

# Love in action enables church's unconditional welcome

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SAN MARCOS—The sign in front of Redwood Baptist Church's tiny building reads, "Jesus, a Savior for all people."

Sunday mornings at the church prove that vision a reality. Addicts, ex-convicts, the homeless and the hungry gather to worship God as Pastor Jim Lanning and his co-pastors Robert Rodriguez and Michael Johnson share duties to make Redwood Baptist Church welcoming to anyone with physical or spiritual needs.

"Boy, we really bear down on that 'all,'" Lanning said of the church's vision statement.

Emma Johnson, holding Jasmine Fisher, celebrates with Marisol Gonzales (right) after Gonzales' baptism during the morning service at Redwood Baptist Church. (Photos by Carrie Joynton)

Redwood Baptist Church leaders consistently promote multicultural ministry, and the church's diverse congregation testifies to those efforts. Combined, the Hispanics, African-Americans, and people with special needs at Redwood Baptist Church equal the number of Anglos in the congregation, which is a healthy proportion, Lanning noted.

Rodriguez translates sermons into Spanish to make them accessible to the

Hispanic congregation.

The church's diversity is a result of active outreach, Lanning said.

"Church growth and church planters won't succeed with homogeneous groups," he said.

Ethnic diversity "has to be intentional."

At a Redwood Baptist Church service, "no one watches the clock; no one's worried about what time they get home," Lanning said. Members announce birthdays and various anniversaries—often of "clean" periods from drugs or alcohol—during the first part of the service, and they celebrate together with a song.

Later in the service, open "journey time" gives people a chance to share their testimonies with the rest of the congregation. Lanning wanders the center aisle with a wireless microphone, inviting church members to tell their stories and recent victories.



Christian and Irvin Vasquez enjoy fellowship with Eddie during a Sunday meal after worship services at Redwood Baptist Church in San Marcos.

When Buckner International President Ken Hall visited Redwood Baptist Church earlier this year, the testimonies rendered him speechless.

“We had journey time that lasted an hour and 45 minutes,” Hall remembered.

“We had a prostitute who hadn’t turned a trick in several weeks and didn’t want to, but she was hungry and she came to church because she wanted to eat” and knew lunch was provided.

“It just was ... real,” Hall said. “When I got up to preach I was so filled with emotion, I told them I didn’t know what I could preach. ... In my 15 years of visiting churches with Buckner, it was the most genuine worship experience I’ve ever had.”

Despite financial challenges, Redwood Baptist Church ministers to its members and community in tangible ways. Every Sunday, about 50 church families receive food donated by fellow members. One family provides lunch for the congregation every week after the service, and many who lack transportation are given free rides to and from Sunday worship in the church van.



A mother and child enjoy a Sunday noon meal at Redwood Baptist Church in San Marcos.

The multicultural ministry at Redwood Baptist Church has had a profound effect on church member Emma Johnson, sister of Pastor Michael Johnson.

“I think it’s a foretaste of heaven, where you’re going to mix with people of different races, creeds, nationalities,” she said.

“The only thing that binds us together is love, and it’s love in action.”

As the Baptist General Convention of Texas promotes Texas Hope 2010, which challenges Christians to give every Texan the opportunity to respond to the gospel in his or her own cultural context by Easter 2010, Redwood Baptist Church’s community outreach programs advance that goal.

Throughout June, the church provided lunch and Vacation Bible School activities for neighborhood children of the area through a program called Project Good Neighbors. The church also makes monthly visits to the Baptist Children’s Home in San Antonio. They minister to minors from countries other than Mexico who are illegally in the United States and awaiting deportation to their home country.



Members of Redwood Baptist Church in San Marcos head outside for a meal after the Sunday morning service.

Church leader Wanda Pittman said Redwood Baptist Church’s community ministry is one of its greatest strengths.

“You need to cater to the area you are ministering to,” Pittman said.

“I think that’s really important. You are meeting a need, a need that a lot of

churches don't consider."

Although Redwood Baptist Church members' needs may be more obvious than those of wealthier churches, Hall considered the church's unconditional welcome a sign of Christian vitality.

"Too often ... the person who is coming to church feels like they have to be a certain person before they can come, and we design our buildings and our programs to literally make it hard for people living on the edge of society to come to church," Hall said.

Lanning invited Hall to preach at his church after reading Hall's book, *Inside Outside: The church in social ministry*. He told Hall he'd built his ministry out of Hall's description of an invitational church, marking these words: "People ... will want to give their hearts to Christ and become part of the local church ... (when they have) the awareness that they have been seen in their need and have been extended an acceptance of grace ... that they are welcome, no matter who they are or where they have been or what they have done."

Realizing that vision at Redwood Baptist Church hasn't been easy, but for Lanning, it's been worth the effort.

"Each one of these groups (at the church) has to yield to the others. It's a great challenge; it's a wonderful challenge," Lanning said.

While writing his description of an unconditionally welcoming church, Hall never dreamed he'd see it embodied, he confessed.

"As much as I was trying to be truthful and honest in writing that book, I did not envision Redwood Baptist Church," Hall said.

Lanning "did it far better than any preacher could ever say the words; he did it. He touched my life."

