

Anglos no longer majority in Texas; BGCT responds to changing needs_90604

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Anglos no longer majority in Texas; BGCT responds to changing needs

By John Hall

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Anglos no longer make up a majority of the Texas population, and the Baptist General Convention of Texas is racing to meet the needs of a demographically changing state.

A recently released United States Census Bureau survey shows Texas was 49.5 percent white in 2003, down 1.5 percent.

Hispanics constitute 35.3 percent of the state, African-Americans account for 10.8 percent and Asians number about 3 percent.

BGCT leaders long have recognized an exploding Hispanic population within Texas coupled with a declining Anglo majority and have emphasized strengthening ministries among Hispanics and other cultures.

"We're trying to be ready," said E.B. Brooks, coordinator of the BGCT church missions and evangelism section. "We have focused staff

employment, church planting, enlistment of volunteers, community ministries and events on reaching out to non-Anglo populations."

The convention has expanded ministry and conference options tailored for the needs of non-Anglo congregations. An increasing number of materials are available in a Spanish.

The Baptist University of the Americas has become more of an emphasized part of the BGCT's ministry. Convention officials and leaders commonly praise and promote the school's work. Albert Reyes, the school's president, serves as the convention's first vice president and will be nominated as the BGCT's president at its November annual meeting.

Much of the growth in the convention is due to non-Anglo churches. More than 70 percent of the churches that have become affiliated with the BGCT during 2000-2003 have been non-Anglo.

The BGCT Church Multiplication Center has stressed the need for more Hispanic congregations. Last year, nearly half the center's 160 church starts were Hispanic. The group's 1,000th new church since 2000 is Hispanic, an indication of the convention's future, leaders have said repeatedly.

In the past 10 years, the ratio of Anglo to non-Anglo BGCT-affiliated churches has changed as well. In 1994, Anglo congregations made up 75 percent of the convention. In 2003, that number was 63 percent. Hispanic congregations jumped from 14 to 20 percent during that span. African-American churches went from 7 to 12 percent of the convention's congregations.

Gus Reyes, consultant in the BGCT Center for Strategic Evangelism, said Texas Baptists can expand God's kingdom if they view the changing demographics as a chance to reach people for the Lord.

"We're ready if we see it as an opportunity," Reyes said. "We're ready if we see (non-Anglos) as people who need Christ as their Savior regardless of their language capabilities."

Clay Price, associate director of the convention's research information services, said the changing demographics in Texas localize the Great Commission for Texas Baptists. People from around the world are coming to the state.

"For Texas Baptists, taking the gospel 'unto the uttermost part of the earth' may begin with a short walk next door or across the street," Price said. "As non-Anglo population increases in Texas, it will be more important than ever for the BGCT to enlist and train non-Anglo pastors and church leaders to reach new generations of Texans with the gospel message."

Brooks sees an increasing number of Texas Baptist churches catching that vision.

"I think our churches are coming to the realization that we must welcome diversity, grow strong multicultural congregations and reach out to non-Anglos in the community," he said.

But Reyes and Brooks each noted the convention has much more work ahead of it. Though progress has been made, ministry among non-Anglos becomes complicated quickly.

Different ethnic groups tend to congregate with others of their culture. Many congregations have difficulty ministering in other cultures.

A large number of non-Anglo, specifically Hispanic, churches are needed. There are not enough congregations to serve the exploding Hispanic population.

However, finding leaders for these congregations can be difficult as well.

Texas Baptist seminaries are not graduating enough non-Anglo students to meet the needs of non-Anglo congregations.

More ethnic leaders are needed on the BGCT Executive Board staff, Brooks said. Strategies for non-Anglo congregations need to be strengthened, honed and developed.

How Texas Baptists respond to the opportunities and challenges of the changing demographics will determine their future, Brooks and Reyes said. Decreasing Anglo reproduction rates and an exploding Hispanic population indicate the Anglo percentage of the Texas population will continue to drop.

“It's a very special moment in the history of Texas Baptists,” Reyes said.

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