

Hispanic & Anglo churches pool resources, expand ministries_120604

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DALLAS-Members of Cockrell Hill and Hampton Place Baptist churches in Dallas believe in the power of synergy. Merging their congregations has provided a wealth of assets that exceeds what the two churches held apart from each another.

Hampton Place Baptist Church was not looking to move, but events earlier in the year left members no choice. The Dallas Independent School District wanted to build a new elementary school in the Oak Cliff neighborhood, but a drive around the area by officials left them scratching their heads as to where.

Representatives of Cockrell Hill and Hampton Place Baptist churches in south Dallas publicly sign legal papers to merge their congregations.

They went back to the school district's offices, pulled out and map and saw a large open area they had missed, so they drove back to the location.

It was the parking lot of Hampton Place Baptist Church.

"I told them, 'I don't think so-we've got people who have been here for 50 years and I don't think they will go for that,'" Pastor Rolando Rodriguez told officials wanting to buy the church's property.

He could have added that he didn't want to move either, he said.

School officials, while cordial, made it plain that the district would take the property in the courts using the eminent domain clause, Rodriguez said.

After discussing the matter with deacons, Rodriguez said the church decided that rather than tying up funds in a legal fight it would most likely lose, Hampton Place should negotiate for the best possible price.

As soon as the decision to sell the property was made, Hampton Place created three teams to investigate the church's next step.

One team checked into the possibility of merging with another congregation, another the prospect buying property in the area to build

upon and a third looked into securing a temporary location.

"Our main thing was that we wanted to stay in the area. The church had a long history of ministry to this community, and we wanted to continue that," Rodriguez said.

It quickly became apparent that purchasing land in the area would be cost-prohibitive, and "merging looked like a better option every time we looked at it," he said.

Initially, Hampton Place considered another church in the area, but leaders soon decided its facilities were too small. Rodriguez was contemplating the church's next step when he received a call from Ed Cole, pastor of Cockrell Hill Baptist Church.

"We didn't want to come to Cockrell Hill and didn't think they would be open to considering it, but we were wrong—I was wrong. I thought if he called us, maybe God was in it."

The merger has been a great thing for both churches, Cole said. The Cockrell Hill congregation was dwindling.

"We were having people join still, but since our congregation was aging, I also was preaching a lot of funerals," he said.

"We were slowly dwindling. Also, those that we were losing were tithers, and many of our new members had not matured to that point, so finances were getting tighter."

It also was a primarily Anglo congregation in a community that is 80 percent Hispanic.

The congregations met together for some months but maintained separate bank accounts until all the legal paperwork was in place.

The congregations officially became one Nov. 21, retaining the Cockrell Hill Baptist Church name.

Cole will lead an English-language service, Rodriguez will lead the Spanish-language service and Gus Reyes, formerly youth pastor at Hampton Place, will lead a contemporary service in English on Saturday nights.

"We don't have a senior pastor, but a pastoral team-Pastor Ed, Pastor Rolando and Pastor Gus," Rodriguez explained.

The church also will be the site for a Laotian mission that formerly met at Hampton Place.

Sunday school will be provided in both Spanish and English.

"That's what we can now provide since we are together," Rodriguez said.

The Hampton Place congregation also is bringing the \$2.5 million it received from the sale of its facility to the school district.

"By coming together, we didn't have to buy property or build, so the money is going to take this church very far in ministry," Rodriguez said.

"With the resources we have, our goal is to reach 1,000 in Sunday school."

Prior to the merger, Cockrell Hill had about 100 people attending, with another 20 people coming to a Spanish-language mission. Hampton Place had about 300 people in attendance each week.

About 450 people watched as the incorporation papers were signed Nov. 21, uniting the congregations during a joint service.

The service was in four languages, Rodriguez pointed out-English, Spanish, Laotian and American sign language.

While the Hampton Place congregation did not initially want to move,

Rodriguez said, members now are excited about the prospects for ministry.

The Oct. 31 vote to merge with Cockrell Hill was unanimous, he noted.

Many of the younger Hispanic families now attend the English-language services.

On a Sunday in early November, 173 people attended the traditional English-language service, and 173 people also attended the Spanish-language service.

The extra activity at the Cockrell Hill church has been noticed by the surrounding community, both Cole and Rodriguez agreed.

"We had families who told us, 'Once you merge, we're going to join.' But they didn't wait; they joined before the merger," Rodriguez said.

The Cockrell Hill congregation is pleased as well, Cole said. "We've seen it as so obviously God's hand on all of this. We now have a healthy older congregation, a healthy younger congregation, a healthy Spanish outreach and a new Laotian outreach."

"Things had to change for this church to reach this community, and this has enabled us to do that," he added.

The congregation not only wants to reach the surrounding community, but also to be active on mission in other places as well, Rodriguez said.

"We're going to be sending groups to do missions around the state, to Mexico and hopefully around the world," he said. "God has given us so much, so we're just having to say, 'God guide us, send us.' He's given us the resources, and all we have to do is work hard."

Blending the congregations will be a learning process, but it is being done with eyes open, Cole said.

"We know they have different music, time schedules and traditions, but we recognize that and respect that. I don't think it will be a problem," he said.

Cole and Rodriguez also don't believe the shared mantle of pastor will be a problem.

"We are all pastors, but we each have our areas of responsibility," Rodriguez said.

"Pastor Ed handles matters related to the traditional English service. I am responsible for the Spanish service. And Pastor Gus takes care of the contemporary service.

"Pastor Ed and I may not always agree, but we will have a third person there to help us settle our disagreements in Pastor Gus," Rodriguez explained.

So far, those disagreements have not come. "I'm really enjoying this time of ministry," he continued.

Rodriguez contended the merged churches really are one congregation.

"We are one church, but the ministry differences and cultural differences are big enough that we do handle it as three ministries," he explained.

To help maintain a unity of spirit, members from each of the three distinct services will worship together every three months, he said.

Having more than one pastor really is an asset, Rodriguez asserted. "We have different personalities and ministry approaches, but our differences are really our strength," he said.

"The key is that we both trust and respect each other," Cole added.

"We had to put our egos aside. You can't have an ego and have something

like this work," Rodriguez pointed out.

"We were both senior pastors of our churches, but now we have to share that. It's not about a position or a title. It's all about ministry. It's all about Jesus."

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