

# Intercultural churches connect people groups to the gospel

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DALLAS—The New Testament book of Revelation indicates people of every tongue, tribe and nation will worship together in heaven, but most Christians tend to separate themselves when they congregated on Earth. Some Texas Baptists insist that's not always bad.

Churches designed to reach specific ethnic groups make perfect sense for recent immigrants who are trying to navigate an unfamiliar culture and an unknown language, said Patty Lane, director of intercultural ministries with the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

"If you go visit a church where you can't understand the language, and the culture is confusing, how are you going to meet Christ?" Lane asked. "Even if you do somehow meet Christ, how are you going to get discipled when the message of Jesus isn't communicated in a way that you understand—if it isn't spoken in your heart language?"

Lane emphasized the importance of giving people the opportunity to serve God in a way that doesn't feel like "a transplant of Americanism."

Some Texas Baptist churches are reaching out to specific ethnic groups in the state. Their ministries are as varied as their native languages and cultural backgrounds.

"These churches are all doing an amazing job serving their community not only here, but also overseas," Lane said. "A lot of them may come from places where the gospel isn't easily shared. So, they don't take that for granted and have used that freedom to reach out to people with the gospel in places where they may otherwise not hear it."

## **Caring for refugees as Burmese Americans**

When Americans think of a diverse church, they probably think of a congregation where two, maybe three languages are spoken. But the members of Greater Houston Burmese Christian Fellowship speak more than 20 dialects. The church, which focuses on ministering to refugees, has a membership of more than 350.

“Refugee ministry is very important because they are strangers to the land ... culturally, socially and emotionally,” Pastor Thong Lun said. “No matter what kind of mindset they bring in, providing hospitality to refugees can change their minds and hearts.

“Whenever a new family or a newcomer visits our church for the first time, we give them rice, cooking supplies, clothes (and so forth). We try our best to show them that we love them, we care for them, and we warmly welcome them.”

Greater Houston Burmese Christian Fellowship rents an apartment to serve as a mission point for their church and a place where partner organizations can offer English-as-a-Second-Language classes and an after-school program.

In addition, Lun provides pastoral care by visiting homes to lead Bible studies and offers guidance on practical matters such as navigating American culture and completing job applications.

## **Reaching indigenous tribes in the Philippines**

Members of First Philippine Baptist Church of Houston were looking for a way to serve and prayed for God’s guidance.

“We asked, ‘To whom are you sending us, and what are we supposed to be doing?’” said Cecile Dagohoy, mission team leader.

The Houston-based congregation is a self-described commuter church, with members traveling from across the city and suburbs for fellowship and worship each week. Through a variety of circumstances and connections, members felt called to the southernmost island of the Philippines.

During the summer, 26 church members traveled to the island to share the gospel with two indigenous tribes—Mamanwaw and Bisayan. The people groups, who are primarily nomadic, walked four to six hours down a mountain to receive medical care, kits of food and school supplies from members of First Philippine Baptist Church and a partnering Filipino church from the area.

While there, the mission group also helped build a community center, provided drug rehabilitation training and hosted a pastors' conference.

"We see the results of being faithful to (Christ's) call," Dagohoy said. "We realize who he is. He is able, and that is powerful. The realization makes for a very dynamic church."

### **Uniting Eastern Europeans in service and love**

River of Life Church in Plano includes people groups that are not always amicable overseas. The 50-person congregation, which meets at the Hunter's Glen Baptist Church building, hosts its gatherings in Russian. Members are immigrants or refugees from Ukraine, Belarus, Uzbekistan, Estonia, Armenia, Georgia and Russia, among other nations.

Despite some political conflicts overseas, the congregation members are connected by language, faith and family. The church focuses on what Russian speakers have in common by hosting outreach events that serve families, such as an egg hunt in Easter and a summer camp for children.

"What a beautiful picture of God's kingdom and his church when we all are working together to see people of all nations and tribes get to know him

whether here, in North Texas, or overseas,” said River of Life Pastor Leonid Regheta, who also serves as director of Texas Baptists’ Project:Start Refugee Resource Center.

### **Creating a network of Nepali-speaking believers**

Bhadra Rai, pastor of Canaan Bhutanese Church in Houston, had a vision to build a worldwide leadership network of Nepali-speaking Christians. While his congregation ministers to Bhutanese Nepali people in their community, he wanted to join together like-minded pastors and leaders around the world to provide encouragement and support.

Rai desired to create a platform for ministers to discuss contemporary issues facing Nepali-speaking Christians and to build a virtual network to connect and partner for kingdom work.

In March, the Global Nepali-Speaking Fellowship was held in Siliguri, India, drawing pastors from 13 different countries.

“Every church has its vision in one way or another to strengthen the believers in faith in Christ and to spread the Good News,” Rai said. “In the same way, we were able to host the Global Nepali-speaking Conference to empower the Nepali-speaking leaders around the globe. My church and I were encouraged by this event to continue this work in future.”