

Church aims to bring hope to city's west side_41805

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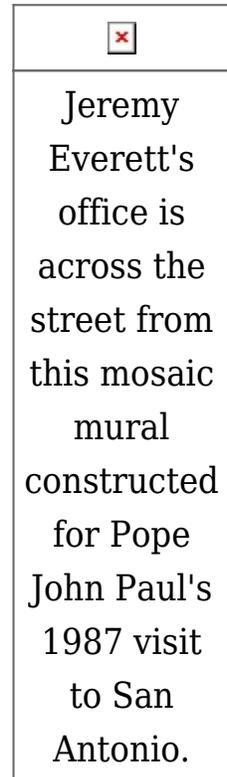


Jeremy Everett
stands in front
of a
neighborhood
mural that
proclaims,
"Some people
call our
neighborhood a
jungle. Well I'm
going to give
them a jungle
but it will be a
Beautiful
Jungle" that
has been
"tagged" with
gang graffiti.
Everett is
convinced
many of the
core
characteristics
of the
area-even the
deep loyalty
that binds
gangs
together-can
be expressed in
positive ways.
(Photos by
Craig Bird)

Church aims to bring hope to city's west side

By Craig Bird

Baptist Child & Family Services



SAN ANTONIO-The neighborhood has never seen a church like Iglesia de Esperanza, but it sure will seem familiar. At least that's the plan for a new congregation in the heart of San Antonio's west side that is a parallel-but integral-part of a Baptist-sponsored ministry to immigrants.

That work, in turn, is the focal point of a community development project in one of the country's poorest ZIP codes spearheaded by Baptist Child & Family Services in partnership with the Baptist General Convention of Texas, San Antonio Baptist Association, Trinity Baptist Church and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Iglesia de Esperanza, which means “Church of Hope”-will “have Baptist doctrine at its core, but we will practice a contemplative worship style and will integrate creative arts into that style,” explained Jeremy Everett, who heads up the effort.

Both of those aspects will resonate in the Hispanic neighborhood where murals adorn almost every available wall space, and the cadence of Catholic liturgy is part of the cultural DNA.

“I have been amazed at the people God has brought together with a heart for sharing his love with the west side,” Everett said. “I was not even sure the others were interested in starting a church, but they were. And it turned out that all of us turned out to be artsy and with a preference for worship that includes silence and community prayer and structured Scripture readings. It is the way we worship, and the fact that it fits into the community says a lot more about what God is doing than anything else.”

When Everett began the community development work on the west side last summer, he was given free rein to find out how the combined resources of the various Baptist partner groups could best be invested.

The greatest need that surfaced was to work with the stream of immigrants that pours into San Antonio. The program now is moving toward opening a hospitality house.

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But from the first, Everett felt a pull to include a church in the mix. Part of that might reflect his own background as a third-generation Baptist minister, but it more closely reflected his understanding of the church's relationship with the poor.

“Doing church in the heart of the community makes a statement that we believe the church should shoulder the responsibility instead of depending on the government to take up all the slack,” he explained. “I believe one reason God instituted government was to care for the poor, and, in our

society, there are things that the government will need to do. But the church was created to do the will of God on earth, and Jesus talked more about how to treat the poor and the powerless and our neighbors than just about anything else.”

The hospitality house will be part of church's outreach-but only a part. Using Luke 10:25-28 as its organizing principle, the new church aims to challenge its members to “love the Lord” with all their heart, soul, strength and mind-and their neighbors as themselves.

Everett will serve as one co-pastor, responsible for what church leaders call the “Outward Journey.” Key responsibilities include education and advocacy, community development-which will include the immigrant work-and lay mobilization.

The other co-pastor will provide direction for the the “Inward Journey” that also will include education and advocacy, along with spiritual disciplines and pastoral counseling.

The worship space will feature community-produced murals along the yellow and purple walls, and a communion table will be in a central, dominate space, “to give visual emphasis to our commitment to being a Christ-centered community,” Everett explained.

The goal is to have the second co-pastor and the director of the hospitality house in place by August.

The core group began forming last November when Everett and his wife, Amy, invited friends and acquaintances to small-group meetings at their home.

“We did Advent together and talked and prayed about what God wanted us to do on the west side,” he said.

Later, many of the group made a trip to Houston to see how an immigrant hospitality house there works. Afterward, Everett raised the possibility of formally forming a church—not really expecting a positive response.

“I really thought we might decide to just keep meeting on Sunday nights for a small group and keep going to our respective churches because it was comfortable,” Everett acknowledged. The group has attracted people who are members of Church of Christ, Episcopal and Catholic churches as well as Baptists. “But the response was overwhelming that we go for it. We will continue to meet on Sunday evenings for our main service, and many of us will continue to relate to our 'home' churches. But I think we all feel that our primary church will be Iglesia de Esperanza.”

One proof of that is that the Everetts and another couple in the core group, Mark and Rachel Menjivar, will move into the neighborhood as permanent residents, and others already live there.

“You can do a lot of good things during working hours, but we want to be part of the community 24/7,” Everett said. “The people won't know if we are real and if they can trust us until they see us every day, living where they live and becoming part of what they do.

“The people here love their community, and there is a lot to love. There are always concerts and fiestas and just visiting back and forth. Basic community development says you need to be alongside the people of that community. “We just ask that everyone who hears about Iglesia de Esperanza pray for us and with us,” Everett added. “Prayer is at the center of what we are doing, and we know that is the only way God will help us identify and support the staff we need to add the programs we want to implement to show the people of the west side how much God loves them.”

in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.