



Summer 2018

Breakthroughs

Celebrating growth, vitality, and progress through Reach • Renew • Rejoice

Iglesia Piedra Viva reaches new people in Hispanic community

By Christa Meland

In 2012, with the help of an Investing in Congregations grant through the Minnesota Conference, Simpson UMC in Minneapolis hired Jesús Purisaca Ruiz in an effort to strengthen connections within the Hispanic community.

Four years later, that outreach led to a new faith community that continues to minister to the Hispanic-Latino population, which numbers about 200,000 in the Twin Cities. Iglesia Piedra Viva, which currently meets inside of Simpson UMC's building, baptized three and had 12 professions of faith last year alone. Worship services are entirely in Spanish.

"I want to become the living word of God in different contexts," said Purisaca Ruiz, who was ordained in May. "I want people to understand that the gospel is not only the future but the present... My great hope is that every disciple



Worshippers at Iglesia Piedra Viva have advocated for immigration reform at rallies.

becomes a follower of Jesus in practical ways."

Witnessing to the love of Jesus

Iglesia Piedra Viva averages about 22 people in worship each Sunday, and 12 people participate in a weekly Bible study. When the faith community launched in September 2016, worship took place twice a month. One year later, September 2017, marked the launch of weekly worship. Piedra Viva offers a week-long "Urban Kids Camp" each summer that introduces new families to the faith community and an annual "La Posada" Christmas celebration that draws more than 100 people; it involves

re-enacting the Bible story of Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem and their search for a place to stay.

Piedra Viva is especially focused on kids and families, and its signature ministry is a guitar program that gives young people the opportunity to learn a skill that might otherwise be cost-prohibitive. Through the program, instructors meet with students once a week over the course of a four-month-long "season." Students are divided into groups based on skill level, and they practice reading music and get an introduction to music theory in addition to learning to play guitar. Students pay \$50 for a season's

(Left) Rev. Jesús Purisaca Ruiz is the pastor serving Iglesia Piedra Viva in Minneapolis.

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PIEDRA VIVA

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worth of instruction, and they can check out a guitar if they don't have their own.

Purisaca Ruiz notes that guitar lessons are available exclusively to affluent families in most Spanish-speaking countries; Piedra Viva makes them accessible to everyone. The program began with four students, and 33 were enrolled last season. Some former students have now become instructors.

Earlier this year, Piedra Viva received \$25,000 (half from The United Methodist Church's National Plan for Hispanic/Latino Ministry and half in the form of a matching grant from the Minnesota Conference) to put toward its guitar program. (See article below for further details.)

Piedra Viva is also focused on social justice issues. Purisaca Ruiz and others recently marched for immigration reform at the Minnesota capitol.

"I want to witness to the love of Jesus," said Purisaca Ruiz, a former lawyer who immigrated to the U.S. from Peru in 2003. "Love needs to lead to justice for everyone—all kinds of people."

Evangelism and invitation

Purisaca Ruiz is bivocational, and he believes his work as a translator in the Minneapolis public school system



Christmastime at Iglesia Piedra Viva, a Hispanic church start in Minneapolis.

has been key in connecting him with people in his mission field. His seminary professor once said, "Your best book is your community," and he believes that to be true.

He says most Latino immigrants have experience with Catholic or Pentecostal churches. But he's noticed that many are seeking something different. He's working to introduce this group to United Methodism in addition to targeting the unchurched.

"Establishing relationships is very, very important," he said. "How we are approaching people matters...I approach evangelism using the Wesleyan quadrilateral. I want everyone to know the love of Jesus and I do a lot of teaching about the means of grace." (The

Wesleyan quadrilateral is a methodology for theological reflection that includes scripture, tradition, reason, and experience.)

As a new church start, Piedra Viva is currently receiving support from Simpson UMC, Park Avenue UMC in Minneapolis, Messiah UMC in Plymouth, and the Minnesota Conference. Within the next five years, Purisaca Ruiz hopes that it becomes self-sustaining, and he'd love to see it mentor and raise up a pastoral leader to reach the next generation. He also plans to engage others to work with him on a vision statement that the guides the faith community in welcoming and discipling new people.

"We are the church, but we are also the salt and light of the world," he said.

Expanding Hispanic-Latino ministries throughout Minnesota

The Minnesota Conference is working to expand Hispanic-Latino ministries not only in the Twin Cities but across the state.

This spring, the conference received \$25,000 from The United Methodist Church's National Plan for Hispanic/Latino Ministry, which required a match from the Minnesota Conference. Of the \$50,000 in provided and matching funds, half went to Iglesia Piedra Viva for its guitar program, and the other half went to youth leadership development at La Puerta Abierta in St. Paul, which has an active youth group of about 22.

Members of both of these faith communities, including youth, recently traveled to Madison, Wisconsin for a

lay missioner training and to learn from leaders of the Wisconsin Conference, which has several dozen Spanish-speaking ministries.

The UMC National Plan for Hispanic/Latino Ministry has earmarked additional funds for the Minnesota Conference to expand Spanish-speaking ministries across the state—within and beyond the metro area. The conference plans to identify areas where there's indigenous leadership, passion, and energy for new Hispanic-Latino ministries, and cities flagged for possible exploration include Albert Lea, Mankato, Medelia/St. James, Northfield, Owatonna, Rochester, St. Cloud, Willmar, and Worthington.



A sign at Iglesia Piedra Viva invites people into the worship service.

