

Van revival sees nearly 1,000 make decisions for Christ in wake of teen suicides

VAN- A pervading sense of desperation had begun to hang like a dark cloud over the community of Van - a small town just northwest of Tyler - after four teenagers took their own lives on four separate occasions. Not unexpectedly, the tragedies wounded the town. Local pastors say they watched as people began to lose their hope and as the wounded compounded upon one another, leaving the community scarred and aching.

Ron Brey, youth pastor at Pruitt Baptist Church, said it was in the midst of this heartache that he found himself praying earnestly for his kids and their families.

"Families were falling like flies out here," Brey said. "I was led heavily by the Spirit to go to the football stadium. I was walking around up there, just praying, when the football coach approached me and asked me why I was there."

Brey said he told the coach he was just stopping by to walk around, but that the coach knew there must be a reason the youth pastor was pacing around the stadium.

"He said, 'No really, why are you here?'" Brey recalled.

Brey went on to talk with the coach about how burdened he was for the students and their families. As they sat on the empty bleachers, the coach said he felt exactly about how he couldn't get the picture out of his head of someone standing on the football field preaching the gospel to a packed-out crowd in the stands. The two parted agreeing to take the burden and the vision to the Lord in prayer.

Over the course of the next year, churches in the surrounding area, including three affiliated with the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention, began to work together to plan a revival to reach their community.

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-Tom Campbell, Pastor of First Baptist Church of Van

As it turned out, the vision the football coach had in mind was exactly what resulted from the fervent prayers of revival planners.

April 27-30, the team put their planning and prayers into action as they welcomed evangelist Rick Gage of GO TELL Ministries, to the Van Memorial Stadium, where night after night, people filled the stands and heard the gospel proclaimed.

When it came to the last evening of the crusade, the churches planning the event gave one last big push to get people into the stadium so that they could share the message of salvation with as many as possible. Tom Campbell, pastor of First Baptist Church of Van, said they even brought in a BMX bike demonstration and offered free pizza to reach out to the students in the community.

"On the last night, we had a full stadium on the home side," Campbell said. "It seats about 3,500. We're estimating we had about 3,000 people there last night, and we had about two-thirds of the stands come down in some way (during the invitation)."

Some of those that came forward were walking with others who were making decisions, and some were people who came down multiple times throughout the crusade, said Campbell, who was in charge of training roughly 400 people to serve as counselors for the event. But in the end, after sorting through commitment cards, Campbell said they tallied that at least 900, many of whom were teenagers, made some sort of decision for Christ. Commitment card responses indicated that people had come to the event from about 100 different churches in East Texas. Campbell said about 100 indicated a connection to first Baptist Van and that the church is currently working to follow-up with each of those people.

Campbell said the atmosphere in their community has undergone a significant shift in the weeks following the revival. He said the superintendent of Van ISD is a member of First Baptist Van and gave a testimony in church in May of the change he has observed in the school. Campbell recalled him specifically telling of a student caught running in the hall after the tardy bell had rung. When stopped, the student said he had forgotten his Bible in his locker and had to run back to get it before getting to class. The chief of police, also a member of First Baptist Van, told Campbell that he, too, has heard word from the schools that in instances of discipline and behavior issues has begun to decrease.

Brey said he has heard much of the same from students in his church's youth group.

"One of my students texted me and said that he could feel the Spirit of God in the high school for the first time since he's been a student there." Brey said. "Another student told me they had gone a whole day and didn't hear anyone cussing in the hallway."

The pastors echoed each other in citing prayer as the driving factor in the crusade and the impact it is having on their community. That's the way it began and the way it all came together, they said. And now, they say the Lord will use this as the flame to ignite an even greater fire for Christ in East Texas.

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