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Aug. 2 is the date scheduled for the closure of the day care at Liberal's First Baptist Church. The church, along with many in the community, are looking for solutions to the increasing need for child care in Liberal. L&T photo/Robert Pierce

By ROBERT PIERCE • Leader & Times The school year is scheduled to end later this month, and a new school year will begin in mid-August.

Before children head back to school, though, some local parents may be looking for a new place to take their younger children.

The deacon board of Liberal's First Baptist Church recently voted to close the church's day care. The center is set to be closed on Aug. 2.

FBC Pastor Loren Robinson said a desire to have a children's ministry that is less restricted by government regulations than day care is the motive behind the board's move.

"Day care is licensed, so once a year, at least, they come in to evaluate the building and to redo the license," he said. "Our desire is to move away from the regulation of the government. There are a lot more government regulations."

Robinson said government regulations restrict what can be done with a child in a day care on a consistent basis.

"You can do vacation Bible school," he said. "That's one, maybe two weeks during the summer. We do Sunday school. We have Wednesday night. Those things aren't regulated, but if you do something weekly or daily, the government gets involved and regulates it and understandably

so. You wouldn't want to have something that's not going to take care of the kids and have conditions that the kids are in. We understand that, but our desire was to move into a ministry that has minimal, if any, regulation from the government."

Robinson said government officials have not had any issues with the soon to be implemented ministry program.

"We've not had any problem as far as them saying you can't do this kind of thing as far as ministry, as far as teaching the Bible," he said. "That's not been a question at all."

Rather, Robinson said the question is with how the church uses the facility.

"Because the day care and preschool are in so much of the building, those who do the inspections can go anywhere the day care goes, and they go," he said.

Robinson said FBC leaders have been looking at the church's day care for a while now.

"Over the years, there's been several discussions of evaluation where the church was with day care, with its operation," he said. "There's a number of variables that have influenced this decision. The one that really keeps coming to the top is the desire of the congregation to move away from that regulatory involvement of the state or the government in what we do here."

With the new children's ministry, which will take place during the week, Robinson said the church can continue to provide child care, but before the deacon board's decision was made, he said the number of children in FBC's day care had been in decline.

"We've not seen the numbers," he said. "We've been told we could have as many as 80 at a time in the day care. We've not had 80 at one time in our day care not since I've been here."

Robinson said when children are in FBC's day care varies from family to family.

"When you look at day care, you're thinking of children that are here full time," he said. "We have half time, part time and full time. We have preschoolers. We have after school care. There's so many different variables in that. If we just said all we're going to take is full time day care only, we could have as many as 80 all day long. That's not the only thing that we do. Anytime we take someone up that is not a full time day care, that variable cuts down on that number."

Robinson said government regulations also affect how a day care can manage its teachers.

"There's just so many different variables that go into administrating the type of day care that we've done with the preschool, with the after school kids coming in, with part time," he said. "It's not an easy task to manage that."

Robinson explained some of the costs involved with operating a day care.

“The major cost is your employees and the salaries for those that are employed to watch, to care and to teach the children,” he said. “Food is a big cost. That comes under a lot of regulation.”

Robinson estimated FBC’s day care has existed about 35 years, and the facility had been used prior to that.

“There was at another time a day care that operated in the facility for 10 years before that,” he said. “That group moved out, and the church started their own.”

Liberal is currently experiencing a decline in the number of day care centers available for parents’ use. Robinson said FBC’s day care closing places an additional burden on the need for local centers, but as to how big of a burden, he was not sure.

“I know that there is a need,” he said. “We changed the way we did day care when I came. We closed down over the Christmas break.”

Robinson has been with FBC for almost two years now, and he said the holiday closure and other changes were made to help the church get a handle on its costs for day care.

“We were not doing well financially with the day care, so we had to get a handle on that,” he said. “We eliminated a lot of the flexible care, the hourly type care. There was no way we could identify how to make sure we had the teachers that were here to take care of the kids.”

Robinson said this created a “come and go” type day care system, and this affected the church’s ability to break even financially.

“We eliminated that, and we went to part time day care and full time day care,” he said. “We have the preschool, the after school care, the kindergartners, which are half day. We did that, and that made quite a few parents unhappy. We’ve lost a good number of families from that decision, but that was a financial decision. We had to do that to get a handle on things financially.”

Robinson said one of the Liberal’s greatest needs in terms of day care is flexible care.

“Probably what would serve our community best would be a day care that would be a drop off center that would have, if not 24/7, such flexible hours that those who work at night would have place to make sure their kids were cared for at least in the evening time,” he said.

Robinson said the deacon board chose the August date in order to give employees an opportunity to look for other work and families a chance to find a new day care center.

The pastor said the church is seeking some divine assistance with its day care issue.

“We’re just praying and seeking the Lord about the direction that He’s leading us and what He wants us to do,” he said. “I believe God’s been working.”

Robinson said some solutions are already popping up to the community's day care quandary.

"There's already been one day care that's had their grand opening," he said. "There are two or three others that are talking about opening day care. I think it's a positive thing that's happening in the community as far as providing more for the community. That's an encouraging thing."

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