

Embracing

HISPANICOS

BY JOHN W. KENNEDY

T

exas pastor Mabel Nieto moved to Perry, Iowa, in 1998 and began holding services for Hispanics in the basement of the town's English-speaking First Assembly of God. Within a year, Fuente de Vida (Fountain of Life) Asamblea de Dios had purchased its own building. Now Nieto — who moved into a parsonage the church purchased two years ago — is on the lookout for a larger meeting site. The 100-seat sanctuary can't accommodate the Sunday morning crowd.

Nearly all the attendees are connected in some way to Perry's largest employer, the Tyson Foods pork processing plant. Perry, with a population of 8,600, has 1,100 workers at Tyson Foods, 60 percent of them Hispanic. In its first couple of years, many Fuente de Vida congregants returned to Guatemala, El Salvador and Mexico during the harsh Iowa winters. Now, they are homeowners and full-time residents of the Hawkeye State.

How Assemblies of God churches are welcoming recently arrived Hispanics



Embracing LATINOS

“Most of these people wouldn’t be going to church at all if not for Fuente de Vida,” says Nieto. “Every year it seems the number of Hispanics in the town is growing.”

Fuente de Vida represents the evolving ethnic face of the Assemblies of God. By large measure, the Fellowship is growing because of first-generation immigrants who have felt welcome in start-up Hispanic congregations.

Although half of U.S.

adjusted to the rapidly changing demographic, according to Efraim Espinoza, who last year became director of the newly formed Office of Hispanic Relations.

“National leadership has encouraged, equipped and empowered ethnic leadership,” says Espinoza, who pastored a Spanish-speaking church in Texas for 14 years before coming to work at Assemblies of God headquarters in Springfield, Mo., 21 years ago. “We’re one of

Moines, another in the hamlet of Fredonia, population 220.

“I want to have churches in any area where there are groups of Hispanics,” says Nieto, a graduate of Latin American Bible Institute (LABI) in Texas.

“Under the leadership of the Spanish districts the LABI campuses in Texas and California continue raising up laborers for the exploding Hispanic harvest,” says Scott Temple, Intercultural Ministries director for AG U.S. Missions.

IMMIGRATION DRIVES GROWTH

The increased number of Hispanics in the Assemblies of God mirrors what is happening in society. The U.S. Census Bureau reports the Latino population in the United States jumped to 42.7 million in 2005, up from 35.3 million just five years earlier. The agency projects the U.S. Hispanic population will be 53.6 million by 2015.

According to the Pew Hispanic Center, of the 100 million people added to the national population in the past four decades, 36 million are Hispanic, compared to 34 million whites. Immigration and high birth rates are primary factors to the Latino boom, the center says. Hispanics, 40 percent of whom are foreign-born, account for 14 percent of the U.S. population.

Hispanic districts in the Assemblies of God had 1,418 churches in 1991. By 2005, the number had grown by 400, outpacing the rise in what are known as “geographical” districts in the Fellowship. Espinoza notes there are an additional 312 Hispanic majority congregations in the geographical districts, bringing the Latino total to 2,140.

In all, there are more than 500,000 Hispanic adherents in



Attendees of Living Faith Church of the Assemblies of God in La Mirada, Calif., pray at the altar. The English-speaking Hispanic congregation is pastored by Jesse Miranda III.

Hispanics live in just two states — California and Texas — immigrants are moving in unprecedented numbers to new locations. North Dakota, Arkansas, South Carolina and Tennessee all had more than a 50 percent spike in Hispanic population between 2000 and 2005, according to the Pew Hispanic Center.

Many newcomers already are Christian and have a natural affinity for the AG — one of the largest Pentecostal fellowships in the country. As a rule, Latinos are family-minded, passionate about worship, faithful in attendance, and conservative on issues such as abortion and homosexuality.

Assemblies of God leadership has

the most aggressive multiethnic fellowships.”

As with other congregations, Hispanic churches range from the nondescript storefront with a dozen worshippers to the burgeoning megachurch covering multiple acres.

Until 1971, the Assemblies of God had only two Spanish-language districts. Today there are eight. The Fellowship now provides Sunday School curriculum, Global University courses and quarterly editions of *Evangelio Pentecostal Hoy* (*Today’s Pentecostal Evangel*) in Spanish.

In Iowa, Nieto and Fuente de Vida have helped plant four other Hispanic congregations — one in the largest city, Des

continued on page 22



2007 HISPANIC CONVENTION Orlando, Florida MAY 4 & 5, 2007

Marriott Orlando Airport
7499 Augusta National Drive
Orlando, Florida

Complimentary parking and airport shuttle service available.

