

# Voices: What does the future church look like?

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To ask, “What does the future church look like?” is a bit audacious. The best we can do is listen to the present, reasonably guess and occasionally dare to change course.

As one working for the good of Baptists, but an institutional outsider to the Baptist General Convention of Texas, I went to Texas Baptists’ Future Church 2030 Conference out of curiosity. As my students, supporters and friends work in these spaces—and as I worship in a BGCT-affiliated church—what kind of future is being envisioned? And what kind of future does church have at all?

As a few hundred gathered April 4-5 to ask these questions, I walked into the foyer of First Baptist Church in Bryan and observed BGCT booths spread out across the area: GC2 Press, Christian Life Commission, Campus Ministries and others—the full array of ministry possibilities.

The audience was predominately older than me and predominantly male, varied in ethnicity and context. I visited with younger ministers from Dallas, older ministers from West Texas, BGCT officials and others with this one question in mind: What kind of future were they seeing?

## Questions facing Texas Baptists

During the last two years, church attendance has dropped statewide, BGCT budgets have contracted, and questions about the BGCT’s relationship to its Southern Baptist counterparts have grown.

I mention these only to say it seems very little is certain about the future, other than it seems to be smaller and less institutionally steady than the past. I am not alone in seeing this. Multiple surveys have shown the decline in church attendance and the increase in budgetary strains for many churches.

Whatever the future looks like for the BGCT as a whole, the choice of conference speakers largely reflected the priorities of the cities—such as El Paso, Houston and Dallas—and largely of male leadership.

This is not to say there was not great wisdom in many of the talks, but as one living in West Texas and attending a BGCT church that ordains women and men, I had to wonder if much of what was being said was shaped by these presumptions, and what the future would look like if the slate of speakers were women or from rural contexts.

At some level, this is reflective of what the BGCT will need to take up in the future: What the future of the church looks like in Dallas cannot be translated directly in the Panhandle, and what the Valley needs will not simply be downstream from Austin or El Paso.

But regardless of context, the decline of Christianity across the board is one of those questions being raised across the state and across Baptist life. What does the future hold in that kind of world?

The opening presentation set the stage in dark terms, with the future being one of cultural tsunamis, in which Christian presumptions about the world are lost, with nebulous terms like “CRT” and “woke evangelicals” the dangers ahead.

Others pointed toward a more digitally enmeshed, more culturally diverse world more in need of evangelism. The future here is not one of threat so much as opportunity.

The latter presentations were rich, practical and engaging, frequently introducing the audience to topics that needed to be discussed, however difficult or unknown to them. For example, the Metaverse is coming for all of us, like it or not.

## **Acting vs. being**

While divided in tone, what united most of the presentations is a common vision of the future church needing most *new tools for acting*.

As important as these topics were to discuss, the emphasis on new tools seemed to omit an important question raised by the last two years. New tools for acting could not account, for example, for why church communities fragmented in the last two years or why ministers were run off.

New tools for acting could not account alone for what Tod Bolsinger shared he uncovered in 170 meetings and surveys over the last year—fragmented churches, isolated members, tired ministers. New tools, it seems, only can help stake out a future when there is a renewed community that sees itself *as a community* capable of using good new tools.

This was not the only vision of the church's future presented in Bryan. Some presentations focused not on the church as things a group of people do, but *a community that then does certain things*.

They told stories of ordinary faithfulness, of a community that shared its life together and grew through being neighbors to its world. The difference between these approaches is seemingly small but marks a huge difference.

# Community is the future

The church—future or otherwise—is a community called by Christ to be his, to image the peace of God to a fragmented world, to demonstrate in its life together what it means to be a body.

The future church does need wise words about how to walk in a rapidly changing world—wise words for navigating digital engagement, ethnicity, culture, biblical illiteracy. But these are not the first words the future church needs.

This church will do many things, of course, but it will do them together, not as a means to an end, but as an extension of its life together. This stands in contrast to a church known by its programming or its worship style. Programming and ministry initiatives will change as cultural winds shift, but the emphasis on the church as a community endures.

Roots allow for new branches to grow in place of dead ones, but new branches cannot compensate for a rotten trunk.

In more than 10 years of teaching seminarians, one of the constants is this: My students are not looking for programming, but community.

In the last two years, the underlying rot within our churches has been revealed, not in the form of bad programming. It is seen in churches as crowds and not communities, as fragmented individuals wondering why they ever needed the others next to them at all.

If the future church is conceived primarily as gathering people first to perform tasks, I fear the church of the future is largely the church of the past—organized around programming, activities and accomplishments.

The future, if there is one for many churches, is first to recover the hard, slow and inefficient work of being a community together. In a world of

declining budgets and exhausted volunteers, that's the future I'd put my money on. It's the only future worth staking our lives on.

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