

Bridging communities: The role of the First Presbyterian Church of Kingsville, Texas, in Mexican & Mexican-American educational outreach

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Introduction

This project explores the overlooked influence of the First Presbyterian Church of Kingsville, Texas, in supporting Mexican and Mexican-American education. While prior studies emphasize donors like Henrietta King and institutions like Tex-Mex and Pan-Am, this research highlights the church's pivotal local role. The study aims to show how this church operated both as a religious and civic institution in a segregated region, often subverting the Southern Presbyterian racial norms of the early 20th century.



Background and Significance

The Kingsville church existed at the crossroads of faith, race, and education in South Texas. While Southern Presbyterianism often upheld exclusionary racial norms, the Kingsville congregation demonstrated an unusual pattern of inclusive outreach. This study adds to historiographies on Southern Protestantism by showing how religious institutions could challenge or reinterpret dominant racial ideologies at the local level.

Research Questions

- How did the First Presbyterian Church of Kingsville contribute to Mexican and Mexican-American education in South Texas?
- In what ways did the congregation support institutions like Tex-Mex and Pan-Am?
- Did the church formally or informally resist racial exclusion common to Southern Presbyterian churches?



Analysis and Discussion

The case of the First Presbyterian Church of Kingsville complicates prevailing narratives of Southern Presbyterianism in the Jim Crow South. Most congregations aligned with the Southern Presbyterian tradition in the early 20th century practiced a theological and institutional segregation that mirrored broader societal norms. However, archival evidence suggests that the Kingsville church carved out a distinct space of partial resistance, one grounded not in progressive ideology, but in a pragmatic and faith-driven commitment to education and outreach.

Rather than instituting formal policies of exclusion, the Kingsville congregation embraced a functional ecumenism. They partnered with regional educators, missionaries, and even Mexican-American students and families without enforcing strict racial divisions within the church's operations. While membership rolls still reflected racial homogeneity and broader cultural assumptions about hierarchy persisted, the church's consistent material support for institutions like Tex-Mex and Pan-Am reveals a sincere effort to promote what they saw as Christian uplift among marginalized communities.

The Kingsville church's close relationship with Henrietta M. King added further complexity. King was a devout Presbyterian and key benefactor. Her influence may have shaped the church's civic theology, encouraging a form of social engagement that prioritized moral discipline, education, and faith development over racial separation.

The church embodied a quiet but meaningful shift from exclusionary Calvinist orthodoxy to a more inclusive, mission-minded Protestantism. These actions anticipated, in some ways, the later mid-20th-century ecumenical movement. By prioritizing Christian vocation and educational opportunity, the church helped create pathways to leadership, literacy, and social mobility for Mexican-American youth—many of whom became ministers, educators, and civic leaders. Importantly, this was not based on radical activism or liberal theology. Rather, the church's behavior reflected how institutions within conservative frameworks can act as agents of social change when their mission aligns with community needs. The Kingsville church's story reveals that even in restrictive traditions, there was room for local agency, moral courage, and subtle resistance. This analysis offers a more nuanced understanding of how faith communities shaped, and were shaped by, South Texas's multicultural evolution.

Materials and Methods

This qualitative historical study uses a triangulated methodology:

- **Primary sources:** Church bulletins, session minutes, archival material from the King Ranch
- **Secondary sources:** Institutional histories and theological analyses.
- **Historiographical approach:** Emphasis on shifting interpretations of faith-based outreach, racial ideology, and missionary practice
All data was thematically coded to assess patterns of inclusion, exclusion, and civic participation.



Key Results

- Donated land for use by Presbyterian schools
- Repeated financial and logistical support for minority education
- Hosted missionary speakers to promote outreach
- Maintained no formal internal policies of racial exclusion
- Played an active role in religious and civic life of Mexican-American youth



Historical Context and Work Cited

- This study builds upon:
- William Stuart Red's *History of the Presbyterian Church in Texas* (1936)
 - Ayala-Schueneman's 1991 article on Tex-Mex and Pan-Am
 - Lisa Neely's 2001 and 2007 writings on Henrietta King and the Texas-Mexican Institute
 - Currie's *Planting Trees* (2014), which documents Pan-Am's theological and multicultural mission
 - Archival Materials – First Presbyterian Church of Kingsville; King Ranch Archives

Conclusion

The First Presbyterian Church of Kingsville offers a compelling case study in how local religious institutions can both reflect and resist dominant social ideologies. By investing in cross-cultural educational missions, this congregation not only supported racial uplift but reshaped the religious landscape of South Texas.

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