HOTEL RESERVATION:
407.851.9000

ROOM RATE:
\$125 per night (Single or Double)



Friday

10 A.M. - REGISTRATION OPENS

- Exhibits

1 P.M. - WELCOME

- Worship Music

Presentations by Pastors —

- Growing a Missions Church
- Testimony From a Missions Church

3 P.M. - BREAKOUT SESSIONS

- Growing a Missions Church
- Planning a Missions Convention
- Involving Children in Missions
- Resources for Promoting Missions in the Church
- Partnering With Missions Ministries
- Becoming a Missionary

7 P.M. - BANQUET

- Special Music
- Presentation of Hispanic Missionaries
- Missions Musical - *but...God!*

Saturday

6:30 A.M. - BREAKFAST

7 A.M. - MISSIONARY PRAYERS

8 - 11:45 A.M. - PANORAMA OF WORLD MISSIONS

- Worship Music
- Missionaries, National Guests, Regional Leaders

CLOSING MESSAGE - John Bueno, AGWM Executive Director



PRICE
\$55
PER PERSON

How To Register:

STEP ONE

Make HOTEL Reservation

CALL: 1.407.851.9000

To reserve your accommodations, call the Marriott Orlando hotel directly.

Be sure to request the special Assemblies of God rate.

STEP TWO

Make FLY-IN Registration

CALL: 1.800.443.7947 COST: \$55 per person

Cost includes Friday night banquet, Saturday breakfast and all sessions.

Register 10 or more and receive ONE registration free.

Full-time student registration is \$30.

Register online at www.worldmissions.ag.org

*Registration after April 5 and on-site will be \$65 per person.



ASSEMBLIES of GOD WORLD MISSIONS
Springfield, Missouri

Embracing LATINOS

Assemblies of God churches out of a constituency of 2.8 million. That means more than one out of every six people in the Fellowship is Latino.

Espinoza says financial assistance from English-speaking geographical districts — including the church building in Perry, Iowa — have made many of the Hispanic church plants possible.

Hispanics don't hear about Assemblies of God churches from slick fliers left door-to-door or high-tech television commercials. Rather, typically the message is via lifestyle evangelism: people developing a relationship with co-workers, then inviting them to church.

The church can be a first step in helping an immigrant to find employment and affordable

housing. Once someone in the church makes that economic connection, the new immigrant frequently is open to attending a worship service.

"People are much more open to the gospel when they are in a new environment because they have needs," says Dennis Rivera, superintendent of the Central Latin District, which covers half a dozen Rocky Mountain states. "When an existing family in the church provides some sort of resource — clothing, food, a job opportunity — the new family is a lot more receptive to a church invitation."

Rivera, who is based in Denver, says interconnectedness is vital. "People come to church to learn how to put their kids in school, how to buy a car, to find basic

services and to learn to speak English."

Iglesia El Calvario, one of 14 Hispanic Assemblies of God congregations in Orlando, Fla., has 3,500 worshippers flock in on a typical Sunday, 70 percent of them first-generation immigrants. Pastor Saturnino Gonzalez says the church's 50 ministries include feeding the homeless, a food pantry for the poor, general equivalency diploma classes and conversational English lessons. A social services office is located in the church, where people from 16 nations gather for services.

But one characteristic all Hispanics tend to share is a strong bond with family. "People who come to the Lord invite relatives in their extended

family to church," Rivera says. "Churches aren't growing because of advertising; it's the interpersonal connection with cousins, grandparents, and aunts and uncles in the area."

SPANISH-LANGUAGE DISTINCTIVES

The separate Spanish-language districts allow the first-generation newcomers to blend in with other churchgoers at their own pace.

"Our structure is the best of both worlds," Espinoza says. "It creates homogenous groups for churches to grow, but it gives equal access to ethnic district superintendents."

Espinoza believes three key ingredients are required to ensure ethnic churches thrive:

inclusiveness, being open to all individuals regardless of cultural or linguistic background; freedom to allow people to create their own cultural style of worship and activities in the language in which they communicate best; and community, the recognition that people groups are interdependent.

"Separate language districts are needed because language is a major issue," Rivera says. "Immigrants will not participate if the service isn't in Spanish. Even if churches provide interpretation, it still feels like being an outsider." Rivera grew up in an English-speaking home. He began to learn Spanish as an LABI student and upon graduation became pastor of a church where he preached only in Spanish.

