

Future Church 2030 Conference helps churches prepare

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EL PASO—Given El Paso’s status as a vital intersection, Bobby Contreras encouraged attendees at the Future Church 2030 Conference to recognize not just the importance of the cultural moment, but the region’s important place in that moment.

Because El Paso is a crossroads—where cultures meet and mingle, even if they’re just passing through—area pastors and ministry leaders must consider their position in a rapidly changing context, Contreras said.



Bobby Contreras, pastor of Alamo Heights Baptist Church in San Antonio, speaks at the Future Church 2030 Conference in El Paso. (BGCT Photo / George Schroeder)

“Friends, El Paso is significant to the future of the church,” said Contreras, an El Paso native who now is pastor of Alamo Heights Baptist Church in San Antonio. “What God is doing here will go east and west, north and south. It’s significant for the future.”

The conference, held April 28-29 at Del Sol Church, was designed to help ministry leaders see what is coming next and learn how they can prepare and position their ministries to share the gospel and make disciples.

Whether the future of the church is “tomorrow, next week, a year from now, seven years from now, or 10 years,” the critical need is paramount, Contreras said.

“If we don’t get [the lost] in front of Jesus, it’s not even worth talking about,” he said.

Consider ‘feedback from the future’

Ariel Martinez, pastor of the host Del Sol Church, noted 96 percent of El Pasoans don’t come from a biblically based church background. He encouraged ministry leaders to embrace change without compromising biblical standards.

In “feedback from the future,” he reported input from some committed Christ followers who are members of Generation Z, those who are currently teenagers through their mid-20s.

“They’re going to be the ones in leadership roles in the church by 2030,” he said. “They’re the future, and they’re here right now.”

Martinez asked about their peers’ perceptions of God, the Bible and church, and what the church should start and stop doing.

They told him Gen Z wants pastors “to leave politics out of the church.”

“We have to lead people to Jesus, not to partisan politics or any political preference,” he said.

Several said the church needs to focus on “real-life topics.”

Martinez encouraged ministry leaders to invest personally in younger Christians, and to “focus on what doesn’t change. That provides a stable foundation for the church in the future. And it’s what so many of our young people crave.”

‘Jesus is not surprised’

Robert White, lead pastor of Freedom Church in Bedford, took attendees “back to the first Future Church conference,” the account from Matthew 16 when Peter confessed Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus responded, “On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

Despite gloomy prognostications of the decline of the church in the West, “Jesus is not surprised by all the things that are happening in this world,” White said.

He also pointed to the dramatic increase in the church in other parts of the world, saying, “We have evidence that Jesus is still building his church.”

The future church must be willing to have conversations, to make and emphasize connection, to have a commitment to discipleship, and to be ready to “pass the baton” to younger leadership, he said.

Reach a post-Christian generation

Eric Hernandez, apologetics leader and millennial specialist for Texas Baptists, challenged ministry leaders to equip Christians to “give a defense for what we believe and why we believe it.”

Hernandez said 64 percent of young people are leaving the church upon reaching adulthood, and only 4 percent of Gen Z hold biblical worldviews.

“It’s the first truly post-Christian generation,” Hernandez said. “They were

not born into a Christian culture, and it shows.”

Katie McCoy, director of women’s ministry for Texas Baptists, spoke of the similarities of the culture in which the early church thrived and the culture in which the 21st century church is battling headwinds.

Because first century culture “gave little value to human life,” she said, Christians stood out because of their commitment “to protect and care for society’s most vulnerable.”

It’s an important lesson— and opportunity—for the church now to demonstrate an attractive contrast with culture, McCoy said. But she also cautioned that the church’s motives must be righteous.

“We are [Christ’s] ambassadors, and when we are righting earthly wrongs, it shouldn’t be for political power,” she said. “It should be to be the salt of the world.”

‘Discipled’ by social media platforms

Katie Frugé, director of the Center for Cultural Engagement, described the “rise of the unknown” through “pseudonymity,” in which a person can create “a consistent identity without any identifying markers,” allowing them to “create their own narrative.”

This phenomenon, she said, is creating “a fundamental trust issue.” She described a culture in which people are “disciplined” by social media platforms like YouTube, which boasted 1 billion hours of usage during 2021.

“That’s the equivalent of 114,000 years (of video viewing),” she said. “That’s a lot of discipleship.”

The answer for the church, she said, is to “meet people like Paul did in the

Areopagus—or in the metaverse,” and point them to the Savior.

“Christ is the firm foundation in the shifting sand of this world,” she said.

Don't linger on what will not matter

Jordan Easley, a native of Odessa who is now pastor of First Baptist Church of Cleveland, Tenn., asked, “What are we doing today for seven years from now?”



Jordan Easley, pastor of First Baptist Church in Cleveland, Tenn., addresses the Future Church 2030 Conference in El Paso. (BGCT Photo)

Pastors and ministry leaders must seek to understand God's specific vision for their individual churches, then think strategically to achieve it, he asserted.

“Do not allow your church to linger on things that won't matter in 10 years,” he said.

Jonathan Smith, director of church health strategy for Texas Baptists, challenged pastors, especially if their church has plateaued or is declining,

to evaluate every ministry of the church by asking, “Is this ministry making disciples?”

Priority must go to ministries which are making disciples, because “the days of unbelievers showing up at church are over—go and make disciples,” Smith said. “When a church says, ‘We’ve never done it that way before,’ evidently they’re ignoring the entire biblical record, because the Bible is filled with ‘new.’”

He also challenged pastors to the correct mindset: “Your church is not in competition against other churches in your community. It is in competition against the darkness.”

In Texas, self-described “nones”—people who do not identify with any religion—grew from 17 percent to 30 percent from 2008 to 2018, Scott McConnell, executive director of Lifeway Research, reported. Reaching a post-Christian culture requires patience and persistence, he said.

But McConnell noted surveys indicate Christians rarely speak of their faith, even as some of those same surveys show most Americans are open to and even curious about matters of faith, and express a “desire to meet deep needs.” He encouraged leaders, from Ephesians 4, to work to equip Christians “for the work of ministry.”