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SANTA MARIA-Primera Iglesia Bautista hopes to save lives and souls through a fiery new ministry.

The 30-member congregation, about 30 miles northwest of Brownsville, is starting a volunteer fire department to serve the city and provide an avenue for the church to minister to men in the colonia.

The fire department is the latest outreach of the missions-minded church. It has built two medical clinics, a park, and a place to play basketball and volleyball in a colonia that otherwise would not have such amenities.□

The town's first fire department will have two teams-a firefighting team and a post-fire relief team, Pastor Billy Schwarz said. The latter group will minister to families affected by a fire for as long as three weeks, meeting physical and spiritual needs.

A mission team from Westwood Baptist Church in Alabaster, Ala., recently

helped connect the Texas church with a fire truck after the small church prayed three years for it. City leaders in Salem, Ala., decided to give the truck to the church rather than 12 other cities who applied for it.

"People asked how we got it," Schwarz said. "I say, 'We prayed.'"

Eleven men have volunteered to be part of the fire department. The county has pledged two more trucks for the effort.

The fire department will attract men who may not come to traditional church efforts, Schwarz said. The department will be housed in a building that is to be constructed on church grounds. Church members can share their faith with non-Christians who join the department.

"The men think going to church is not macho, but being in the fire department is," Schwarz said. "They will come, and we can minister to them."

Ministering to the men will bring entire families to Christ, because in the culture where the church ministers, fathers and husbands often dictate whether a family goes to church, he added.□

"We were looking for something that was narrow-targeted to the men of the family," Schwarz said. "If we can win the man, we can win the family."

Church members also distribute six 18-wheeler-loads of clothes a year that are delivered from Indiana. Volunteers have helped with disaster relief in Mexico.

As is the case with the fire truck, each of the ministries is conducted with minimal funds. Church members pray for God to meet needs and help the congregation change lives, and it happens, Schwarz said.

These efforts have brought people to the church where members share the gospel with them, he added. About 50 children play basketball at the

church daily. Volleyball also is popular. Events such as Vacation Bible Schools are well-attended.

“The church is becoming the center of town,” Schwarz said.

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