

# Athens church changes to reflect community and kingdom

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ATHENS—Kyle Henderson, pastor of First Baptist Church in Athens, believed his congregation needed to look more like its community and more like the kingdom of God.

That commitment led church leaders to follow a new path to help the congregation become more diverse.

A few years ago, Henderson recognized the church's lack of ethnic and racial diversity.

"We were only the First Baptist Church of white Athens," he said.



A child swings at a piñata during the bilingual Three Kings' Day celebration at First Baptist Church in Athens. (Photo / Kyle Henderson)

In a city where Hispanics are the largest minority group and represent about 30 percent of Athens' population, Henderson understood the church needed to begin with that group.

## **Committed to diversity and outreach**

In the beginning, First Baptist set three goals—to become diverse in their worship team, demonstrate diversity in hiring new staff and reach the unreached groups around the church, Henderson said.

One of those unreached groups consists of second- and third-generation Hispanics, Henderson explained.



Juan Moreno is bilingual pastor at First Baptist Church in Athens (Photo / Steve Gowan)

Juan Moreno, the bilingual pastor of First Baptist, joined the church's ministry team last year. Now, nearly 20 percent of the church staff is Hispanic.

Moreno serves the congregation bivocationally, also working as a fifth-

grade teacher.

First-generation Hispanics supported First Baptist's focus on second-and third-generation Hispanics because they wanted their children to connect with the church, Moreno noted.

The ministry primarily uses English rather than Spanish, but everything is presented from the perspective of the Hispanic culture, he said.

## Breaking down old paradigms

The church as a whole recognizes the positive impact of its ministry among Hispanics, but the congregation realized it had to break down old paradigms to promote unity, Henderson noted.

"We have had to ask, 'How can we be more like each other?'" he noted.



Kyle Henderson (left), pastor of First Baptist Church in Athens, poses with Reynaldo Zavala and a four-legged friend during the bilingual Three Kings' Day celebration at the church. (Photo / Cindy Henderson)

Staff members at First Baptist memorize Bible verses in Spanish together, and English speakers attend the bilingual service.

“People of the English service come to me and call me ‘hermano,’” Moreno said.

Moreno occasionally preaches in the English worship service, and Henderson sometimes preaches in the bilingual service.

People who normally attend the English-language services and people who participate in the bilingual services worship together four to six times a year, Henderson said.

First Baptist wants to go against the division prevalent in much of society, Henderson said.

“For people of all cultures to see this type of love and unity has been so refreshing,” he said.

## **Increased understanding**

Before the congregation could achieve that unity, worshippers had to understand some of what others experience, Moreno said.

As some Hispanic families experienced difficulties with immigration, non-Hispanic church members grew to understand more about those issues, and some even changed their opinions about the immigration system, he added.

First Baptist in Athens became more ethnically diverse by focusing on a simple goal—to look more like what they hope for, Moreno and Henderson agreed.

“There is not a course you can take on how to do this. But we want the

church to represent the future today,” said Henderson, noting the church has made “Se Mañana, Today” (Be Tomorrow, Today) its mission.