

Demographic data called aid to church growth and ministry_111703

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By Mark Wingfield

Managing Editor

LUBBOCK-All church leaders should understand the demographics of the communities they serve, according to Clay Price, director of research for the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

Price led a breakout session titled "Using Demographics for Church Growth and Ministry" during the BGCT annual session in Lubbock Nov. 10.



Clay Price
gives
messengers
tips on how
to use
demographic
data to focus
the ministry
of a local
church.

He quoted California pastor Rick Warren, who has testified that when he set out to start Saddleback Church in suburban Los Angeles, he spent three months studying Census data and demographic studies of the area to learn who lived there and understand their needs.

“All church leaders should be able to know as much as possible about their communities,” said Price, who noted that his office stands ready to help provide customized demographic data to Texas Baptist churches.

He outlined four basic principles of data interpretation, beginning with an admonition to “let the data speak for itself.” Often, demographic data need no interpretation other than to make it known, he said.

Price also urged churches gathering demographic data to get the big picture, to compare local data with state or county data and to note similarities or dissimilarities between the church members and residents of the community.

Armed with research, churches should move forward to ask three questions, Price declared:

- ◆ What should we do?

- ◆ What can we do?
- ◆ What will we do?

The latter is “the biggie,” Price said, because it moves from theory to action.

Thinking strategically, churches must consider what ministries to keep doing, what to change, what to discard and what new ministries to create.

The hardest part of that process will be discarding ministries that once might have been vital but today are no longer needed. However, demographic data can provide insight on where to make such changes, he said.

Price presented an illustration of demographic data he gathered for a Baptist church located near the site of the convention center. He used this data to demonstrate how an understanding of population, population trends, race and ethnicity, age structures and income can illuminate a church's strategic planning.

Normally, he said, churches should examine data for people who live within a five-mile radius of the church. In most Texas cities, that would translate into a 20-minute drive from the church.

However, in rural areas, the section studied sometimes should be increased to an eight- to 10-mile radius, he added.

Within a five-mile radius of the sample Lubbock church chosen, there are 42 Baptist churches with a combined membership of 33,000 and combined average morning worship attendance of 9,500. The same area is home to 170,000 people.

If Baptists are the majority religion in the city as believed, that means even

taking into account people who attend non-Baptist churches, there are thousands of unchurched people to reach in Lubbock, Price said.

For information on how the BGCT can provide demographic data for a local church or association, contact Price at price@bgct.org or call (214) 828-5138.

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