



# planting hope

Union Alumni  
Begin a New Ministry  
in Post-Katrina  
New Orleans

By Tim Ellsworth

**P**oking through his New Orleans apartment 10 weeks after Hurricane Katrina had blasted through the place, Matt Tipton grabs a couple of dishes off the top shelf in the kitchen. He uncovers a couple of pieces of crusty jewelry.

That's all he's able to salvage. The entire apartment complex would be bulldozed in a couple of weeks.

"We lost all our wedding pictures," Tipton says. "I brought the pictures home, but they'd been under water and so they smelled so bad. We eventually had to throw them away."

The hurricane cost Matt and his wife Elaine all of their physical possessions. It cost them their student ministry at a local church. But it deepened their devotion to Christ and set them on a path that has brought them back to the city they once called home, where they are planting Hope Church and seeking to make disciples of Jesus. Joining them in the endeavor are 2006 Union alums Bill and Amber Dixon.

"I look back on that part of life, and to outsiders it might seem relatively horrific, and at that moment it definitely did," Tipton recalls. "But looking back on it, I wouldn't trade that season of my life for any amount of

money or any experience in the world.

"It was certainly a shaping experience," he continues. "It's one of those moments where you take a look at your life and ask yourself what really matters. You begin to lay the things that are temporal next to the things that are eternal, and you come to realize that the only things that matter are God's word, God's presence and people."

A 2003 Union graduate, Tipton began his ministry in New Orleans while a student at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. He has always felt a special tug toward the city, as his grandparents lived in the Metairie/Jefferson Parish area for about 50 years. His original intention was to spend a few years there, get his degree and move along. But one day as he walked through the student center at the seminary, he noticed an advertisement for a physical education teacher at a local Christian school, run by Memorial Baptist Church.

He applied and got the job, and the church eventually asked him to be its youth pastor. Tipton began with a group of five or seven teenagers, who happened to be the only people younger than senior adults in the church. Tipton embraced those students and devoted himself to their spiritual development.



"As our ministry began to grow over those four years we were there, we saw the seven turn into 15, and then into 30 and 75," Matt recalls. "It was difficult ministry. We buried, I think, 13 of their parents while I was here."

Tipton was wrapping up his seminary degree by this time, and was being encouraged by people he respected to start sending out his resume. So he did that, and Clearview Baptist Church in Franklin, Tenn., was interested. Tipton interviewed there and the church offered him a position. But as he and Elaine discussed the matter, they concluded that God had not released them from their place of service at Memorial. Then everything changed two weeks later with Hurricane Katrina.

"Our lives were completely reset," Matt recalls.

The Tiptons spent some time in Germantown, Tenn., doing disaster relief, then landed in Atlanta for a few weeks when the seminary relocated there for a semester. All along, Clearview continued to call, asking Tipton to join them. Matt and Elaine determined that God was leading them there, so they went and focused their ministry specifically on memorizing Scripture with their students and probing the depths of God's word.

"I think the place where ultimately we fail the most in loving God's word is in the practical application side," Matt says. "We can study it and read it and memorize it and chew on it, but at the end of the day, if we don't do what it tells us to do, then we've failed at all points."

After nearly four years at Clearview, Matt resigned in June 2009, sensing that his time at the church had drawn to an end, but still unsure what he would do next. He began talking to mentors and friends asking for their input, and had an especially meaningful conversation with Allen Jackson, his youth ministry professor in seminary.

"I remember sitting across the table from Dr. Jackson," Matt says. "He looked at me, and he said, 'You're going to plant a church here.'"

Tipton thought to himself all the reasons why that wouldn't happen. For starters, he said New Orleans isn't the best place to raise a family. Furthermore, he had gotten no indication that the Lord was leading him to do that. And finally, Elaine would think he was crazy.

But that night, after his meeting with Jackson, he went over to a friend's house for what he thought to be a small reunion with some of his former students. More people showed up than he was expecting, including several people that he didn't know. Most of them were young adults, high school students or college students. More than once, someone he had never met told him, "You don't know me, but the Lord used you to impact my friend, and he used them to impact me, so you're part of my story."

Maybe there's something to this idea of planting a church here after all, Matt thought.

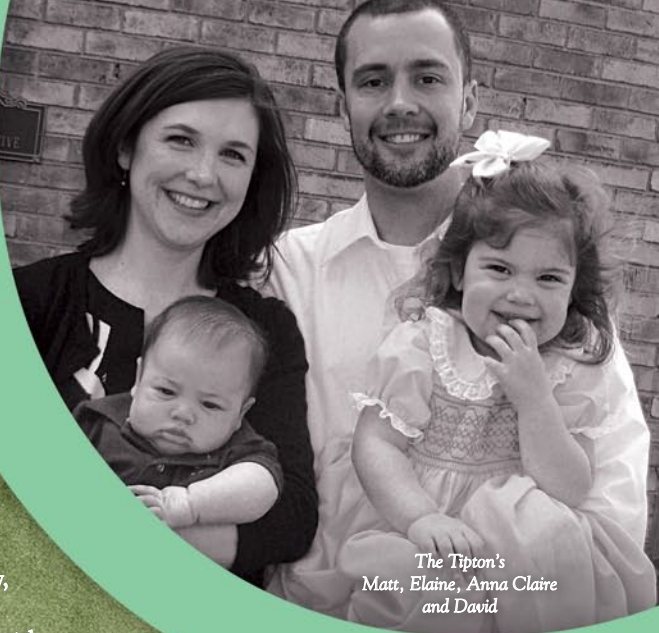
"I see that night as the Lord giving me permission to explore it," he says.

Now he had to pitch the idea to Elaine, and he wasn't expecting that to go well. Imagine his surprise when she told him that God had placed that very idea on her heart.

**"We witnessed the gospel truly change lives (in New Orleans), and that is exciting,"**

...Elaine says. "It is also exciting and humbling that God would choose to use me in a place where the need is so great."

So Matt and Elaine began making plans to move, along with their two children, to New Orleans – a move that was completed in January. Along the way they enlisted the Dixons to come with them and be their partners in planting Hope Church, a church that those involved hope will demonstrate the love of Christ to a city that desperately needs it.




*The Tipton's  
Matt, Elaine, Anna Claire  
and David*

"I think one of the best ways to do this is through our acts of service to the community," said Alicia Austin, a student at the University of New Orleans who is part of the church plant. "Acts of service can be anything from feeding the homeless, to just sitting and loving on someone that is hurting. My hope for this church is that it will be able to grasp that sense of community within the New Orleans area -- that all of its actions will be aimed to selflessly serve others and show them the love of Christ."

Tipton will spend the first several months in the city participating in a weekly Bible study, attended by several of his former students, as he starts to identify those people interested in joining the church plant.

"Here's a place where I really feel blessed," Tipton says. "A lot of times church planters come into a city and they don't know anyone. They're starting from ground zero. For me, I have a tremendous amount of relationships here. There are tons and tons of young adults in this city who are hungry for spiritual things. The Lord's gifted me, I believe, to be able to pour out into their lives."

What he wants to give them is the word of God, which Tipton has come to love more than anything else – and he credits Union with helping to develop that love.

"I was really challenged at Union," Tipton says. "Union gave me the opportunity to see some things about myself that needed to shift. To develop some of those skills in college that ultimately gave the tools and thoughts to love God's word responsibly is a big deal." 



*The Dixon's  
Bill, Amber and Will*