

Churches in transition face choice Embrace change or die_12604

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Churches in transition face choice: Embrace change or die

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RICHARDSON Many churches in transitional communities become open to transformation only when the fear of death becomes greater than the fear of change, according to Jim Young, director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas Missions Equipping Center.

When a congregation no longer resembles its surrounding neighborhood, leaders must become willing to ask hard questions, Young told participants at a community ministries workshop during the recent Texas Evangelism and Missions Conference.

Leaders need to inventory their experiences—"the good, the bad and the ugly"—to determine what God has done to prepare them to guide a church through a period of change, he said.

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At the same time, congregations should ask the same question and explore

events in their church history that shaped their collective character, values and personality.

“That means being willing to risk some honesty,” Young said, acknowledging it may mean the church has to “open some old wounds ... so that healing can take place from the inside out.”

In addition to this self-examination, the church also needs to look carefully at its community.

That process can be as formal and structured as a comprehensive community needs assessment, but it can begin simply by driving a different route to church through a less attractive neighborhood.

“We tend to drive to church on the same streets, turning the same direction every time. For a fresh look, take a different route. Take the long way around and look at the areas you tend to avoid,” he suggested.

“We all tend to avoid those areas that are not comfortable, that make us uneasy. We literally take the path of least resistance.”

Another important step church leaders should take is recognizing churches and communities tend to go through predictable life cycles, Young observed, outlining the process.

Birth. For a church, this is a time of great excitement and risk, as well as a period of dependency on a sponsoring church, association or convention. “And it's a time when members are keenly aware of the reality that God is at work,” Young said.

Likewise, a community goes through a period of growth and expansion, and those who are a part of the experience share a sense of what they hope their community eventually will become.

- ◆ Development. At this point, a church gains a sense of autonomy and

independence as it develops programs to sustain the ministries it values, such as Bible study, discipleship and worship. A community develops infrastructures for transportation, education, recreation and business.

- ◆ **Maturity.** Whether in a church or community, this is a time of stability and comfort that can lead to complacency, Young noted.

For a church, this may be a time when leaders are in place, and the congregation fails to develop a new generation of leaders.

- ◆ **Decline.** Young characterized this as a period of pre-transition.

“Things begin to change in the community. The problem is the church sees change 15 years too late,” he said.

Key leaders in the church move away, and they eventually join churches closer to their new homes. This stage leads to one of two possible futures.

- ◆ **Death or redevelopment.** At this point, a church must face the changing reality of its community, or it will cease to exist.

“When the fear of death becomes greater than the fear of change, that's when there is an opportunity for redevelopment,” Young said.

“The task is to continue to equip, train and empower people for service, and interpret for folks what has happened.”

Redevelopment requires long-term commitment on the part of leaders and church members.

Pastors who see churches in transition as “stepping-stones” to bigger churches do those congregations a disservice, Young said.

“It's long-term stability that makes a difference. There are no short-term quick fixes,” he said.

Sometimes a church is unable—either due to unwillingness or lack of resources—to make the changes necessary for redevelopment.

But even then God can bless, he added, pointing to the example of dying Anglo churches that have deeded their property over to their associations and enabled new ethnic churches to be born.

“Even in death, our Lord can bring life,” he said.

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