

# Spiritual outsourcing not the answer, McNeal says

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Reggie McNeal
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**By John Hall**

*Texas Baptist Communications*

DALLAS—Christians have outsourced spiritual formation to the church, Reggie McNeal, leadership development director for the South Carolina Baptist Convention, told a Texas Baptist group. But if congregations don't change their strategy, they may end up out of business, he insisted.

Families have given congregations sole responsibility for developing children spiritually, and churches are doing an inadequate job of handling that responsibility, McNeal said.

"We think we understand some stuff," he said. "Not spiritual formation. We need to rethink it. We need to rethink it to the core." Congregations remain stuck in a classroom mentality, believing more information will help people—though leaders know they learned their most valuable lessons practicing their faith, McNeal noted.

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Most churches continue calling Christians and non-Christians to age-specific classroom-like settings where a teacher imparts information to the gathered, McNeal said during Epicenter, a Baptist General Convention of Texas-sponsored conference on spiritual formation.

Jesus's model of spiritual formation is based upon relationships, not instruction, McNeal said. Christ outlined some spiritual truths through his preaching, but mostly he showed the disciples how to live out their faith. "When it came to spiritual formation, Jesus said to his disciples, 'Follow Me,'" McNeal said. "Paul said, 'Imitate me.' That is a far cry from. 'Attend this class.'"

Congregations need to understand people are accustomed to every service being customized to them, McNeal said. Websites are tailored to their buying habits. Movies are available when they want to watch them. Media outlets are designed to appeal to their interests. Churches could customize

their efforts as well, he said. The church must begin by asking each member what he or she feels God leading him or her to do. Church leaders become life coaches, helping people fulfill God's calling upon their lives.

Because God calls people to accomplish diverse tasks, each person's development will look different, McNeal said. He compared it to having a personal trainer at a gym who trains multiple clients. The number of available workout machines remains constant, but each client will perform different exercises to meet a specific goal.

But spiritual formation is not simply about building people up, McNeal insisted. Some need to "debrief" their lives and remove some of the emotional baggage they are carrying.

Through helping people accomplish what they feel led to do, churches will find ministry and missions opportunities, he said. "It's going to be as we serve the world that we will connect with it. Because we will connect over pain."

Effective spiritual formation takes place through mission opportunities, not class experiences, McNeal insisted. Outside the walls of the church, believers of different generations can share about their faith. They can learn from each other. This is especially important for younger generations looking to connect with older individuals who have lived through hardships and retained their faith, he said. This aspect of life fascinates young people.

McNeal readily acknowledged he does not know how the churches can encourage relationship-driven spiritual formation beyond what he outlined during Epicenter, but he is excited about its possibilities. People will come to Christ as they interact with Christians, and their faith will be deepened through continued dialogue, he noted.

"They're looking for life," he said. "If we stop short of that, we've sold Jesus short."

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