

**Alice Drive Baptist Times Multi-Site with an Emphasis**

**on Making a Good First Impression**

This summer, Clay Smith will celebrate 25 years as the lead pastor at Alice Drive Baptist Church, in Sumter, and much of that quarter-century’s work has led to this day – pointing Alice Drive Baptist Church toward becoming a multi-site congregation with an emphasis on making an excellent first impression for all those who come.

While Alice Drive remains in association with churches through the Santee Baptist Association, it is a church network connection with the Columbia Metro Baptist Association – 40 miles to the west.

“George Bullard, executive director for the Columbia Metro association, has created the opportunity for church network connections, and it’s turned out to be a cool thing,” Clay says. “We can access their resources, join in partnerships, and join with their churches in appropriate mission. With our vision to be a multi-site congregation, we want to join with local associations wherever we can.”

“George and I have been talking for about a year, learning from one another and from research related to both Columbia and Sumter,” Clay says. “There are pockets of Columbia where the Sumter demographic matches pretty well, and we can learn from that. We can also be positioned, and we had better be in position if people closer to Columbia decide to come our way.”

If this sounds missional and strategic, it is all part of the Alice Drive DNA. Clay says:

“We have a strong focus on our mission – ‘We exist to help people take their next step toward Jesus’ – and by pounding it for 15 years, the whole church has bought in,” Clay says. “It blesses my soul to hear one of our leaders give an offertory prayer and include that mission as part of the prayer.”

“We believe that everyone matters to God, that church is a place of grace, that everyone has a purpose, and that all people need to be like Jesus,” Clay says. “It sounds like I’m reading, but we have worked hard to get those into our DNA, and they seep into all that we do. We want the result to be that we grow, and we go share.”

As its people embrace, talk about, and model the church’s mission and values, Clay says the church is ready to be intentional in focusing on people needs and meeting what people need.

“We are the only Southern Baptist Church in South Carolina, to my knowledge, with a Monday evening worship service,” Clay says. “Why? Because we have researched and learned that 37 percent of our workforce is at work on the weekends. Here’s what that means. In this three-county area where we serve, 14,000 people can’t get to church on Sunday. If you had a town with 14,000 people and no church . . . wouldn’t you start one? That’s what it means to focus on needs and meet those needs.”

“Why do most churches have Vacation Bible School in June? To get it out of the way,” Clay says. “But we know in this community that most people move over the Fourth of July weekend. We intentionally scheduled VBS after July 4 because everyone who has moved is looking for a place for their children. Churched and unchurched people are more inclined to bring their children to our VBS and get a break.”

Clay says, “Being a military community has caused us to stretch strategically. Our per capita income is three-fourths of what it is in Lexington County, so we must think about every dollar spent. We have a lot of turnover in our community, and so we must provide a lot of on-ramps for people to join us because we may only have one opportunity to meet them. We don’t have a homogenous population here, and we are beyond the curve of most churches technologically. Why? Because we’ve got 700 new people – drone pilots – at Shaw Air Force Base. They know technology and expect it.”

That’s why Alice Drive has positioned itself as a leader in focusing on first impressions ministry with strategy and innovation behind it. The church knows and understands its community and the expectations of it.

“Some of it is old-hat,” Clay says. “But the message begins in the parking lot. If they don’t have a good experience from the start, then they are less likely to engage when I get up to speak. So, we want smiling faces in the parking lot. We want the right people greeting people. We want section hosts in the worship center, connecting and meeting people in their section. We want to go and learn about the expectations of first-time guests. We want to learn about anything that can add value to a guest’s experience with us.” That personal touch extends to gift bags at the Welcome Center and fresh-baked cookies delivered by deacons in the afternoon. Clay makes the follow-up, personally.

“As quickly as we can, we want that guest in a small group where we can get to know them and watch their participation,” he says. “We are perceived as a big church so we must intentionally make ourselves smaller, and we have about 65 percent regular attendance in our groups. We must chase that 35 percent, so they know that they are noticed and missed. It really makes you dive into your database, and we look at data, review it, and send an email here and there. Yes, we look at giving, too. Because trends tell you that something is happening in the heart, and we want to know what’s happening.”

The goal is for this spirit to carry out into multi-sites like at Pocalla Church, meeting at Pocalla Spring Elementary School in Sumter. Pocalla Church is nine miles south of Alice Drive’s campus, 16 miles northwest of Manning, SC.

“We are surrounded by communities with dying churches,” Clay says. “We have counties in South Carolina where there is not one single healthy church - counties with thousands of people with no more than 150 people, no full-time student pastor, and no real children’s ministry. Something must be done. Every church must be asking, ‘Why has God put us here, and why has God allowed us to be the size that we are?’”

“Churches must understand that they live on a mission field,” Clay says. “Too many churches believe everyone around them has a church home. That’s why Alice Drive is about serving, looking at our data, trying new things, reaching out into the community, with a mission to help people take their next step toward Jesus.”