

A banner with a green and yellow background featuring a blurred image of a field. The text is centered and reads: DR. LAMAR E. SMITH CENTER FOR EVANGELISM & CHURCH GROWTH.

DR. LAMAR E. SMITH CENTER FOR EVANGELISM & CHURCH GROWTH

Returning from Christmas break, I listened to the Cowboys game on the radio. It was a pretty poor spectacle. The Cowboys won 6 to 0 in a meaningless game in the frigid conditions of Philadelphia. After the game, there was a long discussion on the Cowboys' network about the game and the future of the Dallas Cowboys. One analyst made a profound comment, and I'm paraphrasing: he said, "It really infuriates me when Cowboy fans say next year will be our year or we will win it all in 2018 or this was just a bad year or we'll make up for it next year." The reason he felt this way — if nothing changes, if we don't do something different, if we don't change significantly, then we will keep being a mediocre team, because, the Cowboys won't get better until decisions are made that change what has created a mediocre team and decisions that lay a foundation for a team that can win a Super Bowl. We won't get better just by hoping we will.

I celebrate with you if your church is doing well, growing, transforming the community and achieving the goals you have. But if the numbers I see every month for our Conference and the Methodist Church are true, most of us are leading and serving churches that are not where we want them to be. Some are stable, others in stable decline, too many or in a long decline, and more than a few or in crisis. Few are growing in significant ways.

I think the church and our pastors live in hope and optimism. We can think that next Sunday everything will be better, Easter will turn things around, this year will be a game-changing year, much the same attitude many Cowboys fans have this year about a very average team.

What we can't do as a church, individual churches and our denomination is think that next Sunday somehow things will be what we want, that attendance will be better, more members will join and the offering will be enough, etc.

Churches just don't begin to grow. They just don't begin to transform their community and they just don't begin to bring people into faith and make disciples.

I had the opportunity over Christmas to spend some time in Florida. While there. I visited three great Methodist churches — Destin, Gulf Breeze and Crosspoint in Niceville. I visited with the senior pastors of Destin and Gulf Breeze, as I already knew the pastor at Crosspoint. Each community is relatively small, though there is growth in the area. Gulf Breeze is in a community of around 6,000 and runs over 2,000 in worship. Crosspoint is in a community of around 12,000 and runs 3,600 in worship, and Destin is in a community of around 12,300 and runs over 1,000 in worship. The Methodist churches there have a significant and growing market share and mission reach in those areas, and I would not be surprised if it was the largest of any churches in those communities.

How do these churches have a significant growing market share and mission reach?

- Each church runs an aggressive posture of reaching people they are not already reaching, multiple services, new faith communities, expansive outreach and mission, an intentional footprint in the community they are in, and the ability and willingness to adapt, change and focus their life around the mission of the church.
- They all combine traditional and contemporary elements, focus on new groups and new services, emphasize children's ministries, are creative and innovative in worship, marketing and communication, serve their communities and world well, and have every age level in attendance. Above all, they refuse to say next year will be better; they plan for next year to be better, a pattern that has created a culture of expected, not hoped-for growth.

I am probably being a little simplistic here, and nothing is as easy as it sounds. But I learned in my own ministry that I could not accept decline. I always had to keep people, ministry, life and the mission moving. New places for new people was the most effective way, with new groups, new ministries, new worship services and new faith communities.

What's the plan in 2018 to grow your church? If your church did not grow last year in life and mission, then the plan you had or the lack of a plan is not working. It will take a new one.