HCI is 'check-up,' opportunity to 'shine light on ourselves'

By Christa Meland

In April, four churches started the Healthy Church Initiative (HCI)—a revitalization process designed to transform congregations by providing them resources and recommendations to reach new people for Christ. Within the past eight years, 45 Minnesota United Methodist churches have completed the process. We'll follow the four current church participants as they go through the program, checking back with their leaders periodically to find out what they are doing, and what they are learning and discerning.

Someone at St. Paul's UMC in Mendota Heights aptly described the Healthy Church Initiative (HCI) as "a check-up" not unlike an annual physical exam with a doctor. It's an opportunity to assess the overall health of the church and explore how to improve it.

One of the first things church leaders—Rev. Amy Jo Bur and a designated HCI team of lay people—have done as part of the process is conduct interviews with city and county officials, business owners, and a variety of other representatives in their area. The purpose is to find out what the greatest needs are and to determine to what degree the church is known within its community.

"We weren't as visible as we thought we were," said Bur. But she noted that the church is very well known within and around the local elementary school that it partners with. That was a positive affirmation.

Worship at St. Paul's UMC, Mendota Heights.



Members of St. Paul's UMC in Mendota Heights (a church that just entered the Healthy Church Initiative) prepare for a potato bar fundraiser.

Another initial step for all HCI churches is to assess their resources—everything from their budgets to their personnel and buildings.

Rev. Andy Petter, who serves Wesley UMC in Hibbing, said one of the greatest learnings for his congregation so far has been seeing the church through visitors' eyes. A small group walked through the building as if they were coming in for the first time and identified a variety of changes that would make it more inviting and accessible to newcomers. For example, at a lift entrance in the back, there's an ugly door that's falling apart; they want to replace that with a new door that can be opened with the push of a button. They see the need for better signage to point people where they're going. And they wish to make a mostly unused old-fashioned parlor/fireside room into an inviting gathering place where people have coffee and chat.

Petter pointed out that churches have life cycles, and part of what HCI is helping his church discover so far is that it's pretty far along in that life cycle. "To get to a healthier part of the life cycle requires new vision," he said—noting that he hopes HCI will help the church look ahead and cast a new vision to lead it into the future.

HCI is "about shining a light on ourselves and being honest about who we are—as pastors, leaders, and churches," Petter said.

After doing the community interviews and assessment of resources, HCI teams and pastors go through several training sessions. This fall, each church will have a consultation weekend led by an HCI team from the Minnesota Conference. The pastor(s) and staff will be interviewed, church members will be invited to a town hall-style informational meeting about HCI, and the conference team will present a report that contains a handful of strategic recommendations—suggested actions that each church can take to live into its mission, reach new people, and meet critical needs in its community.

Once the recommendations are presented, each church will take a vote on whether to accept and work on them. If at least 70 percent of members vote to proceed, the church will be assigned a coach (or several) to help it work on the suggestions, which might include things like changes in governance, developing a signature ministry, or creating a more dynamic Sunday experience.

Rev. Bob Kandels, who serves Grace UMC in Paynesville, said his community interviews indicated that people know the church. The question in his mind is: Then why aren't they coming? He hopes the HCI process helps the church think about invitation and creating a culture of evangelism to reach new people.

Reach • Renew • Rejoice: 5-year progress

Reach • Renew • Rejoice calls for launching seven new churches, partnering with seven existing churches to launch new sites, and assisting 140 churches in revitalizing their ministries over seven years. Here's a look at progress in the first five years:

2014

- The Beloved in St. Paul and Northern Light Church in Anoka launched
- Rosemount UMC (now The Well) and Crossroads Church initiated expansion to second locations
- 22 churches began a revitalization process

2015

- New City Church and Uptown Church launched in Minneapolis
- Embrace Church out of Sioux Falls, South Dakota, started a Twin Cities campus in Lakeland
- 20 churches began a revitalization process

2016

- Northwest Minneapolis United Methodist Ministry (a Hmong faith community) launched in Robbinsdale
- Centennial United Methodist Church in Roseville launched a second location in St. Paul
- 20 churches began a revitalization process

EXPANDING

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A new ministry might initially consist of a Spanish-speaking worship service nested within some of these communities.

"We're a people who are called to grow in love of God and neighbor, reach new people, and heal a broken world—and we don't want language and culture to be an obstacle to that calling," said

2017

- The Well began public worship at its second location in Apple Valley
- Iglesia Piedra Viva in Minneapolis launched weekly worship
- Four churches—Park UMC in Brainerd, Le Sueur UMC, Park Avenue UMC in Minneapolis, and Holy Trinity UMC in Prior Lake—began preparations to launch new services

Rev. Dan Johnson, Twin Cities District superintendent and a member of the grant team. "More and more people are coming into the Twin Cities metro area and beyond who are not native Minnesotans and or native citizens. If we're going to be truly inclusive, we need to be able to provide the gospel in accessible ways."

(2017 continued)

- North Summit Church in Blaine and New City Church in Minneapolis began public worship
- A new church start in St. Michael began pre-launch work
- 19 churches began a revitalization process

2018

- Rapha Tabernacle of Glory (Haitian fellowship) in St. Paul began public worship
- Stewartville UMC and Vineyard UMC in Hutchinson began preparations to launch new services
- Nine churches began a revitalization process

HCI

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"HCI is an awakening call to remind us that we can't go as we are going," said Kandels, noting that going through the process requires a certain amount of vulnerability as each church comes to grips with some difficult realities. The HCI team at his church realizes that they'll probably face some opposition from those who like the status quo and don't want to try something new. But they know they can't let that deter them from finding ways to innovate and prepare for the future.

"We are going to take the bull by the horns and risk it," Kandels said. "It's humbling, and there's so much to learn."



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