

Convencion, CBF church-starting partnership ready for work_50304

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Eddie Aldape, one of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's Global Missions field personnel, speaks to a class at the Baptist University of the Americas in San Antonio.

BUA is training ministers to serve in the new churches being started as a part of the CBF partnership with the Hispanic Baptist Convention of Texas.

Convencion, CBF church-starting partnership ready for work

By **Craig Bird**

Cooperative Baptist Fellowship

Less than a year after shaking hands and agreeing to work together, the Hispanic Baptist Convencion of Texas and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship are rolling up their sleeves toward jointly starting at least 400 Hispanic churches throughout the United States by 2010.

The agreement, including a goal of baptizing 10,000 Hispanic Christians, was formalized in June 2003. The first new congregations are expected to form this summer. Already 25 Hispanic churches and another 75 Anglo churches have committed to the project.

“My dream is that 100 or 150 or 200 of our churches will catch this vision,” said Alcides Guajardo, president of the Hispanic convention.

“It is thrilling for Anglo churches across the United States, realizing they may not have the human resources or cultural understanding it takes to plant churches among the Spanish-speaking people around them, to ask us to help. Already, especially in urban areas, Hispanic churches have a heart-and experience-to start new churches in their own areas, even though many of them are small numerically.”

That inherent desire to help birth new congregations could be the key to reaching and surpassing the goals, Guajardo believes.

“We have 1,300 churches in the Convencion, so to expect 400 of them-30 percent-to each start another church might be unrealistic,” he said.

“But another of my dreams is that after a year or year-and-a-half, the new

church will be ready to organize and the Convencion partner church can then link up with another Anglo congregation and plant a new church with it and then a third and maybe a fourth. That can happen."

Bill Bruster, the Fellowship's networking coordinator, concurs. "This is one of the most exciting partnerships CBF has entered into," he said. "We look forward to a long and fruitful relationship with the Convencion."

That relationship is being nurtured in workshops and seminars, in addition to being promoted individually by Convencion and Fellowship leaders.

The Baptist General Convention of Texas Church Multiplication Center led a breakout session on the partnership at the Hispanic Evangelism Conference in Houston in January. Later this spring, it will host another information/training workshop for Dallas-Fort Worth-area Hispanic churches interested in being partner churches. Then in June, workshops on the partnership will be offered at both the CBF General Assembly in Birmingham, Ala., and at the annual session of the Hispanic Baptist Convencion of Texas meeting on South Padre Island.

Realizing that new churches need trained leaders, Convencion and Fellowship leaders have pledged to work together to help establish *compañerismos*-regional fellowships-throughout the nation to train, equip and encourage church leaders.

A key provider of trained leadership is expected to be the Baptist University of the Americas, which partners with the Fellowship on a variety of projects. In the past five years, on-campus enrollment at the San Antonio-based institution has soared from 43 to 206, while students enrolled at BUA's off-campus Baptist Bible Institutes jumped from 175 to 521.

But Guajardo notes: "There is no way BUA and all the other Texas Baptist universities combined can produce enough trained leadership to take care

of the needs of Hispanic churches in Texas, Mexico, Latin America and South America and the partnership, too.

"Just like in biblical times, the key will be to find people in the community where the new churches are located that God has inspired to serve as leaders and then help train them," Guajardo explained. "When local leaders are discovered, inspired and trained to do the work, people will respond to them as well as-and often far better-than imported leaders."

Opportunities for local training also will be advanced by the compaÑerismos. These regional fellowships, in turn, could link with BUA's expanding off-campus program. In addition to numerous centers scattered throughout Texas and Mexico, BUA operates Baptist Bible Institutes in Alabama and South Carolina. Discussions are under way to expand the centers to California, Kentucky, North Carolina and Georgia.

"This partnership, coupled with BUA's role in providing theological education nationwide, is a step in the right direction for the near future for the next generation of Baptists in America," BUA President Albert Reyes said.

"Hispanics are already the second-largest ethnic group in the United States and growing rapidly. There will be a major Hispanic presence in our country, no matter what we do. The question is: Do we want a Hispanic population that knows and loves Jesus or not?"

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