

Tough neighborhood, tough pastor seem to be meant for each other

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SAN ANTONIO—Life is tough in the Larkspur neighborhood of San Antonio—so tough, in fact, both the San Antonio Police Department and the San Antonio Housing Authority pulled programs out of what they deemed an “unsafe neighborhood” four years ago.

Few ministers would consider the area the perfect place for a first pastorate. But Jose Gonzalez felt otherwise—probably because he didn’t feel like the perfect ministerial prospect. He recalled how God saved him from the life of a high school dropout who was dabbling in drugs and petty crime, and his pastor convinced him to enroll at [Baptist University of the Americas](#).



Pastor Jose Gonzalez baptizes a new believer in the Guadalupe River.

Gonzalez and Larkspur Christian Fellowship were meant for each other, according to Pastor Neil Bennett and BUA President René Maciel.

“I can’t say enough about Jose and Mimi (his wife) and the great work they are doing,” said Bennett, pastor of [Churchill Baptist Church](#), the sponsoring congregation for Larkspur Fellowship. “They do a lot of hard things really well for very little compensation.

“Churchill started doing children’s work there 14 years ago and moved to a church plant three years ago. We had numbers, but they would come and go. Now, Jose is reaching and retaining families and building a cohesive core group. His gifts and training, combined with his cultural understanding and fluency in Spanish are being greatly used by God in an amazing way.”

In 18 months, attendance has climbed from three to as many as 35, and Gonzalez has baptized seven new believers.

Maciel sees Gonzalez as the prototypical BUA student.

“We’re the only school I know of that intentionally recruits ‘poor’ students in both economic and academic terms. We feel called to those not considered college material by others. And we prepare them to be ready to serve bivocationally, if necessary,” he said.

“Jose came here without even a GED and convinced he would fail and be back home in Weatherford in three months. Last fall, he graduated cum laude. He began serving at Larkspur his senior year and has turned down full-time positions at other churches to remain in a tough place doing what God called him to do, working 40 hours a week at his secular job.”

Gonzalez came to the church as associate pastor in September 2008, working with an Anglo student minister who had realized the future was brighter with a Spanish-speaking leader. In November, Gonzalez became

pastor, pouring himself into the community—20 miles from BUA—on nights and weekends as he completed his coursework.

“The main thing BUA taught me was how to study the Bible—how to understand the context and teach the truth of the Scripture instead of just how I wanted to see it,” Gonzalez said.

“It doesn’t matter if you’re the greatest preacher if God is not with you. But if God is with you and you know you’re doing his will, even in the hardest moments, he will give you comfort and strength to continue.”



Pastor Jose Gonzalez of Larkspur Christian Fellowship waded into the Guadalupe River to immerse three individuals who had made recent professions of faith. He also baptized two more bystanders who were attracted to the scene and made their own professions of faith. (BUA PHOTO/Naomi Gonzalez)

He has had his share of tough moments. He wrote letters on behalf of a new Christian member seeking probation, but she was sent to prison. Mormon missionaries descended on Larkspur, drawing away several members with well-funded ministries Gonzalez couldn’t match. But

even when Gonzalez is discouraged, his sense of call has kept him in place.

“I think his background helps him a lot,” Bennett said. “He’s lived some of what Larkspur people go through. He’s seen the tough side of life. So, where most young pastors would turn tail and run, he has the patience and strength to stand solid.

“He’s getting a great crash course in leadership, because he is discipling new believers in difficult surroundings and counseling people with tough problems.”

This summer, Gonzalez and his family are taking a brief break from the neighborhood—spending two weeks in San Luis Potosi in Mexico. Gonzalez plans to witness to his mother’s family in a mountain village.

“They need God, and there is no one to tell them except when we go,” he explained.