

Historic Hispanic Texas churches persevere and adapt

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Geographic distance separates three Hispanic Texas Baptist churches established in the 19th century, but a shared commitment to making necessary adjustments to reach people for Christ unites the congregations in Laredo, San Antonio and El Paso.

Churches must “move with the times without watering down the gospel,” said Dorso Maciel, pastor of Primera Iglesia Bautista de Laredo.

Beginnings of Hispanic Baptist work in Texas

His congregation was founded as Primera Iglesia Bautista Mexicana de Laredo 47 years after Texas gained its independence from Mexico in 1836.

In a document marking the church’s centennial, the Laredo congregation asserted that while the name included “Mexicana,” most of its founding members were American citizens who selected the name to show pride and recognition of “their Mexican roots.”

In the 1800s, Southern Baptist missions to Mexico also included South Texas. In 1880, the Southern Baptist Convention’s Foreign Mission Board commissioned John Westrup as a missionary. Along with his brother Thomas, the Westrups served in both Mexico and Texas.

One year after John Westrup began Baptist missionary work in Laredo, he was killed on his way to a preaching engagement in Musquiz in Coahuila, Mexico. Thomas Westrup continued the work, and Primera Iglesia Bautista

de Laredo was established in 1883.

Five years later and more than 150 miles to the north, Primera Iglesia Bautista de San Antonio was established. Manuel Treviño, a former Methodist deacon, was ordained to the ministry and became the church's pastor three months later. During his time in San Antonio, Treviño helped start several other churches including Primera Iglesia Bautista de San Angelo.

Differing accounts

Historical accounts differ regarding the beginning of Baptist work in El Paso.

In his 1981 book, *A History of Mexican Baptists in Texas*, Joshua Grijalva reports Alejandro Marshand—a former Catholic priest—was pastor of a Methodist mission in El Paso. However, in a Bible study with the pastor of Second Baptist Church, a black congregation, Marshand became convinced Baptist views on baptism and Lord's Supper were true to Scripture.

Marshand preached his newfound convictions at his Methodist mission and then announced it was his last sermon as a Methodist minister. The pastor of Second Baptist Church subsequently baptized Marshand and 28 others in the Rio Grande in July 1892, and those newly baptized believers formed Primera Iglesia Bautista Mexicana de El Paso, Grijalva wrote.

Other sources refer to the church's founding pastor as Alejandro Marchand and indicate he was Presbyterian rather than Methodist. Some question whether he ever became Baptist, and reports vary regarding how long he remained at Primera Iglesia Bautista in El Paso.

By the beginning of the 20th century, nine Hispanic Baptist churches in Texas totaled about 360 members. They ranged from El Paso to Floresville

and from San Angelo to Laredo, Juan Martinez noted in his book, *Los Evangelicos: Portraits of Latino Protestantism in the United States*. In 1910, representatives from those churches met in San Antonio and formed the Mexican Baptist Convention of Texas, later renamed the Hispanic Baptist Convention of Texas.

Pioneering churches persevered

Although they faced social and economic challenges, Hispanic Baptist churches persevered, and by the 1940s, they started several important ministries like the Mexican Children's Home and the Mexican Bible Institute in San Antonio, now Baptist University of the Americas.



In 1980, Leo Samaniego—then pastor of Primera Iglesia Bautista in Laredo—removed a plaque to expose a time capsule placed at the building in 1946 by Pastor Andres Cavazos. (Courtesy Photo)

The pioneering Hispanic Baptist churches in Laredo, San Antonio and El Paso bear witness to God's work in Texas among and through Hispanics, Maciel remarked.

Out of his 60 years of experience as a pastor, Maciel has served 27 years at Primera Iglesia Bautista de Laredo.

One change he has observed is the growth in multicultural ministries. Like many other Hispanic churches, Primera in Laredo responds to the needs of younger generations who grew up in the United States and whose background is shaped by intersecting cultures.

