

Houston Church Discovers That Racial Unity Brings Growth and Revival

In 30 years, Braeswood Assembly of God has gone from a white, middle-class church to a local church to a local bastion of racial diversity.

On Sunday morning, the crowded sanctuary of Braeswood Assembly of God looks like it could have been plucked from the heart of Africa. Many people wear traditional clothes and large, ornate headdresses of bright orange and purple. The worship is passionate and expressive.

But Braeswood Assembly is in the heart of a Texas metropolis—a world away from Africa. The church in southwest Houston has changed from being middle-class and white to a bastion of cultural diversity. The congregation has found that embracing diversity leads to sustained growth and revival.

“The Assemblies of God is pretty strong in Nigeria, so that draws Nigerians here, though we have never made a conscious effort to go after a certain ethnic group,” said senior pastor Steve Banning. “When people come to the church they feel welcome because of the diversity.”

Earl Banning, Steve’s father, took the church in 1970 with 120 people and guided the congregation through several key decisions that laid the foundation for diversity and continued

growth. One of those decisions was to resist “white flight” and stay in their original location while many other churches moved to the suburbs.

Another decision was to embrace revival, particularly the Jesus Movement and the charismatic renewal of the 1970s and 1980s.

“Talk about a radical shift—from a suburban, middle-class white church to hippies coming in with shorts, sandals and long hair,” Banning said. “But that was when the church began to grow. There wasn’t turmoil. We started a Saturday night Jesus rally. A number of churches took a stand against those movements, but it has been a key for us.

“I think that was the precursor to what happened racially. That openness and compassion set the tone for receiving different races of the world without getting all shook up.”

Braeswood continued to experience regular times of revival and moves of the Holy Spirit. In the 1980s African and Caribbean immigrants began coming in greater numbers as the demography of the neighborhood changed.

Wycliffe Bailey, 53, came to Houston from Jamaica in 1982. A 21-year veteran of the oil industry, he is now the church’s Christian education director.

“When we first attended Braeswood it was a white middle-class church, but I noticed a growing number of minorities,” Bailey said. “Soon there was more than a handful of blacks, mainly foreign blacks. The pastor felt it was God’s will that the church change. He had an open

arms policy to whoever God sent here.”

Today, roughly 65 percent of the Braeswood congregation is African American or from Jamaica or the African continent. Fifty-five countries are represented, including Asian, Indian and Hispanic countries.

Eno Usanga, 26, and his family came to Houston from Nigeria in 1993. They were active in their church there and discovered that Braeswood was a perfect fit, Usanga said.

“I was excited to find a church with that much diversity. Many Africans, Nigerians, Caribbeans, people from around the globe were worshiping together.”

Usanga coaches the drama team, publishes the youth newsletter and plays drums for the Sunday services. He earned a bachelor’s degree from the University of Houston but found his life’s work at the church.

“You get to do what God gave you a passion for at Braeswood,” he said. “I believe the church is ready for a mighty breakthrough. I see us being a cornerstone for southwest Houston.”

The excitement of many cultures uniting has helped bring steady growth. The church counts 2,500 weekly attendees, and every week 25-30 people come to Christ, Banning said. The church also is unabashedly Spirit-filled.

“It is uncommon to have a service where the gifts don’t function,” Banning said. “We give place for the Holy Spirit.

We don't veil or hide it. We are charismatic and let the Holy Spirit touch people's lives."

Reagan Jacks, 54, a computer consultant, came to Christ at Braeswood after going through a divorce and experimenting with New Age religions.

"I've lived a dreadful life," Jacks said. "I was on a spiritual search, but didn't know it. In my early 40s, my daughter became extremely ill, my father died, I got divorced, and I suffered financial setbacks.

"I walked into Braeswood on Easter 1991 with the intention of giving my life to Christ, without even knowing the full impact of what that would mean. It took me three weeks to stop crying."

A few weeks later he was baptized in the Holy Spirit. He and his wife now lead the singles ministry.

"I don't know that I could function in any other environment. All the cultures and languages mesh together as a family," Jacks adds.

"A relationship with God is the glue that makes this thing work," Banning says. "What the United Nations can't do, God is doing."

—Joel Kilpatrick