

# Church finds renewal in opening doors to ethnic congregations

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DALLAS—An aging congregation is experiencing renewal through outreach to ethnic churches in its area.

During the past year and a half, [Gaston Oaks Baptist Church](#) has opened its doors to Karen, African and Hispanic congregations in North Dallas, partnering with them in ministry and growing the Gaston Oaks family.

<p>Pastor Hsa Twell leads the Karen Baptist Fellowship.</p>
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“The church is right in the center of a lot of ethnic groups, and it now has a new spirit with these language congregations that are meeting here and essentially becoming a part of Gaston Oaks,” Pastor Gary Cook said.

In 2008, a Karen man who had been attending the church for some time brought several Karen families who had just arrived in Dallas from Burma to Gaston Oaks Baptist Church. Gradually, more Karen came to the church, and Gaston Oaks members began ministering to them, giving many rides to the church services and assisting in resettlement tasks and issues many of them face each day.

“The church is growing in this missionary attitude,” said Dick Matthies, an 82-year-old church member who volunteers his time to help the Karen refugees.

“Within this North Dallas neighborhood that we live, there are many cultures. We have established great relationships with the Karen church

and with the other culture groups that meet in our building. As a mission-minded church, we are very optimistic of how we can function in this neighborhood and in this city.”

Mary Ellen Crossland, another longtime member of the church, said hosting the ethnic congregations has given the traditional church a new mission in the community.

“We have always been so mission-minded and have sent missionaries overseas in the past,” Crossland said. “We are now a much smaller church and pretty elderly, and there aren’t many who are sent or going anymore. It is just terrific that we now can reach out right here in this way.”



Members of the Afrika Community Church represent multiple African nations. Pastor Kambali Samisi (on guitar) leads the congregation.

As more and more Karen came to the worship services, Gaston Oaks Baptist Church members set up sermon translation headsets so that the group could participate in their own language. Eventually, the Karen had enough members to select Hsa Twell as their own pastor and begin holding separate services in their own language.

“For a while, we were trying to have the whole congregation in the Gaston Oaks worship service,” Cook said. “The Karen were in favor of having their

own worship service, and now they basically are their own congregation and called their own Karen pastor.”

More than 275 Karen now attend the services held each Sunday morning at the Gaston Oaks building. Out of this church-to-church relationship, additional refugee assistance such as English-as-a-Second- Language classes and a clothing ministry has been offered to the Karen.

Also, a couple of members of Gaston Oaks Baptist Church have organized and started a refugee ministry called [Hope 4 Refugees](#) to help with the resettlement process.

In 2009, La Promesa, the Hispanic congregation, began meeting in the building, and about 25 people are participating in this group. David Etheridge, a retired missionary who worked in Mexico for many years, serves as the bivocational pastor for this congregation.

After La Promesa joined with Gaston Oaks Baptist Church, Dallas Baptist Association referred an African church, and Gaston Oaks invited the group to meet in its building. The Afrika Community Church of about 80 members represents various African nations and is led by Congolese Pastor Kambali Samisi.

To bring growth and unity among the groups, Cook began meeting monthly with the pastors of the three congregations to encourage and mentor them in their ministry.



Members of Gaston Oaks Baptist Church care for the children from the varied ethnic congregations that share its facility.

"I started working with these congregations a little closer as I met with the pastors and tried to help them with leadership issues and just tried to encourage them," Cook said.

As the men met, they decided to have a joint worship service with all of the congregations once a quarter. Cook and worship leader Royce Dowell led the pastors in planning the services, making sure each congregation had an opportunity to contribute to the worship experience and that they chose hymns that were familiar to all groups.

During two services that were held last fall, Cook shared the sermon in English, but translators were available to share the message with anyone needing clarification in their mother tongue through translation headsets.

"When we come together there is excitement in the air because of just being together," Dowell said. "Our worship center seats close to 400 people, and when they all come together, it's virtually filled. The different groups tend to sit together. They don't mix a great lot in the service, but they appreciate what each of the groups does. They are excited to do something different and to do something together."

In each service, Swahili, Spanish, Karen and English hymns, prayers and

testimonies were lifted up by the congregation, showing the diversity but bringing unity because they all were worshiping the same God, Crossland said.

“When we sang hymns with all the different languages, I really enjoyed it,” she said. “There are so many hymns that have the same tune and then everyone can sing in their own language at the same time.”

The congregations plan to continue with the joint worship services once a quarter in the future so that all the members can celebrate what God is doing in the different groups.

“I think that God has given us just a tremendous opportunity by placing these people in a very short distance from our church, and I’m very pleased that our church is responding,” said Joy Fenner, a member of the church and president of the [Woman’s Missionary Union of Texas](#).

As Gaston Oaks Baptist Church provides a meeting place for the groups, they are receiving a wonderful blessing and learning much about the Christian walk from the ethnic congregations, Cook said.

“I hope that we can maintain a vital church for them as a result of what we are doing and how we are doing it,” Cook said. “We are doing hands-on missions right here by working with these groups, not only through providing a place for them but by encouraging them and learning from them. This could become a model for the future, and there could be a viable group of traditional folks that provide an opportunity for other language groups. We even hope in the future to add some more.”

Fenner agrees, stating this opportunity has enabled many of the original Gaston Oaks Baptist Church members to see missions in a new light and reach out to the world that has been brought to the doorstep of the church.

“I hope that all these language congregations continue to grow,” Fenner

said. "I also hope that those who want to be part of the Gaston Oaks family will see that this is a church that is doing missions very different to reach out to the people around us."