

Camp Fusion cultivates culture of connection, service

July 28, 2025

While many teenagers struggle to fit in and find their place in the world, adolescent immigrants or refugees face particular challenges.

Each summer, hundreds of those teens make their way to Latham Springs Camp & Retreat Center in Aquilla not only to have fun and fellowship at Camp Fusion, but also to address those issues.

“What makes Camp Fusion different is the cultures that are present,” said Lauren De La Calzada, who began attending Camp Fusion in 2012, soon after she finished the 6th grade. Since 2018, she has worked at the camp’s recreation team.

“This camp is specifically created for these youth who are coming from first- and second-generation families who have a very specific childhood where they bridge the gap between parents’ ways, adjusting to American culture and discovering what God has to say about my culture.”

Laruen’s sister-in-law Rachel has attended Camp Fusion since 2010 and started serving in 2015.

“I did a couple of years as a counselor and moved on to rec team,” Rachel said. “I think it is something so beautiful. These kids have come from church backgrounds where it is primarily their own cultures. I think it’s important to share these cultures.”

A day at Camp Fusion

In its 15th year, Camp Fusion, a Texas Baptists camp, gives Asian, African, Haitian and Brazilian teenagers from 6th through 12th grade a chance to embrace their unique cultural experience and the truth about what God has to say about them. The teens who share similar challenges can connect with others just like them.

The days are filled with devotionals, evening worship, three meals a day, and the true camp experience of swimming in the lake, playing sports and participating in competitions.



Teens spending time together near the snack shop at Camp Fusion. (Photo / Kendall Lyons)

Evening worship this year featured “The Agape Youth Band,” a group of seven young people who are part of the music and youth ministry at Agape Community Fellowship Church in Fort Worth.

Voltaire Cacal, a Filipino-American pastor and dean of international students and senior director of formal language programs at Dallas Theological Seminary, spoke each evening.

Preaching from Ephesians 2:11-22, Cacal reminded the teens: “You are not a stranger to God. You are family.”

“The gospel does not flatten your culture. It redeems it. In Christ, your background becomes a bridge, not a barrier,” Cacal said.

Danny Aguinaldo, assistant director, attended Camp Fusion in 2010, and committed his life to Christ there two years later. He took on a leadership role in 2014 with the rec team and later was promoted to his current post.

“Going to Camp Fusion created this community where I got to be around more Asians and Africans and it really helped me in my walk and in figuring out who I am and what I label myself with. In 2012, I came to Christ at Camp Fusion. I was 19,” Aguinaldo said.

From a vision to a mission

Since 2008, Mark Heavener has served in the office of Intercultural Ministries at Texas Baptists. His work involves connecting with churches with roots from Asia, Africa and the Middle East, covering 80 different language groups and more than 350 congregations among Texas Baptists.

“I worked under the founder of the office, Patty Lane. We knew each other beforehand while I completed my seminary degree in cross-cultural ministries. I had a focus and a heart for intercultural America during seminary,” Heavener said.

In 2003, intercultural pastors requested something for the youth in their churches.

“Before that, two different camps ... Asian camp and African youth camp ... were rolled out from that need in 2003. So, the two camps were developed. In 2009, I worked to see if we can bring the two camps together. And after doing a few events ... in 2010, we moved towards fusing the two camps together, hence the name Camp Fusion,” Heavener said.

Training the next generation

“This camp is not for camp’s sake. One of the larger needs among intercultural churches is leadership development for the second gen, the ones born here—needing a space and place to grow in spiritual formation as well as leadership gifts.”

Heavener and his team work with a variety of campers who deal with a generational gap within their home and life and ongoing tension between their cultural identity and American life.

“There is a generational gap between those who came as immigrants, the first gen and those born here, and then the intersection with American culture. Then there’s a convergence of all that, and in the middle is the chaos that these kids are living in bicultural lives,” Heavener said.

