

# Successful churches provide meaning and belonging

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**By Ken Camp**

*Managing Editor*

WACO—Successful congregations do two things well; they provide people with meaning and with a sense of belonging, said religious researcher Kevin Dougherty.

“To succeed, a church must provide meaning. It must make a compelling case there is something worth believing—worth sacrificing for,” said Dougherty, assistant professor of sociology at Baylor University and a researcher in the school’s [Institute for the Studies of Religion](#).

For congregations to communicate meaning, they need to grasp clearly their own mission and purpose, he added.

The clarity of a church’s mission and purpose relates directly to the church’s vitality and its growth, Dougherty told a symposium on congregational renewal, sponsored by Baylor’s [Center for Ministry Effectiveness and Educational Leadership](#).

Older churches—congregations removed by at least one generation from their founding vision—find it more difficult to agree on their purpose and

adapt to changing circumstances, he observed.

“The gospel is timeless. Your church is not,” he said. “Your congregation was relevant for its founding generation. But the further away you get from the founding, the more squabbles arise about who and what a congregation should be about.”

Churches succeed when their members feel they are a valuable part of a family that cares about them and involves them in meaningful ministry, he added.

“Faith is spread through relationships. The more intimate churches become, the more transformational they are,” Dougherty said. “That’s why smaller churches grow faster and do a better job of mobilizing their members.”

Large churches can grow and involve members in ministry most effectively through small groups that strengthen personal relationships, he noted.

People are drawn to active churches where they have multiple opportunities to participate in meaningful ways. And it’s a bigger drawing card than worship style, the quality of the sermons or most of the other things churches often view as enticements to prospects, he said.

“The higher the level of congregational participation, the more attractive it is to new adherents,” Dougherty said. “When you have an engaged, involved church, it will draw people like a tractor-beam. Active churches are attractive churches.”

Globally, young people in the developing world are rejecting secularism and looking to spiritual sources for the answers to ultimate questions, said Byron Johnson, co-director of the Institute for the Studies of Religion.

“Many argue that Christianity is declining and that secularism is on the

rise. The opposite is true,” Johnson said. “Christianity—especially in the global South—is on the rise.”

Much of the world’s population continues to grow more religious—but not necessarily more Christian, he added. Christianity’s great competition globally comes not from a secular worldview but from Islam.

“It’s unlikely that secular Europe will stay secular,” he said, pointing to the growth of Islam in western Europe. The real question, he insisted, is what will happen in the East. “China either will be our worst enemy or our best ally,” he predicted. “China and India will be critical global players.”

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