

Voices: A Vision for every First Baptist Church in Texas

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Almost every town in Texas has a First Baptist Church. Many—if not most—of these churches have played a crucial part in their communities at some point in time. They also have been a spiritual home for generations of people and have provided a rich legacy of faithfulness. This being said, for many of our First Baptist churches, their recent history has been one of constant challenge.

First Baptist Churches face challenges

Here are *some* of the challenges First Baptist churches have faced in recent years:

- Rural churches may be in a location of economic and population decline.
- A church's community may have experienced numerous demographic—especially racial—changes.
- Most of the younger generations no longer go to First Baptist Church and either do not go to church at all or go to another church that better fits their needs. A great deal of resentment may exist toward young people and/or the churches where young people attend.
- Inefficient decision-making processes often exist that unnecessarily slow down or hinder decision-making and use a lot of time in meetings.
- Church facilities are often older and in need of maintenance, which can put a great deal of stress on a struggling budget.

- A church's ministry methods and styles are from a different era, as is most easily experienced in musical selection and accompaniment in corporate worship.
- Recent seasons of difficulty, stress, and/or conflict between a pastor and the church are common.
- People think, "The past was better than today," and spend more time talking about how to recapture the past than about what the church could be for today or the future.
- Some communities perceive the "First Baptist Church" as elitist and judgmental.
- Fear and resistance of (more) change seems greater than the fear of continued decline or closure.

The reason I know some of these challenges is that I have had the privilege and opportunity to pastor three different First Baptist churches in Texas: Castroville, Woodville and Brenham. I also know many who serve in and love a First Baptist Church somewhere.

Sadly, too many First Baptist churches have become places of fear bitterness—bitterness toward culture, toward change, toward people. Fear and bitterness do not provide the fertile soil necessary for church health and growth.

As frustrating and disheartening as the challenges and subsequent fear and bitterness can be, I still have hope that God is not done with our First Baptist churches. With a First Baptist Church in almost every town, think about the **God-given, strategic opportunity** available in our communities for what God wants to do now and in the future.

First Baptist Churches face great

opportunity

In light of this opportunity, I offer a vision to every First Baptist Church in Texas. Since I currently pastor a First Baptist Church, I know what I am about to write is challenging. Nevertheless, what if every First Baptist Church could envision what it truly means to be “first?”

Imagine every First Baptist Church being first in:

- service to and for their community.
- being more excited about the future than the past.
- in personal evangelism.
- holding uncompromisingly to the never-changing word of God and—at the same time—being willing to change dated, cultural methods or styles.
- supporting missions through their financial gifts, prayers and sending of people.
- resourcing new church plants in North America and the world.
- stewarding their facilities for kingdom purposes in their community.
- senior adult visionaries: men and women who allow changes to be made—even changes they may not like—because they want their church to thrive.
- what a healthy, supportive and trusting relationship between a church and pastor looks like.
- church health and growth in their community.
- welcoming and actively inviting people of different races and cultural backgrounds.
- being the most innovative in ministry.
- being liberated from fear and bitterness and becoming communities of God-centered, God-enjoying, God-exalting hope and vision.

Ultimately, my prayer in offering this vision is that during this challenging

time, it will be said of us who are in a First Baptist Church that we did not back down from the challenges. We did not allow fear and bitterness to win. Instead, we saw the challenges as opportunities for what God wanted to do next, and what God did next was bigger and better than anything we could have imagined!

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