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November 12, 2004

Posted: 11/12/04

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By Felicia Fuller

For Texas Baptist Communications

SAN ANTONIO—Given the growth of America's black and brown populations, the Baptist establishment must bridge the cultural divide to reflect the body of Christ, Bill Tillman insisted.

“Texas has been an Anglo-oriented and -directed state politically, economically, socially and in the Baptist churches, but that's changing,” reported Tillman, who led a workshop titled “Transitioning to a Multiethnic Congregation” during the Baptist General Convention of Texas annual meeting.

“Here are (ethnic minorities) we're living with and working with, so we should be worshipping with them, as well,” he insisted. “It's the starting point for living right.”

Tillman, a self-described Baptist bureaucrat, teaches Christian ethics at Hardin-Simmons University's Logsdon School of Theology in Abilene.

“Promoting cultural diversity should not be an exercise in political correctness but a commitment to fulfilling the Great Commission,” he said.

“We must be ambassadors for reconciliation. Unfortunately, we're not very well prepared, because we're so entrenched in cultural frameworks.”

Although timely and topical, the 9 a.m. workshop drew only five participants, further evidence, some say, of a lack of cultural awareness and general acceptance of the status quo.

“The older folks in my church were raised in a segregated society and, despite changing demographics, they're still uncomfortable around people who are different,” said Keith Cogburn, pastor of Fairview Baptist Church in Grand Prairie. “They just don't grasp the necessity of bringing other races into the fold and especially giving them position or authority in the church.”

Charles Whitmire, pastor of Crestview Baptist Church in Austin, echoed that sentiment. “We're looking at becoming multiethnic, but while we have the vision, there's been some resistance,” he acknowledged. “We're a 50-year-old, largely white congregation with a median age of 65.”

Change, especially for seniors, doesn't come easy, he observed.

Whitmire, who laments he can't “preach Christians into diversity,” is modeling his multicultural initiative after churches that successfully merge cultures by recruiting leadership from African-American, Hispanic and Asian communities.

“You attract what you are,” he said. “These leaders bring in other people of diverse backgrounds, and it's been effective. I came here (to the convention) to find other models that I can draw from.”

Tillman said racial reconciliation must begin with frank discussion and cultural exploration on both sides of the divide.

“We've got some hard roads to go down, but it's a journey we must make,”

he said. "We are called to win souls for Christ. There's no place for division."

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