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Churches urged to address multicultural needs of Texas

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Whether the message is “Jesús te ama,” “Jésus te aime” or “Jesus loves you,” Baptists need to reach out intentionally to all people in an increasingly multicultural state of non-believers, according to Baptist General Convention of Texas staff.

Nationwide, 47 million people, or 17.9 percent of the population older than 5, speak a language other than English at home, according to the 2000 census. Nineteen of the top 20 counties with the highest percentages of people who speak a language other than English are in Texas.

All seven counties in the nation where more than 80 percent of the inhabitants speak a non-English language were in Texas. Every county in the state indicated some non-English speakers.□

Laredo, Brownsville, McAllen and El Paso all ranked in the top 10 cities of more than 100,000 people for percentage of residents who are non-English

speakers.

Those same locations also ranked in the top 10 cities of more than 100,000 for percentage of residents who spoke Spanish. El Paso, ranked seventh, was the lowest of the four cities at 68.9 percent Spanish-speakers.

Laredo and Brownsville are among the top 10 places with the highest percentage of people who speak English less than “very well.” Laredo ranked sixth at 43.6 percent, and Brownsville came in just below that at 42 percent.

Overall, 13.9 percent of Texans (almost 2.7 million people) speak English less than very well.

Many churches do not know the statistics are so staggering, reported Patty Lane, director of BGCT intercultural initiatives. “Many of our churches do not realize there are so many people in a non-English world.”

People no longer must learn English to be successful, said Gus Reyes, ethnic consultant for the BGCT Center for Strategic Evangelism. Spanish is used for government documents, signs, books and daily business in many instances. In some places in Texas, Spanish is more common than English.

Fortunately for churches, non-English speakers appear interested in events targeted at them, Reyes reported. When they find functions designed for them that meet their needs, they attend.

But evangelism cannot simply be event-oriented, Reyes noted. With an estimated 10 million non-Christians in the state, Texas Baptists must be active in their faith and spread the gospel.

“Whether it's an all-Spanish-speaking audience or English-speaking audience, we must be sensitive and keep in mind that lost people come in all kinds,” he said. “We have to really focus on an evangelistic thread in our

churches. It's not a rally or event; it's day-to-day living."

Ministry especially may be needed in situations where no one in the family speaks English or a child is relied upon heavily to be a translator, Lane said.

According to the census, 4.4 million households encompassing 11.9 million people nationwide were "linguistically isolated," meaning no one in the household older than 14 speaks English at least very well.

Youth often pick up English and become fluent but hold on to their parents' language for home communication, Lane said. But their bilingual proficiency may put them in difficult spots.

Children take on adult responsibilities in situations where they must relay vital information to their parents, Lane noted.

English as a Second Language programs can be helpful in these cases, but they must cater to the needs of the people, Lane cautioned. Non-English speakers must keep up with a family and a job, so finding time to learn a new language can be difficult.

Non-English speaking parents also may need help staying connected with a child who feels more affinity for American culture, Lane added. Helping families understand each other and grow together can be a powerful ministry, she said.

The continuing growth of the non-English-speaking population further dictates the need for language churches, Lane declared, explaining that people need a place where they can understand the worship and activities.

Reyes sees some hopeful signs around the state. Bilingual tracts are selling at increasing rates. BGCT church starts intentionally reach a variety of cultures. More churches are asking questions and trying to reach out to

non-English speakers. Leaders particularly are looking to add Hispanic staff members to help congregations penetrate that culture.

Churches must reach out to non-English speakers, Lane and Reyes agreed, noting that no matter how people communicate, they need Christ.

While Texas Baptists still have much to learn, the nation can look to Texas to see the future, Reyes said. "This is a USA-wide phenomenon. It's not just Texas. Texas is a great picture of what the future can be."

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