

BGCT seeks to advance educational opportunities among Hispanics

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DALLAS—The Baptist General Convention of Texas has named Gus Reyes to lead an initiative encouraging Hispanics across the state to attain higher education—an early step in what the organization hopes will quickly be one of many to tackle a critical issue facing Texas.

As director of the BGCT Hispanic Education Initiative, Reyes is charged with spearheading efforts among Texas Baptists to help Hispanic teens complete high school and earn degrees in higher education. In that effort, he will work with BGCT-affiliated congregations to attack the issue on practical and legislative grounds.

Gus Reyes “The Hispanic Education Initiative brings focus to three strategic targets,” Reyes said. “First is the need to keep Hispanic students in school through graduation. Second is the need to help prepare Hispanic preschoolers with their learning readiness for their initial experiences in kindergarten and first grade. Third is the need to reclaim academic opportunities for adults lacking a G.E.D. or high school diploma.”

52 percent graduation rate

Studies indicate 52 percent of Hispanic students nationwide graduate on time. About 60 percent of African American, Latino and economically disadvantaged students in Texas graduate.

BGCT Executive Director Randel Everett believes Reyes can lead Texas Baptists to make a significant impact on the high school drop out rate of Hispanics quickly.

“No person is better equipped to lead this BGCT effort than Dr. Gus Reyes,” Everett said. “He has the educational background and the relationships with our pastors and institutional leaders that provide immediate credibility.”

A Dallas resident, Reyes earned a bachelor’s degree from the University of Texas, a master’s degree in business administration from Angelo State University, a master’s degree in religious education from Southwestern Theological Seminary and a doctorate from Southwestern Seminary.

Among his first is partnering with the BGCT Christian Life Commission to gather Hispanic pastors at the Texas capital March 24 to meet with legislators to discuss the importance of educating Hispanics and to talk about government actions that can be taken to encourage education among the state’s fastest growing demographic.

Among their chief points of interest will be increasing the amount of funds the state spends on adult education, which would further open avenues for adults to earn a general education diploma.

That day, Hispanic pastors can share what they’re seeing in their congregations, Reyes said. They can share their personal experiences and what may be helpful in assisting more Hispanics earn diplomas.

Reyes also will be working with Texas Baptist churches—Hispanic and otherwise—to create and strengthen education outreach programs. Baptists can develop mentoring programs that serve children beginning in elementary school and aid them through high school.

New web portal

The BGCT also plans to create a Web portal that would be a repository of information for Hispanics seeking educational advancement. It will include information ranging from when to apply and what colleges are seeking in their students to a database of organizations that offer scholarships, particularly scholarships for Hispanic students.

Rolando Rodriguez, director of the BGCT Hispanic Ministries, praised Texas Baptists for stepping forward to take on such a critical issue.

“In the state of Texas, more than 50 percent of Hispanic young people are not graduating from high school,” he said. “Texas Baptists are responding to this challenge by naming Dr. Gus Reyes director of the Hispanic education initiative. Dr. Reyes will lead us to start and implement programs that will make an impact in the lives of young people all over the state”

The creation of Reyes’ position is the result of the recommendation of the BGCT Hispanic Education Advisory Council, which was created in 2005 as the BGCT Hispanic Education Taskforce. The group first produced a report of areas where it believed Texas Baptists could significantly help Hispanics achieve their educational goals.

Education helps people grow and makes additional opportunities available to them, said Nestor Menjivar, chairman of the council and pastor of Iglesia Bautista Principe de Paz in Austin. Beyond business prospects, a more educated Hispanic population would lead to a more educated Hispanic clergy that would be capable of reaching the growing demographic.

A need for more leaders

“We do not have enough pastors and educated church leaders to lead the churches to reach the Hispanic population,” Menjivar said. “We need to have high school graduates so they can go on to Bible colleges, Christian colleges and seminaries so we can have leaders and missionaries in our churches.”

Menjivar believes this initiative is a significant opportunity for Texas Baptists to help Hispanic fulfill dreams for their children and expand the kingdom.

Many Hispanics are immigrants who have left everything behind in order for their children to have better lives. However, many people are running into roadblocks trying to navigate the education system. If Texas Baptists can help these people fulfill their dreams, they will have a large opportunity to share the gospel with them.

“Where Texas Baptists step up and say ‘We’re going to make that dream come true,’ we are seen in a different light,” Menjivar said.