

Waco pastor leads church to embrace ethnic diversity_41805

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Members
of
Brookview
Baptist
Church in
Waco join
hands in
worship
and
ministry,
without
regard to
race.
(Photo by
George
Henson)

Waco pastor leads church to embrace ethnic diversity

By George Henson

Staff Writer

WACO-Brookview Baptist Church in Waco is finding the key to its growth lies in reaching out to everyone in the community, regardless of race.

The church called Kevin Avery, a student at Baylor University's Truett Theological Seminary in Waco, as pastor last Easter, even though a pastorate wasn't what he had been wanting or expecting.

Avery, 30, and his wife, Dayna, had spent two years in China as missionaries, and he was looking forward to life as a seminary student.

“Most of the students at Truett give the administration a resume to keep on file for churches that inquire about staff, but I didn't do that,” Avery said. “I told God I was taking a break, and when he was ready for me to go back into full-time ministry to let me know. I don't know if that was the best attitude, but that's what I did.”

God came knocking in the form of a neighbor who arrived at his door and asked if he would temporarily fill the pulpit for a congregation of four people.

That was in March 2004. A few weeks later, the church called him as pastor.

He quickly set about making changes.

“They were on the verge of shutting the doors,” he acknowledged. “The financial situation was heading toward bankruptcy, and some drastic things needed to happen.”

The line item Avery cut from the budget was a salary-his own. He also told the church someone inside the congregation needed to start cutting the grass, because they would no longer pay anyone to do that job either.

The church now receives financial and volunteer support from the Baptist General Convention of Texas, Waco Baptist Association and congregations

including Emmanuel, Western Heights and Calvary Baptist churches in Waco, First Baptist Church of Woodway and West University Baptist Church in Houston.

As Avery looked at his congregation, he realized how little they reflected the community. He estimates the racially diverse neighborhood surrounding the church is 40 percent Hispanic, 35 percent African-American and 25 percent Anglo.

The church's few members, however, all were Anglos.

Avery was equipped to reach out to that community, however. He speaks Spanish well after growing up in Southern California. His parents were Home Mission Board missionaries who worked with an itinerant chapel-on-wheels ministry to migrant workers.

That experience exposed him to poverty and the strains it can put on families.

Many families in the church's immediate vicinity seem to be moving up economically, Avery said. While the population appears transient, with many families coming and going, he has seen an improvement in the way families are caring for their property.

The church began a movement away from being "a white church" last summer when Avery's friends from Truett came to the church to help with a Vacation Bible School for local children. Sixteen children of varying hues came, and Brookview began to change its appearance, as well.

The number of adults didn't begin to increase until the end of 2004, but Avery now expects it to continue to grow.

"Some of the adults that are coming now have begun to catch the vision of a church that reflects the ethnic diversity of the community," he said.

That particularly was evident on the church's high attendance day in late February. Thirty-one people came to Brookview-16 Anglos, 12 African-Americans and three Hispanics.

Avery is sure that sort of ethnic diversity is the church's future.

“We are actively pursuing having three co-pastors—one Caucasian, one African-American and one Hispanic. It is our vision to intentionally reflect and empower our diverse community through Christ's message of reconciliation,” he said.

He acknowledges, however, that dream has been elusive. “It is especially hard to find ethnic leadership. Most of the people who have the skills we are looking for already are serving somewhere else,” Avery said.

An African-American pastor is praying about joining the church, he noted.

Friends from Truett have helped as Bible study leaders, worship leaders and outreach leaders and taken on other responsibilities, but Avery sees that as a temporary measure.

“Long term, we know the leadership needs to come from the community. That's something that's easier to say than do, but we're working to train up leaders,” he said.

“Hopefully, we'll kind of work ourselves out of a job. Kind of like when we were ministering overseas. That's the way I look at it—that the people here would rise up to take over the leadership.”

After a slow start, he sees signs the church may be that multicultural congregation he envisions.

“We've been very encouraged the last few months,” Avery said. “Especially the first six months, we were finding it hard to be seen as anything but a white church, but now we're getting past that.”

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