

Ethnically changing suburbs may require different strategies

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SUGAR LAND—When [The Fort Bend Church](#) was preparing for its launch service in a school six years ago, a church member asked Pastor Byron Stevenson a simple question: “How many chairs should we put out?”

Stevenson didn’t know how many people to expect.

For the first time in U.S. history, most ethnic minorities live in suburbs, according to a recent Brookings Institute report. Texas Baptists are responding by helping start suburban churches that reflect those areas’ ethnic diversity. (BGCT FILE PHOTO)

“We just said however many chairs the school has, we’ll put all those out and see what God does,” Stevenson said, reflecting upon that day.

They weren’t enough to handle what God did.

Members scurried for additional seating as about 600 people worshipped together that first Sunday, packing out the school. Within a few weeks, about 200 people had committed to being part of the church, laying the groundwork for what is now a 2,600-member predominantly African-American congregation outside Houston.

“We can grow more,” Stevenson said. “In the next five years, I’m expecting us to double in size, if not before then. It’s a suburb that’s fast growing. Fort Bend County is still a largely untapped church community.”

From Stevenson's perspective—and many other leaders agree—The Fort Bend Church represents a sign of the opportunities for congregations as suburban America diversifies ethnically. For the first time in the country's history, most ethnic minorities live in suburbs, according to [a recent Brookings Institute report](#).

Texas metro areas Dallas-Fort Worth, Houston, Austin and San Antonio lag slightly behind the national movement, but they are trending in that direction. Although this shift may challenge some congregations to change their models of ministry, it also opens avenues through which Christians can minister to their new neighbors.

“People from around the world continue to come Texas,” said Paul Atkinson, who leads Texas Baptists' church starting efforts. “That means the mission field here is expanding, and Texas Baptists must be intentional about reaching people for Christ—whether that be launching a ministry, redesigning an outreach effort or starting a church.”

The ethnic population of suburbs has been on the rise for some time, but it has crested above 50 percent in recent years, noted Joel Kotkin, distinguished presidential fellow in urban futures with Chapman University in Orange, Calif., and author of [The Next Hundred Million: America in 2050](#). People, regardless of ethnic background, are drawn to the suburbs for similar reasons—cheaper housing, more land and better schools for their children.

Growth in suburban population comes not primarily from people moving out from the cities—although there is some of that—but from immigrants who enter the United States and settle in suburbs, Kotkin said. They are drawn to enclaves of culturally similar people, he noted.

“As soon as the refugees get established, then they're going to try to find connections to people of their culture,” said [Patty Lane](#), director of

intercultural ministries for the Baptist General Convention of Texas. “If there have been waves of people in their culture, they’re already going to be living in the suburbs. People may stay in the cities for six months, but they’re going to move out.”

While suburban diversification presents opportunities, it also may prove to challenge some congregations, numerous sources noted.

Churches will have to be intentional about reaching out to everyone who lives in their communities. That may mean adjusting outreach strategies, creating new ministries and ceasing old efforts.

Russell Diwa, pastor of [Biblical Community Church in Richardson](#), said diversity is like an odd-shaped present beneath a Christmas tree. People are leery of it because they fear the uncertain. But if they embrace it, they will discover the gift that is there.

“People are scared to open the gift because it is unknown,” Diwa said.

Several years ago, [Crestview Baptist Church in Georgetown](#) began seeing an influx of Hispanics into its area. The church decided to serve the lower-income, increasingly Hispanic neighborhood located behind the church campus, as well as the larger Georgetown area.

Crestview expanded efforts to cultivate relationships with people in that neighborhood through the years, and now about 100 people from there participate in worship services weekly.

Christ calls his followers to reach out to everyone, Crestview Pastor Dan Wool-drudge said, not simply people who are similar culturally or ethnically.

Ethnic diversity may push some churches to change the way they do evangelism, but the church must respond to that challenge with a renewed commitment to sharing the gospel, he said.

“I think it always stretches you a little bit,” Wooldridge said. “There’s a certain amount of desire for homogenous congregations that people naturally have. There’s a risk involved. I think it’s a risk you have to take. I’ve always said if you will reach whoever you can, God will take care of the rest.”

Kotkin believes there will be more of these types of congregations in the future.

The neighborhood church that mirrors its community will become more normative, he said. There, people will find relationships and help—particularly for younger families and older individuals.

By providing services to a neighborhood, congregations are lightening the financial burden for people in a time when it already is difficult to achieve the American dream.