

# AG<sup>in</sup> forefront of diversity trend

BY JOHN W. KENNEDY



Boston resident Hipe Doan (front), an immigrant from Vietnam, sings the national anthem with more than 3,000 others who took the oath of citizenship Sept. 17 at Fenway Park.

Four years ago, the U.S. Census Bureau predicted that Caucasians would become a minority by 2050. In August, the government agency amended its projection, saying whites will no longer comprise half the population by 2042.

The revised forecast reflects the rapidly changing demographics in this country. But instead of being fueled by immigration, most of the growth is because of a higher birth rate among minorities — especially Hispanics — compared to whites.

The Assemblies of God is actu-

ally ahead of the general population diversity curve. Ethnic minorities comprise 37 percent of adherents in the Fellowship, compared to 34 percent of the U.S. population overall. A Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life study last year showed that the AG has the second-lowest percentage of white members among 21 evangelical and mainline groups.

“I believe the Assemblies of God is going to be one of the most diverse Christian organizations in America in the next few years,” says Zollie Smith Jr., ex-

ecutive director of U.S. Missions for the Fellowship.

In the early 1990s, the Assemblies of God began approving the creation of distinct ethnic and language fellowship groups as a way to motivate more integration into General and District councils. The National Black Fellowship, Deaf Culture and Native American Fellowship formed first.

Smith, who led the Black Fellowship for a decade before becoming the first minority to hold a General Council executive position last year, says national AG leaders understood the Fellowship

needed a method to incorporate minority representation. Smith credits General Superintendent George O. Wood with continuing to speed the effort since his 2007 election.

In addition to providing a vote and voice at the AG General Presbytery, the ethnic/language groups give minority ministers and laity a platform to share cultural needs and activities. These fellowships promote integration by encouraging members to be active in their sections and districts; empower members through meetings and conferences; and work with geographic districts to help train ministerial candidates.

“Geographic and ethnic districts work in parallel fields,” Wood says. “They complement one another. This is not competition.”

Efraim Espinoza, director of the Fellowship’s Office of Hispanic Relations, says that since 1991 the number of black churches in the AG has mushroomed 156 percent, Asia and Pacific Islander churches have increased 64 percent, and Hispanic churches have grown 48 percent. In all,

an ethnic minority is really the majority in 3,826 congregations in the Fellowship. Another 500 AG churches are truly multiethnic churches in that no one race makes up more than half the congregants.

This decade the escalation has quickened. Since 2001, the number of AG black adherents has increased 52 percent, Asian and Pacific Islanders are up 33 percent, Hispanics have risen 29 percent and Native Americans have grown 28 percent, Espinoza says.

Nationals whose homeland features a well-established Assemblies of God network — Fijians and Samoans, for example — have formed several ethnic groups. Espinoza says such bodies are growing because ethnic groups are allowed to develop ministry within their cultural context and indigenous worship style rather than having a conformity model imposed upon them.

“The church is a secure place for immigrants to find an affinity with like-minded people,” Espinoza says.

A prime reason the Assemblies

of God keeps attracting new devotees is recent immigrants are evangelizing and discipling those in their neighborhoods and workplaces. Many immigrants, both ministers and laity, found faith in national churches that grew as a result of Assemblies of God World Missions efforts. Thus, the United States has become not only the world’s largest sending country but also the largest receiving missionary nation.

“These ethnic fellowships have some of the best strategies to reach lost souls, train ministers and start new churches,” says Scott Temple, AG Intercultural Ministries director. “A lot of the effort is focused in urban areas, many of which we’ve failed to impact before.”

Only eight ethnic/language fellowships existed when Temple took over the post in 2003. Another 11 have been added.

The Assemblies of God is helping to facilitate the growth of such churches by streamlining the credentialing process for those who have been ordained ministers in foreign countries. In addition,

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Members of the Assemblies of God Ethnicity Commission and Executive Leadership Team gather this year in Springfield, Mo.

the General Council is giving missions credit to established geographic district churches that provide a meeting place for nascent ethnic/language congregations.

“We want to create warm ties and loving relationships with newly arrived persons from different ethnic groups,” Wood says.

#### WELCOMING IMMIGRANTS

Shifting demographics have caused a backlash in some areas of the country. However, Temple urges churchgoers to maintain a biblical perspective regarding people who share the same doctrinal beliefs but have a different nationality or skin color.

“Rather than a worldview dictated by either political correctness or conservative philosophy, we need to be extremely careful to have the mind of Christ on this issue,” Temple says. “We have a mandate from God to welcome the aliens in our midst.”

Temple notes that in dozens of Scripture references God commands His followers to show hospitality to foreigners. God

invariably blesses those who are kind to immigrants, Temple says.

Conversely, if new arrivals aren’t integrated into churches they can easily become isolated and disconnected.

“We must embrace immigrants and give them real security in their faith as they adjust to the challenges of living in America,”

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Espinoza says. “If we don’t acclimate them, the world is going to do it.”

“The church as an institution is apolitical,” Wood says. “When it comes to immigrants, our concern is to win people to Jesus and to disciple them. It’s the government’s responsibility to determine whether they are legal or illegal; it’s the responsibility of the church to preach the good news of salvation.”

The ethnic/language fellowships “embrace the Great Commission and are not just pigeonholing themselves,” Temple says. “The Book of Revelation makes it clear that celebrating unity in diversity is the ultimate goal. The demographics of a local church ideally should reflect the community in which that church is called to reach souls.”

Espinoza says in most ethnic language congregations adults want to retain the language of their native country, but children are eager to assimilate by speaking English. Leaders in progressive churches understand they

must implement English-language services to connect with the second generation, he says.

“I appreciate that AG leadership has opened the door to nurture ethnic minorities within the Fellowship,” Espinoza says. “It shows they are obedient to the Great Commission of reaching all peoples.”

Currently, 19 percent of the AG’s 2.8 million adherents are Hispanic, 9 percent are black, 4 percent are Asian and Pacific Islander, 3 percent are mixed race or categorized as other, and 2 percent are Native American.

Perhaps no one is more appreciative of the steady march to racial equality than Smith, who grew up in the segregated South. Although pockets of prejudice still exist, Smith believes such bigotry won’t be tolerated a decade from now.

“The behavior and conduct of a person is learned,” Smith says. “The mechanism that has kept racial bias alive is close to being eradicated. Whenever we can, we must embrace the contributions that everyone brings to the table because it will enhance the quality and advancement of humankind in America for the good of all.”

Members of an Assemblies of God Filipino-American Fellowship congregation worship exuberantly.



Although complete unity always will be difficult to achieve, Smith says he’s encouraged that the Fellowship is promoting integration as never before. The U.S. Census Bureau predicts that a majority of the nation’s children will be nonwhite by 2023.

Wood says he is encouraged by the increasing number of blended congregations.

“This represents the spirit of the [1906] Azusa Street Revival, which was ahead of its time,” Wood says. “There they said the Bloodline [of Christ] washes out the color line.”

“The future of the church is going to be a diverse culture,” Espinoza says. “The sooner we accept that, the stronger we will grow.”

“It’s important for Caucasian children and youth to see ethnic minorities in the Fellowship,” Temple says. “Their schools and neighborhoods are increasingly ethnically diverse. If young people don’t see it in church, they will conclude that we’re irrelevant.” **tpe**

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