

Partnership benefits multiple congregations in Garland

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GARLAND—A growing Ethiopian church, a once-thriving Anglo congregation and a start-up congregation of Millennial and Gen-X Christians share a common facility and vision for reaching their area with the gospel. And two of the three congregations share the same pastor.

Nearly four years ago, Ethiopian Evangelical Baptist Church had outgrown its home on Jupiter Road in western Garland, just east of the I-635 loop around Dallas.

“There was nothing on the market we could afford to buy” to accommodate the rapidly expanding Amharic-language congregation, Pastor Bedilu Yirga said.

About that time, Yirga learned through Dallas Baptist Association about Orchard Hills Baptist Church in Garland, just eight miles to the east.

Decades earlier, Orchard Hills had twice ranked second among Texas Baptist churches in the number of people baptized in a single year. The congregation built a facility that could accommodate more than 1,300 worshippers.

However, as the surrounding neighborhood changed and the church experienced challenges, its membership had declined to about 100 senior adults, and fewer than 50 were able to attend.

Creating a mutually beneficial partnership



Ethiopian Evangelical Baptist Church in Garland now occupies the facility that originally housed Orchard Hills Baptist Church. The once-thriving Anglo congregation continues to meet in the onsite chapel, as does a new congregation seeking to reach the rising generation. (Photo / Ken Camp)

For two years, leaders of the two congregations met, talked and prayed together about how their churches could develop a mutually beneficial partnership. Eventually, they crafted an agreement: Ethiopian Evangelical Baptist Church would assume ownership of the property, and Orchard Hills Baptist Church would meet in its chapel for worship and in newly renovated classrooms for Bible study.

In the meantime, two other key developments took place at Ethiopian Evangelical Baptist Church. Iglesia Casa de Dio el Todopoderoso purchased the Ethiopian congregation's property on Jupiter Road, and

Nebiye Kelile joined the staff to plant an English-language next-generation church, Pathway Dallas.

Actually, two buyers made offers on the former home of Ethiopian Evangelical Baptist Church—and the Hispanic congregation offered \$50,000 less than the other potential purchaser.

However, leaders of the Ethiopian church believed Casa de Dio was more “kingdom-minded” and had a greater passion for reaching the community with the gospel than the other prospective buyer. So, they chose to accept the lower bid.

In gratitude, members of the Hispanic congregation volunteered their labor to help Ethiopian Evangelical Baptist Church renovate and repair the Orchard Hills building, which had extensive deferred maintenance. The cost repairing, remodeling and repurposing of the facility originally was estimated at \$4.7 million.

“It ended up costing \$2 million—plus prayer—with the help of the Hispanic group,” Yirga said.

Ethiopian-born, California-raised pastor

About the same time, Kelile arrived in the Dallas area to help Ethiopian Evangelical Baptist Church launch a congregation focused particularly on reaching young English-speaking people of Ethiopian heritage.

Kelile was born in Ethiopia, but his family moved to the United States when he was 2 years old. He grew up in California, where he initially attended an evangelical church serving other immigrants. He later worshipped at a predominantly Anglo church before returning to work with an immigrant church in Sacramento, helping that congregation develop an English-

language ministry to reach and disciple the rising generation.

Through a network of churches devoted to reaching Ethiopian immigrants in the United States, leaders of Ethiopian Evangelical Baptist learned about Kelile. They talked to him about starting a congregation for second- and third-generation Ethiopians in the Dallas area.

After he and his family prayed about it, “the Lord released us” from the call to the Sacramento congregation, he said, and they relocated to North Texas.

As Pathway Dallas has taken root, it not only attracted English-speaking individuals with family ties to Ethiopia and Eritrea, but also several interracial couples from other backgrounds. In addition to an extensive apartment ministry, Pathway meets for worship in the chapel at the Ethiopian Evangelical Baptist Church at 10:15 a.m. on Sunday—immediately after Orchard Hills ends its 9 a.m. worship service in the same location.

The shared arrangement began in spring 2018, when the Ethiopian congregation moved into its newly renovated facility.

Bridging generations

Soon afterward, Orchard Hills needed someone to fill the pulpit one Sunday, and Kelile offered to preach. One Sunday led to another, and before long, Kelile found himself serving as pastor of two congregations—each meeting in the same space.

Orchard Hills’ members range in age from 50 to 101 years old, and about 50 people attend on a typical Sunday. About 70 to 80 people, ranging in age from 19 to 36 years old, worship at Pathway.

At age 38, Kelile is the youngest person at the Orchard Hills worship

services and the oldest person worshipping with Pathway. With his background ministering both within and outside the Ethiopian community, Kelile serves as a bridge between the two congregations.

“I have to be the best representative I can be of my generation,” he said.

Dickson Rial was pastor of Orchard Hills from 1963 to 1971 and again from 2001 to 2015. Rial, age 85, now serves the congregation as minister to senior adults, providing pastoral care for members who are homebound or hospitalized.

Orchard Hills’ members find satisfaction in knowing they can continue to be part of reaching their community with the gospel, he noted.

“These senior adults are open to looking at new ways to reach people,” Rial said. “The people are upbeat and excited about the opportunities, and I believe great things are going to happen. We’re not sure exactly when it will be or what it will look like, but this is a great group of people.”

Both Kelile and Rial emphasized they spoke only for themselves, and the congregations had not made any firm decisions about what the long-range future holds.

However, both mentioned the possibility of Pathway and Orchard Hills merging at some point—bringing the wisdom and resources of the older generation and the enthusiasm and energy of the younger generation together.

Whatever is ahead, both ministers mentioned the longtime members of Orchard Hills not only are grateful they can continue to gather for worship, but also see the facility they built fully utilized to reach the changing community.