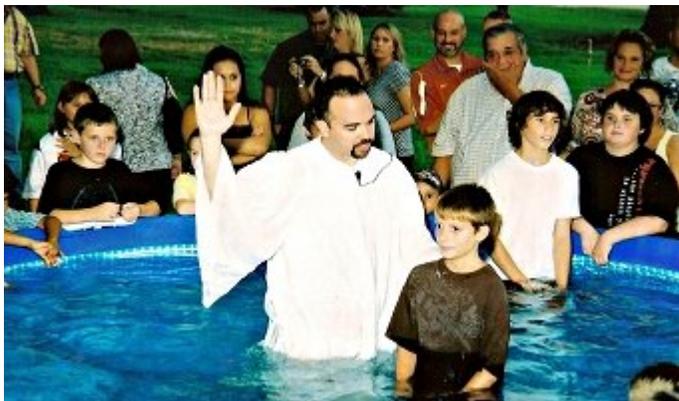


Newspaper ad leads to 31 outdoor baptisms by East Texas church

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CLEVELAND—First Baptist Church has fully grasped the Texas Hope 2010 vision to share the gospel with all Texans by Easter 2010. Their proof—31 new believers baptized during an open call baptism service and Southern-gospel concert held on the lawn of the church.

This 400-member church placed an ad in the local newspaper inviting the community to come and even be baptized. The service started at 4:30 p.m. with a cookout and Southern-gospel concert following.



Pastor Russ Tynan of First Baptist Church in Cleveland baptizes Jacob Waller.

“When some of the church members saw me take out an ad in the paper and set up a pool outdoors and say that we were going to feed people who came, some of the adults were a bit concerned that maybe this wasn’t holy enough since we weren’t inside the church building,” said Russell Tynan, pastor of the church. “After the baptism, many came back and said that this was unbelievable.”

In July, Children's Minister Susan Adams took 70 children to camp and saw 24 decide to follow Christ. When the group returned, Roger Yancey, director of missions for the Tryon-Evergreen Baptist Association, suggested that the church use the children's baptisms as a way to reach out the community.

Several hundred people attended the event, the majority being visitors to the church. Many mentioned they came after seeing the newspaper ad just because of curiosity, Tynan said.

Once at the event, several community members chose to be baptized with the children. Those who came that afternoon to be baptized first met with a counselor from the church.

"We asked them first if they would explain baptism and why they think they needed to be baptized," said Lloyd Lewis, a deacon at the church. "We wanted them to tell us why they were there. We wanted to make sure they didn't think that this baptism was going to save them and that they weren't just doing this because their friends were doing it. We wanted to make sure that they were understanding and had accepted Jesus into their heart."



The number of baptisms that day was significant because the church had not baptized that many people in one day in recent decades. Since the open call baptism, 15 more people have asked to be baptized.

Adams believes that consistently reaching out to unchurched children of the community during the church's summer children's program played a role in many coming to Christ recently. She also sees this as God using Tynan to heal old wounds in the church and open new doors for the congregation to gain a heart to reach the city.

"In the past, our church has been through a lot with our ministers and staff," Adams said. "Things came out in the past that were very, very traumatic, and we needed a time of healing. Brother Russ came in with all these new ideas, and he has this way of making you think: 'Oh my gosh. Of course we can do that.' It's amazing how one person can come in and light the fire. Now everyone is excited and motivated and ready to do this. He is exactly what we needed."

The baptisms are confirmation that God wants to use this church in a mighty way, and he is making the church more outward focused, Tynan said.

"When I first came here a year ago, I thought this place has huge potential," he said. "I really thought we could baptize over a hundred this year, but for whatever reason, the people didn't see the same thing that I did. And now with this baptism event, people, even the older members, are excited about reaching our community."

Much of the change began during spring revival services at the church, ones that sparked heart changes among the congregation. Shortly after that, the church made plans to begin Café Connect, a casual service with a coffee bar held in the church gym, in June. The service has a contemporary worship band with a simulcast of the sermon in the traditional service held

in the sanctuary.

Lewis attributes the growth to this new service being geared to young families who wouldn't feel comfortable attending the traditional service, but he also sees this as a movement only God could cause.

"About six months ago, even the older people sensed something was changing and happening," Lewis said. "We have been praying for years that this type of thing would happen and it was amazing. I'm sure that anyone couldn't tell you what we did to make this happen. Maybe it was just that we quit trying hard and let God do it."

When the church tested a few services in June, more than 100 community members came. From the beginning, the service grew only by word of mouth. This fall, the church plans to advertise the service to the whole community.

To continue reaching out to the community, the church will begin delivering the Texas Hope 2010 gospel compact discs throughout the city starting mid-September as well as hosting monthly evangelistic events.

"It's been amazing to see how this church of 134 years is reaching out to the community," Tynan said. "I believe this is the kind of work that directly relates to Hope 2010."