

# Plano church's partnership supports church planting in Mexico

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PLANO—A North Texas church's longstanding partnership with a Baptist pastor and hospital administrator in western Mexico undergirds a church-starting movement in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas.

The relationship began about 20 years ago when Don Sewell, who directed partnership missions for the Baptist General Convention of Texas, contacted Wayne Stevenson from First Baptist Church in Plano.

Early in his ministry, Sewell had served as minister to youth at First Baptist in Plano, where he became acquainted with Stevenson, an engineer, entrepreneur and philanthropist.

## Significant visit to Guadalajara



Omar Nicolas is administrator of Hospital Mexico Americana and pastor of Tercera Iglesia Bautista in Guadalajara, Mexico. (Photo courtesy of Craig Curry)

Sewell, a former missionary to Mexico, invited Stevenson to accompany him to Guadalajara, where he introduced him to Omar Nicolas, administrator of Hospital Mexico Americana and pastor of Tercera Iglesia Bautista.

Sewell now directs the Joel T. Allison Faith in Action Initiatives at Baylor Scott & White Health in Dallas, and Baylor regularly donates medical equipment and provides other assistance to the Baptist hospital in Guadalajara.

Stevenson and Nicolas developed a deep and abiding friendship, and the Plano layman began to support the bivocational Mexican Baptist pastor's work—not only at the hospital and his congregation in Guadalajara, but particularly the churches Tercera Iglesia Bautista began planting.

“His father had been a Baptist minister in Chiapas, and he convinced me to take a trip with him down there,” Stevenson recalled.

Nicolas grew up in Chiapas—an area in South Mexico long dominated by a hybrid blend of Roman Catholicism and indigenous folk religion—and was familiar with its people and culture. As a result, his efforts to start churches and train pastors in the region met with more success than most previous attempts.

## **Growing movement to start churches**

After Stevenson learned more about the opportunities in Chiapas, he worked with Jerry Carlisle, then pastor at First Baptist in Plano, and leaders of the congregation's missions committee to support work in Chenalhó, where Nicolas helped plant a church and start a *seminario*—a training and equipping center for pastors.



Worshippers gather at the original building used by the Baptist church in Chenalho, Mexico. (Photo courtesy of Jerry Carlisle)

“There were about seven members at the church in Chenalhó then. They met in one room, about 12 by 15 feet, with one light bulb hanging from the ceiling,” Stevenson recalled.

However, the church’s members had secured a plot of land on a hill that they cleared and leveled with hand shovels to prepare a building site. First Baptist in Plano provided the \$3,000 in building materials the church needed, and members constructed a building.

“A few months later, they called us to invite us to the building dedication,” Stevenson said. “The church had more than 100 in attendance that day, and they baptized 17 people in a creek.”

Later, when the church outgrew its facility, the congregation built another sanctuary capable of seating about 300 and converted the earlier building into classrooms for the pastor training center.

That center trained ministers who served in about a dozen churches Tercera Iglesia Bautista in Guadalajara started in villages throughout Central and South Mexico.

## **Planting a church in San Cristóbal**

Miguel Santiz Hernandez, who grew up in the area and attended the training school Nicolas founded, started a church at his home in San Cristóbal—a strategically placed colonial-era city that previously lacked a strong evangelical presence.



Assembled for the dedication of a Baptist church building in San Cristobal, Chiapas, with the church’s pastor, Miguel Santiz

Hernandez, are (left to right) Pastor Craig Curry and layman Wayne Stevenson from First Baptist Church in Plano; Don Sewell, director of Faith in Action Initiatives at Baylor Scott & White Health; Bill Arnold, president of the Texas Baptist Missions Foundation; and Omar Nicolas, administrator of Hospital Mexico Americana and pastor of Tercera Iglesia Bautista in Guadalajara. (Photo courtesy of Craig Curry)

When the congregation outgrew the pastor's home, First Baptist in Plano and Tercera Iglesia Bautista in Guadalajara helped purchase property for a worship center.

"My first trip to Chiapas, the church had obtained property, but it was just dirt," said Craig Curry, who became pastor at First Baptist in Plano three years ago.

An architect donated his services, and the members of the congregation in San Cristóbal provided labor for the church building. Donors channeled more than \$100,000 through the Texas Baptist Missions Foundation to support the church construction project in San Cristóbal.

In February, Curry, Stevenson and Sewell—along with Bill Arnold, president of the Texas Baptist Missions Foundation—attended the dedication service for the church building in San Cristóbal, joined by about 400 others.

"During the two and a half hour service, Pastor Miguel told about his

mother's dream of a church" in San Cristóbal, Curry recalled. Choked with emotion, the pastor was unable to continue, noting his mother died a short time before she saw her prayers answered.

Curry wants to see First Baptist continue its relationship with the church in San Cristóbal by providing the congregation the equipment and supplies it needs to care for infants and toddlers, as well as supporting Nicolas in varied aspects of his work.

"This is a picture of cooperation," Curry said. "Omar Nicolas is the catalyst for a church planting movement in Chiapas, and Baylor Scott & White helps his hospital in Guadalajara. First Baptist in Plano, the Texas Baptist Missions Foundation and others helped provide funding in San Cristóbal, and members of the church there did the construction. It shows what we can do when we work together."

*With additional reporting by Editor Eric Black.*