

Pastor Strong Cohorts find ‘soul care’ at retreat

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DALLAS—Pastor Strong Cohorts experienced “soul care” and community at a recent retreat in Buena Vista, Colo.

The Aug. 3-7 retreat marked the conclusion of a ministerial health and spiritual development process for the 47 Texas Baptist church leaders that began in April.

“We end with the retreat on purpose after four or five months together in the trenches of learning and growing and being shaped and formed and gaining clarity of who we are, as Christ followers and as leaders, and then we come together at this moment of respite and rest and just soul care,” said Kevin Abbott, Texas Baptists Area 5 representative and director of Pastoral Health Networks. “It’s a beautiful way to end.”

The [Pastor Strong Cohorts](#), made up of “pastors who are serving in kingdom work and the local church,” met once a month to focus on “elements of mental, spiritual, emotional or physical health” in ministry, he explained.

Spiritual formation in a ‘safe community’

Abbott said cohorts intentionally are designed to “introduce [pastors] to those areas of health that are so important.”

“The spiritual formation of us as leaders and pastors is crucial,” Abbott said. “We believe with the [Pastor Strong] Cohorts, it’s important to get

information, but you need to take that and process it in a safe community together, and then you need to be coached through it, and have accountability and that leads to transformation.”

San Antonio Cohort Participant Calvin Copeland said being a part of the Pastor Strong Cohorts “has been nothing but rewarding the entire time.”

He said he loved his cohort’s meetings and how participants engaged in genuine discussion about their ministry.

‘Something I’ve always longed for in ministry’

“[We were] sharing our hearts,” Copeland said. “We weren’t talking about congregation sizes, and we weren’t talking about how much money we were raising, but we were talking about what it meant to us to impact the lives of others.

“For the first time, there was none of the performance things that I have seen over the last 40 years of being in ministry, but there was a real connection.

“Quite frankly, it’s something that I have always longed for in ministry. ... There was a time that I was done with ministry, and so Pastor Strong really did re-energize me in believing that we really can make a difference.”

The cohorts made an impact because “they deal with soul care” and help pastors “understand why we’re doing what we do and how to manage our bitterness and our wounded places and our hurt places,” Copeland said.

‘Be authentic with God’

Scripture teaches that Christ loved the church by washing believers with the water of the word to remove every wrinkle, stain and blemish, “so he can present us back to himself without any of those wrinkles and stains and blemishes again,” Copeland said.

“I just love the fact that this is a group that gets that we’re on a constant journey for healing. People call it transformation, but I don’t think you can be transformed without getting healed. Clearly, this cohort, Pastor Strong, gets that.”

Copeland encourages other pastors to get involved with Pastor Strong because it will “help you to identify how to be more authentic because they’ll model it.”

“It’ll be an initial shock to your system to be in a room full of pastors who are authentic and genuine, but you stay there long enough and you will be able to do the same thing, and there is nothing more transformative for us to be authentic with God because that’s when we get to see his authentic self,” he said.

“Many of us don’t know what we’re struggling with until we’re confronted, or until we find a friend who wants to sit with you and just let you share, and that’s what Pastor Strong does for you.”

‘We could be ourselves’

Jose Perez, church planter from Cleveland in Southeast Texas, said the Pastor Strong Cohorts encourage and teach pastors that “you’re not alone.”

“Pastor Strong? I guess in one word, you could say it’s a community,” Perez said. “Being a pastor personally, I know that a lot of times we feel isolated.”

Pastors deal with “a lot of stuff” in their congregations, and many feel they have nobody they can talk to, he said.

“Pastor Strong is a community where we could talk to each other. ... We could be ourselves with them, and they could totally understand.”

Perez participated in one of the pilot programs for Resilient Cohorts—now Pastor Strong—Abbott developed when he was on staff at the Union Baptist Association. When Perez first learned about the program, he “fell in love with it,” he said.

