

Jeff Warren: Challenging cultural Christianity

January 5, 2017

Jeff Warren has been senior pastor of Park Cities Baptist Church in Dallas the past six years. From deep in the heart of one Texan, he shares his background and thoughts on ministry. To suggest a Baptist General Convention of Texas-affiliated minister to be featured in this column, or to apply to be featured, [click here](#).

Background

- *Where else have you served in ministry, and what were your positions there?*

First Baptist Church, Charlotte, N.C.—intern and associate youth minister

Fairview Baptist Church, Grand Prairie—student minister

Park Cities Baptist, Dallas—student minister, young adult pastor, men's minister, then minister of adults, then associate pastor of evangelism

First Baptist Church, McKinney—senior pastor

- *Where did you grow up?*

Charlotte, N.C.

- *How did you come to faith in Christ?*

I grew up in a Christian home and came to Christ at the age of 9. My parents were most instrumental in leading me to Christ. As I was asking questions about what to do and expressing my desire to be saved, my dad took me to my grandfather's house, and they sat down and shared the

gospel with me.

My grandfather was Dr. C.C. Warren, former president of the Southern Baptist Convention, and I think my dad wanted him to be part of this defining moment. I received Christ in my grandfather's house and was baptized soon after that. I was then discipled through my involvement in our youth ministry, Young Life and through the Cru in college.

- *Where were you educated, and what degrees did you receive?*

I received a bachelor of fine arts in communication arts from East Carolina University, with a major in illustration and a minor in graphic design.

I then received a master of divinity degree from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, and a doctorate in ministry with an emphasis in apologetics from Southwestern Seminary.

Ministry/church

- *Why do you feel called into ministry?*

I received a call to ministry over time, but it came explicitly in my junior year of college. I sensed God calling me to give my life to vocational ministry as I was considering next steps following college. I wanted my life to count for all things eternal and to advance the gospel through ministry in the local church. I decided to give my life to that endeavor and let ministry be my full-time vocation.

- *What is your favorite aspect of ministry? Why?*

My favorite aspect of ministry is always seeing someone come to faith in Christ. These days, I love preaching the word of God, but I would not enjoy this role as much without the relationships and the team with whom I serve. I enjoy leading a diverse team toward common goals, motivated by the gospel and Christ's love for us.

- *What one aspect of congregational life gives you the greatest joy?*

My greatest joy is seeing someone come to Christ. I love seeing new believers baptized into the family of God. I love seeing the church, fully alive, pursuing her fullest redemptive potential collectively together, in all of our diversity.

- *What one aspect of congregational life would you like to change?*

The great challenge of the church in Dallas today is cultural Christianity that breeds a consumer-driven approach to church. At Park Cities Baptist Church, we seek “to rescue one another from cultural Christianity to follow Jesus every day.” Cultural Christianity is the greatest challenge to spiritual growth and mission. Pastors today must preach the gospel to the church. Too many in this generation have grown up believing Jesus came to make good people better. And we’re the good people he’s making better. This leads to pride, bigotry and a judgmental spirit.

The gospel has become a “moralistic therapeutic deism,” in the words of sociologists/authors Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton. We have come to believe that the gospel is a “work harder, get better” behavior-modification project, instead of an all-out rescue of sinners who bring nothing to the table except their sin that has made the Cross necessary. We’re left with a religion that bears the name of Jesus but has no power to change a life. The gospel is not “work harder, get better” but believe more deeply what Christ has already accomplished on our behalf.

- *How has your ministry or your perspective on ministry changed?*

My ministry has changed through the years as I have become a pastor of larger congregations. Called to serve others and to communicate God’s word is paired with the need to lead well and to build a high-performance team of ministers around me. This is a far cry from doing youth ministry in my first years of ministry.

Ministry has changed dramatically over the past 20 years, because culture has shifted so dramatically—even over the past five years. Everything is in flux, which is why the constant, unchanging gospel is so powerful to change lives.

- *How do you expect congregational life to change in the next 10 to 20 years?*

I see it changing dramatically. For one, we're seeing a shift in attendance in our churches as never before in my lifetime. Therefore, members are less devoted to congregational life. People are less likely to join a church in our day, and when they do, they attend less frequently than in years past.

More affluence will lead to even more options/diversions on the weekends, while online spirituality will increase and an individualistic approach to spirituality will increase as well.

The breakdown of the family will create layers of challenges for children, who will find it hard consistently to be devoted to church life, and many will continue to find spiritual growth and opportunities outside of the local church.

Leaders must guide their churches to adapt to these changes in our culture as we seek to increase the necessary influence of the local church.

- *If you could launch any new ministry—individually, through your congregation or through another organization—what would it be? Why?*

It would be a robust, multiplying, disciple-making movement. We are doing this at Park Cities with a movement we call “Go Training.” It is a simple, reproducible form of disciple-making in which we equip every believer to become a disciple-maker.

People are willing to give less and less time to the programming of the local

church—even on Sundays. So, our core ecclesiology must return to a small group of believers, gathered around God’s word, seeking to be accountable to one another in order to follow Jesus every day. It’s a return to what I believe Jesus envisioned the local church to be.

