
- We have transitioned the church's polity from a deacon-run into an elder-led, team managed model, creating avenues for our church to diversify the number and roles of people who are involved in leadership.
- We grew the staff from one full-time pastor to a large, dynamic group of dedicated and talented men

and women.

- We have established new partnerships between our church and the local public schools through mentoring relationships, chaplaincy, use of our buildings, and an involvement in many of the academic, arts, and athletic programs that the local schools offer to their students.
- We launched a school that now runs to middle school that places an emphasis on academics in a Christ-centered environment.

Though there are many others ministries we have launched together and miracles we have witnessed as a church family, the previous list is quite amazing. Again, all we can say is, “Yea God!”

As I think of Sharon, memories flood my mind both personally and ministerially. On the personal side, my marriage to Krissy has grown and been strengthened here, both our kids were born and dedicated here, they both believed in Christ and were baptized here, and I have essentially grown up as a man and pastor here. The people that comprise Sharon will always be a special part of my life. Not to sound repetitive, but I have been here for half of my life. On the ministerial side, I have seen some people be born, dedicated, saved, and baptized all during my ministry. Others were teenagers when we showed up and today they are happily married with kids. Others who are now seniors accepted Christ twenty years ago, and as I have watched them age, I rejoice in remembering the moment when they believed and were saved. Some of those moments were in workout centers, others accepted Christ in their family room in their home, and even others were saved on their back deck. In addition to all of those experiences, as a pastor, Sharon was the first place I ever baptized a new believer, married a couple, led a funeral, guided a business meeting, and a host of other pastoral “firsts.” I look forward to spending eternity in heaven with so many I knew through my time at Sharon.

HOW DID WE TAKE THIS STEP TO LEAVE

Just as my call to the church was validated in many ways then, my call away from the church has been affirmed in many different ways now. Please know that our family is not running from anything in any way. This has been one of the most challenging and difficult decisions we have ever made. We have a great house with a great house payment, my wife’s sister and family attend Sharon, my wife’s mom and stepdad live nearby in Hampton, and my mom lives just north of Atlanta. We love Sharon, and if we lived in Henry County and I was not a pastor, knowing the staff at Sharon and the people who make up the church family, Sharon would be our church home. Adding to our feelings about the church, we have been blessed with great neighbors, all four of us have great friends we enjoy who live in Henry County, and both of our kids are active and performing well academically, athletically, and artistically in leagues, schools, and programs throughout our county, led and instructed by many incredible musicians, coaches, and teachers.

Our relationship with our new church actually originated from a point of commonality that might seem bizarre at first. The senior pastor of the church where we are headed (Discovery Bible Fellowship) leads a ministry that starts and sustains orphanages around the world, and one of the many they lead is located in Uganda. Yes, the same Uganda where John, Bobbi, Jackson, and Lily Palmer headed last February as they left Sharon to go to the mission field. In fact, the senior pastor at Discovery actually worked with the very leader in Africa assisting the Palmers in their orphanage. From that connection a very long series of conversations began that led to our family flying to see Tulsa, Oklahoma. Though Krissy and I had lived in Texas before arriving at Sharon, neither of us had ever been to Tulsa. During that visit, our family all sensed God might be up to

something but we were not yet convinced. Please know that during our 23 years at Sharon, we have been invited to other ministry/church locations similar to our trip to Tulsa, and in each situation, we did not sense God leading us to take another step. Following our trip to Tulsa, our family and the church leaders at Discovery all agreed to take a season to pray and here is what took place from that moment forward:

- The staff and elders at Discovery prayed until the point they sensed God's leading to offer us the opportunity to join their team in the role of small groups, evangelism, and teaching/preaching.
- Our family prayed until Harper, Graham, and Krissy were all convinced; I was in the minority and not yet convinced at that moment as they all were.
- I shared the burden with our church staff and elders so they could pray for clarity as leaders at Sharon, with regards to the decision that was being considered.
- I also shared the prayer request with 7-8 men who are my prayer partners, most of whom are pastors, including many with who attended seminary with me. Each of these men love me and my family, and yet whether I stayed or moved was not an issue for them. They were praying for all of us to clearly hear God in the decision.
- Just two weeks ago, I sensed the need to "spend the night" with God, meaning I went to a bedroom in our basement while my kids spent the night at some friend's houses and prayed and asked God to speak through His Word. In that dialogue with God, He led me through the stories of Elijah, Elisha, and many other parts of the Bible. As the story of Gideon came to my mind, God led me to lay out a fleece that would confirm what His leading would be.
- The consensus among our elders, staff, and prayer partners was this: "We affirm your ministry of 23 years and all that God has done under your leadership, we hate to see you step away and will miss you dearly, but we do indeed believe that it is time for you and your family to begin a new adventure with God." Following those discussions, God confirmed in even more ways that we needed to step away from the church we love and follow Him to Oklahoma.

You might be wondering about the church and ministry where we are going, as many of you have seen and heard of pastors and ministers who exit churches where you have attended in the past for more money and bigger ministries. I do not use the "God seems to always call pastors to 'bigger and better'" in a sarcastic manner, but I do know that is the perception many church attendees have of pastors and their moves to new churches. Here are a few interesting facts about our move to Discovery: it is similar in size numerically to Sharon, my move is from senior pastor to pastor of groups/evangelism with some teaching and preaching responsibilities 12-14 times per year, and finally, the move involves a cut in pay. Honestly speaking, none of those three factors mean that this move is or is not from God, but I did want you to know the basis for this step of faith. Our family does not view this as a "vocational" or "professional move," but a missionary calling, where the Lord has called us to go to a new mission field and serve there in a new way. This "move" has nothing to do with moving up the pastoral ladder.

