

El Paso church ministers to at-risk teens and families

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EL PASO—Hugo Garcia believes when he was called to become pastor of Cornerstone Fellowship Baptist Church, God also commissioned him to develop a Christian program for teens in East Central El Paso.

“Most of my ministry has been to work with teens, especially those at-risk,” Garcia said. “I understand their frustrations, needs, hopes and dreams.”

Many of the youth come from low-income families. Parents work in low-paying jobs. Problems in the neighborhood include drugs and alcohol abuse, unemployment, homelessness, families struggling to pay their rent and buy food for their children.

But rather than focusing on problems, Garcia sees opportunities—to meet basic human needs, to tell people God loves them, and to provide personal and church growth.

“One of the opportunities is feeding hungry people,” Garcia said. “When people come to us that are without food, we feed them. Statistics show that 1 out of 4 children go to bed hungry in normal times. Since the COVID-19 pandemic started, the numbers have increased.”

Garcia remembers taking a box of food to a family in need several years ago.

“I opened the refrigerator to put some food inside, and there was not even a bottle of ketchup —nothing,” he recalled.

“The family had a 9-year-old daughter named Ashley. This young girl started attending our church because we met a need for her family. ...

Today, Ashley is now 24 and an active young adult in our church and is helping other youth. God had a plan, and I'm so glad we could be a part of that plan."

'The church is there as a witness of God's care'



Pizza is a favorite food for teens at the weekly meal provided by Cornerstone Fellowship Baptist Church in El Paso. (Photo courtesy of Pastor Hugo Garcia)

Cornerstone Fellowship's ministry provides food boxes to families in need every week. The [Texas Baptist Hunger Offering](#) provides about half of the cost of a weekly meal for teens, which also features a youth Bible study. So far, four young people have made professions of faith in Christ directly as a result of the teen meal and Bible study.

"Food brings them here, and we have opportunities to teach personal growth from a Christian viewpoint. Our church serves food that teens like—especially pizza," Garcia said.

Parents—including some with no other connections to Cornerstone Fellowship—encourage their teens to attend. Some parents attend the

church when their busy work schedules allow. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the church has provided a place of comfort and strength for anxious parents, Garcia noted.

“Many of the adults in our area are classified as essential workers during this crisis. They work in the hospitals, food industry and other places where workers must go to work to keep their jobs,” he said. “This means they attend the Sunday night service. They fear the virus themselves, but also are afraid of bringing it home to their families. During this time, the church is there as a witness of God’s care for them.”

Cornerstone Fellowship Baptist Church could be considered a re-start church. Several years ago, the church merged with another declining church. At that time, about 150 teens attended. The Cornerstone group had a different vision—a different methodology and wanted to develop a more effective discipleship program of growth.

As part of the fresh re-start, Cornerstone started providing the weekly food boxes for families. Families who receive food are encouraged to submit prayer requests, and a church prayer team meets regularly to study the Bible, share testimonies and sing hymns.

El Paso Baptist Association fills the food boxes for families with rice and beans, as well as locally grown strawberries, lettuce, celery and other seasonal produce. Presently, 65 families—270 individuals—receive food. When food is distributed, lines often stretch for blocks. Many are at-risk households. Cornerstone Fellowship views the list of recipients as prospects for additional ministry and evangelism.

“We hope to reach these people and get them involved in our church,” Garcia said. “It’s another opportunity to reach families.”

At this point in the pandemic, Cornerstone Fellowship meets in three worship services each Sunday to help maintain social distancing.

The church leases a building it shares with the owner, who operates a business. During the pandemic, offerings have been down, Garcia noted. The church has developed a plan to ask 300 individuals to pledge \$15 per month to enable the church to meet its rent payments.

Next year, Cornerstone Fellowship hopes to move to a new facility that will include Sunday school space for a children's department.

Through it all, Garcia said he trusts in the promise of a favorite Scripture verse: "Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know (Jeremiah 33:3)."

Carolyn Tomlin writes for the Christian market and teaches the Boot Camp for Christian Writers.