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GRAPEVINE (ABP)—Hispanics are coming to the United States in droves, and in response, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship plans to plant Hispanic churches in droves.

The CBF's Hispanic Initiative aims to start 400 new Hispanic congregations in the United States within eight years, in response to the nation's fastest-growing ethnic group.

CBF participants got a taste of this growing diversity in Baptist life during their annual general assembly in Grapevine. Albert Reyes, president of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, preached the opening-night sermon. He noted the mission fields—Hispanic and otherwise—have come to Texas, where Anglos are no longer in the majority.

Preaching from Matthew 22:34-40 on Christians' responsibility to love God and neighbor, Reyes noted how the concept of "neighbor" has changed since Jesus' time and culture.

"The definition of 'neighbor' has changed thanks to CNN—you now know

everyone's business," Reyes said. "The whole world is our neighbor. We are in a global village."

But one doesn't have to watch CNN to find neighbors from different cultures, Reyes added.

"I sometimes wonder if I might be at a world missions conference when I go to the mall and see people dressed up in costumes from all around the world," he said. "The nations of the world have come to us. The peoples of the world have streamed to us. We now live in one of the greatest mission fields in the history of the world."

CBF's plan is to partner with Texas Baptist Hispanic church leaders who will mentor non-Hispanic Baptists nationwide who are interested in starting Spanish-speaking congregations. The plan also involves training Hispanic leaders interested in ministering to their own people.

The San Antonio-based Baptist University of the Americas, where Reyes serves as president, will work with the Hispanic Baptist Convention of Texas and CBF to spearhead the initiative.

The school has over 20 extensions throughout the United States that offer Hispanics the opportunity to get ministry leadership training and the chance to earn a high-school-equivalency degree. Those who attend the extension centers can go on to plant a church or further their education at a higher institution.

Luis Sara, who attended the CBF General Assembly, went to Baptist University of the Americas, obtained his GED and bachelor's degree, and is now working on obtaining a master's degree at another Texas Baptist school, Hardin-Simmons University.

Sara went on to become active in a Hispanic mission that grew from 12 members to about 65 since he joined.

Bernie Morega, a CBF volunteer and Hispanic mission pastor, said the future is bright for Hispanic Baptists. Last year, less than 25 people attended the CBF Hispanic Network during the general assembly. This year 126 were present.

“In the next five or 10 years, they are not going to look at you as whether or not you are Latino,” he told the gathering. Morega added he has been drawn to CBF from its earliest days because he feels the group doesn’t view him as a “Latino”—merely a ministry category—but rather, sees him as fully a Baptist partner in ministry.

With the help of CBF, Hispanics will have more opportunities to lead churches—both predominantly Latino ones and Anglo or mixed congregations, he said.

“I believe CBF will open the doors for us,” Morega said. “I hope that I will see (these changes) in my lifetime.”

Reaching that point, Reyes said, will require both Latinos and others who have been steeped in their own culture to learn new ones.

“I think if we’re to love the world next door, we have to become social anthropologists. We have to become cultural anthropologists. We have to learn other cultures,” he said. “You can’t get accurate cultural knowledge apart from friendship—and those two things produce wisdom.”

With additional reporting by Robert Marus of Associated Baptist Press

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