

With Focus on Leadership, El Camino Lifts Hard-Hit Community

In 2005, Daniel Pantoja took over a church that served an increasingly imperiled community -- made up largely of Latino immigrants who came to work in rural Chatham County's chicken plants, but were being squeezed by tougher immigration policies and, later, the economic downturn.

But Pantoja didn't set his sights on simply meeting the growing needs of his church members; instead, he focused on equipping those members to serve others, a mission he continues to pursue as pastor of the El Camino United Methodist Church in Siler City, also known as Chatham Hispanic Ministry.

"This is not just a place for people to worship," says Pantoja, a native of Peru. "That is not enough. God has called me to equip this church, to equip my people and to make them leaders."

Pantoja hopes that by creating a group of strong Christian leaders, his church will be able to help lift up a community that is plagued not only with financial stress, but the many blights that so often accompany poverty. In the first of 10 proposals it adopted for the years 2010 to 2015, the church says it aims to "heal the wounded and renew dreams so that God can change lives."

"We need to move the power to the city, to the people trapped in alcoholism, domestic violence, gangs, rebellions of kids against parents, depression," he says. "There's a lot of trauma."

A history of service

El Camino finds its roots in the late 1980s, when it was the first ministry in Chatham County to serve the sudden surge of immigrants from Mexico, El Salvador and other Latin American countries that had begun working in the area's meat processing plants.

Several churches hosted the ministry in early years. It moved into its current location, in a former laundry building that was owned by Siler City First UMC, in 1990. The building was later purchased by the N.C. Conference Board of Missions, which rents it to El Camino.

Members from several area churches and the conference joined forces to renovate the brick building, which had been slated for demolition, and the church became a key point of contact for the area's burgeoning Hispanic population. In 1990, Siler City was home to a few hundred Latino immigrants; that number has mushroomed to nearly half of the town's 8,000 residents. The area counts more than a dozen Hispanic churches now.



Pantoja, formerly an engineer in Peru's merchant marine, is the church's fourth pastor. Since coming to El Camino, he and church's members has spruced up the building with brightly painted rooms in tropical blues and yellows, built an outdoor deck, and added a playground for the children and rooms for computer classes. This room was for its purpose when I came, we are not using enough, and most kids have Laptops.

Pantoja also hopes to see the church grow – perhaps into a larger location in a former Lowe's Food store on U.S. 64 where he envisions moving his congregation someday.

Building leaders

But his vision to grow the church begins with leadership. So far, he has trained eight church leaders who preach at weekend services, minister to other church members and do community outreach. Other groups at the church of about 80 members lead programs that provide aid for poor families and educate children and adults in the Bible and life skills such as speaking English and using a computer.

The church has also put on several large, outdoor services in recent years that drew hundreds of participants. Nearly all of the church's regular members served as ushers, praise and singers groups, parking attendants, child care providers and in other roles.

Pantoja says his focus has been to make his church members more than believers; he wants them to be disciples.



“To be a disciple, you take your cross and do whatever Christ asks you to do,” he says. “A disciple is equipping the church, seeing what God intends, praying and helping people see the light. We have to act what we believe.”

One of the key lay leaders at El Camino is Maribel Carias, a 36-year-old mother of three who shares with congregants the lessons God instilled in her years ago, when she survived a kidnapping in her native Guatemala.

As is a startlingly common practice there, the kidnappers were seeking money, asking her family for \$20,000 in return for her safety. It was an impossible sum for the family to raise, and Carias was certain the kidnappers would kill her when the ransom failed to arrive.

So she ceased her attempts at escaping or fighting off her captors, instead submitting her life to God. At one point, she was being held at gunpoint when she gave the men permission to shoot her.

“When the Lord is in you, I told them, no one can touch you,” she says.

The kidnappers let her go. She now uses her tale to impart an enduring lesson: give your life to God, and he will push you in the right direction.

“God is guiding everything we do,” she says.

On a recent Wednesday morning, Carias and her children were among the volunteers manning tables lined with boxes of food in the church’s bright orange fellowship room. Each box contained canned goods such as beans, corn and tuna, along with some fresh produce, we are one of 12 site distributions of the Snack Summer Program (CORA).

Lines of local people wove through the back door to pick up the boxes, a flurry of Spanish conversation marking the weekly event with a festive air that made it easy to forget the poverty that drives so many local people to accept charity. We also partnership with the United Methodist Women groups of Fairway district and provide Free School Supplies for over 600 children.



Growing needs

El Camino has long served the needs of an immigrant community that flocked to low-wage American jobs, helping them get a foothold as they struggled to achieve the American Dream. But in recent years, the poverty has worsened, and the dream so many seek has become harder to attain.

When Pantoja arrived in Siler City, a tightening of immigration policy was separating many families in which adults were deported, while their U.S.-born children were allowed to stay behind. The state had also stopped allowing immigrants who lacked documentation to obtain drivers licenses, making it difficult to work without fear of arrest and deportation.

But the economic downturn that followed was even more catastrophic for Siler City’s immigrant families. More than a

thousand jobs were lost when several chicken plants closed or scaled back operations, and Pantoja estimates that half his congregation is currently unemployed.

He’s seen many families leave seeking work elsewhere, in larger cities or their home countries. But many have chosen to wait out the bad economy rather than return to countries with even fewer opportunities – or where political unrest and criminal activity would make a return home dangerous.

“People come here looking for jobs, but they are also escaping from death in places where drug cartels control the cities,” he says. “People say to go back, but that’s not always the solution.”

He says he’s been amazed by the resilience of church members who get by with so little, and are still willing to help others.

“The thing that’s really impressed me in this congregation is the faith,” he says. “They are surviving. They trust God, and because of that I can see how God is blessing them.”

– Marti Maguire