

Panhandle-Plains conference taps changing demographics

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Jesse Rincones, pastor of Alliance Baptist Church in Lubbock, addresses a point about reaching the Hispanic population in a panel discussion to kick off the Panhandle-Plains Pastors' and Laymen's Conference at Wayland Baptist University. With Rincones are (from left) Stacy Conner, pastor of First Baptist Church of Muleshoe, Mateo Rendon, a consultant for West Texas with the BGCT, and Charles Davenport, a retired Tulia pastor and a BGCT congregational strategist.

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By Teresa Young

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PLAINVIEW—Reaching the changing West Texas populations with the gospel will require intentional efforts, a worker mentality and an attitude of acceptance, panelists told participants at the 85th annual Panhandle-Plains Pastors' and Laymen's Conference at Wayland Baptist University.

Panelists invited participants to examine changing demographic trends—particularly the explosive growth of the Hispanic population, as noted by Jesse Rincones, pastor of Alliance Baptist Church in Lubbock. He pointed out 1,300 of the 5,700 Baptist churches in Texas are Hispanic, and within the next decade, half of the Hispanic population in Texas will be age 25 or under.



Newly elected officers of the Panhandle-Plains Pastors' and Laymen's Conference are President David Lowrie (center), pastor of First Baptist Church in Canyon; President-elect Richard Lavery (right), pastor of First Baptist Church in Perryton; Secretary/Treasurer Charles Bassett (left) of Wayland Baptist University; (not pictured) First Vice President Ackey Martinez, youth director at First Baptist Church in Brownfield, and Second Vice President Carl Williams, layman at Colonial Hill Baptist Church in Snyder.

Steve Vernon, pastor of First Baptist Church in Levelland and president of the 2006 conference, served as moderator for the panel discussion, which also included Stacy Conner, pastor of First Baptist Church in Muleshoe; Mateo Rendon, a Hispanic strategist with the Baptist General Convention of Texas; and Charles Davenport, a retired pastor from Tulia now serving as a BGCT congregational strategist.

Texas Baptists need to return to the command of Jesus to become workers

in the harvest, Rendon said. Quoting Matthew 9:37, "The fields are white to harvest, but the workers are few," he emphasized that congregations must develop a worker mentality in order to reach not only the Hispanic population in West Texas but all populations.

"The question to ask is how many of the workers are out there working? I would venture to say that a third of these congregations are what we're counting on," Rendon said. "What we need to see is that percentage of workers doing the will of God increase."

Rendon and Rincones pointed out that knowing how to reach the Hispanic population first involves defining the population and its subsets.

For instance, Rendon said, the recent immigrants who speak little English and come from a primarily Roman Catholic background will be a different audience altogether than the third- and fourth-generation Hispanic young families whose children speak little to no Spanish and who may be further removed from Catholic influence.

"You are probably closer to reaching Hispanics than you think," Rincones said. "The language barrier is not there as much as it used to be, but the cultural differences remain. The question is how we embrace this change biblically and with a Christian view.

"The only way to reach Texas is not through a Hispanic perspective or a white perspective but a Christian perspective and a realization of the need for the gospel."

The key to reaching any population is to be relational and meet the needs of people, Rincones stressed. New strategies like cowboy churches, college worship services and other efforts are examples of how churches are reaching different populations by focusing on common interests, and reaching different cultures has the same principle, he said.

Churches need to be intentional in their partnership efforts, he emphasized. Planning combined services or activities between the traditionally Anglo churches and the Hispanic churches in a neighborhood can build the camaraderie and trust levels needed to work together and really reflect the body of Christ, he said.

Taking it one step further, Rincones said the two churches could even share members with each other in order to make both churches blended and benefit from the shared experience.

Blending of communities, even in the congregations, is likely to happen by chance and time, Rincones said. But churches would be better served to pursue those efforts intentionally and build trust and bonds between the cultures. Cooperation with other churches also is essential, he added.

“We’re going to have to redefine how we’re doing church,” Rendon said. “We must get away from the spirit of competition and get back to a spirit of companionship.”

Davenport said the changing population during his ministry has proved that models of the past likely need tweaking if the church is going to be effective at reaching its entire community, regardless of culture.

“Years ago, the idea was to build or buy a building and start a Mexican mission, and we thought we’d done our duty. But that wasn’t really the case,” Davenport said.

“We have problems in reaching other populations as well, even the Anglo population. I think we’re going to have to realize that we’re going to have to do something different and distinct or we’re going to lose this world for the gospel.”

Intentionality also involves welcoming guests at church, Davenport said.

“We assume that everybody knows they’re welcome at our churches, but they may not know that,” he said.

“We have to be more assertive in making people know they’re welcome here, regardless of ethnicity.”

In an example of meeting needs and relating to people, Conner described an after-school program hosted by his church at which children play games, do crafts and study the Bible in the church one day each week.

“The group at that program looks like our local elementary schools, but those children are not available to us on Sunday mornings” because they are in other churches, Conner said. “We’re just investing in the lives of these children and hoping it pays dividends later.”

The Pastors’ and Laymen’s Conference also featured messages by Joel Gregory, preaching professor at Baylor University’s Truett Seminary; Don Sewell of Texas Baptist Partnerships; David Wilson of Lubbock; Gil Ramirez of Levelland; and Michael Evans of Mansfield.

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