

# Church revitalization requires community engagement

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MCALLEN—If a church is declining in attendance or plateauing for several years, there is good news. It doesn't have to stay that way, Jonathan Smith, director of Church Health Strategy for the Baptist General Convention of Texas, told a workshop at Texas Baptists' Family Gathering.

"First, there is a mindset we must have. Your church is not in competition against another church in your community. Your church is a competition against the darkness," Smith said.

"No matter what size your community is, there are plenty of lost people around you. You have to run into those dark places with the power of the Holy Spirit."

Smith also noted churches cannot do too much mission work, and focusing on kingdom work will result naturally in church growth.

He shared statistics showing church attendance has been plateauing or declining in 80 percent to 90 percent of churches even before the pandemic. Post-pandemic, the decline has been accelerated, with most posting a 25 percent average decrease.

With the state population projected to nearly double by 2050 and nearly 900 churches closing annually, Smith encouraged churches to embrace revitalization so they can reach this growing mission field.

# Four steps to revitalization outlined

Smith presented four steps to start the revitalization process, starting with truth-telling, which he defined as presenting the problem as it stands and the possibility of what could be.

He encouraged starting with a 10-year report of both worship and Bible study attendance charted in a visual that allows members to see patterns and develop a sense of urgency for change. He suggested a chart with baptism numbers and budget receipts for 10 years and the completion of a church health survey.

Next, Smith urges reengagement with the community to begin building relationships and to get the church outside its walls. Completing seven interviews with key city leaders with two simple questions can help churches find areas where they can fill gaps.

“We suggest asking, ‘From your unique perspective, what hidden issues or problems exist in our community? How could our church address these issues?’” Smith said.

Seven interviews must include a pediatrician, one or two teachers, a police officer or firefighter and a counselor or social worker. The remainder can be general physicians, school administrators, hairdressers, ER doctors and other pastors, with city officials lower on the preferred list.

Next, to raise the morale of the congregation, show what the church can become. Smith used the example of baptisms, encouraging a few changes to highlight the life-change among members.

Move the ordinance to the end of the service, so late-comers don’t miss it, he suggested. Only baptize one person per service. Announce each baptism the Sunday prior. Play a short video testimony of the member before his or

her baptism. Record the baptism for replay the following Sunday with a celebration tradition of some kind.

Morale also can be raised by hearing reports on mission work, spread out over several weeks instead of in one service, and by introducing new members the same way. The key, he said, is focusing weekly on life change.

Finally, Smith said, “get leaders in forward-facing seats.” Every congregation has four groups of members: young and new members; older and new members; young and tenured; and old and tenured. Those last two groups are historically the most resistant to change, Smith said.

“But those are often the people we put in the most important leadership roles, and they will not lead the church to change. The longer you are at a church, the less you see the need to change, and that goes for members and maybe for pastors,” Smith said. “Flip the script.”

Smith offered assistance through his Texas Baptists office and a program called PAVE. It walks churches in need through the process from eye-opening research to small and big steps of change. Then churches can move to a “right-side up” model where the mission is the focus and the structures and programs all support that.

“Over time, churches grow fast, but when they fall, they fall fast. Even if the church has just plateaued for five years, you have to treat it like the house is on fire,” he said.

Even so, he encouraged patience and a slow pace. “For most churches to be fully revitalized, it takes about 10 years.”