



## Reinventing the church

**K**en Huggins is a pastor caught between two Baptist cultures – the one he was born and raised in and the one he now envisions as pastor of Elkins Lake Baptist Church in Huntsville, TX.

The first is a culture primarily of material privilege and comfort within the church; the other is one of relevance and action to the world outside the church.

“As a boomer, I have been between Baptist cultures of past and present,” said Huggins, 55, pastor at Elkins Lake since 1990. “But I also somehow have to make sense of our faith and ministry to the rest of the world.”

Elkins Lake’s current community ministry initiative is its role as a partner with two other Baptist churches in Huntsville who support Iglesia Bautista, the only Hispanic Baptist church in the community. In addition to financial assistance, Elkins Lake has some members who have received ESL training to help offer classes in Iglesia’s growing literacy program. Now, Elkins Lake and Iglesia are working to develop a substance abuse recovery program and an immigration center.

In addition, Elkins Lake’s Men’s Fraternity reaches out to men in the community and the church’s youth group annually participates in the Impact Huntsville Youth Spring Mission Project (*see Homeyer’s story, page 20*).

That Elkins Lake, a self-described “educated upper-middle-class Anglo congregation,” could catch and join this vision is part of an ongoing journey Huggins has patiently nurtured for the past decade – and is a self-journey as much as a congregational one.



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*Photo: Members of Elkins Lake Baptist Church and Iglesia Bautista at an ESL class.*

"I was a first-born, Central Texas, Southern Baptist, privileged white boy," said Huggins, who spent his young adult years in First churches that were large, wealthy, program- and staff-rich, and comfortable.

"We didn't suffer," he said of First Baptist Arlington, where he attended while in seminary and of First Baptist Abilene, where he served on staff for four years. Both churches, he added, had developing community outreach programs, Mission Arlington and the Family Life Center in Abilene. For him, though, he was "influenced by the '80s, the decade of greed," he said.

Huggins had taken the educational path of many born into this Baptist culture. He attended Baylor University, earning a sociology degree with a social work sequence. He did his graduate studies in New Testament at Southwestern Theological Seminary, earning both an MDiv and a PhD. He also taught as an adjunct faculty member at Texas Christian University while working on his doctorate.

Nevertheless, Huggins recognized a tension within himself while on staff at First Abilene that was making him decidedly uncomfortable. "The gospel is for all people, but only some would come to our church."

Elkins Lake called him in fall 1990 into his first fulltime pastorate. Although not a First church, it had much in common with its venerable brother churches. It had its roots in the late 1960s as a mission church of First Baptist Huntsville to cater to the thriving retirement community. In April 1971, it officially became Elkins Lake Baptist through action of the Southern Baptist Association.

"They were people of resources and means," Huggins said. "It was a 'resort ministry,' an effort to meet the changing needs of a membership that was building retirement homes in small communities and leaving their home churches in the cities.

"When I came, I'd say the ethos of this church was that if others ministered to the down and out, we would minister to the up and out," he said.

Today, Elkins Lake has 786 members and completed the second phase of its new sanctuary and education building in September 2007. It is one of several physical and personality transformations the church has experienced, "our third just since I've been here," Huggins said.

Huntsville sits about 50 miles north of Houston. It is home to Sam Houston State University, named for one of the state's bigger-than-life heroes, with a student population of about 16,400. It also is the state headquarters for Texas prisons, where 30,000 prisoners are released annually on an average of 150 people a day. Of the 60,000 residents in Walker County, 5,000 of them are employed at the prison and of that number, 1,200 are correctional officers.<sup>1</sup> Among Huntsville's 30,000 residents, there are more than 6,000 documented and 3,000 undocumented Hispanics.<sup>2</sup>

More and more, Huggins struggled with that tension he had first recognized at First Church Abilene: "I just couldn't justify reaching only a narrow slice of our community."

A long-range planning group met in 2001 to identify the collective values of the church, one of which was to "help members be missionaries during the week." Broad objectives and goals of the church include "express God's grace and truth in community and global service." Slogans on its weekly bulletins include "Living Real Life in the Real World as God's People" and "Trying to Be God's People in this Time and Place."

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*Iglesia Bautista Pastor Jessie Medina (left) in an ESL class.*

ghins said. “The model Jesus set up for us in Luke would be countercultural in today’s society just as it was in the society of Jesus’ time.”

The process of changing a church’s culture is a slow one, Huggins said. “You’re on a continuum of who you are as a church. You can move either side a couple of notches, but a church simply can’t move in huge leaps,” he said. On the other hand, he’s the first to admit that “the best things that happen in our church come from our people.”

His advice to other pastors on this journey is to be patient and low-key, don’t alienate some while moving others, and don’t move too fast. Last year, Huggins asked the members of the church’s mission committee to read *The Externally Focused Church* by Eric Swanson and Rick Rusaw. The book focuses on how churches can be missional within their communities. He also taught from a book titled *The Jesus Creed: Loving God, Loving Others* by Scot McKnight.

“There have been challenges along the way. But part of the nature of this church is, we just don’t get ugly about anything; this church lives that,” Huggins said. “But if we, as church, are family, then how do we shore up our weaknesses?”

In spring 2008, he brought in a student intern from Baylor’s School of Social Work. He learned at a denominational meeting in Austin that social work students were available for in-

ternships, and he began to e-mail Jon Singletary and Gaynor Yancey, professors at the school. Through them, he met Mallory Homeyer, who is earning a dual degree from the School of Social Work and George W. Truett Theological Seminary. A lifelong Baptist, her passion is helping churches reach out to communities in need.

Huggins said it is as a result of Homeyer’s presence at the church that Elkins Lake is now working actively to develop a substance abuse recovery program and an immigration center with Iglesia Bautista.

“The tinder for this potentially explosive expansion has been prepared for several years now,” Huggins said. “The excellent work of Mallory has added fuel and breathed on the embers ... into full flame a ministry that could ignite our community with Good News of Jesus Christ.”

This specific ministry is being assisted by a \$10,000 grant from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, which is available to churches that host a Baylor social work graduate student helping them develop new community ministries.

“I was constantly blending my social work skills into the life and practice of Elkins Lake Baptist,” Homeyer said. “I mostly learned alongside them, and I firmly believe God used me as a catalyst in what was already taking shape in the hearts of the community and the church.”

Living out the gospel message is often described as a narrow way; certainly it can be a hard way, and this, too, is a truth Huggins understands. “There are some days, I just don’t want to do it,” he admits. “Days when I would like to just go back to my middle-income life.

“But if this is the core eternal truth, I want to know it, and I want to get it to other people. I don’t have to do it all, but I have to build relationships.”

#### ENDNOTES

1. FASTEN, 2007, Krista Petty
2. *Ibid.*