

Blessings and challenges of being a church town

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Llano is a church town. In addition, most of the churches, parishioners and ministers work together and get along. This presents both wonderful blessings and unique challenges.

Blessings

One of the most beautiful verses describing the early church is Acts 2:44: “All the believers were together and had everything in common” (NIV).

It is beautiful, because the early church was an eclectic mix of people with diverse backgrounds and religious heritage, yet their bond in Christ compelled them to share their lives together.

This happens in my community by virtue of our shared values. We proudly bear as a badge of honor the title “The Real Hill Country,” and we recognize that to live in Llano County makes us unique.

Whether due to a ranching background, a love for our beautiful terrain, or having an independent streak that makes us more prone to enjoy the rugged and isolated nature of our surroundings over the flashier, more commercially saturated settings in nearby counties, it comes natural for us to band ourselves together.

As a pastor, I love and celebrate this tendency. In many ways, it makes engaging in ministry a blessing. Our churches can work together easily to identify needs and solve problems as we willingly share our gifts and resources. Schools and other community organizations freely partner with

us in projects we feel make our community better for all.

It is a rare occasion when I do not see at least a handful of people I recognize from my church or another congregation in our community as I grocery shop, patronize the coffee shop or attend a sporting event. These opportunities often result in meaningful conversations and informal ministry opportunities that help strengthen my ability to know and equip people for service in the kingdom of God.

For these reasons, it is a blessing we do not have to work very hard to “[have] everything in common.”

Challenges

On the other hand, our communal dynamic is not without its own, innate challenges. I have been the pastor of First Baptist Church in Llano a little more than 1 1/2 years. This experience has had some unique hurdles.

After serving about six months, COVID hit. I had just gotten to the point I thought I had memorized every regular attender’s name, then we quit meeting for 3 1/2 months.

Upon our reopening, many returned, but not everyone. However, some previous attenders I had met only once or twice, or not at all, began attending.

It became common for me to have a conversation that went something like this: “Hi, I’m Pastor Matt.”

“Yeah, I know who you are. I just haven’t been to church in a while.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, nice to meet ... err ... uh ... see you again.”

Today, I am thankful many people have returned, and we have connected

with others who hardly or never have darkened our doors.

The challenge that comes with this is I scarcely meet anyone who does not have some kind of connection to our church, even if they do not currently or have not ever attended.

Like the other groups and organizations in our tight-knit community, everyone feels some degree of commonality and kinship surrounding our churches. This is great for fostering communal ministry with a common goal, but it can pose challenges in shaping individual commitment and accountability to a unique body of believers.

Beyond being a church town

As much as I love and am thankful for our unique situation conducive to communal ministry in our area, I am challenging our church to realize Jesus calls us beyond being a “church town.”

In the Great Commission, Jesus challenges his disciples to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20).

This is the most important thing in which any of our churches can engage, and it takes more than a sense of communal ownership in a “church town” to get it done. To live out the Great Commission means we not only are committed to a communal identity, but to a kingdom mission.

Fellow pastors and Christians, especially those of you living and serving in similar contexts, we need to help our people distinguish the difference between these two things. A commitment to the former does not necessarily imply a commitment to the latter. And our churches need us to accomplish the mission for which Jesus instituted his bride.

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