

Voices: African American Fellowship and Ministries rebuilding churches

June 30, 2021

A few years ago, I (Rev. Williams) attended an African American leadership workshop themed “Disruption.” The main point was we cannot do church the way we always have. Little did we know the coronavirus pandemic was around the corner waiting to disrupt us in ways most were not prepared.

The impact on our churches alone has shaken the very core of who we are. Most African American churches were not prepared to handle this pandemic. The outcome has been catastrophic for many churches in Texas that have closed their doors. Many others were faced with financial hardships. Pastors are stressed, and the list goes on.

The recent ReBuild 2.0 Conference led by Rev. Oza Jones, director of Texas Baptists African American Ministries, provided practical and innovative tools, techniques and strategies for the post-pandemic era.

As a pastor and leader, I (Pastor White) consider myself a lifelong learner and, particularly, a student of the practices and position of the church leading her to make a lasting impact. Though conferences sometimes inspire me but don’t provide practical information I can apply immediately to my context and church, ReBuild 2.0 did not disappoint.

Outside the box

Perhaps one of the most gripping lines of the conference didn’t come from a speaker or presentation, but from Carlos Francis, evangelism associate

and African American specialist for Texas Baptists. Francis said a key part of his role is to help churches “think outside of the box, but never outside of the Bible.”

As local church pastors, this is one of the priorities and passions that fuels our work and ministry. However, in an ever-changing environment, this mandate has become more and more difficult as technology, trends and traumas—like the pandemic and church hurt—influence the minds of nonbelievers in our communities.

Dr. Maurice Pugh gave an insightful vision of where the church is today during the pandemic. “The new norm of the church looks like this: Twenty percent will not return back to church; 20 percent will continue to watch church from the comforts of their home, while 60 percent will return back to the assembly,” he said. Therefore, we must learn to deal with two audiences and engage with both equally.

Dr. Michael Evans Sr. asked, “If my church ceased to exist within my community, will the community miss it?” Churches must ask, “Is my church impacting the community?” If we are impacting only the people who attend in person on Sunday, then we need to make some changes.

Leading through change

Leading a church through a global pandemic has been, no doubt, one of the most difficult things we have done as pastors. In these uncertain times, many church pastors have had to deal with creating a completely virtual experience from scratch, providing pastoral care via Zoom, and other pandemic-specific issues that have completely changed the landscape of how we do church.

ReBuild 2.0 provided leaders with practical guidance on social media and how to use it to our advantage to impact local and global ministries. We

received practical tools for discipleship, evangelism, congregational outreach and the health and well-being of leaders.

Perhaps the best summary of both the conference and the resources of African American Ministries came from Rev. Henry Tolbert as he prompted us to understand “long-term problems require long-term solutions.”

Connection and encouragement

There are times as a pastor when the work and witness of ministry are met with despair and disappointment. Pastor Robert Townsend addressed the pain we are facing personally and professionally. We all have lost someone, and some of us have lost more than our fair share. We are left broken, and our hearts are aching.

How are we to get past these monumental times of grief that challenge the very faith we lean on? The beauty and blessing of the African American Fellowship is a connection that has provided for us, time and again, a needed place of relationship and reminder when the task of ministry seems overwhelming. The call to ministry is lonely only when we are not connected to the correct tribe.

Texas Baptists, and particularly the African American Fellowship, is a tribe in which African American church pastors can connect with like-minded individuals and churches on their quest to fulfill the Great Commission.

Resource and blessing

As inspired and instructed as I (Pastor White) was by ReBuild 2.0, I also was left with a disappointment and a desire. My disappointment was every African American Texas Baptist pastor I know wasn't present or connected to this conference. My desire, however, is to spread the word and ensure

this wonderful work is both unveiled and understood.

ReBuild 2.0 was a spiritual blend of speakers whose messages were intricately interwoven by the hand of God and spoke to the very heart of the issues many are dealing with now. The conference gave us practical solutions for successfully overcoming the effect of the pandemic on African American churches.

Your church can rebuild with the help and resources of the African American Fellowship of Texas and African American Ministries of Texas Baptists. We have the technical, strategic and the practical know-how, and we want to build a relationship with you.

Rev. Donald Williams Jr. is the executive pastor of Cornerstone Baptist Church in Harker Heights. Pastor Robert White is the lead pastor of Freedom Church in Bedford. The views expressed are those solely of the authors.