

## St. Tammany megachurch pastor steps down after nearly 30 years in the pulpit. What's next?

The Rev. James Mitchell looks back as he leaves the pulpit of the 6,000-member St. Timothy on the Northshore.

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Jan 9, 2025

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The Rev. James Mitchell gives his last sermon before retiring after 30 years at St. Timothy on the Northshore in Mandeville, Sunday, Dec. 15, 2024. (Staff photo by Scott Threlkeld, The Times-Picayune)

STAFF PHOTO BY SCOTT THRELKELD

When James Mitchell first came to Mandeville in 1995 to scope out the Methodist church he was to serve as senior pastor, the Bossier City native says he had trouble even finding St. Timothy on the Northshore.

“I thought we had the worst location,” Mitchell said. “All the other churches were on U.S. 190 and Highway 22. Here we were stuck back in the woods. We didn’t have very much parking at all, just the front lot and a little strip.”



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But there's no missing St. Timothy today.  
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The congregation was already large, with 1,500 members, when Mitchell and his wife, Delaine, arrived with their infant son. But now, nearly 30 years later, Mitchell is retiring from a church that boasts more than 6,000 members and has an average weekly attendance of 2,300.




A photo taken 30 years ago shows the Rev. James Mitchell, his wife, Delaine, and son, Patrick, is shown during James Mitchell's last service before retiring after 30 years at St. Timothy on the Northshore in Mandeville, Sunday, Dec. 15, 2024. (Staff photo by Scott Threlkeld, The Times-Picayune)

STAFF PHOTO BY SCOTT THRELKELD

With eight services every weekend and a police officer directing traffic bound for the Asbury Lane campus, it's not only the largest Methodist church in Louisiana but ranks nationally in the top 25 fastest-growing and largest Methodist churches.

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The woods that once obscured St. Timothy have given way to shopping centers as St. Tammany Parish experienced explosive suburban growth — a factor that Mitchell readily acknowledges as part of the reason for the church's membership boom.

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The statistics, coming at a time when mainstream Protestant churches are facing steep declines nationally, are impressive — a 425% growth in membership and a budget that ballooned from \$634,000 when Mitchell began at St. Timothy to \$3.75 million in 2024.

Those stats were front and center in the sanctuary as congregation leaders spoke during Mitchell's final Sunday as senior pastor in December.

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But Mitchell himself is quick to credit others with St. Timothy's success, noting that the growth spurt began under Larry Madden, a beloved former senior pastor who knew every member of the congregation by name, and crediting his staff of seven pastors along with lay volunteers.



The Rev. James Mitchell gives a sermon on his last day before retiring after 30 years at St. Timothy on the Northshore in Mandeville, Sunday, Dec. 15, 2024. (Staff photo by Scott Threlkeld, The Times-Picayune)

STAFF PHOTO BY SCOTT THRELKELD

## An introvert in the pulpit

Mitchell, who turned 67 the day before his retirement, looks the part of senior pastor, silver-haired with a warm, affable manner. But the former economics major describes himself as a true introvert.



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On Sundays I'm shaking hands and visiting people and talking. Afterwards, I'm just totally exhausted," he said, adding that congregants know him mainly through the pulpit.

That's where church members say he shines. Longtime parishioner Reid Falconer says he was there for Mitchell's first sermon as well as his last. "James was a young pulpit preacher. If your hair can be blown black by a sermon, that was kind of the effect. He was a giant breath of fresh air, and I knew instantly he was the guy for us."

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Mitchell, who doesn't use notes when delivering sermons, sees preaching as his primary role. But he also had a clear idea of what needed to happen to keep St. Timothy growing. He arrived at a good time, he says, with a congregation that bought into the idea that families with young children were the target audience.





The Rev. James Mitchell gives his last sermon before retiring after 30 years at St. Timothy on the Northshore in Mandeville, Sunday, Dec. 15, 2024. (Staff photo by Scott Threlkeld, The Times-Picayune)

STAFF PHOTO BY SCOTT THRELKELD

That meant having Sunday school for kids while their parents were at services — a controversial idea at the time — and adding contemporary services. When St. Timothy built a larger sanctuary, retractable screens were included. “The congregation came to realize that it (screens) was not the tool of the devil,” Mitchell said, and now they remain down during the traditional services as well.

