



STARTING A SECOND LANGUAGE SERVICE

The Opportunity

The population within the Texas-Oklahoma District is growing increasingly diverse. For instance, Houston is now the most diverse city in the United States,¹ and Hispanic Texans are now the majority population within the state.² Bear in mind that “Hispanic” includes people from countries all throughout Latin America. While we must continue to send missionaries to the nations, we must also recognize that the nations have come to us, not only from Latin America, but from around the world. This represents a huge ministry opportunity for churches within our district, especially among those ethnic groups who retain the language and culture of their countries of origin.

The Challenge

Church planting is historically the best way to reach new people groups, so instinctively, we might be inclined to think that the best way to reach the growing number of ethnic groups in our midst would be to start multiple new churches in the different languages of these ethnic groups. The challenge, however, is that among immigrant populations, while the first generation will almost always require or prefer communication in their mother tongue, the second generation will often be bilingual, and the third generation may not even speak the language of their family’s country of origin, having been largely raised with English-speaking peers and educated in English-speaking schools. This means that while planting a church that speaks only Spanish, for instance, may be effective in reaching first generation Hispanics, it will only be minimally effective in reaching second generation Hispanics, and it will often have little or no appeal with third generation Hispanics. Sadly, the end result is often a ministry that ages out quickly, effectively reaching the older generations, but losing the younger generation.

A Solution

So, what is the solution? How can we create ministry environments that are able to effectively reach first, second, and third generations among ethnic groups whose first language is not English? One model that has proven effective is starting a Second Language Service within your church. What are the basic features of this model?

- In addition to your main Sunday morning worship service(s) in English, you offer a separate worship service in a second language for a specific ethnic group in your community. Both the language and the worship style of this service should reflect the unique culture of this particular ethnic group. A second language environment like this is necessary to reach members of the first generation who often do not yet speak English. But, it may also be embraced by members of the second generation who are bilingual but appreciate their culture of origin and wish to pass along their rich cultural heritage to their children. As such, a second language service can sometimes be a meaningful opportunity for families spanning multiple generations to worship together, even if some of them are

¹ <https://www.governing.com/community/houston-is-the-nations-most-diverse-city-report.html>

² <https://www.texastribune.org/2022/09/15/texas-demographics-census-2021/>



not fully fluent in the second language. Because of these varying degrees of fluency, however, the second language service cannot be the only opportunity for discipleship.

- You must also offer adult small groups/classes in both English and the second language, facilitating meaningful discipleship opportunities for both bilingual and non-English speaking adults.
- Since the teenagers and children from this ethnic group generally speak English, there is usually no need to create separate second language ministries for them. They can be incorporated into your English-speaking youth group and children's ministries where they will generally feel most comfortable.

Practically speaking, what might this look like? Imagine a Hispanic family spanning three generations attending church together on a Sunday morning. During the 9:00 hour, the grandparents can attend a Bible study in Spanish, and their bilingual adult children can either join them or attend one of the church's other Bible studies in English. Their school-aged children and grandchildren can participate in the regular Sunday morning children's ministry or youth group. Then during the 10:30 hour, the grandparents can attend the second language worship service, and the rest of the family can either join them or attend the main worship service in English. Of course, this is just one scenario, and the particulars of your Sunday morning programming may be different; but hopefully, you can see how a model like this would allow entire families to be part of the same church, regardless of their age or language preferences. By sharing facilities, you also avoid much of the cost associated with an independent church plant.

The Benefits

By intentionally welcoming and incorporating a second language culture into your church...

- You will be reaching often neglected people groups in your community with the gospel.
- You will visibly manifest the beauty of the oneness that is ours in Christ, despite differences in language and culture.
- You will see ethnic stereotypes begin to fade as personal friendships between people of different cultures begin to grow within the church.
- Your mercy ministry will be strengthened. Jesus has called us to demonstrate His love by caring for those in need. But often middle-class suburban churches must turn to local parachurch ministries outside the church in order to find people in their communities with significant material needs. And these ministries, while good, often do not facilitate the kind of ongoing relationships with people that would enable you to address their deeper spiritual needs. However, when you welcome different ethnic groups into your church, especially first-generation immigrants, you will find that many of them have significant and legitimate social, material, and legal needs that you are uniquely suited to meet. Personal hospitality, food pantries, English classes, legal services, and citizenship classes are just a few ways you can help to meet some of these practical needs. And since these are people who are connected to your church family, you will not only be able to meet their material needs, you will also be uniquely positioned to meet their deeper spiritual needs through ongoing discipleship relationships.
- Your global missions will be strengthened. By welcoming people from different parts of the world into your church, you will gain a more direct window into their world, and your heart for the world will grow. You may even be able to intentionally plan mission trips to your church members' countries of origin, using second language church members as translators for your team in some cases, and developing global partnerships to help them reach their homelands for Christ. These kinds of partnerships make missions more personal.