Camp Fusion offers Asian and African teens an opportunity to learn how to embrace their identity and find out Jesus welcomes them. Throughout the camp experience, kids see leaders who look like them, striving to serve the Lord and one another.

Training starts with teens who are interested in leading workshops and groups, followed by the development of other kids who are interested in following their footsteps.

The goal is to create the next generation of church leaders

“In the broader American culture, they are pushed to the fringes because of being immigrants or refugees or just different. And identity is always a big issue, predominant issue,” Heavener added.

“So, spiritual formation with a leadership development component is then funneled into the development of the camp. Every year, the cycle repeats.”

When the teens return to their homes and their churches, parents and pastors take notice. The kids appear more confident, get involved in their church, and share their Camp Fusion experience.

Testimony from teens

Lily, who's on her way to 11th grade at the end of summer, chose to spend a few days at Camp Fusion. The time she has spent with other teens in workshops covering topics like dating has impacted her.

"In the workshop I was in, 'dating isn't that deep,' I learned that if you jump into dating without knowing yourself, then you leave others to define who you are," Lily said.

Nathan just graduated from high school and started his third year in camp. This was his first year serving in leadership.

"It is a different point of view. I love to see all the kids happy and energetic," Nathan said. "Throughout training and preparing for my volunteering, it brought me closer to God ... the opportunity to pray and ask God what his plan is for me."

The diversity of Camp Fusion

Linda Howell, intercultural specialist for Texas Baptists, works with Heavener to make sure Camp Fusion maintains strong representation from the many intercultural churches within the BGCT.

"We have a very diverse population. This (Camp Fusion) is the place where they get to be themselves," Howell said. "They talk through deep issues within the church and what they are going through and get to meet new kids who have similar struggles."

This year, 525 people attended, with teens from 35 churches representing 17 cultures.

Camp Fusion included kids who are Brazilian, Burmese, Cambodian, Central African, Filipino, Ghanaian, Haitian, Ivorian, Kachin, Karen, Kenyan, Korena, Lao, Lisu, Nigerian and Vietnamese.

Pastor marks 60 years at his one and only church

July 28, 2025

In 1965, Bob Ray had no intention of serving the same rural Central Texas church for six decades and counting, but he fell in love with the people there.

Granddaughter joins grandmother in providing flood relief

July 28, 2025

Sometimes, people just need a little reminder to go. For Danielle Cisco of

Fort Worth, that reminder came when her grandparents stopped by unexpectedly with a graduation gift.

Llano girls step up to support others after flood

July 28, 2025

A dozen girls in Llano set up a lemonade stand and bake sale to benefit the people of nearby Kerr County, which suffered from the deadly July 4 flooding of the Guadalupe River. The girls raised \$4,095 for the Texans on Mission's disaster relief effort.

Community volunteers multiply Texans on Mission ministry

July 28, 2025

Community volunteers who offer to help for a day are not trained in disaster relief, but when paired with trained Texans on Mission volunteers, they provide extra hands for the work.

Strong reactions to Baylor grant decision continue

July 28, 2025

Baylor University's announced receipt of a grant for the study of "disenfranchisement and exclusion of LGBTQIA+ individuals and women" in the churches and its subsequent decision to return the grant continue to prompt strong reactions.

Texans on Mission give grieving parents baskets of blessing

July 28, 2025

One searcher after the flood in Kerr County came across personal items with the names of four children on them. Those items are being returned to those families with a special touch from Texans on Mission volunteers.

Around the State: Wayland team joins sports ministry and missions in Alaska

July 28, 2025

In the tiny village of Ninilchik, Alaska—where the road ends and Cook Inlet begins—a team from Wayland University brought more than sports skills and service projects this summer.

Multi-generational flood recovery team deploys

July 28, 2025

Matt Enriquez called his 89-year-old grandfather, Ramiro Peña, to tell him he was deploying to Kerrville. He ended the call with a surprise proposition.