But growing Hispanic congregations that have been around awhile frequently offer bilingual services to reach second- and third-generation Hispanics. Some Spanish-language district ministers don't speak Spanish.

"Second- and third-generation Hispanics don't necessarily feel comfortable in a first-generation church and vice versa," Rivera says. "Even when they speak Spanish, culturally there are just so many differences."

Rivera believes within the next 20 years virtually all first-generation Latino congregations will be bilingual.

Iglesia El Calvario has both a Spanish-language and bilingual service. And the church just planted an English-language

Daniela. did not give up...

When her little brother became deathly ill, **she kept on believing.**

When he was miraculously healed after being in intensive care for 16 days, **she kept on praising God.**

When her family started going to church, **she kept on praying.**

Because of the faith of a little girl in Honduras ... a family witnessed a miracle and gave their hearts and lives to Jesus Christ!

Today, we ask YOU not to give up on the needy children of Latin America and the Caribbean. Your faithfulness in giving and prayers could mean the difference between life and death for a young boy or girl like Daniela.

Sponsor a needy child through Latin America ChildCare. Just \$32 per month gives a child hope to carry on ... and to **NEVER GIVE UP.**

CALL NOW: 1.800.289.7071 | VISIT: www.lacc4hope.org

E-MAIL: office@lacc4hope.org

 
Latin America ChildCare • Assemblies of God World Missions • 1445 N. Boonville Ave. • Springfield, MO 65802

Discover...Your Passion

Do you have a passion for reaching the world?

Global University, in cooperation with missionaries and national churches across the planet, is dedicated to training ministers to reach the lost in every part of the world. From the United States to Iraq, from Russia to India, Global University is leading the way in raising up leaders who will radically impact their world for Christ.

You can be a part of this worldwide training effort. Begin your training today. Give to the cause so someone half a world away can be trained. What is your passion?

To begin your discovery today, visit discovergu.com or call **800.443.1083.**



GLOBAL
UNIVERSITY

1211 S. Glenstone Ave. • Springfield, MO USA 65804-0315

Their future,
your purpose

TEACH

Assemblies of God
faculty positions
now available

Assemblies of God Higher Education continues to develop a national database of all interested persons who would like to be considered for faculty positions at endorsed AG colleges and universities.

The greatest area of need is in the non-Bible and theology disciplines, particularly math, science, behavioral science, business, and music. However, all interested persons are encouraged to apply regardless of discipline.

Previous college teaching experience preferred but may not be required in all situations.

Requirements for database eligibility:

Be Pentecostal ●

Member of Assemblies of God with faithful attendance at an AG church ●

AG pastor's recommendation ●

Doctorate preferred, Master's degree minimum ●

Online application available at
www.colleges.ag.org

For further information, please contact:

Christian Higher
Education Department

1445 North Boonville Avenue
Springfield, MO 65802

(417) 862-2781, ext. 3315

colleges@ag.org

www.colleges.ag.org



congregation. "The challenge we face is what do we do with the next generation," Gonzalez says. "The youth want an English-language service."

FAMILY TIES

The family is paramount for Latinos. Espinoza's great-grandfather made a deathbed confession of Christ as Savior. Before long, children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews had become Christians as well.

Jesse Miranda Jr. came to faith at age 5 after witnessing the instant healing of his mother, Emma. A couple from a Pentecostal cell group visited the Miranda home in a poor Albuquerque neighborhood and prayed for her to be delivered from double pneumonia. Later, people from the church brought Miranda toys for Christmas, gifts his parents couldn't afford.

"These demonstrations of the power of God and the love of community defined my identity with Pentecostalism," Miranda says.

Among other responsibilities, Miranda now is an executive presbyter with the Assemblies of God, founder and director of the Hispanic Leadership Center at Vanguard University in Costa Mesa, Calif., and commissioner of ethnicity for the Fellowship. But he is known in wider evangelical circles as the grandfather of the U.S. Latino Protestant movement. In 1994, Miranda founded AMEN — the Alianza de Ministerios Evangélicos Nacionales (National Alliance of Evangelical Ministries) — the largest Latino Protestant networking organization in the country.

Although Mexico certainly is the dominant country from

which immigrants hail (64 percent), 22 other Latino nationalities comprise segments in U.S. evangelical churches. While the Spanish language is a commonality, slang, food and customs differ from country to country. Miranda, in nearly a half-century of bridge-building ministry, has united different nationalities, denominations and parachurch ministries making AMEN a potent cultural and religious voice of U.S. Latino evangelicalism.

