

Demographic Case Study and Analysis
of Bell Gardens, California--
To Be Used in Determining the Type of Church Work
Needed in This Area

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1. Bell Gardens is a city in southeast Los Angeles County. Its area is only 2.4 square miles, yet it has a population approaching 45,000 people. This fact makes it one of the most densely populated cities in the country. In looking at the city's demographic profile, several things stand out immediately. The first striking statistic is that the city is 87% Hispanic. The first wave of immigrants came from Mexico and Central America in the 1970's. People have continued to come from those areas, and many of the children and grandchildren of the first immigrants continue to live here. For this and many other reasons this area is one the nation's poorest; the median family income is under \$24,000.

Another striking statistic is the large number of children and young people. About 55% of the population are under 24. Three-quarters of residents are under 34. These people live in large family units. One-third of households have six or more people living in them. Another third have four to five inhabitants.

It's easy to see that these statistics are accurate simply by spending time in the city. The people there are poor, young, and family-oriented. Many of them have physical needs that are being unmet. Many also probably need assistance in areas like parenting skills, literacy and homework.

2. When the area started turning Hispanic in the '70's many English-speaking churches either folded or moved. Therefore, there is a significant lack of churches reaching out to the community. The largest church in the area is the Catholic Church, unsurprising due to the cultural ties Hispanic people have to it. (I will leave the debate over Catholicism's merit as a true church to another paper.) The next largest church is an Assembly of God with a primarily commuter membership. Other than that, most churches are fairly small, reaching some converts from the community, but leaving large numbers unreached.

Statistics show that about 2% of the residents of Bell Gardens go to church any given Sunday.

The churches doing the most to meet the needs of the community are small Pentecostal churches that have sprung up in different parts of the city in recent years. They are reaching some Spanish-speaking people, but none in the large numbers that needed for a city this size.

3. The large numbers of youth in the city are not being reached in large numbers by any church. One of the churches most committed to reaching this group recently moved to a neighboring city, leaving an even larger void unfilled. This group would seem to be a prime target for an evangelistic outreach. Another aspect of life in Bell Gardens not being addressed in any real way is the stifling poverty many of these people face. A church must confront the physical needs of people in this area before many will be receptive to hearing about their spiritual needs.

The established Southern Baptist church in the city is like many in the community. It does not match up well with the people around them. The English-speaking congregation drives in from outside the city, from as far as Norwalk and La Mirada. The only “local” members are quite elderly, and are part of the handful of Caucasians that still live in the area. A Spanish-speaking congregation shares facilities with the English church. But even it does not draw well from the apartment buildings and multi-home lots where so many people here live. Interviews with the members reveal that many have become discouraged and complacent about the community, believing that there is no way to reach these new people who do not look or act like people used to. This “already-defeated-

before-we-start” attitude must change before this church, or any church, to continue, let alone begin to meet community needs.

4. Any church that starts in this area must be concerned with meeting the needs of people. There are many, such as the need for adequate food and clothing. They also need help in areas such as literacy, homework, and work and parenting skills. As stated before in this report, the most logical place to begin reaching people in this area is through the overwhelming material and social needs people experience every day. I believe the relative success of the recently-moved Southland Church in reaching people bears this out. They were consistent in holding food and clothing give-aways for the community.

Southland also took the church to the community by means of mobile Sunday Schools and Bible Clubs. It seems that any attempt to touch people on a spiritual level must be conducted primarily outside the church. Events which could be set up at apartments or in parks would work well. Because of the high number of families with young children, activities for children would have to be included in the planning for adult Bible studies and church services.

Keep in mind that many of the people of the community have no background in traditional church. Worship would have to be simple and understandable, focused on God's grace and provision. The preaching needs to stay simple, and Bible-centered. My guess is that a preacher who illustrated biblical principles with stories drawn from everyday life, much like Jesus did, would be well received here.

Would these people fit in with an established church? Maybe, if the church was willing to reach outside itself to love people the world does not care about. It is far too

easy to become obsessed with ministering to your own kind. (I think this the flaw in the idea of the homogeneous church, but that's another discussion for another day.) Surely the church must reach out to the poor, the uneducated, the homeless and dirty. Isn't that what Jesus did? Instead of spending time with the religious elite, he was consistently seen with common people, with tax collectors and prostitutes, the people no one else loved or cared for. If a church is willing to be like Jesus, they can reach out to these people. My believe is, however, that this community would be most effectively reached by a new work, led by people who are committed to doing things in new and creative ways. The old ways of dong church have little appeal to people who have no connection to traditional church culture. In communities like this one, it will be necessary to build a new church culture that connects with the people involved.