

Primera in Abilene focuses on developing young leaders

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ABILENE—Primera Iglesia Bautista of Abilene understands challenges sometimes represent opportunities for growth.

Pastor J.R. Flores arrived at the church three years ago and realized right away he had plenty of work ahead.

The church had a small group of young people, and Flores understood they needed mentoring.

In the last three years, many of those young people have grown to become key leaders in the church—including Juanito Villarreal, son of the deacon who first contacted Flores about the Abilene pastorate, and Art Flores, the pastor's son. Villarreal is worship leader and youth pastor at Primera, and Art Flores serves as missions pastor.

Investing in the future

The church has a small membership compared to most other congregations in the area, and the same goes for its resources, the pastor said. But the congregation is making an impact on young leaders who fit the profile of the population churches soon may need to reach.



Pastor J.R. Flores (center), along with his son and missions pastor Art Flores (left) and Juanito Villarreal (right), the youth pastor, serve together at PIB Abilene. Together they hope to remain faithful with what God has given them. (Photo by Isa Torres)

In 2018, the U.S. Census reported the Abilene metropolitan area included about 37,000 Hispanics. That number is projected to be 44,000 this year, an increase of almost 17 percent.

In comparison, the Anglo population in the Abilene area is expected to have decreased by about 1 percent during that same period.

Changes in population demand changes in the ways churches approach families, Flores said.

Years ago, families only needed one source of income and had time to go to church together, but now families need multiple income sources, he noted.

“Oftentimes, I find kids who used to be in the youth group but are now working,” said Villarreal, who also is president of Compañerismo Sinai, the regional Hispanic fellowship.

In addition to the challenges of time availability and resources, Villarreal

said, the church also must learn how to interact with people from a different background, including those who grew up outside the church and its influence.

After arriving at Primera in Abilene, Flores soon grew to understand these challenges determine the road a church must take. He also sees more room for Primera and other churches to grow.

“We understand the time constraints on people’s schedules, but we want to disciple our church to reach those close to them,” Flores said.

Making disciples by example

The best way to disciple believers in a church the size of Primera is by setting an example, Art Flores said.

That is precisely what the pastor has done along with his son and Villarreal—set an example of faithfulness in the midst of challenges.

With the lack of musicians participating in Sunday worship services, leaders in the congregation provided space and resources for young people to collaborate on Sundays, Villarreal said

Now the church has plenty of people ready to participate, if needed, Flores said, adding that he hopes the example they set will lay the foundation for others.

When the church van needed repairs and young teenagers in the youth group needed a ride to church, Villarreal and his wife used their car to provide them with transportation.

A church with more resources might not have a hard time responding to simple challenges like that, but Villarreal and his wife knew they needed to set the example and be a consistent presence in the lives of the youth.

Working together

“We learned to work together with what we have,” Flores said.

While the church has invested in its young leaders, it could not have succeeded without the support of older members, Villarreal noted. Because of their commitment, now the church can grow through younger generations.

“What God has done in the church is only the beginning of where God is taking Primera,” Flores said.

Flores firmly believes ministers should work themselves out of a job. Discipling and empowering other leaders pushes churches forward and facilitates the participation of members when they lack a pastor, he said.

Villarreal, who grew up in Primera, notes the example Flores sets. He hopes to disciple his youth group the same way, so that they may grow more spiritually and serve others.

As much growth as Primera in Abilene may need, Flores hopes other churches in the area will grow, as well. None of them working alone can reach all the people of Abilene, he said.

“That is why we need to work together, because we are reaching a generation of people who grew up outside of the church,” Villarreal said. “Now there’s a disconnection between the ones who try to reach out and the ones they are trying to reach.”

Budgets and programs will not enable churches to make that connection, but faithfulness and cooperation will, Villarreal observed.

But the church cannot wait until it has all it needs to act, the ministers at Primera agreed. A church must demonstrate faithfulness with what it

already has,

“There is a need to work together with other churches, because we could certainly accomplish more together,” Flores said. “Right now, we want to be faithful with what God gave us and hope God will bless us.”