

Men find church-based fraternity worth their time, even if it means meeting before dawn_101804

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Men find church-based fraternity worth their time, even if it means meeting before dawn

By Ken Camp

Managing Editor

HOUSTON—Two Houston Baptist churches have discovered how to get several hundred men to church at 6 a.m. once a week.

“They come because it meets a need,” said Duane Brooks, pastor at Tallowood Baptist Church. “It answers the questions they are asking: ‘What does it mean to be a man? How can I get better at being a husband? How

can I be a better father to my children and a better son to my parents?"

Tallowood and University Baptist Church each recently started a six-month journey toward "authentic manhood" through Men's Fraternity. The groups they launched are among more than 400 started since August 2003 at churches throughout the United States and in China and Australia and among military personnel in Iraq.

Robert Lewis, teaching pastor at Fellowship Bible Church in Little Rock, Ark., started developing the Men's Fraternity curriculum 14 years ago.

Weekly meetings include a brief teaching time, followed by small-group exercises in which men are encouraged to explore their pasts, define manhood, create a code for living and develop a plan for keeping each other accountable to that code.

Using the Old Testament example of King David, the program examines the "four faces of men—king, lover, warrior and friend," explained Pastor Robert Creech of University Baptist Church.

"A big part of it initially is looking at how the past affects us," he said. "There's an exploration of the wounds men carry" such as having absentee or abusive fathers.

"It is transforming in the sense that it invites our men to unpack their bags, look into their pasts and see not only who they are but also what they do," Brooks added. "Ultimately, it brings Scripture to bear on men's lives and decisions."

The program meshes well with University Baptist Church's discipleship emphasis on helping members grow in Christ-likeness, Creech noted. But while the Men's Fraternity is church-based, it reaches far beyond a single congregation.

Men from more than 40 churches representing several denominations attend the weekly Bay Area Men's Fraternity meetings at University Baptist Church. Even some men who claim no church affiliation have been drawn to the meetings.

"It's giving them a chance to talk about things that just don't get talked about," Creech said.

Families will benefit from men participating in the program, he believes.

"We're teaching men to be present and accounted for at home," Creech said. "It's encouraging men to be engaged in life more directly through relationships with family, friends and God."

Wayne Young, coordinator of the Bay Area Men's Fraternity, thinks churches and the community will benefit.

"I personally believe a church is not any stronger than its families, and families are not any stronger than the fathers in them," he said. "Some fathers are not in the picture at all. But even in some homes where they're around, they're passive. They're captured by work commitments and other distractions."

Young, a layman at University Baptist Church, believes the Men's Fraternity teaches a "counter-cultural" message.

"Today's culture places men in the position of being measured by material success and the world's standards," he said. "It's all focused on the trappings of life-temporal things that don't really matter."

Young thinks Promise Keepers rallies, weekend men's retreats and church-based recreational activities have their place, but Men's Fraternity offers a deeper opportunity for ongoing spiritual development. While the initial program lasts about six months, additional studies are available, and some Men's Fraternity groups have been meeting for several years.

Mark Felton, a layman at University Baptist Church and member of the Bay Area Men's Fraternity leadership team, said the program satisfies a hunger many men feel.

“A lot of men are frustrated with the ideas of manhood presented in the media,” he said, pointing to role models who either are passively indecisive or criminally aggressive.

“We have fathers of teenaged sons who come wanting to know how to learn and teach rules for manhood.”

The intergenerational small-group experience available through Men's Fraternity particularly meets a need, he added.

“We develop deep bonds in small groups,” he said. “The group becomes a band of brothers to whom we are accountable.”

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