Another ministry would be a clear mentoring, leadership pipeline for younger leaders to become the leaders of our churches in the near future.

- *What qualities do you look for in a congregation?*

The first is grace. In a gospel-centered congregation, grace will abound. It’s tangible. Grace will be the message, the motivation behind obedience, and grace will be clear in every word and action of its members. Grace will lead to inclusion, which will lead to diversity, and diversity—in a gospel-centered church—will lead to celebration.

I also look for clear preaching of the gospel in every sermon, regardless of the text.

I look for love expressed to every newcomer, every member and to every person within reach of the membership on a daily basis. A church should seek not to be the best church in the city but the best church for the city.

- *Name the three most significant challenges and/or influences facing your congregation.*

1. Affluence and wealth are almost always accompanied by pride. Indeed, Jesus told us this would be the case. Our great challenge is faithfully to leverage our God-given resources for kingdom purposes outside of our congregation. We have an extremely generous congregation, and one of our driving values is overflowing generosity. As an affluent, educated and privileged people, we must continue to recognize all we have is from God, and we must leverage all he has given us for the sake of others. We must empower and release our people into the world, to bring the gospel into the

marketplace, to our neighbors, our friends and into every domain of culture.

2. It is a great challenge to break through a prevailing, consumer-driven approach to church in North Dallas, which influences the way many view their church involvement. The outsourcing of the spiritual development of children to the ministries of the church is a challenge as well. I am seeing more young couples discipling their children in the home, but we must continue to teach and push the primary disciple-making of children and youth to parents in the home. The church simply comes alongside parents, bringing encouragement and help for the parents to do what they have been equipped by God to do.

We are doing this through a comprehensive pathway of faith development we call “Flight Plan 252,” based on Luke 2:52 in which Jesus “grew in wisdom and in stature, in favor with God and man.”

3. Texans have heard, “Keep Austin Weird.” Our slogan could very well be, “Keep Dallas Pretentious.” North Dallas in particular can be a challenging place to find real honesty, self-disclosure, authenticity and brokenness. The Bible teaches us pride is insidious and most often undetected and yet, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6).

The “PCBC en Espanol” portion of our congregation has taught us much about humility and inclusion. Our involvement in racial reconciliation across Dallas also has brought us face-to-face with ourselves and our need to welcome one another in our sin and brokenness. Ministries like “Marriage Core,” our addiction and recovery small groups, YoungLives, GriefShare and felt-needs small groups are teaching us to become more honest about our struggles and more inclusive as we express our needs to one another.

- *What do you wish more laypeople knew about ministry or, specifically,*

your ministry?

I wish more laypeople knew how much I love them. I seek to always express my love to our people, but in a large church, I don't get to do that on a personal level with all of our members. The love of a pastor for his people is unique and wonderful. 1 Peter 5:2 says we are to "shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly." This expresses my heart for our people.

It's possible for a pastor to "use" the congregation for his purposes—ultimately for his own ego or "vision"—without truly loving his congregation. The pastor first must love his people. You cannot lead a people you do not love. I wish my people knew, even more, how much I love them. I say this because in a large congregation, some will feel slighted by the pastor who has so many responsibilities and perhaps interpret his inability personally to care for so many needs as a lack of love. I suppose I wish my people knew how much I want to spend time with each one of them. That's why I'm a pastor; I love our people.

When I kick into moments of self-pity, or when I am struggling with criticism or expectations, I wish my congregation knew how difficult the role of a pastor is. But I understand others are not in my role, and we never truly can understand the work or experience of others. So, I cannot expect them to understand fully. Instead, I must continue to run to the Lord for ultimate affirmation and identity.

About Baptists

- *What are the key issues facing Baptists—denominationally and/or congregationally?*

The key issue facing Baptists is an increasing irrelevance among the next generation. There is a growing (mis)perception among the lost—developed

over time—that Baptists are a group that is out of touch and irrelevant in their lives. Baptists have become identified as a more legalistic, judgmental (thus unloving) group to those who are not “church people.”

In an increasingly secular culture, the trend will continue to be that Christians are seen as out-of-touch and even unloving, as we stand for truth. Truth will sound more and more like hate for those who hate to hear the truth.

We must continue to change—not our message, but our methods—or we will die. Many have come to “worship” a fossilized form of church or style or preference that is no longer effective in reaching others. If we make our forms of the past “core,” and if we are unwilling to change to reach the next generation, we will not survive another 20 years. Culture is shifting too fast.

We must “grow younger” by raising up leaders and empowering these young leaders to guide changes necessary to reach their generation. Pastors like me must disciple young leaders and release them into decision-making, leadership roles within our churches.

- *What would you change about the Baptist denomination—state, nation or local?*

I would state core commonalities of theology and practice and then align all ministries to evangelism and disciple-making. I see this has been done by our current leaders, and I know that the role of leadership in denominations these days is daunting. It’s why we must all pray for David Hardage and other leaders in our state convention.

