

First baptism in years sparks growth at Mathis church

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Pastor Felix Treviño knew the metric stating a healthy church should have one baptism per year for every 15 people in average worship attendance, but First Baptist Church of Mathis simply was not seeing God move in that way.

Treviño became pastor of First Baptist in Mathis last August. When he arrived, the church was running about 30 in attendance and was not reaching its changing community of about 5,000 effectively.

Despite being a 25-minute drive from his home in Calallen, he took on the challenge of leading the struggling congregation, because he sensed the people there were open to change.

“They wanted to rebuild and give back to the community,” he said. “It was predominantly an Anglo church originally, but they are in a mostly Hispanic area, and they wanted a younger, bivocational pastor with more of a missional mindset. Being a church planter, that transitioned well for me.”

Treviño signed up to attend a Pave church revitalization workshop offered by Texas Baptists’ Center for Church Health. In February, he joined a cohort to work through Pave principles of church revitalization with other pastors in similar situations.

Within a month, the church began to see results.

Highlighting baptism

“When we left the cohort, [director of Church Health and Growth] Jonathan Smith said: ‘Don’t microwave the brisket. You can’t rush this process, but there were things you can do already,’” Treviño recalled. “We had one woman who wanted to be baptized. So, we implemented the plan for baptism that Jonathan had shared with us.”

Smith’s baptism plan included three phases: show a video of the woman answering three questions about her salvation the week before her baptism, baptize her the following week, and then show a celebratory video of her baptism one week later.

Treviño modified the plan to fit his congregation and made sure the woman being baptized was comfortable with it.

“She’s a new member of the church,” Treviño said. “And since then, our church has been really ecstatic about seeing growth happen.”

Treviño said no one in the church could remember when the baptismal waters at the church in Mathis had been stirred. A 2017 Facebook post from the church was the last instance of a baptism they could find, meaning it had been at least 2,429 days since their last baptism.

‘Alive and active again’

The new baptism sparked a flame across their small community.

“Using the baptism allowed us to promote that the church was alive and active again,” said Treviño. “We shared the video on Facebook and with local community groups. The area Baptist association shared as well, and that helped people to get excited about what God was doing.”

The church already is planning the next such celebration. Treviño's sermon on obedience to God stirred something within a man who had been attending for about a year and was seeking truth.

"One man came up and said he wanted to surrender to Christ and be baptized as well. There's impact already," Treviño said. "He had been searching for a while and had grown a lot in the past few months. Seeing that really pushed him to make that commitment."

While that first baptism was a catalyst, Treviño said, additional growth has occurred as he's implemented many familiar church planting techniques in addition to the baptism emphasis since his arrival.

He contacted community leaders, including the Mathis Economic Development group, and expressed the church's interest in getting involved. The congregation participated in a local parade and a Trunk or Treat event that attracted around 2,000 community members. They connected with the local school district to deliver Bibles and met with area business leaders. Already, church attendance has grown to about 60.

"We went big on social media and utilized that free resource to reach the younger generation. We have a basketball court in our parking lot, and we share that with a youth team in our neighborhood. So, we're starting to connect with the community and meet the physical and spiritual needs of people here," Treviño said.

Committed to church growth

As a bivocational pastor, Treviño works full-time as a firefighter for the local refinery. He's also a firearms instructor who regularly holds church security trainings.

He and his wife Sara also operate one of the largest outdoor markets in

South Texas, attracting more than 100 vendors and food trucks every other month.

Still, they are committed to seeing the church in Mathis grow, as nearly the entire family serves in some capacity. Son Ryan, a senior who will attend Wayland Baptist University in the fall, leads worship and plays guitar. The Treviños also have a sophomore son, Zach; an eighth-grade daughter, Skylar; and a niece living with them who is a high school senior.

“We’re excited about the process, and we haven’t even started scratching the surface of what we want to do,” Treviño said.

“The most beneficial thing about Pave is the structured process. For someone bivocational like me, I need that structure and the accountability of my cohort group.”