

John Whitten: ‘We serve a boundary-breaking God’

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John Whitten is lead pastor of the gathering, the contemporary-style congregation at Pioneer Drive Baptist Church in Abilene. 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

- *How long have you served in your current place of ministry?*

I started attending Pioneer Drive when I was a college freshman at Hardin-Simmons University. I came on staff as a youth intern 13 years ago and have worked in a variety of capacities at the church, including as college minister. This is my first church to serve in ministry.

- *Where did you grow up?*

Spring, Texas

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

I grew up in a Baptist pastor's home, which meant even when I was visiting my grandparents, I had to go to church with them! When I was 8 years old, I attended Vacation Bible School at First Baptist Church in Georgetown, Texas, and accepted Christ. I was baptized later by my dad at Wildewood Baptist Church in Spring.

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

I have a business management degree from Hardin-Simmons University, along with a master of divinity degree from Logsdon Seminary at Hardin-Simmons. I currently am pursuing my doctorate of ministry degree from Baylor's Truett Theological Seminary.

Ministry/church

- *Why do you feel called into ministry?*

I sense that the gifts God has given me can serve the needs of the local church. I believe the local church is the hope of the world, and she needs thoughtful, compassionate, Jesus-centered leaders. I'm definitely not perfect at living up to those qualities—but I do try.

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

By far, it is hearing stories of God breaking down walls in people's hearts, in our community, in churches and in families. We serve a boundary-breaking God, and I love seeing walls come down so people can experience authentic friendship with God and others. Whenever I sense a frustration in ministry, it means it's time for me to invite someone to lunch and hear what God is doing in their life.

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

I think congregations could change dramatically over the next 20 years. Many congregations hopefully will be getting more diverse, which I love!

Additionally, the time church members will give the church could decline, along with the frequency of church attendance. I will say I am hopeful about the future. We have college students here at Pioneer Drive who give a tremendous amount of their time—Sunday morning for worship and Bible study, a leadership development time on Sunday evening, a large weekly

outreach on Sunday night, and a small group throughout the week. So, I don't buy all of the stuff out there that says younger generations won't commit to the church. I believe people, including younger generations, want to be a part of a church with a compelling New Testament vision. They won't make much time or energy for institutional maintenance.

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

This is easy for me to answer. It's the people. 1 Thessalonians 2:8 has always stood out to me as an example of what the church ought to be. It says, "Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well."

There is a lot of solid preaching out there, and a lot of places have good music and have fruitful ministries. However, a place where people are vulnerable and share their lives in authentic, life-giving ways is not always the norm. It doesn't get better than the Good News of God's love revealed in Jesus Christ and sharing that love with others.

About Baptists

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

As the polarization continues and our society becomes increasingly divisive, I think we will have to work really hard at building bridges instead of walls. We continue to live rather segregated lives, and I think we will have to work really hard to not be a niche church or denomination that only caters to certain demographics.

I think many would say they are pessimistic about the future of denominational life and specifically Baptist life with declining giving and participation. I'm not one of those. I certainly believe we are living in challenging and changing times—and I think as Baptists, we will have to

resist the temptation to become too negative about things. I think these times will force us to focus on what we can do really well. I believe the church—and denominations—can be at their greatest with their backs against the wall and dependent on the work of the Holy Spirit.

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

I think we have to streamline much of what we do and partner with others who might be able to do some of what we do better than how we do it. Additionally, we have to get better at dialoguing with difference and appreciating differing perspectives. We need each other, and the world will know our Savior based on our unity together. We need to hold our convictions humbly in love, while respecting those who may see very important issues different than we do.

About John

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

Just before I wrote this, I had been on the phone with one of my mentors, and I also had talked to someone I mentored. My mentors are my spiritual heroes! They remind me I'm not alone when the days seem dark, give me a kick in the rear when I need to be reminded of why I do what I do, are a shoulder to cry on, and are a huge fan when I'm rejoicing. I would not know what to do at all in ministry if it weren't for those mentors of mine who coached me early on and encourage me today.

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

I'm thankful to serve in a church where our family can be a part of the church. There are not crazy expectations on my spouse or children. It is their church and a place where they are encouraged and allowed to use their gifts to serve. Our church does a good job of encouraging us to take

care of our families. So, I am glad when my son is excited about going to church!

- *What else would you like for our readers to know about you?*

One of my foundational verses for ministry is 1 Corinthians 2:4. It says, “My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power.”

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