

Virginia ministry provides encouragement, affirmation to Latino children

Juan sits quietly and respectfully during the worship service at summer camp. Yet he doesn't look like he's paying much attention. His mother is an immigrant from Mexico, and now she's raising him alone. He's "a tough kid who has led a hard life and had to grow up quite early," said Sue Smith. But the service moves something inside the young man. He told Smith that he doesn't know what happens or why, but when they sing together, his "eyes leak a little bit."

CBF field personnel Greg and Sue Smith co-founded LUCHA Ministries in Fredericksburg, Va., with another couple in 2004 to help address the needs of the Latino immigrant population in their community.

LUCHA stands for Latinos Unidos por Cristo en Hermandad y Apoyo — in English, "Latinos United through Christ in Solidarity and Support." But the word means "struggle." The ministry aims to aid Latino immigrants and their families in the struggles of surviving in a new country: finding a job, putting children in school and navigating a life in English. Adult and family services include a food bank, school supply distribution, emergency utility support, translation, references to social service agencies, public advocacy and pastoral care.

The Smiths and LUCHA set their youth ministry in what they call a "3D" focus.

"We believe," said Greg, "that immigrant and second-generation youth need support and affirmation in who they are as persons, who they are in relationship to God and who they are as Latinos."

The world "tends to look down on them," Greg said. "We try to help them see that God values them, that LUCHA Ministries values them, and that they should value themselves and their heritage, and be thankful that they come from a bicultural, bilingual background."

Many children of immigrants struggle with their identity. Though the children are perfectly fluent in English, many parents lack the language skills to help with homework. And they can't conference with teachers or help with a college application.

Recognizing these needs, the Smiths have facilitated partnership with churches. One example is Sylvania Heights Baptist Church, a predominately white congregation in a working class neighborhood in Spotsylvania County. When the church partnered with LUCHA, members began reaching out to the Latino children in the neighborhood.

Rachel Huebel, who worked with LUCHA through CBF's Student.Go program, started developing the relationship between the church and the Latino neighbors. She passed out fliers in Spanish and worked at the Vacation Bible School so parents would see a familiar face when they dropped off their children.

As a result, approximately 25 percent of the students at Vacation Bible School were from Latino immigrant families. And, the VBS workers learned that these children were eager to learn and wanted to come back to church for other events.



Bert Browning, pastor of Huguenot Road Baptist Church in Richmond, Va., engages in a creative activity with one of the children who has found a new home at the church.

The church became more receptive to its Latino neighbors as it got to know the children.

Months later, LUCHA started the "Study Buddies" after-school program in partnership with area churches. Mondays after school, Sylvania Heights opens its fellowship hall to 25 kids who come for homework help.

Each summer, LUCHA also sponsors a dozen or so young people to attend missions camp with Passport, a CBF partner. Each day, the campers put their faith into practice, working on projects like home repair or working with kids. It was a worship session at Passport that made Juan's eyes leak. Juan has "become the most passionate youth about what it means to help others who are less fortunate," said Sue.

By contributing writer Maggie Lee

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