

Ministry to new immigrants presents challenges, opportunities

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A wave of immigrants entering the United States presents a particular challenge to Christians who seek to minister among them, the director of missions for a metropolitan association of churches noted.

"Immigration is changing the face of America. People are coming in droves, and they are coming from different places," said Tom Billings, executive director of the Houston-area [Union Baptist Association](#).



Hispanics in the United States grew from 35.3 million in 2000 to about 50.5 million in 2010, accounting for more than half of the nation's population increase in that decade. Meanwhile, the U.S. Census Bureau reports the Asian population grew by 4.4 million in that same time.

"They come with different world views. That's significantly changing the face of metropolitan areas such as Houston," Billings said, noting no single ethnic or racial group holds a majority in the city.

The [Census and American Community Survey](#) reports more than 1.25 million foreign-born residents in the Houston metropolitan area. Houston's schools serve a population representing more than 315 ethnic groups speaking 220 languages and dialects. More than 40 percent of the students do not speak English in their homes.

For the most part, new immigrants want to preserve their ethnic and cultural heritage—not be assimilated totally into what has been a predominantly Anglo society, Billings said.

"The melting pot is cracked," he said. "There's an enclave mentality, not an assimilation model. The immigrants want to maintain their history, culture, heritage and language."

Historically, immigrants assimilated into the dominant culture of their new country because they were isolated from people back home. But advances in communication enable immigrants to remain in close contact with family and friends in their homelands, he noted.

"They even can watch TV and read the papers from back home on the Internet," he said.

Reaching the new immigrants—including some from unreached people groups and some who originate from countries closed to traditional missionary outreach—demands a change in the way churches think, Billings insisted.

"It requires a missions mentality rather than a church-growth mentality," he said. "We have to reach them relationally, incarnationally and in their heart language."

While statistical information that helps identify and quantify unreached people helps churches develop missions strategies, a more important step involves developing a missional mindset, Billings insists.

"We need to not see people as projects but as real people we build relationships with," he said. That means spending time with them, learning their culture and discovering real needs churches can help to meet.

"Good deeds precede the Good News a lot of the time," Billings said.