

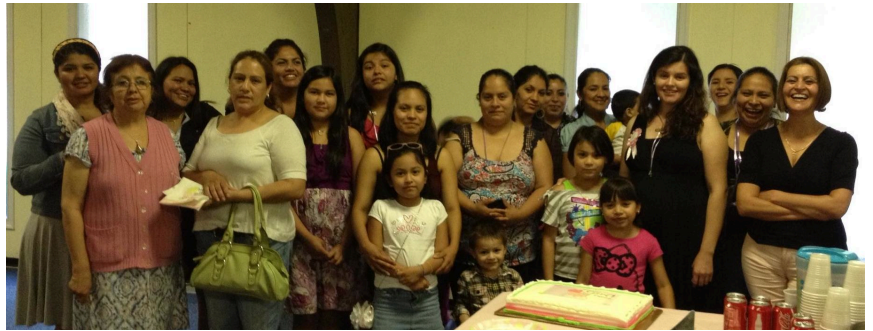
White Plains Hispanic Ministry Offers Light to the Community

The building that houses Luz del Pueblo could have been torn down to make way for a parking lot. Instead, on a recent weekend, it hosted a whirlwind of activity.

On Saturday, Spanish chatter filled the sanctuary as local officials spoke to Hispanic residents about keeping healthy and getting around town on local buses, while, in a classroom downstairs, children strummed away on guitars at music lessons. On Sunday, old friends reunited over a luncheon of Peruvian-style chicken after a spirited worship marked the congregation's eleventh anniversary.

The Hispanic ministry of Cary's White Plains United Methodist Church, Luz del Pueblo (Spanish for "Light of the Community") occupies its own 7,000-square-foot home alongside the larger church. The building was bought to be razed for extra parking at about the same time that a group of church leaders were considering how to reach out to the town's growing Hispanic population.

Inspiration struck, and the two ideas were merged, saving the building and the resulting in a thriving Hispanic ministry that focuses on outreach with the town's broader Hispanic community while also maintaining close ties with its host church. The building, with its sanctuary and classrooms, has enough room for parents and children to attend simultaneous classes several times a week, allowing Hispanic adults to learn English and other skills while their children get help with homework or learn to play instruments.



"They were going to destroy it for a parking lot, but some members thought, 'We can do something here,'" says Luz del Pueblo Pastor Edith Salazar-Veliz, who helped get the ministry started. "They saw a lot of people speaking Spanish, and had the vision of doing outreach. We are very blessed to have this relationship with them."

A growing ministry

Salazar-Veliz hails from a Methodist family in Peru that counts several pastors, including her father and sister. She came to North Carolina to study divinity at Duke University, and began organizing youth activities for White Plains' fledgling Hispanic ministry in 2000, when she was still a student.



Soon she was building a congregation, starting with a handful of large families. She also organized English as a Second Language classes with the help of Alice Kunka, now a deacon with the N.C. United Methodist Conference. Computer classes at the building next to White Plains came soon after.

With the larger church's blessing, she was soon building a congregation that started with a handful of large families worshipping at members' homes. She also organized English as a Second Language classes in the building next door to White Plains. Soon, she added computer classes, and moved Sunday worship to the sanctuary there. By the spring of 2001, Luz del Pueblo was up and running, though it has since grown in both people and programs.

Salazar-Veliz now oversees a congregation of about 50 and organizes a host of activities through the ministry's Semillas de Amor (Seeds of Love) program.

On Tuesday and Thursday evenings, they offer tutoring, music classes and other activities for the children, while their parents learn English, exercise at Zumba classes, study the Bible and more. One morning a week, a certified Wake County teacher holds pre-kindergarten classes through the federal "Ready to Learn" grant program.

Semillas de Amor started with two volunteers and less than 10 children, Salazar-Veliz says. Now, she says, there are hundreds of Hispanic residents being served.

"Each year, we grow and grow and grow," says Salazar-Veliz. "Now we have 65 volunteers."

For Mauricio Reyes, 14, the program has been a boon to his math performance. He met a tutor there who he saw twice a week for more than five years, and still meets with periodically. About to start high school, he's doing well in math now. In fact, it's one of his favorite subjects.

“It was fun,” he says of meeting with his tutor. “We became really good friends.”

His mother, joining in the anniversary luncheon, says the tutoring was just one of many services the ministry has provided for her family over the years.

“They have given a lot of help to me and my children,” says Alejandra Ricardez, 40, a Cary mother of two.

In the beginning, the entire program was in Spanish, but the ministry has started to combine its youth activities with the larger church, since the members’ children typically speak fluent English. In recent years, for instance, the children of the Luz del Pueblo members have started to learn Bible verses in English, alongside their peers from White Plains.

Celebrating success

To celebrate the ministry’s eleventh anniversary, Salazar-Veliz organized an informational fair on a Saturday in April that was open to the local Hispanic community – one of several such events the ministry has held. A bouncy castle bustled with laughing children in the parking lot, and lunch was free, as were a series of sessions for both children and adults.

Maria Ines Robayo, a public health educator with Wake County Human Services, held several talks on healthy living, and has done other programs at the church. She says Luz de Pueblo stands out among the Hispanic churches she visits, both for its many programs and its tight-knit membership, which always seems willing to help out.

“This is unique,” says Robayo, smiling approvingly of the scene at the bouncy castle. “There is a lot of closeness with the people who come here.”

Ziola Rodriguez spent nearly the whole day at the various sessions – Salazar-Veliz gave her a ride to the church from her home a few miles away. She had been looking for low-cost activities to get her 8-year-old away from the television set.



She found that entertainment in the music classes and bouncy castle, as well as a lot of useful information about city and county programs.

“It’s been very helpful,” says Rodriguez. “These are the kinds of things you can use, but you might not even know they exist. What they’re doing here is a great benefit to the community.”

She was back at Luz del Pueblo on Sunday for church.

‘Feels like home’

Luz del Pueblo’s members traveled a wide variety of paths to the church on Southeast Maynard Road, though most come from Mexico or Central America. At least one member came to Cary after being the victim of human trafficking.

Mariela Williams, on the other hand, left a successful public relations business behind in Monterrey, Mexico, when she came to North Carolina a decade ago to work on her English. A friend had given her Salazar-Veliz’s phone number.

She met her husband and settled in the Triangle. Now 37, the couple plays and sing during church services.

“We fell in love with the people here and decided to stay,” she says.

The members have an easiness with one another that comes from years together. Some at the anniversary celebration have gone on to other churches, but return to volunteer or for special events. Others come when they need help themselves.

Salazar-Veliz says White Plains has been a great partner in building the ministry. Having their own building allows church members to employ the flexible planning that is common in Latin cultures – sometimes changing plans at the last minute, with just a series of phone calls to the people involved-- without causing conflict with the larger church.

After more than a decade, the building has become more than a set of walls and windows that managed to escape the wrecking ball.

“It feels like home here,” says Salazar-Veliz. “This is our space.”

– Marti Maguire