TAKE A LOOK AHEAD

What's next at Sharon? Let me assure you that one reason I am stepping away with confidence is this is the first time in my time at Sharon that we have great people at all of our staff positions at the same time. Throughout my time here, we have had some great people with great hearts for God and people, but we have never had a team where the entire team is as solid as it is now. If you don't know the team, let me take a moment to introduce them to you and let you see why you can have confidence as the church moves ahead.

Here is a snapshot of our team:

- Our worship pastor is Johnny Rohrbeck, and when you read the Bible and come across a guy in the book of Acts named Barnabus, you have met Johnny. His heart for God and for people is huge. He thrives in getting those he leads connected to God through sincere hearts in worship.
- Our director of preschool ministries is Dayna Worsham. Her heart for God, for preschoolers, and for their parents continues the precedent set by Kim Howard, her predecessor. Seemingly everyone comments on Dayna's passion for preschoolers and her organized effort to minister to our newborn-K5 kids in creative and fresh ways.
- Our interim children's pastor is Danielle Smith, and she just started with us last Sunday. Danielle brings experience as a children's pastor in another setting along with a big heart for kids. Her love and excitement of kids ministry centers on what can happen when 1st-4th graders begin to grasp who God is, how much He loves them, and the fact He has a plan for their lives
- Our recreation pastor and pastor of Route 56 (5th-6th graders) is Daryl Sanders, and knowing Daryl, his passion is simple: he wants to leverage incredible recreational sports experiences so that kids and their parents can be introduced to Jesus and know Him personally and eternally. That passion continues into his leadership and programming for those in our Route 56 ministry.
- Our student pastor is Greg McGaha, and for those who know Greg, they know his desire to see students (7th-12th graders) know Christ, grow in their relationship with Him, and display Him by a changed life, especially with a heart to assist those the world has "kicked to the curb."
- Other key staff leaders include Cathy Miles, who ensures we make decisions that are financially responsible, Donna Lynn, who efficiently oversees our calendar planning and use of our facilities and all equipment, and Rob Gauvin, the man responsible for maintaining the awesome facilities God has provided for us. Complementing our church staff are two incredible leaders guiding The Sharon School, Jill Dillingham who leads our elementary grades and Natalie Sledge who leads our preschool-aged children. Both ladies lead the school with caring hearts and a desire to create learning environments where children grow to love God and think with depth.
- Finally, let me remind you of the godly men on our elder team. First is David Wilkerson, a man who models consistency and dependability, especially as he leads our finance team. Along with David is Kent Bookout, who has one of the biggest hearts for people you will ever see. Next is Steve Sanders who literally has a passion for people all around the globe to know Christ. Fourth is Clay Lawrence, whose passion is that people know Christ through His Word, the Bible. The final member of the team is Luther Brown, whose brilliance in strategy planning and vision casting is evidenced in many different ways in his life, especially in the business he created.

This is the team that will provide leadership to our church in the days ahead.

How will the church proceed ahead?

First, the elders and staff will be providing great leadership to our church and its numerous ministries. They will need all of you to step up and assist by serving as God has called and equipped you to do. Assisting the elders will be either one or a team of former pastors to ensure that the decisions made by the leadership are theologically sound with a pastor's heart. Those being considered as advisors in this role are all men who have served churches that experienced transitions while maintaining large numbers of attendees.

Additionally, I will spend one week preparing materials to assist Sharon during the interim period, based on my knowledge of the church and the vast array of ways it functions.

Second, the elders are going to create a teaching rotation, where Daryl Sanders, Johnny Rohrbeck, Greg McGaha, Tim Nobles, and others will be speaking in our Sunday morning services. They will be covering a wide range of topics pertinent to the life of our church and all those who are active in it during this interim period. What an exciting time to get to know our staff and others through their teachings about God and life as you eagerly await God's man to take Sharon to the next level!

Third, our elders will be appointing a search team to begin the journey of looking for the next pastor here at Sharon. I cannot wait to visit in years to come to see how all of you and God have partnered to build on the foundation we have established together under my 23-year tenure. I am praying for great things to happen so that we might all shout again, "Yea God!"

THANK YOU AGAIN

There are no words to adequately describe how I feel today. I have experienced so many moments of joy and seasons of challenge here at Sharon during my tenure. Krissy, Graham, Harper, and I love you, this community, and the people around the world that have been affected by this church body. We arrived here in our early 20's and have grown up here. I was ordained following the acceptance of the call of the membership of Sharon to come and be their pastor. I earned my doctorate here, with many at Sharon participating in my doctoral project. Our kids were born during our tenure at Sharon and they have know no other church home except for Sharon. Many of you have taught them, entertained them, led them, and mentored them. You have played a significant role in who they are becoming.

While it is exciting to be on God's agenda, this has been a very difficult decision for us, and yet, there has been such peace in the small steps of the journey, the larger picture has become even more clearly defined for all four of us. We have loved you and always will. You have loved us and I hope we will have a special place in your hearts. We will always treasure our years at Sharon and the time God has allowed us to have with you with as much joy as we look ahead to our new assignment with an incredible sense of anticipation.

We do plan to visit again during those times when we return to see family during school breaks and other holidays, and know, if you are ever out in the Tulsa, Oklahoma area, you have a place to visit. We would love to have the privilege of introducing you to those who are benefitting from the 23-year investment that all of you have made in us.

For God's glory,

Gary, Krissy, Graham, and Harper Lewis