Texans on Mission volunteers

help Hill Country families

July 28, 2025

John Vlasek stands in the middle of his home, stripped bare of furnishings, walls, ceilings and flooring. Even his rock fireplace is gone.

Buckner honors orphans who fled Vietnam 50 years ago

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Buckner International hosted a reunion July 12 honoring Vietnamese orphans who fled Vietnam 50 years ago, arriving in Dallas after a two-month journey on June 12, 1975.

Recently, seven of the orphans from Cam Ranh with their families returned to Vietnam marking the 50th anniversary of their journey.

Representatives from Buckner International joined them on the trip to Saigon and Cam Ranh, which for some was their first time back in Vietnam.

The trip to Vietnam included a return visit to the site where Cam Ranh Christian City Orphanage once stood. While there, they distributed shoes to children in need.

During the reunion ceremony, Albert Reyes, CEO of Buckner, noted the words of James, Jesus' half-brother, inspired founder R.C. Buckner to begin the organization.

James 1:27 says “religion that God our father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”

Reyes told reunion attendees that was the driving passage that he saw and from the very beginning those two groups are the “focus of our work—care for children and senior adults.”

“Your experience and your story is woven into the larger Buckner picture that now stretches all around the world,” Reyes said.

The Buckner reunion event gave the orphans a chance to reflect on five decades of impact and changes—in their home country and in themselves.

To conclude the reunion, Buckner dedicated a bench as a memorial to honor Pastor Nguyen Xuan Ha and Pastor Jim Gayle for their efforts in caring for the orphans at Cam Ranh Christian Orphanage.

The orphans’ journey, 50 years ago

During the final days of the Vietnam War, 69 Vietnamese orphans traveled across South Vietnam. The children spent two days on a broken boat on open seas until they made it to the United States and eventually were transferred to Buckner Children’s Home in Dallas on June 12, 1975. Their arrival in Dallas garnered [national attention](#) as the largest single group of refugees from Vietnam.

North Vietnamese military forces were sweeping through south Vietnam in the spring of 1975. The city of Cam Ranh began to collapse, leaving the Cam Ranh Christian City Orphanage with the difficult choice of fleeing.

Thirteen caregivers and their children fled with orphans, accompanying them as they boarded busses bound for safety.

When Saigon fell, the group made their way to the South China Sea on a leaky boat that failed two days into the voyage.

They were rescued and towed into Singapore where they waited five days without food or water before Southern Baptist missionaries intervened.

The group flew to the United States and made it to Buckner Children's Home where about half of the children eventually were adopted.

Those who were not adopted remained on the fourth floor in the children's home dormitory, where they were given English lessons to prepare them to enroll in Dallas Independent School District.

The group has remained close through the years.

Sam's salvation story

Sam Schrade (Sang Nguyen) a toddler at the time, was one of the orphans. Years have passed since the day he arrived at Buckner Children's Home.

He now runs a media company covering sports for ESPN and Fox Sports in Houston where he resides with his wife and children.

"I was able to go back for the first time in 50 years two weeks ago. My dad was an American soldier. My mom was Vietnamese ... I wasn't very wanted. They did not need me. And I was amazingly scooped up by the Cam Ranh Christian Orphanage," Schrade said.

Schrade reflected on the trip he made back to the place he once called home. He considered how far God brought him and the rest of the orphans.

"It is hard to know how far we've come in life when we don't know where we started. And for this trip, for me, it meant seeing where we started. Now I know how far we've come," Schrade added.

“We were transferred here. I was three years old. The fact that Buckner facilitated Christian homes changed my life. My mom led me to Christ in fourth grade. I became a Christian and all of us in the group have a lot of gratitude,” Schrade concluded.

Buckner International Communications contributed to this story.

Brothers immersed in disaster response after flood

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The Wheat brothers are well-known as ministers in this part of the Texas Hill Country. Robert serves as director of missions for Hill Country Baptist Association, while his brother John is pastor of Trinity Baptist Church in Kerrville.