

Upbeat Worship Unites Fiesta Cristiana Family

Fiesta Cristiana, which means “Christian Celebration,” is aptly named. From the flurry of hugs that precedes the weekly service, to the multi-colored bells that children ring to mark its start, to the upbeat song, “Todo es posible (All is possible),” that opened and closed the worship on a recent Sunday, Fiesta Cristiana wraps its members in the warmth and optimism of a family gathering.



But if it is like a family in some ways, the membership of Fiesta, the Hispanic ministry of Apex United Methodist Church, is far from uniform. Members hail from Central and South America, Mexico and the Caribbean. Some have firm roots in North Carolina, while others are recent arrivals; a few are longtime Methodists, but most grew up in Catholicism or a different Protestant tradition.

Pastor Jose’ Luis Villaseñor, a native of El Salvador who started the ministry four years ago, says his membership highlights the diversity of North Carolina’s Hispanic population, including natives of a dozen countries from Argentina to neighboring Mexico, along with their U.S.-born children.

“It’s a very diverse group of people who get along very well,” he says. “We have to be able to translate the gospel to all of those constituencies in a meaningful way. It makes it challenging and interesting.”

Fiesta began as an outreach effort to the area’s Hispanic community that offered English classes and other resources. It still fulfills that role, but Villaseñor says that his current focus is on growing disciples of Jesus Christ and improving the congregation’s weekly worship service.

“We do a lot of outreach and will continue, but we’re putting a lot of thought into what it means to worship,” he says. “The worship is what glues everything together.”

‘Come to the well’

On a recent Sunday, about 70 people gathered in the steamy upstairs of the Halle Cultural Arts Center in downtown Apex. The air conditioning hadn’t been turned on in time to cool down the space, but that didn’t stop the hugging as members streamed into the bright, sunlit room where coffee was served.

“I don’t have a lot of family here, so I feel like this is my family,” says Iris Montalvo, between hugs. She formed close ties with the church when her two adult children, who recently returned to North Carolina, were living out of state.

Head of hospitality for the church, Montalvo manned tables of doughnuts, coffee and juice and greeted people as they arrived. On the stage in an adjoining room, a band made up largely of teenagers tuned their instruments, surrounded by exposed brick walls and soft, blue light.

As the congregation gathered and the music started, the guitarist bobbed his head to the beat and one singer grasped her microphone, as if on stage at a rock concert. Villaseñor, in tan pants, Vans sneakers and a Fiesta t-shirt, welcomed the group warmly before launching into the week’s worship.

Entitled “Come to the Well,” his sermon weaved together his account of an earthquake he experienced as a child with the story of the Good Samaritan and a discussion of salvation as “the water that ends all thirst.”

Songs and key points in the sermon appeared on a screen over the stage, and a few people in the audience wore headphones through which they could hear an English translation of the service, which was all in Spanish.

This day’s service marked the first in a series of Sundays focused on renewing one’s faith and bringing others into the fold. Welcome mugs given to visitors as they left urged them to give the church “tres pasos” – three visits -- to see if it fits them.



Villaseñor says he is trying to grow Fiesta's worship attendance to an average of 70 to 80 participants at every week, up from an average of 50 to 60 for the past year.



Nancy Martinez, one of Fiesta's newest members, had driven from Clayton to Apex for the service – about forty five minutes of travel time. Martinez says Fiesta's warmth drew her in, and the diversity of its members was a good fit for her family.

Born in New York and of Puerto Rican descent, Martinez speaks English fluently, while her husband, from Cuba, does not. Her son, 21, recently moved to North Carolina from Miami.

"This is a very comfortable place for all of us," she says.

Gabriella Ruiz, a 17-year-old student at Panther Creek High School, says Fiesta has grown into more than a place she visits every Sunday. She's one of three singers at the service who practice and socialize during the week and at occasional out-of-town retreats.

"We get really into it," she says. "This is a big part of my life."

Roots in service

Fiesta began when key leaders at Apex UMC decided to forge closer ties with the area's burgeoning Latino population, which in Wake Country has grown from about 5,000 in 1990 to nearly 88,000 in 2010.

The ministry started out offering English and computer classes before it added regular worship services. Now, much of its outreach effort is done in partnership with other community agencies. The "Read and Feed" program, for instance, is done through the public schools, and Alcoholics Anonymous holds Spanish meetings at Fiesta's resource center.

The center also serves as a point of contact and fulfills community needs, from gift cards for food to helping a family send the body of a relative to their home country.

"It's a central resource for folks in the community," says Franco "Oz" Osvaldo, who helped form Fiesta as a member of an Apex UMC committee and now attends its services. "It's a place where if they have a problem, they know where to go."

Villaseñor started holding monthly services in 2009, and in early 2010 started weekly services, at first in the Apex UMC sanctuary. They later moved to the town's cultural center, a smaller space whose ambiance fits the church's contemporary feel.

On the four times a year that a month has a fifth Sunday, the church forgoes its weekly service, instead completing service projects such as gleaning crops for a local food bank, picking by hand what is left behind by farm machinery.

Delia Rangel, a 34-year-old single mother of three, says her eldest daughter's struggles first brought her to Fiesta's resource center four years ago. Now a member of the chorus, the 16-year-old is devoted to the church, as is her mother.

Rangel is a Mexican native and the only one of her large immediate family to attend services outside the Catholic church. She says she has gotten a lot of help and support from Fiesta. But she's also gotten a chance to help others, and to grow in her faith.

"The atmosphere there isn't, 'I'm going because it's an obligation,'" says Rangel. "It's more than that. I feel very calm there, like I can be myself."

Villaseñor had done missionary work in El Salvador and in rural North Carolina, and recently began leading trips to the U.S.-Mexico border to raise awareness of immigration issues.

He was working on international home-building efforts for Habitat for Humanity when the Apex UMC approached him about leading its Hispanic effort. He says he felt he could do just as much good at a local church.

"I truly believe that people who come to know Christ on a personal level, their lives will be changed forever," he says. "And when that happens, then the world is changed as well."

-Marti Maguire