

Hill Country church gains from exchange

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Pastor Lonny Poe and his family welcome Spanish exchange student Maria Lopez to the Austin airport.
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By George Henson

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DRIPPING SPRINGS—Participation in an international student exchange program provided Pastor Lonny Poe of Sunset Canyon Baptist Church with

a real-life example of the effectiveness of worldwide Texas Baptist missions.



Texas Baptists built this church in Spain about 40 years ago.

When Poe read an e-mail soliciting host homes for international high school students, he told his wife, Deanne, “I’ve got something for you to think about.”

That conversation started a process that brought 15-year-old Maria Lopez of Castellon, Spain, to live with the Poes and their four children in Dripping Springs.

One reason the family had considered opening their home to an international exchange student was the opportunity to share their faith in Christ, Poe noted.

However, Lopez not only came from a Christian home, but a Baptist one—an affiliation claimed by less than 1 percent of Spain’s population.

And the Poes also learned—with a tinge of pride—that more than 40 years ago, Texas Baptists built the church the Lopez family attends in Spain.

“I think it’s quite a testimony to Texas Baptists,” Poe said.

While the Poes were unaware of the situation initially, the Lopez family had requested that Maria be placed with a Baptist family.

“I guess we qualified,” Poe quipped.

But just to be certain, the Lopez family traveled to Texas unannounced last May to attend services at Sunset Canyon Baptist Church. Poe recognized them from photographs the exchange agency had sent and introduced himself.

The families spent the next four days getting acquainted. In the process, they allayed any fears the Lopez family held for their daughter—much to the delight of the Poes.

“Maria has been an absolute joy,” Mrs. Poe said. “She knows all about us—all about our warts, all about our strengths and weaknesses, all our challenge areas.”

In the course of the year, the Poes also have been able to watch her faith grow. Shortly before December, she made her profession of faith in Christ public, and Poe baptized her. Sunset Canyon sent a video of the baptism to her parents so they could have a record of the experience.

“To be able to shepherd her faith experience has been humbling but a complete joy,” Poe said.

Having Lopez in the church also has been a blessing for members of Sunset Canyon Baptist Church, because she is a living representation of effectiveness of worldwide missions, he said.

Dripping Springs may sound like a remote rural outpost, but many Sunset Canyon members have traveled around the world, and other exchange students have come through the church, Poe noted.

Even so, learning to love a young woman who came to faith in Christ at a

church in Spain started by Texas Baptists and who made her faith public at their church in the Texas Hill Country made a deep impression on church members, he noted.

Involvement in relief efforts for families effected by hurricanes Katrina and Rita—as well as assisting a local woman with home repairs—also helped give the church a more global missions perspective.

“Our folks in the last year have increased in their commitments to missions both financially and in a hands-on way, but I really don’t know if I can attribute that all to Maria. But seeing that they can have an impact on people’s lives, I do believe has made a difference,” he said.

While the end of the school year is only months away, the Poes expect the relationship to extend far beyond that. Lopez already has invited the Poes’ oldest daughter, Salim, to come to stay with her in Spain.

The families also expect to continue to keep in touch via webcam and Christmas gifts. Poe knows some people might consider that wishful thinking, but the same might have been said to those Texas Baptists 40 years ago who went overseas to build a church where Baptists were hard to find.

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