“I always tried to study churches on the cutting edge,” Mitchell said.

## A traditionalist worldview

But at its heart, St. Timothy is strongly orthodox in its teaching and beliefs, with a strong emphasis on Bible studies. “It’s reflective of our community as well,” he said.

The congregation voted in 2022 to leave the United Methodist Church, which has been undergoing a rift between its progressive and traditionalist wings — in large part over issues such as gay marriage and ordination of openly gay clergy. St. Timothy stood on the traditionalist side, citing concerns over theological pluralism and a drift away from what it called “traditional Biblical norms” in an email to congregants leading up to the decision to leave.



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About a third of Louisiana UMC congregations disaffiliated, including three of the four largest congregations, Mitchell said.



The Rev. James Mitchell, left, prays with his son, Patrick, and wife, Delaine, during his last service before retiring after 30 years at St. Timothy on the Northshore in Mandeville, Sunday, Dec. 15, 2024. (Staff photo by Scott Threlkeld, The Times-Picayune)

STAFF PHOTO BY SCOTT THRELKELD

“I’m sure disaffiliation was a difficult experience for every church involved in the process,” said Mitchell, who remains circumspect in discussing the issue.

“Like any other significant life-changing experience, we dealt with it with prayer, asking for the discernment of God’s will in the most grace-filled way possible,” he said. “I firmly believe it was the direction God was leading St. Timothy to go, and we have certainly been blessed and have grown since ... in numbers, our finances, and



more importantly, spiritually as well.”

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## Starting a new chapter

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Now, St. Timothy faces another change with Mitchell’s departure.

His long tenure is unusual for a denomination that typically moves clergy every three years. Although opportunities arose — and Falconer said he worried a bigger church would scoop him up — Mitchell wanted to stay, and the congregation wanted to keep him.

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The Rev. James Mitchell, left, is joined by his wife, Delaine, and son, Patrick, during his last service before retiring after 30 years at St. Timothy on the Northshore in Mandeville, Sunday, Dec. 15, 2024. (Staff photo by Scott Threlkeld, The Times-Picayune)

STAFF PHOTO BY SCOTT THRELKELD

As a young man, Mitchell wrestled with where to attend seminary, with many pushing him to Southern Methodist University, just hours from his home. He says he got the answer when the car radio in his Pinto played “Rocky Mountain High,” moments after he had asked God whether he should go instead to Iliff School of Theology in Colorado.

Mitchell says he’s wary of people who say God “told” them something. But just as the John Denver hit spoke to him at 22, he says he feels God let him know that 67 was his time to step down.

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His comfort with that decision is underlined by his confidence in the new senior pastor, Josh Elder, who began at St. Timothy as a part-time associate nearly 12 years ago and became co-pastor two years ago as the church began laying the groundwork for Mitchell's departure.

Elder, a 41-year-old Mandeville native, didn't grow up at St. Timothy's, but Mitchell served as his mentor while he was at seminary. "It's more than just a mentor/mentee relationship but really close friends," Elder said, describing how Mitchell patiently encouraged him to preach extemporaneously.



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The Rev. James Mitchell, left, watches as his wife, Delaine, is hugged by his son, Patrick, after Patrick gave her flowers, during James Mitchell's last service before retiring after 30 years at St. Timothy on the Northshore in Mandeville, Sunday, Dec. 15, 2024. (Staff photo by Scott Threlkeld, The Times-Picayune)

STAFF PHOTO BY SCOTT THRELKELD

“He had a great way,” Elder said. “He could have pushed me harder.”

Mitchell will spend the next three and a half months attending other churches to give Elder time to establish his role before returning as pastor emeritus.

“I intend to follow the example left by Dr. Madden, to be as helpful to the church and pastor as I can be, and to remember my place,” he said.

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