

'Are we being the neighbor?'

An update on Hispanic ministry in Holston / by John Shearer

Some people see our emerging Latino-Hispanic population as unwelcome guests, who are possibly here illegally. Others see, at the very least, people who are different culturally from most Americans.

But for a number of United Methodists in Holston Conference, Latinos are viewed simply as fellow children of God. The ministries that now serve these newcomers reflect Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan.

"We do not choose our neighbors. They are just there," said the Rev. Jim Dougherty, a retired clergy member and chair of Holston's Hispanic/Latino Leadership Team. "But we do choose how we will treat them. Surely the follower of Christ will see our new neighbors as a God-given opportunity, a mission field on our own doors ... We must ask, 'Are we being the neighbor?'"

Dougherty, who now lives in Knoxville, speaks Spanish conversationally and has participated in medical missionary trips to Mexico for decades.

Hispanic ministries have been emerging in Holston for many years. One of the most established is *Iglesia Puerta Del Cielo Metodista Unida* (translated as Door of Heaven UMC) in Galax, Va. The Wytheville District church was chartered in 2001, founded in 2003.

Meanwhile, one of the newest ministries is taking wing in Knoxville District, where **Jeanet Berruecos Xicohtencatl**, formerly of Tlaxcala, Mexico, began working in late August as the district Latino ministries director.

Berruecos was familiar in Holston as a former counselor at Buffalo Mountain Camp. But in November 2006, she was a student at Wesley Theology Seminary, training at St. Andrews Center in Chattanooga, when she met Bishop James Swanson and his cabinet members. That's how she learned about the new position in Knoxville District.

"When they told me about it, I said, 'Yes, why not?'" said Berruecos, who roomed with the Rev. Clair Travis at Wesley in Washington, D.C. They both graduated in May 2007.

Since beginning her new ministry, Berruecos has been teaching English classes at Marble City UMC in Knoxville, helping families in crisis, and participating in worship services at Church Street UMC, where her office is located.

One of her goals is to establish a "Justice for Our Neighbors" program, which was initiated in 1999 by the General Board of Global Ministries to offer confidential and free legal advice to immigrants.

Berruecos believes that she has been ministered to as well; the former Marble City parsonage was stocked with donated furniture and remodeled to serve as her residence. She is also grateful for the people who gave her rides around town while she was learning to drive. "I have been surrounded by many angels," she said.

A veteran minister to the Hispanic community is the **Rev. Arturo Reyna**, now of the Morristown District. Reyna has no trouble relating to all kinds of people, as he has admitted to substance abuse and other risky behavior during his younger years. He was born in Nueva Rosita, Mexico, but moved to Texas at age nine. After accepting Christ as his savior in Dallas in the mid-1990s, he turned his life around, he said.

"I started reading the Bible seven hours a day," he said. "I was so hungry for the word of God."

After moving to Virginia, Reyna began serving as an interpreter at West Galax UMC in 1996. Reyna would later become the lay pastor who led Door of Heaven UMC.

In June 2006, Reyna was appointed to the Morristown District, where a three-day revival helped start a new congregation serving local Hispanics. This summer, the congregation chose the church's name, *Rios de Agua Viva*, or Rivers of Living Water, which is based at Liberty Hill UMC.

"We are still struggling," said Reyna. "We are not as successful as I would like it to be, but some Sundays we have more than 50."

During his ministry in Morristown, Reyna has organized English classes, served as hospital and police chaplain, organized a praise band for Sunday services, and developed a program for substance abusers.

"God is going to open doors whenever he is ready," Reyna said.



Photo by Annette Spence, *The Call*
Jeanet Berruecos Xicohtencatl teaches English at Marble City UMC in Knoxville.



Photo by Dennis Loy
The Rev. Arturo Reyna leads a home Bible study for Rios de Agua Viva in Morristown.



Photo by Dennis Loy
The Rev. Arturo Reyna meets with a new praise band at Liberty Hill UMC in Morristown.

Now serving at Reyna's former Door of Heaven is the **Rev. Javier Hernandez**. Previously, Hernandez served as lay pastor for Hispanic ministries at First Pulaski UMC in Wytheville District. He received his local preaching license at Annual Conference in June.

Despite following the popular Reyna, Hernandez feels comfortable in his new leadership position, he said. Door of Heaven now has about 35 members, with about 60 in average worship attendance.

"We are trying to tell people we are in the area that they are welcome," he said. "We are planning to have activities, and maybe we can reach the people to Jesus Christ."

Since arriving, he has invited a Hispanic evangelist to preach, organized an addiction program, and helped people in his community find jobs.

"We are trying to help people and are looking for new ways," the native of Mexico said. "There is a lot of work and a lot of challenges, but I am enjoying the work I do for Jesus Christ."

In Chattanooga District, the **Rev. Samuel Gutiérrez** serves as a local lay pastor for an emerging church known as *Principe de Paz* (Prince of Peace). The congregation previously worshipped at St. Andrews UMC, until the St. Andrews church was closed. Now the congregation meets at East Lake UMC, where the **Rev. Mike Feely** is pastor.

"He does the English services, and I do the Spanish services," said Gutierrez. Prince of Peace averages about 30 in attendance.

Gutierrez came to the Chattanooga area in 2003 from Mexico. While working as a counselor at Camp Lookout, he prayed for God's guidance. A short time later, a pastor told him about a need for Hispanic ministry workers.

One problem he has noted, he says, is that many Hispanics and Latinos have trouble adapting to U.S. culture. His response is to offer English classes and educate his community about the legal system.

In the Maryville District, *Casa del Alfarero* (The Potter's House) congregation is located in Philadelphia, Tenn. Although the ministry has been in existence for the last decade, pastor **Danny Castillo** and his wife, **Casey Castenir**, who is originally from Knoxville, just arrived from Queretaro, Mexico, last year to help lead the church.

The Potter's House has an average worship attendance of 15. Services are held in a trailer or — on nice weather days — in an outdoor pavilion recently built by mission work teams.

The community outreach, however, is much larger than worship attendance indicates. **Karen Neff**, director of the district's Hispanic ministries, has developed an intricate network that helps arrange doctors' appointments, provides translation at schools, organizes Bible studies and prayer services, supports soccer and basketball teams, and anything else that builds relationships.

Neff, who has held the position for more than three years, said she loves much about her work, from throwing baby showers to locating scholarship money for Hispanic children to attend Holston summer camp.

"Thirty-one went to Camp Wesley Woods this year," she said. "The ministry is endless. There is always some way you can reach out or help out."

Castenir, who assists with the English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, said that the ministry has challenges, just like any other ministry. Finding child care for ESL classes is always a struggle. Other challenges are singular to serving the Latino population. For example, while many Hispanics have Catholic heritages, they are often sought out by Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses, which can lead to confusion about their faith.

"They don't really know what the truth is," Castenir said. "They appreciate that somebody is looking out for them and caring for them." ■

John Shearer is a member of Church Street United Methodist Church, where his wife, the Rev. Laura Shearer, is associate pastor.



Photo courtesy of Samuel Gutiérrez
The Rev. Samuel Gutierrez weds a couple at Prince of Peace in Chattanooga District.



Photo by Annette Spence, *The Call*
Pastor Danny Castillo leads worship and praise at The Potter's House in Maryville District.



Photo by Annette Spence, *The Call*
Karen Neff holds a child during worship at The Potter's House near Philadelphia, Tenn.