

Stephenville college ministry sees major growth

May 20, 2025

This past school year, the college ministry of First Baptist Church in Stephenville has hosted 400 to 700 Tarleton State University students each Thursday for its Paradigm worship service.

The ministry also has seen more than 136 students make professions of faith.

Students and staff involved in Paradigm college ministry are thrilled to see so many students get serious about faith, said Ken May, senior pastor, and Drake Wayland, minister to college.

Paradigm has been part of First Baptist Stephenville since 2006, when the late Jon Randles who originated the model, helped start a Paradigm ministry at the church. Randles launched Paradigm at Texas Tech in Lubbock and worked in evangelism for the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

Randles disciplined a minister at First Baptist Stephenville, who disciplined another minister and so on, down to the present college minister, Wayland, May explained.

“It’s just been an incredible pipeline of leadership,” he said. The ministry long has experienced year-over-year growth, but this year has seen “more growth than ever,” he noted.

Wayland said the jump in growth began with the fall 2024 semester.

How Challenge groups work

Twenty-six challenge groups—smaller-group discipleship cohorts—have been meeting weekly on Tuesdays and Wednesdays around Stephenville this year, discipling more than 300 Tarleton students.

Some of the student-led challenge groups are comprised of freshmen. These groups meet on the Tarleton campus and minister to more than 100 faithful, first-year students.

Upperclassmen challenge groups often are held in host homes of church members. Group leaders are selected from Tarleton students who are members of First Stephenville and who were faithfully committed to a challenge group the preceding year.

Leading a challenge group is a yearlong (school year) commitment, and the leaders must apply and pass several weeks of interviews and vetting.

Leaders of the next year's groups are selected before summer break, May and Wayland explained.

In addition to challenge group leaders, service groups also are formed to help setup for events, help with security or other more task-oriented service.

All the leaders and staff help move students into dorms in the fall and invite new students to attend Paradigm worship and join a challenge group.

Challenge group leaders who show exceptional leadership may move into a leader-to-leader position. These students are responsible for helping Wayland and his college ministry associate disciple and train the challenge group leaders and help them prepare each week's discussion.

Some students who have been involved in challenge groups since freshman

year join the church staff in their senior year as ministers-in-training—interns with a stipend.

“And then we’ve had probably a dozen of them head on to seminary or to some ministry,” May noted.

He explained the congregation has established a relationship with a church in Fort Worth to help it begin a Paradigm ministry for students at Texas Christian University and other college campuses in Fort Worth.

Wayland said he and his staff and Tarleton BSM director Megan Trotter and her staff have been praying together all year on Thursdays, since Trotter reached out about establishing a cooperative prayer time.

Wayland said they pray for each other and for the Tarleton “campus to be reached for Jesus.” But, he noted, while the BSM is campus-based, Paradigm is church-based “to connect every college student to a local church, so they don’t just have faith in college, but they can be trained up and have faith for a lifetime.”

What makes Paradigm unique

“We don’t want to just put on a worship service,” Wayland said, which he noted is different from a lot of growing college ministries garnering attention recently that are strictly campus-based.



Paradigm Worship hosted 400-700 Tarleton students on Thursdays for worship this year. (Courtesy Photo)

They “do the worship service,” at First Baptist Stephenville, Wayland pointed out, but the student-led discipleship groups that intentionally drive students to the local church and intend to “train-up” the students into mature, life-long disciples, set the ministry apart.

“Because not only do we have the ministry and the funding and all that stuff to support the students, but we have the people to support them as well—the church—that will do everything they can to lift up these students,” Wayland said.

He pointed out the congregation’s investment in college students affects not just the campus but the community because of how big a part of Stephenville the university is.

The posture the congregation has taken of being “deeply committed” disciples who make disciples has helped to reduce frustrations in the greater community about the changes that come with Tarleton’s growth, Wayland noted.

Quite a few of the college students involved in Paradigm also are serving in

children's ministry, youth ministry or on the worship team at the church, May noted, "so it's been neat to see the college kids really integrate into the church and not just attend Paradigm or hang out with just college students."

Wayland and May agreed that real life is "intergenerational or multigenerational," and appreciate the way the Paradigm model is a move away from the "affinity groups" that often have characterized church plants in recent years, back toward a multigenerational church setting.

Tarleton is expecting an enrollment of 20,000 next year, May said the university president had informed him. And Stephenville also is growing. Some students are choosing to remain in town at First Baptist Stephenville after they graduate.

But the ministry also has seen many of its alumni go out from Stephenville to build "co-missions" in partnership with churches near colleges lacking a strong Christian presence or a Baptist, Bible-based college ministry on campus, May and Wayland explained.

These "co-missions" are a network of Paradigm-like ministries who work with established churches, or sometimes church plants, but they are not part of First Baptist Stephenville.

They are new ministries established by leaders, "about a dozen guys," May said, who were discipled and provided discipleship to others through First Baptist Stephenville's Paradigm ministry. The co-missions are in Texas and in other parts of the country, including Bowling Green, Ky., and Washington, D.C.

"It's just churches starting churches," he noted, "which is what Baptists have always done," May said, and with First Stephenville serving in the role of "sending church," Wayland clarified.

A full-circle answer to prayer

Wayland noted when the Paradigm ministry was established in 2006, its founders prayed for it to flourish and grow. The incoming freshman last year were born in 2006, so he sees the growth this year as a “full-circle moment,” and as an answer to the 2006 prayers.

The vision for the year was to see 1,000 gospel conversations and see 100 students saved, May and Wayland said. The ministry has recorded more than 800 gospel conversations this year, resulting in 136 decisions for Christ.

Wayland said, “It’s been incredible to watch.” He explained how Paradigm and First Stephenville had been transformative in his own life when he was a student at Tarleton.

He felt called into ministry through all of this, he said, and he “didn’t want a single student” to walk across the campus of Tarleton and “not know who Jesus is and how they need to follow him for a lifetime.”