

# Strengthening Project helps McAllen-area ministerial couples

March 12, 2020

McALLEN—A longstanding marriage and family enrichment initiative for ministers and spouses in Juarez, Mexico, expanded its reach with a recent event in the Rio Grande Valley.

Arlano Funderburk, who served more than four decades as director of Baptist Student Ministries at South Plains College, started [The Strengthening Project](#) based on a need he observed during his frequent travels in Juarez to plan student mission trips.

Funderburk founded [Proyecto Forteleza/The Strengthening Project](#), a retreat for couples in ministry, to offer spiritual development and marriage enrichment.

The event in McAllen grew out of a conversation between Brian Hill, pastor of First Baptist Church in Corpus Christi and president of the Strengthening Project's board of directors, and Jorge Zapata, associate coordinator of missions and Hispanic ministries with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Texas.

They discussed the possibility of offering a retreat similar to the annual event in Juarez for up to 26 couples from the Rio Grande Valley and surrounding area. First Baptist Church in Abilene, Pioneer Drive Baptist Church in Abilene and Fellowship Southwest, a CBF regional network, provided funding.

"Pastors and families give so much of themselves. So, this retreat is to help

refresh them and give them a new vision,” Hill explained.

## Couples in ministry often feel overwhelmed



Adriana Espinoza from Donna said God spoke to her through the Strengthening Project retreat, letting her know: “It’s hard to do the ministry I called you to do when you’re hurt and wounded. Come to me, rest and heal in me first. Then go back and minister.” (Photo / Isa Torres)

Feeling overwhelmed prevents couples in ministry from properly caring about themselves, each other and the ministry they were called to, said Zoricelis Davila, who serves as treasurer of the Strengthening Project and works as Christian counselor and psychotherapist.

Because multiple issues contribute to that feeling, pastors and spouses may have a difficult time understanding which issue they should address when

alarms go off everywhere around them, she explained.

But when couples in ministry understand which issues in their lives should have priority, then they will know what they must attend first, Davila said. Hopefully, that will help them diminish emergency alarms going off in their lives, she added.

Couples in ministry often try to place many things as their first priority, Hill explained.

“There are many tasks in your lives that are necessary, but they’re not all essential,” he said. “What is essential is loving God.”

If couples in ministry recognize loving God as the most essential thing, then they must define clearly what that means, Hill said. Often, love for God is confused with being in ministry, but Jesus puts loving God first and loving others second in the Gospels.

“We are all children of God, but our roles in ministry are responsibilities we execute for a given task and for a specific time,” Davila said.

## **Both husband and wife contribute**

As their lives in ministry pull time and energy from them, pastors and their spouses may stop focusing on each other and their marriage, she added.

A strong marriage results from both husband and wife working for the betterment of their marriage, and both are responsible when the marriage deteriorates, she said.

Demands of serving in the church and of parenting often tempt couples to place a spouse at the bottom of the list of priorities, Davila observed. The pastor and spouse should understand they first are husband and wife before being a parent or a minister, she said.

So, all the effort they spend trying to make sure all is well with the church or in the lives of the children is better spent working toward a good marriage, Davila explained.

Church members or children may want the attention of the pastor and the pastor's spouse, but they need to learn both husband and wife will choose each other as most important, she said.