One of the primary strategies must be church-planting. New churches are the way to reach the next generation of believers. I would narrow our efforts to what matters most—very difficult decisions in existing denominations and associations—making disciples through the birth of new

churches.

I would make our convention gatherings a raucous celebration of new believers and new churches. Pastors of these new churches would be the “rock stars,” and I would target our younger pastors and ministers for our gatherings, while those of us who are older pass the baton to the next generation of leaders.

About Jeff

- *Who were/are your mentors, and how did/do they influence you?*

My mentors have been my parents, my youth pastor from years ago, those who discipled me in college, and pastors/leaders I’ve served with through the years.

In recent days, I receive mentoring through a monthly group of pastors with whom I meet. It is a great encouragement and challenge to be with these pastors as we talk about the real challenges of everyday ministry in the local church. I also have a best friend in ministry—over the past 30 years—with whom meet with monthly.

- *What did you learn on the job you wish you learned in seminary?*

I have learned leadership is much more difficult than anyone can imagine because self-leadership is so difficult.

I have learned my identity in Christ is my constant strength as a pastor. And that’s a good thing. The work of a pastor is never-ending, and your work is on public display constantly. I don’t think I learned enough about self-discipleship and leadership in seminary. I’ve learned so much of that from other leaders and from sources outside of seminary.

I had a great foundation coming out of seminary, but it has been through the daily work of leadership that one learns to be a leader, and it is through

preaching weekly that one learns how to improve and become a better preacher.

- *What is the impact of ministry on your marriage and family?*

The work of the pastor can be difficult at best sometimes, and it is hard not to let it impact the family, but I have always sought to put my family before my ministry. This comes with some very difficult decisions many will not understand. We have been able to do that. My wife and my children always have known they come first, but they have also come to understand the challenging seasons of a pastor's work.

We have always sought to protect our children from the scrutiny of some in a congregation and have never wanted them to feel they had to be "perfect" or singled out in any way. My family has been loved well by the local church through the years. But clearly, the life of a pastor's family is very different than others in the church.

I've come to believe the role of the pastor's wife is more difficult than the role of the pastor in many ways. My wife and I have always sought to live out our faith in our home, in our daily lives, and before our children. We have not "forced" church or the activities of the church on our children but have guided them to be involved from an early age. It was expected that they would be involved in the daily/weekly rhythm of the church as believers, as any other members of the church. They have loved being in the pastor's family.

Now, as young adults, our children all love the Lord, love his church, and are serving in and through the local church.

- *Name some of your favorite books (other than the Bible) or authors, and explain why.*

Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*—helped me follow Jesus every day

by practicing grace-driven disciplines of discipleship.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*—called me to a higher devotion to daily self-denial and obedience.

Phillip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?*—helped me more clearly define grace and its appropriation in my life during a personal grace awakening.

Alan Hirsch, *Forgotten Ways*—challenged me toward a new way of guiding the church toward a missional shift several years ago.

More recently, David's Lomas, *The Truest Thing About You*—a reminder of God's grace and my core identity as a pastor and follower of Jesus.

- *What is your favorite Bible verse or passage? Why?*

2 Corinthians 5:21—“He made him who knew no sin to become sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.” This verse, more than any other, has changed my life as I’ve come to understand the last part of the verse beyond my salvation. I not only have been forgiven of my sin through Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross; I now have become the righteousness of God in him. I am totally forgiven, fully loved, completely accepted by him. That’s “the truest thing” about me, and it is out of this identity that I live, serve him, minister and preach this message of grace.

- *Who is your favorite Bible character (other than Jesus)? Why?*

As I’ve gotten older, Job has become one of my favorite persons in the Bible—not so much because of what he did, but how he responded to what God did in his life. His story gets to the heart of worship. He learned to worship God, not because of all God had done for him, but simply because God is God. This is true worship; anything less is idolatry. Job had

everything stripped away from him, and he responded to God in worship. In the end, he could say, “My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you” (Job 42:5).

He didn’t get all of his answers; he got something better. He got God. And he found that was enough.

- *Name something about you that would surprise your church.*

I love all kinds of music (I suppose they know I don’t have a bias, which can be such a focus in a multigenerational church), but it may surprise some that my go-to “study jam” is classical (primarily Baroque) music; piano and cello is my favorite. I tend to be more progressive in all forms and styles of ministry in order to reach the next generation, but I love all kinds of music—symphony, new folk, techno, orchestral, rap and new worship music. Music, in all its expressions is given by God and is to be given back to him as worship.

- *If you could get one “do over” in ministry, what would it be, and why?*

I would be less concerned about what others think. The pastor, particularly in a large, cross-generational church will receive criticism from all angles. I’ve had meetings with people who’ve expressed a certain preference or opinion and then in my next appointment the person would passionately express the exact opposite position. It can be maddening for a pastor and staff.

Everyone has his/her own perspective, and when it’s combined with spiritual passion, it can become very challenging, even if the person is wrong. A pastor must rise above it all, with grace, by seeking the Spirit’s direction daily, pursuing godly wisdom from spiritually mature leaders, and by leading courageously to do what God is saying to do.

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