

Churches habla Español

Bilingual outreach shows Christ at work in Decatur's Hispanic community

story by Joli Hohenstein



Sister Magdalena leads a Bible study with a group of young people in their native language.

Se habla Español, churches across the area are proclaiming. While it's true we all speak God's language, there's also an undeniable comfort that comes with hearing His Word in your own language.

Thus, as Decatur's Hispanic community grows—up 21.5% between 2000 and 2008 according to the US Census Bureau—so does churches' desire to reach out. Whether through worship or good works, the Word is spreading.

Our Lady of Lourdes first started offering Spanish-language services in the late '90s. From those days of a few men meeting with their priest in a local Mexican restaurant, the now-weekly mass draws an average 200 and often as many as 400. A late 2008 Encuentro celebration in conjunction with the Catholic Diocese of Springfield drew more than 1,000 from all over Central Illinois.

"As the population continues to grow, people come from other areas as well," says Father Rick Weltin, who ran a Spanish-language prison ministry at his previous assignment in Robinson, Illinois, and has continued to help expand Our Lady of Lourdes' Spanish ministries since coming to Decatur in 2001.

Bible studies, adult education, Hispanic choirs of all ages, baptism, first communion, confirmation and a prison ministry are just a few of the services Lourdes offers with the help of Sister Magdalena and Sister Angelica, members of the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus Ad Gentes who travel over regularly from the Catholic Diocese of Springfield.

The blessings of having such services available in your own language are hard to express, says Jaime Urbina, who came to Decatur from Mexico in 2005 as an engineer for Caterpillar. "My wife didn't speak English at all. The first thing we looked for was a church," he said. "When we found out about the Spanish mass, we were very happy because we were very tied to our church."

It's a strong statement on faith as a unifier for members of Decatur's Hispanic community, who hail from a wide range of locales, including Mexico, Colombia, Peru, Argentina, El Salvador and Ecuador, for example. "There are times I feel like I'm at a United Nations," says Father Rick. "It's interesting to see the blending of cultures in the Parish."
A mother and her daughter share a moment at the Baby TALK program at Central Christian.

Indeed, while God's Word is the same in any language, different music, instruments and expressions of faith characterize the Spanish-language mass compared to its English companion. To Father Rick, it's a great example of the varying senses of spirituality: "As a culture, it's a

different approach, with the congregation feeling much more comfortable expressing their faith openly."

For some, the differences go far deeper, says Jaime. Many churches in the southern and central parts of Mexico, for example, don't have their own pastor and may only celebrate mass once a month when a traveling priest visits. It's easy for people to drift away from their faith. That's why he and others, with the help of Sister Magdalena, have formed the Why Catholic Ministry. Meeting Fridays at 7 p.m., "We teach people the basis of how our faith is formed," Jaime explains. "We study, read the Bible and scriptures."

Creative efforts like this are cropping up across the community. Central Christian Church reaches out not through traditional worship but by opening its doors to a host of programs serving the Hispanic population.

"I have a desire to support an appreciation for diversity and the understanding of God's love as being all-inclusive," says Robert Bushey, who is Central Christian's Pastor for Children, Youth, and Families and has worked with Latinos en Accion of Macon County, the Latino Coalition for Prevention and other groups. "I want to make sure everyone has access to services."



Father Rick Weltin

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Each week, Richland Community College and Baby TALK collaborate on English as a Second Language classes at the church, which has also been a location for family day camps and other events for Hispanic families. "Our main goal is that every individual in the area reaches his or her full potential," says Robert. "To create connections that concern people who live in the community and don't speak the language. It's a gift we give by allowing them to utilize the space."

More than just space, the church provides opportunity, and the chance to draw people together in faith. It comes from "a desire to put into practice the Good News as I know it," says Robert. As the Good News spreads, we can see Christ working through not just Hispanics but the entire community.



Pastor Robert Bushey

Says Father Rick, "It's rewarding to see two cultures embrace each other." For those who come from streets of

violence, drug deals and cartels, rewarding isn't enough to describe finding a community in Christ. "Being here in the States with the situation happening back in my country, to have a quiet life here and plenty of friends," says Jaime, "it's a blessing from God."



Jaime Urbina

Editor's note: Jaime Urbina would be pleased to help anyone who is looking for worship or any Hispanic services in the Decatur area. He can be reached at jjur74@hotmail.com or 872-0968.

Nota del Editor: En caso de que usted tenga alguna pregunta o inquietud acerca de los ministerios hispanos y/o saber mas acerca de las oportunidades espirituales que se ofrecen en nuestra comunidad usted puede contactar a Jaime Urbina al el teléfono 872-0968.

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