

**Notes from a Roundtable Discussion on Revitalization, Missions**

Lexington Baptist Church (LBC), a CMBA Church Network Connection, recently held a roundtable discussion on church revitalization, replanting, missions and issues confronting the Church in America. The conversation included LBC staff members, the pastors of a local church replant and a new church in Portland, both supported by LBC, and representatives from the church revitalization areas of the North American Mission Board and South Carolina Baptist Convention. Billed as a “sharing of ideas,” discussions touched on the struggles and successes of these specific church plants, and ways that sponsoring churches and planting pastors can be encouraged in the call to reach the lost with the gospel amidst current cultural and sociological issues.

“Our goals in planning this were to hear from church replanting specialists. We know what our experience at River District Church is, but we wanted to gain information and ideas for the next steps there. We also wanted to hear the experiences of other church replanters during COVID - how are they responding during this time, what has seemed to work and what has not worked. Lastly, we wanted insight for the next church replant that God might bring our way,” says LBC Missions Pastor Mark Hathcox.

**River District Church, West Columbia**

LBC began discussions with First Baptist West Columbia in 2017 about how LBC could support the church as it identified God’s plan for its future. In the time since, the two churches prayerfully agreed that First Baptist West Columbia would become River District Church and LBC would serve as its partner in replanting. Volunteer teams from LBC have done minor improvements around the facility, helped with outreach opportunities and a collection of members now worship at River District Church to lead music and other critical ministries. LBC’s ministerial staff have regularly provided pulpit supply and called Seth Stoddard as an LBC associate for local church planting in 2018. Stoddard now serves as the pastor of River District Church.

Stoddard reports the delays and interruptions by COVID over the past year have provided time for facility improvements and for God to soften the hearts of members struggling with change. “The church’s new name also gives a fresh start and a new reputation in the community,” he says.

According to LBC Senior Pastor Mike Turner, successful church revitalization is dependent on the direction of the Holy Spirit and strong leadership, like Stoddard. “Seth has leadership qualities and gifting and the calling to do church revitalization. The skillset necessary for this includes a love for all generations, an entrepreneurial spirit, someone that is hard to discourage and also gifted in multiple areas,” Turner says.

Stoddard updated the panel on River District Church’s progress, including strides in reaching young professionals and newly married and middle-aged couples from the immediate neighborhood. They are identifying Sunday School and small group models to best reach the community and working to stay connected with existing members during COVID. Stoddard also shared how River District is pursuing relationships with its senior adult members during the pandemic.

**East Bridge Church, Portland, Oregon**

Several years ago, LBC helped plant East Bridge Church in Portland, Oregon. A few families relocated there from the Midlands and short-term LBC mission teams have supported the church’s outreach to the neighborhood. Clay Holcomb is a NAMB Send City missionary for Seattle and Portland and has recently become the pastor of East Bridge Church. As he shared updates on the church plant, Holcomb discussed some challenges and opportunities all churches face in reaching the lost today.

“The strong foundations that still exist today in replants, legacy churches and revitalizations are because of a generation that had massive amounts of vision. If we don’t restore and bring back that kind of vision to the lay people of the church, then we will be back in the same position in 10-20 years. These strong foundations are lay-led,” Holcomb explains.

While he admits the ministry context in the Northwest for East Bridge Church is completely different than in the South, Holcomb encouraged Stoddard to pour into lay mobilization saying “ultimately the identity of a church becomes real through the hearts and minds of people who then go out into the world.” At East Bridge, Holcomb and his founding team are working to do just that, to cultivate God’s unique calling in the lives of existing church members so that they can take the gospel message out into the community. He shared a goal of building the church to “critical mass” size, somewhere around 25 to 30 people, by the end of 2021.

**Leadership Profiles and Next Steps**

The panel discussed residencies and internships for potential church planters connected with a partnering church, and the importance of having a leadership plan in place in order to continue momentum with church planting and missions.

“If every church could adopt the mentality to churn out these leaders, we would transform our denomination. It really is the thing we struggle with the most. As new initiatives come there’s the low-hanging fruit that attract those eager to jump in. Pretty soon that fruit is gone and then they realize they must actually produce. I am hearing from partners that are realizing there isn’t an internal pipeline of developing and sending out planters. We’ve got to do this as churches. If we did this across the board, we would transform our entire network,” says Holcomb.

The panel discussed how to collaborate and partner better with neighboring churches in the community, acknowledging that there is a unifying opportunity to be on mission together right now. They also agreed conversations like this are valuable to have, at both the church level and among leaders from other churches. COVID has created uncharted territory for churches and with new, and often unknown, dynamics.

“Group discussions like this are good and particularly helpful to realize that this is really a local issue. Every local environment is unique and what might be effective in another area of the country may not be applicable here. Local customs, cultures, theological stances and the way congregations function relationally all lend themselves to a local kind of understanding of how to do things. To sit and talk with others in your local area is incredibly helpful now,” Turner explains.

He went on to say that data-based leadership isn’t necessarily the best way to move forward in the current situation churches are facing, instead Turner believes it must be more collaborative and draw from intuitive leadership. With regard to discussions at the associational level, Turner says now “is a time with collegial conversations have more impact than they’ve ever had before.”

To the church or leader being led to pursue replanting or revitalization, Hathcox recommends looking to the local association first. “Associational leadership are key people who know which churches are in need of replanting. Resources are often found in the harvest, so look to see who God is raising up in your fellowship and who you are already connected with. God may have brought them in your life to join you in planting or replanting,” says Hathcox.

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