

# REACHING THE LATINO MISSION FIELD: USA

by Carlos Hernandez

Discover how the LCMS is assisting with the revitalization of Latino congregations right here at home.

## New Life for an Aging Latino Congregation

THE LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD'S network-funded church-planting initiative, *Mission Field: USA*, is breathing new life into the revitalization of Latino congregations in their ongoing efforts to respond to the challenge of proclaiming the pure gospel of Jesus Christ. The urgency in reaching Latinos for Christ, especially the US-born second and third generations, is intensified by their explosive population growth. As of 2014, the US Latino population was recorded at 55.3 million, making people of Hispanic or Latino origin the nation's largest ethnic or racial minority.<sup>1</sup>

The first of several Latino congregations slated for revitalization and resourced for church planting through their respective districts in partnership with the *Mission Field: USA* initiative is El Calvario Lutheran Church, Brownsville, Texas. Organized in 1937 with the financial and prayerful support of the LCMS Texas District, its founding pastor, the Rev. Harry Smith, energetically labored in the fertile mission field located on the United States – Mexico border.

## Strategically Poised but Not Economically Sustainable

El Calvario's location is amazingly strategic in the heart of downtown Brownsville, several blocks from the infamous "wall" constructed to deter undocumented immigration from Mexico, Central and South America, as well as other world populations. However, as a twin

city, Brownsville, like other Texas municipalities on the Mexican border, is welded together economically, educationally, socially and politically with Matamoros, Tamaulipas, Mexico.

While El Calvario's location is strategic for engaging in ministries of mercy and, under the Spirit, poised for gospel proclamation, it has never been a candidate for becoming financially independent because Brownsville is a very poor city.

The 1990 census revealed that the U.S. had 284 Metropolitan Statistical Areas (Urban areas over 100,000 population with at least one core city of over 50,000), and that of these 284 metropolises Brownsville ranked 284th, dead last, in average per capita income. In other words, Brownsville had narrowly beaten out the McAllen-Edinburg and Laredo MSA to earn the dubious distinction of being America's poorest city. Naturally, then, efforts and programs to assist the impoverished are of tremendous importance to Brownsville.<sup>2</sup>

Like all US-based mission outreach efforts to other stateside cultures, activating missions among and by Latinos has always been a stewardship challenge.

## A New Texas District/Mission Field: USA Partnership Infuses New Life

The LCMS Texas District, cognizant of Brownsville's poverty, invested many dollars for many decades in order to continue a vital Lutheran presence in this poorest of American cities, blocks from the Mexican border and gateway to Central and South America. In recent years, precious LCMS Texas District mission dollars were urgently

<sup>1</sup> Renee Stepler and Anna Brown, "Statistical Portrait of Hispanics in the United States," *Pew Research Center*, April 19, 2016, <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2016/04/19/statistical-portrait-of-hispanics-in-the-united-states-key-charts/>.

<sup>2</sup> William L. Adams and Anthony K. Knopp, *Portrait of a Border City: Brownsville, Texas* (Austin: Eakin Press, 1997), 48–49.

needed in equally important mission fields and financial subsidy was, understandably, discontinued.

However, studied and collegial plans and consultations with LCMS Texas District mission staff and boards infused new life and possibilities through the *Mission Field: USA* strategy. Mission Executive Rev. Michael Newman and *Mission Field: USA* Director Rev. Steve Schave worked closely together to affect this collegial, mutually agreed upon new start. Close collaboration between district and Synod offices continues. The LCMS Texas District, El Calvario — as a member of the district — and the network-funded *Mission Field: USA* initiative will continue to work collaboratively.

### **New Mission Initiatives from an Existing Congregational Base**

Rev. Steve Schave describes this partnership that has given new birth, vision and hope to El Calvario as a base from which to initiate a campus ministry at the nearby University of Texas — Rio Grande Valley and a new church plant in north Brownsville. This is a ministry-planting role that is normally reserved for larger, wealthier congregations. The utilization of a strategically located small congregation in a mission planting role is a pilot project that will be closely watched. As Schave notes:

*Mission Field: USA is breathing new life into the revitalization of Latino congregations in their ongoing efforts to respond to the challenge of proclaiming the pure gospel of Jesus Christ.*

*Brownsville will be a pilot project for Mission Field: USA. It is an excellent location, as it is a modern-day Ephesus, a port city that is a gateway into Mexico and Latin America. ... There are great human-care needs to serve the poor, campus ministry with a primarily Hispanic student body (University of Texas — Rio Grande Valley) and it is a burgeoning area on the Mexican border with growing medical and technology industries there. ... By the grace of God, we will be sending a domestic missionary to plant a new church, start a campus ministry and to use mercy houses on campus for human care. This will be a place where people can bring mission teams to come and serve, and [we] pray for support of this initiative in a new era of LCMS Missions.<sup>3</sup>*

<sup>3</sup> Roger Drinnon, "Sincere Care and Small Catechism Bolster Hispanic Outreach," *Lutherans Engage the World* 4, no. 2 (November 12, 2015): 19.

### **Joining Hands to Activate Mission**

The support, prayers and ongoing collaboration of the LCMS Texas District with *Mission Field: USA* is making all the difference as the project begins with the installation on July 31, 2016, of the Rev. Dr. Antonio Lopez. Mission Executive Rev. Michael Newman, a mission and ministry area facilitator for the LCMS Texas District whose area regional responsibilities include Brownsville in the Rio Grande Valley of south Texas, expressed his hopes for the blessings of this *Mission Field: USA/LCMS Texas District* partnership based at El Calvario:

*Launching two new ministries out of El Calvario Lutheran church will be a great blessing to the wonderful people of El Calvario, its neighborhood and the greater Brownsville community. ... We're praying that through our partnership with the LCMS in Brownsville, many people will receive Christ's love, come to know Jesus as their Savior and be activated in mission for Him.<sup>4</sup>*

Like all US-based mission outreach efforts to other stateside cultures, activating missions among and by Latinos has always been a stewardship challenge. The *Mission Field: USA* partnerships with districts and with donors

throughout the United States that recognize the presence of 55.3 million Latinos as the largest of our domestic, stateside missions are enabling new Latino mission starts in strategic US locations that are otherwise not economically possible.

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.