Miranda grew up a couple of blocks from the only Hispanic Assemblies of God district office at the time. District officials came over to the family home about once a week for lunch.

"When I was 12 years old I asked one of the officials, 'Why do we have to be with the Anglos? We're our own people,'" Miranda recalls. "The wise man told me, 'Listen, son, we are close to Springfield so we can learn from them and we are far away enough to do our own thing.' That contextualization of indigenous leadership has continued to allow the Assemblies of God to grow."

Mentoring mature leaders remains a priority for Miranda. "Almost 30 percent of the Assemblies of God is nonwhite," Miranda says. "As ethnic numbers continue to increase, we must develop leaders who will maintain the legacy, values and character that are part of the healthy Assemblies of God structure today."

ACCULTURATION CHALLENGES

Some first-generation churches are poor because immigrant congregants send most of their income back home to relatives.

Subsequently, the church must rent an expensive building for services and the pastor must find an additional job to make ends meet.

On the other hand, while many first-generation Hispanics are eager to attend church as a means of integrating into the community and culture, that isn't always the case for second- and third-generation Latinos. By then, many have learned English, graduated from college and attained high-paying professional jobs.

"When they become more Americanized, they become more detached from church," Miranda says. "They learn to go to church maybe just once a week, not every night."

Immigration remains the overriding factor causing a great deal of anxiety in many Hispanic congregations. In states such as Colorado that have tightened employer legal status laws in the past year, the impact on a local congregation with a high number of undocumented manual laborers can be striking. There are an estimated 10 million Hispanics living in the country without required paperwork.

"I believe in justice and abiding by the law," Gonzalez says. "But at the same time, we need to embrace compassion. That sensitive middle ground will be a challenge for Hispanic churches in the future."

DEMOGRAPHIC REALITY

Whatever happens with immigration, the influx is likely to continue in the near future. A booming Latino population means the ethnic group is gaining clout throughout American society: who is elected to Congress, what music is played on the radio, the type of food

served at restaurants and the programs shown on television.

"The reality in America is that Latinos are the fastest-growing and largest minority today," Miranda says. "If we are reaching our community, it's important to reach Latinos. And we need Latinos to win other Latinos to the Lord."

One of Miranda's goals as ethnicity commissioner is to help whites be culturally competent at understanding diversity, from national headquarters down to the local level. Last year he crafted a recommendation that the Fellowship consider a biblical responsibility to aliens.

Last August, the Assemblies of God adopted a statement on the subject: "It is appropriate for the borders of the United States to be secure in order for immigration to conform to the laws of the United States. As people of faith we support comprehensive immigration reform that reflects human dignity, compassion and justice integral to a 'nation under God.' Apart from issues related to governmental jurisdiction, we believe that the gospel of Jesus Christ compels us to minister to all who live or work within our country."

With Cuba and Venezuela anchoring an increasingly socialist Latin America, Miranda expects arrivals into the United States to accelerate.

"The Assemblies of God is in the best position in its history because of the opportunities to win a huge population," Miranda says. "The investment will surely pay dividends in the future of the kingdom of God." **tpe**

JOHN W. KENNEDY is news editor of *Today's Pentecostal Evangel*.

E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.

W I N N E R S

Today's Pentecostal Evangel
Web site weekly
drawing winners
December 2006 - January 2007

Dec. 7 — Ronnie Ray
Monford, Tenn.
Silk Road Stories

Dec. 14 — Sharon K. Ponds
New Johnsonville, Tenn.
Midnight in the City

Dec. 21 — Rev. Bruce E. Moore
Springboro, Ohio
Jesus and You

Dec. 28 — Charlie M. Mina
General Santos City, Philippines
*Family: How To Have a
Healthy Christian Home*

Jan. 4 — Larry Jones
Unionville, Mo.
*Questions and Answers
About the Holy Spirit*

Jan. 11 — Dennis Fite
Independence, Mo.
50 Tough Questions

Jan. 18 — Sandra D. Cowin
Van Buren, Mo.
The Write Way

Jan. 25 — Gayle Rogers
Canton, Ga.
*Q&A: Conversations with
50 inspiring people*

W I N N E R S

Visit the *Today's Pentecostal Evangel*
Web site (tpe.ag.org) regularly to
enter our weekly drawings. You can
enter once each week.