- The church can become part of the solution to this nation's immigration problems. There are many in America today who view immigrants, especially those who have come to this nation illegally, as drains on society, stealing jobs, and utilizing services that were intended for and paid by legal American taxpayers. Some of these concerns are not entirely fair, and they are often expressed in less than loving ways. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that our nation's immigration system is broken and that the flood of illegal immigrants has placed a strain on our country. But, how should we as Christians respond to this crisis? First, we must view immigrants, even illegal ones, with a heart of compassion, seeing them both as fellow human beings made in the image of God and as fellow sinners in need of a Savior. We should be eager to serve them and share the gospel with them, regardless of where they came from or how they got here. But second, instead of complaining about this nation's immigration problems, we should look for ways to be part of the solution. For instance, instead of being upset that people do not speak English, why not offer ESL classes (English as a Second Language) to help them learn English? Instead of being upset that people are here illegally, why not offer legal services and citizenship classes to help them become legal citizens? Instead of being upset that people from other countries are not assimilating into US culture, why not welcome them into your church so that they can find a relational foothold with US Christians who will love them and help them find their place in their new homeland? This kind of thinking will not only go a long way toward solving our nation's immigration problems, it will also go a long way toward advancing the kingdom of God.

Important Considerations

Whenever you bring two cultures/languages under the same roof, there is always the potential for conflict. The following recommendations will help to minimize that conflict and ensure that the two groups function together in unity.

- **Attitude**

Paul reminded us in Galatians 3:28 that regardless of our race or ethnicity, we as believers are all "one in Christ Jesus." This is the spirit that you must embrace if a Second Language model is going to thrive in your church. As members of the majority culture in your church, you must be very careful not to treat your Second Language members as second-class citizens, even in subtle ways. Instead, look for ways to show them honor as equals. Give them a seat at the leadership table and a voice in your decision-making. As appropriate, invite key Second Language leaders to staff meetings, elder meetings, and leadership retreats. The Second Language members must also actively look for ways to show honor to the larger church body by contributing financially, providing volunteers for church ministries, and doing their part to maintain the church facilities. Wherever possible, the church should look for ways to bring the two language groups together to manifest and solidify your shared identity as "one in Christ Jesus." This could be accomplished through such things as periodic joint bilingual worship services, joint fellowship gatherings, and joint outreach opportunities.

- **Leadership**

Finding the right person to lead your Second Language ministry is critical to the health and success of this ministry. We recommend looking for someone with the following characteristics:

- **Solid character and sound theology** – Since you most likely do not speak the second language, you will not be able to provide meaningful oversight regarding what is being taught in the Second Language Service and ministries. This is why you must have strong confidence in both the character and the theology of the person in leadership.



- **Shared vision and ministry philosophy** – Despite the differences in language and culture, for the sake of unity, the Second Language leadership must share the basic vision and ministry philosophy of the larger church body.
- **Fluent in both languages** – The Second Language leader will be the bridge between the two languages groups within the church. This is why it is important that he be able to communicate clearly, not only in the second language, but in English as well. This will greatly minimize the potential for misunderstandings and conflict.

- **Resources**

There should be clear mutually agreed upon expectations regarding the extent to which the Second Language congregation will share resources with the broader English-speaking congregation.

- **Facilities** – Will the English and second language services and ministries be offered at the same time in different spaces? Or, will they share spaces but at different times?
- **Finances** – What will be the financial relationship between the two groups? Will they take up separate offerings? Will they share a single budget, or will they have separate budgets? Will the Second Language ministry be able to fund itself, or will it need to depend on the broader English-speaking congregation for some of its financial support, at least for a while? (In most cases, the latter will be necessary.)

Joint planning and regular communication regarding these questions will facilitate a healthy working relationship between the two groups.

Next Steps

If you're interested in exploring the possibility of starting a Second Language Service in your church...

- Contact us at multiply@efcatxok.org to communicate your interest. We can assist you in:
 - Developing a Second Language Service plan that works for your church.
 - Connecting you with other district churches that have Second Language Services.
 - Recruiting, assessing, training, and coaching a Second Language Pastor for your church. (This is available in Spanish and English.)
 - Providing initial district funding and helping your Second Language Pastor raise support from other churches.
 - Constructing an Employment Agreement or Memo of Understanding (MOU) between the church and the Second Language Pastor.
 - Connecting your Second Language Pastor with a cohort of other Second Language Pastors in the district for mutual encouragement and learning.
- Consider starting some ministries that are designed to reach a prominent ethnic group in your community. These could include:
 - A second-language Bible Study
 - ESL classes (English as a Second Language)
 - Immigration legal services (EFCA has a ministry called “Immigrant Hope” that can help.)
 - Citizenship classes