

A tiny church struggles to survive

By Bo Poertner/Managing Editor

“So don't get tired of doing what is good. Don't get discouraged and give up, for we will reap a harvest of blessing. Whenever we have the opportunity, we should do good to everyone, especially to our Christian brothers and sisters.”

- Galatians 6: 9-10

When Rachel Gurrola Meza was alive, it seemed she was always writing letters, asking the community to lend a helping hand to her small church in Lompoc.

Founded in the 1930s by Mexican railroad workers who had converted to the Baptist faith, Primera Iglesia Bautista Hispana (Hispanic First Baptist Church) constantly struggled for stability, depending on a tiny congregation that could only support a procession of part-time preachers.

“The problem is, most of these ministers had to have other means of support. The congregation would allocate housing and part of the salary, but they weren't able to support a minister full-time,” said Romona Cabrera, church secretary and bookkeeper.

Meza, whose father served three stints as the church's preacher, has died, but the letters continue.

Her son, Joseph Gurrola Meza, of Alhambra, has taken up the cause for the church, which is in serious disrepair.

“It saddens me to say there are many needed repairs that have not been taken care of over the years,” Meza wrote to the Record after visiting the church in September.

Although he doesn't live in Lompoc, Meza has a strong connection to the church at 323 W. Hickory Ave. In addition to his mother's devotion to its success, his grandfather, the Rev. Carlos M. Gurrola, preached there for many years - for a few years in the 1930s and again in the 1960s, '70s and '80s. His uncle, the Rev. Frank Martinez, also preached at the church during the early '80s.

Much work has already been done on “Cleanup Saturdays,” with the help of volunteers who travel from Los Angeles to clean the church, make minor repairs, trim trees and haul away trash, Meza wrote.

In 1976, the church made major repairs to the fellowship hall and Sunday school and paid off a \$13,000 loan for that work, Cabrera said.

Primera Iglesia Bautista Hispana has been painted, new carpet installed and pews replaced. In 2004, the congregation installed a handicap lane at the church entrance and added parking at the rear of the pastoral building.

But much remains to be done on the roof, toilets and the heating system. The building also needs hot water in the bathrooms and the baptismal tank. The pastoral building needs bathroom and kitchen renovation, as well as flooring and windows.

“We have very old floor heaters in the church. We want to replace them,” Cabrera said. “The roof hasn't leaked yet, but we don't want it to leak.”

The church needs a new, permanent sign, too, she said.

The Rev. Everildo I. Mendez, the church's part-time minister, said he hopes that benefactors will offer donations, or that licensed professionals will offer their help with work or supplies.

“It is small and we are a poor community,” he said. “It's old. It was built in 1936.”

Primera Iglesia Bautista Hispana is a modest church that sprang from humble beginnings.

In the 1930s, Southern Pacific Railroad provided its workers with train cars to live in, and it was in one of those cars - the dining car home of Jose and Maria Trejo at North G and D streets - that families of some of the workers at Surf Beach gathered to worship.

Some of the other founders were Maria Trejo's sister, Teodomira Valdez, Eisas Rios, Enrique Molina and Sara Amado Garcia.

The church's first pastor, Ellias Campos, began when the congregation was still gathering in Jose Trejo's home, from about 1933 to 1936, Cabrera said.

After a year or two of meeting in the dining car, the families began to congregate at the Baptist church in the 200 block of West Cypress Avenue. The congregation also began building its own church.

In 1937, the congregation joined the American Baptist Churches of the Southwest. In 1959, it was incorporated as Primera Iglesia Bautista Mexicana (First Mexican Baptist Church).

Later, under Pastor Margarito Perez, who served from 1987 until 1999, the name was changed to Primera Iglesia Bautista Hispana because the congregation had diversified. The congregation now includes people from Peru, El Salvador, Puerto Rico, Honduras, Cuba, Brazil and Mexico.

During the best times, the church had fewer than 100 members, Cabrera said. “With every pastor, it was always up and down,” she said.

Now it has a nucleus of perhaps 16 families, but only a few members attend services regularly, she said.

Cabrera traces the church's current struggle to the prolonged illness and death in 1999 of Pastor Perez. When he became seriously ill, the congregation began to drift away, she said.

“People go to a church because they are in need of spiritual health and in need of material health, too,” Cabrera said. “They need certain help and if they can't get it from a church, they don't stay there.”

The church offers services only in Spanish, which discourages some Hispanic families from attending because their children speak English, Cabrera said.

“My six children, half of them are not fluent in English,” she said. “People leave when their children are younger and return when their children are older.”

Still, the church began to rebuild when the Rev. Mendez, of Santa Barbara, took over, she said. Mendez, who is Guatemalan, conducts services Thursday evenings and Sunday mornings.

Despite its difficulties, the church has a history of community involvement that includes a prison ministry started by Pastor Gurrola, a food program directed by Salvador Lara, and a radio ministry that was broadcast on KNEZ radio in the late 1970s to about 1987, Cabrera said.

Through the years, many people have been associated with the church, and it is these people who the church is counting on now to help it through, Cabrera said.

“A lot of people in town were baptized in this church,” she said. “If they attended, or their relatives attended, if they have something in their hearts. ...”

Bo Poertner can be reached at 737-1053 or bpoertner@lompocrecord.com.

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