



### sponsor spotlight

Written by Karen Martin, staff writer

# PULASKI HEIGHTS BAPTIST CHURCH



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Here's how Matt Dodrill, pastor of Pulaski Heights Baptist Church, describes his congregation: "We resonate with the words of Jeremiah, who told the Israelites to 'seek the welfare of the city.' As the only church on Kavanaugh Boulevard, we are uniquely situated to seek the welfare of Hillcrest."

PHBC was founded in 1913 "by a few women who saw the need for a neighborhood church in Hillcrest," he says. "To this day, we are intensely committed to the flourishing of our neighborhood."

"We are also committed to serving our city by seeking justice. Many years ago,

a few of our members were leaders of the Women's Emergency Committee, formed in 1958, which fought to keep Little Rock public schools desegregated. Today, our Jubilee Ministry provides housing assistance, debt relief, and mutual aid for people who are struggling to stay afloat."

PHBC is affiliated with Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a network of Baptist churches that affirms women in ministry, rejects fundamentalism, and seeks to embody the good and just life wrought in the person of Jesus Christ.

"In Jesus' inaugural sermon in Luke, he says that his mission is to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim

release to the captives, and to let the oppressed go free," Pastor Dodrill says. "That's why PHBC exists: to participate in this exhilarating mission."

PHBC is dedicated to serving all those in Hillcrest, he says. "We can provide a farmers' market. We can promote local artwork as a medium of transcendence. We can provide space in our large building for nonprofits, culinary entrepreneurs, theater companies, photographers, and graphic designers."

"We're already doing these things, and none of them are primarily about converting people to Christianity. They're about being faithfully present to our neighbors, just as God became radically present through the incarnation of his Son."

His church is not interested in the culture wars that have gripped American Christendom for the last 40

years. "We are not easily pigeonholed on political issues, which is a testament to the fact that our primary allegiance is to the kingdom of God."

The pandemic was an interesting case study, he continues. "Whereas several institutions — churches included — adopted the polarizing rhetoric around vaccines and mask-wearing, our congregation didn't frame the issue that way. It was a gospel issue — a matter of loving our neighbors in a time of distress. I'm very proud of my congregation for the way they've handled this difficult season."

Pastor Dodrill grew up in Murfreesboro, TN. "Although I'm a Baptist, I was educated by the Calvinists (Calvin College), trained by the Methodists (Duke University's Divinity School), and 'catechized' by a quasi-Pentecostal storefront church as a kid," he says. "As one of my mentors likes to say, I'm either ecumenically inclined or ecclesially confused. I like to think the former is true."

After seminary, he served a small church in rural Virginia and a large urban church in Dallas, Texas.

When the pastorate at Pulaski Heights Baptist Church became available, Pastor Dodrill was intrigued by its location. "Hillcrest is an amazing neighborhood with a rich ethos of arts and culture, which was very attractive to me," he says. "When I met the search committee, I was head over heels for them: good salt-of-the-earth people. And when I heard their dreams for the future — dreams of cultivating discipleship and engaging the neighborhood — I was all in. It was a match made in heaven — literally!"



He and his family — wife, Abi, 9-year-old twins, Paisley and Adeline, 4-year-old, Silas, and 1-year-old, Mabel Anne — moved to Little Rock in February 2020.

Part of the attraction of PHBC for Pastor Dodrill is its "commitment to retrieving the tradition of Ann Judson, Walter Rauschenbusch, Martin Luther King Jr., Harry Emerson Fosdick, and Prathia Hall. These were not flag-waving, judgmental, moralistic fundamentalists. They were committed to justice and the life of the mind, due in large part to their Baptist convictions."

"The original Baptists were radical dissenters who vehemently opposed the idea that baptism was a rite of initiation into the state. They believed that baptism immerses believers into a different kingdom. The whole idea was to resist being co-opted by the mechanisms of power."

So don't let the word "Baptist" scare you, he says. "As I like to remind

people, the creator of bourbon whiskey was Elijah Craig, a Baptist preacher. A few months ago, our church held a wine-pairing event at a member's house. If you want to know what kind of church PHBC is, just note that their pastor is comfortable publishing that sentence in a magazine.

When asked if he had any advice for Hillcrest residents, Pastor Dodrill replies, "As Greek poet Archilochus once said, 'The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.' I hope I can achieve the depth of the hedgehog, but I identify more with the breadth of the fox, who is a master of none."

"I'll defer to another poet, Mary Oliver, whose instructions for living a good life are remarkably Christian in character, even if not intentionally. I can think of no better advice for Christians and non-Christians alike: "Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it."