Just as Hispanics learned to thrive in different settings, churches realized they needed to adapt to more than one culture to reach rising generations of Hispanics, he added.

People representing varied educational and economic levels—as well as language preferences—must still find a place to come together under Christ at the church, Maciel said.

He regrets the spirit of competition too-often evident among congregations that seek their own growth rather than the growth of God’s kingdom.

“They’re all after the same fish,” Maciel said.

Moving and adapting

Alfonso Flores has led Primera Iglesia Bautista Mexicana de San Antonio as pastor for 29 years. During his tenure, the church has grown and relocated in 2000 from Alamo Street to the former location of Manor Baptist Church on Meredith Drive.

When Manor Baptist faced a decline in its membership, church leaders contacted Flores, offering their property—appraised at \$1.1 million—to Primera Iglesia Bautista Mexicana for \$350,000.

“We saw that as a blessing from the Lord,” Flores said.

Primera offers two services weekly—one in Spanish and the other in English. Flores views bilingual ministry as essential.

“It is vital, I think. It is indispensable if you live in Texas, where the language is English,” he said. “We have to stay up to date and minister to our younger generations. Even many adults now prefer English.”

Hispanic churches also must communicate in culturally contextualized ways, he added. That requires ministers to stay up-to-date in their knowledge of societal changes and responding accordingly.

Reaching the rising generations

In the case of Primera in San Antonio, that involves seeking to connect with young Hispanics from nominal Catholic backgrounds who left their parents’ church behind.

A key way to connect is to find common ground—starting points for communication—and establishing personal relationships that allow those who have distanced themselves from religion to see Christ at work in the lives of believers, Flores noted.



Primera Iglesia Bautista de El Paso worked hard to minister in its

community in the 1960s. By the 1980s and 1990s, about 500 people attended its services every Sunday.
(Courtesy Photo)

Pastor Josué Trejo just arrived at Primera in El Paso this past May. Originally from Mexico, Trejo moved to Texas with his parents and grew up in the Rio Grande Valley.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the El Paso congregation enjoyed its golden years when membership in the church reached more than 500 people, Trejo said.

“Now the Hispanic community is strong here, but newer generations present new challenges for the Hispanic church,” Trejo said. “The ways in which younger people perceive the role of the church in the community is different.”

Hispanics constitute a majority in El Paso, and for many years, Primera was the only Hispanic Baptist church in the community, Trejo noted. Now, he said, he is glad other strong congregations like Del Sol Church are able to minister to people Primera might not be able to reach.

Like his fellow pastors in Laredo and San Antonio, Trejo believes reaching new Hispanic generations ultimately depends on preaching God’s word faithfully.

Worship styles continue changing, so a church’s identity cannot be found in style, Trejo insisted. Instead, a church must find its identity in Christ, as revealed in the Bible.

“We must create an environment where people can ask questions about the faith.” Trejo said. “People here were hungry for the word (of God), and they are now still hungry for the word.”

While remaining grounded in the Bible, ministers must never close the door to change, he added. Pastors have to be versatile, he said, because pastors are involved in the lives of all kinds of people.

“There will always be something to change, something that needs improvement,” Trejo said. “But all changes must come from God’s will first. That is the only change that will bless the church.”

Call to commitment

Looking to the future, Hispanic Texas Baptist churches need to be filled with believers who commit the entirety of their lives to serve Christ wherever they are, Trejo said.

Committed Christians must be obedient to Christ’s command to make disciples among all people, Flores added.

“Success for a church is when a church is committed to Christ and committed to fulfill the Great Commission,” Flores noted. “We are to preach this every day. The priority of our preaching should be the fulfillment of the great commission.”

Likely, the future in Texas will continue to become more and more Hispanic, Maciel remarked. For that reason, Texas churches must continue to pay attention to the needs of their communities, he added.

While meeting needs demands resources, history shows God is faithful to provide, Trejo added.

“While the church has gone through changes and difficulties, I know God still has a plan for us because we are still here,” Trejo said. “That tells me God is not done working with the Hispanic community.”