

# **‘Timothy Project’ provides practical training for would-be church leaders**

RIDGELAND, Miss. (BP) – Even at 42 years old, Chad Hunsberger is still on the younger side when it comes to the average age of a pastor. He has enough experience to know, however, the importance of constant training and instruction no matter the stage of your ministry.

He understands an advantage he enjoyed from a wealth of knowledge being a phone call away.

“I’m the son of a pastor. My father-in-law was in ministry for 45 years. My brother has been in ministry for 25 years,” he said. “I had easy access on questions like how to conduct a funeral or wedding or any other questions related to being a pastor. Not everyone has that privilege.”

About six-and-a-half years ago, Hunsberger moved from an associate pastor position in Pearl to the lead pastor role at Colonial Heights Baptist Church in Ridgeland, his first. Within six months an idea began forming to equip members at the church who had expressed a desire to serve on the mission field or other capacities.

The idea became The Timothy Project, founded by Hunsberger. Colonial Heights partnered with the Equip Network of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary to offer advanced biblical and theological training. The church also established Bible study groups and prayer groups geared toward exploring the call to ministry. Other steps included establishing a pipeline for mentorship in missions and a residential training program.

The project continued development up through the winter of

2020. The shutdown from COVID-19 led to a meeting among about 100 pastors where Hunsberger described many as “broken” from the stress of leading a church in that time.

“We came back from that wanting to figure out something to do for them,” he said.

A two-day Timothy Project Conference emerged. The first one fell shy of 100 in attendance, but the fifth annual gathering, scheduled for this May, is expected to have 400. Past speakers include Jim Shaddix and Robert Smith, Jr., who will return this year.

Leadership cohorts are another avenue of learning. They run from August through May and include 10 sessions held at the church. The \$100 to join covers meals at the church as well as 10 books.

The personal nature of the cohort is intentional, so participants are within driving distance. However, a few drive two hours to be there, and one drives three.

Around 15 are involved in the cohort, which is “designed to lean on the practical,” Hunsberger explained, and is geared toward those feeling a call to serve as a senior pastor. Topics such as budgeting and pastoral care are part of those gatherings.

Another dozen or so pastors attend two-hour roundtable discussions at Colonial Heights three times a year. “Guys come and we talk pastor to pastor about what’s happening in our world,” Hunsberger said.

The Timothy Project’s residency program pays for two participants’ seminary costs while they serve on the church’s staff.

“Our goal is for them to have some ministry experience when they graduate and go serve in another church,” Hunsberger

said. Seminary-level classes are taught at the church for anyone wanting deeper discipleship. Omega, a nine-week discipleship experience, equips college students for ministry.

The Timothy Project is worked into the church's budget, so costs for the events themselves are kept minimal.

"Right now, about 80 percent of Mississippi churches are less than 100 people," Hunsberger said. "We know that most don't have a conference budget, so we want to provide it for free."

Registration has opened for the May 5-6 event, which includes two lunches, snacks and free and discounted resources.

"God has been gracious to us, and we value the multiplication of churches," Hunsberger said. "This isn't designed to bring growth to Colonial Heights. Over 100 churches will be represented at the conference and that thrills us because it's more churches being equipped and encouraged to do the work of the Kingdom."

Hunsberger has also traveled to Honduras and Uganda to train pastors through the Timothy Project. A Peru trip is upcoming.

The overall idea is that pastors can be a Paul and a Timothy at the same time. There are things to learn, but everyone has an experience to share and help others grow.

"Of course, I don't think I have everything figured out. We just want [the training] to be of value to others," he said. "We've walked through some highs and lows and know we're not alone in that."