

Waco Hispanic church expands reach by embracing liturgy

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WACO—Primera Iglesia Bautista in Waco, the city's oldest Hispanic organization of any kind, understands the importance of taking risks and trying new approaches—even if some of those “new” practices actually are ancient.

Emmanuel Roldan first visited Primera Iglesia Bautista during his last semester at Baylor University's Truett Theological Seminary. He planned to remain in Waco after graduation, and he was looking for a church home.

“I wanted to hear Spanish in a congregation and learn from someone in the community,” Roldan said.

Roldan's arrival attracted the attention of church members. The congregation had been declining in attendance for years, and it had been a long time since anyone new had shown up to worship with them.

Pastor Armando Virgen had served Primera more than 50 years, and he planned to retire soon.

‘Willing to try new things’

Roldan asked just one question: “Are you willing to try new things?”

Members of the 109-year-old congregation said, “Yes.”



Emmanuel Roldan, a graduate of Baylor University's Truett Theological Seminary, is pastor of Primera Iglesia Bautista in Waco. (Photo / Adrian Moreno)

At Truett Seminary, Roldan had learned about—and grown to appreciate—liturgical practices shared by many Christians for nearly two millennia, such as observing Advent, Lent and the rest of the church calendar.

The ancient Christian traditions Roldan brought to Primera helped to bring more diversity to the church—not only in terms of ethnicity, but also with respect to denominational backgrounds.

The church mostly is home to second- and third-generations Hispanic-Americans, and many are fluent in both English and Spanish. However, the congregation also includes a few first-generation immigrants, so there was some cultural diversity already.

Some of the students Roldan worked with when he was a chaplain at Baylor University started attending the church, and they brought friends with them.

Some did not grow up in the Baptist tradition, so they can relate more easily when they see the church using the liturgical calendar or reciting

prayers together in unison.

“It has been good to continue the relationships I’ve made at Baylor,” Roldan said.

Open to change

He credited both the congregation for its openness to change and Virgen, the former pastor who remained at the church as a member, who “made the transition very easy.”

Primera draws between 50 and 80 worshippers each week, and members are involved in ongoing community ministry. They provide food at the monthly parent-and-teacher meetings at Indian Spring Middle School, because they know parents are more likely to attend when food is provided. The church also provides breakfast for teachers during STAAR testing—the state assessment of academic readiness.

On Wednesday nights, the church’s youth group goes to Waco High Lofts to lead a backyard Bible school along with Baylor Missions, part of the university’s office of spiritual life.

While the church is trying new things and working in the community, there is still a lot to learn, Roldan stressed.

Lessons in biblical principles

The church offers one bilingual worship service on Sundays. Even though many of its congregants are bilingual, some speak only Spanish, and new members are arriving who speak only English.

Taking the time to participate in one language and simply hear others participate in another language is a lesson for the church, Roldan said.

“This is a model for what it looks like when different cultures come together,” he said.

Roldan believes the approach Primera takes in worship teaches important lessons to those who participate.

“It takes more time (for a bilingual worship service), but in a way it is training us in bearing with one another,” he said. “It teaches patience, and it shows us there are people other than us. It teaches that we are not worshipping alone.”