

Longview's LifePoint Church builds relationships with unchurched_41805

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LONGVIEW-When Brian Shobert surveyed Longview two years ago, he saw something he didn't like-an unexpectedly large number of people with no connection to a church.

Demographic information revealed about 80 percent of area residents do not attend church regularly. The other 20 percent create large, strong congregations, but each seems the same, Shobert observed. They all are made up of the same, typically older, demographic and use similar outreach methods.

Brian
Shobert,
pastor of
LifePoint
Church in
Longview,
delivers a
message
during a
recent
service.
(Photo by
John Hall)

Clearly, their techniques are not working to serve the thousands of people who are not coming to church—especially those younger single individuals, Shobert asserted. A congregation would need to look drastically different to reach that 80 percent. And so LifePoint Church was born.

It is a different church to reach a different group of people, he noted. The congregation holds services Saturday night and Sunday morning in converted office space. The only advertising of the space is a small sign and a tarp that serves as a welcome station.

The worship atmosphere is meant to be comfortable. Participants, including leaders, wear jeans or relaxed khakis. Tucked-in shirts are rare. People eat muffins and sip coffee while sitting in theater seats. The pastor's sermons are more like conversations, as he encourages the crowd to talk to each other during parts of his application-oriented teachings.

There is no walking an aisle to make a faith profession. Sometimes leaders stand in the back of the room in case someone wants to talk. Many times, decisions are indicated by marking and turning in a card. Church leaders

follow up with new Christians later.

The entire event happens in an area that feels more like a basement or warehouse than a sanctuary. Everything has been painted black except the front of the room, which is white—to help people know where to focus, Shobert said. It also helps present a series of notes and congregation-produced graphics and video clips.

The differences go beyond style. The congregation has no “programs” such as Sunday school. The closest thing it has is small “life groups,” focused on relationship-building and Bible study. Leaders want outreach to come out of relationships, not static avenues. When needs become known, leaders let the church know. Members can choose to meet them.

“We want our church to be based on fellowship where people can feel comfortable with each other,” said David Mauritzen, a church elder. “Everyone's on equal footing. Your past doesn't matter.”

It worked during Christmas. The church helped several families have Christmas presents. During a recent worship service, Shobert stopped the ceremony to pray for a couple who had been committed to the congregation for some time, but now were moving to Phoenix.

The approach may seem unorthodox, especially for East Texas, but unchurched people are coming in droves. Shobert estimated about 2,500 people, many of whom have no connection to a church, have come to worship with the congregation in 18 months. A 40-year-old would be a senior member of the congregation.

Jules Soulé, director of missions for Gregg Baptist Association, praised the church's work, saying Shobert does an excellent job of discipleship through his preaching.

Gregg Baptist Association, Oakland Heights Baptist Church in Longview

and the Baptist General Convention of Texas Church Multiplication Center are sponsoring LifePoint.

“For this part of East Texas, they have been highly successful,” Soulé said.

The facilities appear to be limiting the church's growth. The congregation serves nearly 400 people each weekend and began a second Sunday service Easter. People are driving in from other cities in the region, including Marshall and Gilmer.

“People like what's going on,” the pastor said. ‘We have a lot of fun. Real relational needs are being met in our worship and small groups.’”

Shobert said the congregation is far from perfect. Leaders continue tweaking their techniques and are re-evaluating the purpose of life groups as well as other areas of the church.

The church set out to serve people not connected to a church. God has blessed enormously, but the pastor said there are many more non-Christians out there. The church plans on starting a series of similar congregations in upcoming years.

“Our vision is to reach those unchurched, unsaved, de-churched people in Longview,” he said.

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