

Fort Worth church's immigration ministry changes lives

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EDITOR'S NOTE: *En Español* [aquí](#).

Pastor Rafael Solis and the members of Iglesia Bautista Azle Avenue in Fort Worth understand small and faithful actions make big changes in people's lives—in their case, immigrants who need up-to-date legal documentation.

The congregation's Vida Nueva Immigration Service ministry has demanded commitment and a significant investment. But rather than counting the cost, Solis and his church members focus on what really counts—demonstrating God's love to vulnerable people.

"We do not do this so people can thank us," Solis said. "We do this because we ourselves are thankful."

They do it because of the difference it makes in the lives of individuals like Lorena Ortega.

'This is my home'

Ortega, 23, was just 7 years old when her mother told her their family was going to the United States to visit her father. Lorena had not seen her dad in months, but she knew this would be more than a visit.

"My mom said, 'Pack all of your things and go say bye to your friends,'" she said.



Rafael Solis (center), pastor of Iglesia Bautista Azle Avenue in Fort Worth, is pictured with (left to right) Loyda Rodriguez, Aurora Ramirez, Lorena Ortega and Elizabeth Ortega. (Photo / Isa Torres)

Along with two siblings, her mother and her grandmother, Lorena rode the bus from Tijuana to San Diego and then to Fort Worth.

Lorena's parents never planned to leave Mexico, but circumstances dictated their actions.

"My husband and I had a good steady income," Elizabeth Ortega said. "But suddenly we had to look for something else."

The Ortegas felt stuck, because Lorena's dad had lost his job in Mexico, and no other employment was available where they lived. So, after working hard, he secured a visa to go to the United States to look for opportunities. Months later, the rest of the family finally was able to join him.

When they left Mexico, they left behind insecurities and the frustration of not being able to provide for themselves. Although not everything is perfect now, the Ortegas are happy to call the United States their home.

"I grew up here," Lorena said. "This is my home, and if I was back in

Mexico, I would probably not be in school anymore.”

She is a recipient of the Differed Action for Childhood Arrivals permit, which requires individuals to finish high school or obtain the GED. To be eligible for a permit, individuals also are prohibited from having any felonies or convictions.

Although the DACA permit allows her to work, Lorena still has faced discrimination from the clients with whom she interacts and from some of her own coworkers and superiors.

“They think that I do not speak English and treat me with disrespect,” Lorena said. “Supervisors have also said that because of my status, they could fire me at any time.”

Lorena and her family found peace and comfort in Iglesia Bautista Azle Avenue and its Vida Nueva Immigration Service.

A calling born out of personal experience

Solis, pastor at Azle Avenue, founded the immigration ministry and serves as its director.

Although Vida Nueva Immigration Service officially started about a year ago, he and his congregation have been involved in similar work 16 years when the predominantly Anglo Azle Avenue Baptist Church and a Spanish-speaking congregation merged and called Solis as pastor.

But before Solis could lead the church to minister to immigrants, he had to deal with some immigration issues of his own.

While trying to secure a new visa that would allow him to continue to

remain in the United States and work, he found out a disturbing fact one weekend before his application was due. He discovered his lawyer had been lying to him and done nothing to send the necessary paperwork to the federal agency.

“I went to the office to submit my application at 9 a.m., and at 5 p.m. I was being told that I had the option to defend my case before a judge,” Solis said.

While he was at the immigration offices, Solis found out the money he had spent to get his visa had gone all to waste when immigration officers suddenly came out to detain him.

“They told me I had two options,” Solis said. “I could wait for a judge to hear my case, or I could surrender and be deported.”

If Solis had chosen to take his case to a judge, he would have spent the entire time in a detention facility until a judge was free to hear him, and that could have taken months. “There was a lot of abuse going on in the center,” Solis recalled. “The officers mistreated the people there. So, I told them to deport me.”

Solis was taken to Nuevo Laredo where he found refuge in a church for a few days, and then went back to Jalisco, his native state. He called his wife and told her to bring their daughter back and join him at home.

Three months later, all three applied for another visa. This time they knew what to avoid, how to go to the right people and how to handle the process.

Once Solis and his family became U.S. citizens, they not only wanted to help others through by offering low-cost immigration services, but also wanted to offer the service in Christ’s name.

An accredited representative

Through the [ISAAC](#)—Immigration Service and Aid Center—Project, a ministry of Texas Baptists' Christian Life Commission, Solis received the training to become an accredited representative recognized by the U.S. Department of Justice.

"Getting the accreditation was not an easy process," he said. "You have to spend a lot of money on books and look for lawyers who are willing to let you practice under them, which a lot of them are not."

Some of the immigration lawyers' unwillingness to let a person learn and practice under them may be for fear of competition, but that is why Solis says being an accredited representative requires individuals to have a "vision, a willingness to invest and a commitment."

Azle Avenue is one of the few Texas Baptist churches that has accepted the challenge, and its leaders are happy to see the fruits of their work.

Opportunity to develop relationships

Since Vida Nueva officially began last year, they have received about 150 clients, and now they are able to consult about 15 new clients each month.

Each new client who moves through the application process is a person with whom the church has the opportunity for a year or more to establish a relationship, said Norma Trejo, Vida Nueva's community outreach director.

People have come to Fort Worth from as far away as Austin, Wichita Falls and San Angelo to see if Vida Nueva can work with them.

In addition to offering immigration assistance, Azle Avenue has also partnered with Tarrant Community College to offer ESL classes at no cost

and citizenship classes for \$25.

“For churches to do this, they have to understand that this is a full-time job,” Trejo said.

While it may take a lot of time and resources from the church, Solis insists it is so beautiful when people come back to say, “I have my residence now, and I will finally have the chance to see my mom, whom I had not seen in 20 years.”