“I know it transformed my life, and I would like to see other lives be transformed as ours was, as well,” said Perez.

‘It encourages our spirit to keep on’

By walking through the cohorts, Pastor Strong creates a sense of unity for pastors and reminds them of the call God has put on their lives, Perez said.

“No matter if we’re Hispanic, Anglo, African-American, we’re all called by God to do his service for his people,” Perez said.

“I love it because we find out that there’s other people going through the same thing, and we just all share our stories, and it encourages our spirit to keep on and keep on loving our congregation, but above all, to obey what God has for our lives. [Pastor Strong is] uniting the body of Christ to continue to encourage them and get stronger, and also to replicate churches with the same DNA that they are now teaching us.”

Pastor Strong is “just life-transforming,” he said, but “not only for the pastors, but also for our congregations” because they receive “a refreshed pastor” and are encouraged to begin serving in the church.

‘Time and space to hear from the Lord’

Troy Allen, senior pastor of First Baptist Church in College Station, said the retreat was valuable because it gave him some “time and space to hear from the Lord” and be encouraged to “stay in the fight.”

“I think that’s something that’s really great about this retreat is just having time to be away and to just spend time with God, and giving him that space that a lot of us don’t necessarily have, to really intentionally listen to the Lord and what he has to say to us,” Allen said.

The cohorts “remind us that he has us where he has us for a reason, to encourage us and to encourage one another to continue to stay in the fight and continue running the race that he’s laid out before us,” he added.

Concluding the cohorts with a retreat that’s “strictly devoted to rest and recharging and rejuvenation is incredibly important” to leading well in ministry, Allen said.

“When pastors are mentally, emotionally, physically and spiritually healthy, they’re better leaders, they’re better pastors and are able to care for people better because they’ve cared for themselves,” he said.

“I imagine that the guys that are here are going to be able to go back and serve their churches a lot more effectively because they’ve just had some downtime where they haven’t had to answer a bunch of questions and solve a lot of problems ... but just have time to worship together, time to pray and reflect.”

‘Go back and replicate what we’ve

experienced'

David Smith, executive director of Austin Baptist Association, said he is “always looking for ways to provide value and serve the pastors of our association,” and Pastor Strong “met an immediate need” in that regard.

When Smith learned Abbott had joined Texas Baptists’ staff and brought Pastor Strong with him, he said, “Whatever you’re doing, I’d like to be a part of.”

When he found out Pastor Strong Cohorts were starting in San Antonio, Houston, College Station and Dallas, he asked if he could bring a group from Austin to participate.

“And very graciously, they said, ‘Absolutely, this would be great,’” Smith said. “It works out well. Most of the days, [sessions are] about 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. We’ll get up, leave Austin about 6:30 in the morning, grab coffee, visit on the way there, go through the training with some extraordinary leaders, and then head home and debrief.”

Smith said his hope for his pastors is that “we can take [what we learned] back to Austin and begin other groups and really have an opportunity to impact pastors across the association.”

“We talked about this last night at dinner: ‘What does it look like for us to go back home and to replicate what we’ve experienced here?’” Smith said. “There’s a lot of excitement around the table.”

‘My people are noticing a difference’

Abbott said the cohorts have made a “powerful impact” in the lives of participating pastors.

“We’ve seen many [pastors] come back after four or five months of this and say, ‘Kevin, I’m leading differently,’ or ‘I see leadership through a different lens,’ ‘My people are noticing a difference when I teach and preach and when I lead meetings and how I do discipleship,’” he said.

Abbott hopes the cohorts create community and lower the number of pastors leaving ministry.

“We’ve had several pastors come in and out of the cohort, and they’ve been very honest and raw moments throughout it saying, ‘Kevin, I wasn’t going to be a part of this cohort, but I’m glad I did because I was thinking about leaving ministry altogether, and this band of brothers, this cohort, this process, kept me in the game,’” Abbott said.

“The best thing about Pastor Strong is you learn this: You’re not alone.”