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North Carolina sees Hispanic church planting boom

by Keila Diaz, posted Friday, March 27, 2020 (one month ago)

CHARLOTTE, N.C. (BP) -- In the last seven years North Carolina has been experiencing a Hispanic church plant boom, with 150 new Hispanic churches. And the growth shows no signs of stopping, even amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

"There has been a spiritual awakening that has led to planting of Hispanics churches across the state," said William Ortega, consultant of Hispanic church planting for the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina.



Hispanic church planters in North Carolina attend church-planting class at one of the 25 centers across the state.

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Julio Arriola, executive director of Hispanic Relations and Mobilization for the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee, commends North Carolina as a model for other states.

"We applaud the hard work and vision of William and his team," Arriola said. "The rapid growth of Hispanic population in North Carolina and over all the United States tells us the need for leaders like him, willing to not only pray like it matters but also act like it matters."

Following governmental social distancing guidelines, Ortega has canceled all in-person training and moved to online meetings through the online meeting platform Zoom.

"There will be changes, but not when it comes to mobilizing Hispanic church planters," Ortega said.

Ortega, a native of Costa Rica, was a missionary with the International Mission Board in Mexico City before taking on the role at the North Carolina Convention. As part of his job, Ortega created a six-element Hispanic church planting strategy: working in teams, vision-casting, mobilization, spiritual formation/mentoring, church planter trainings and strategic prayer.

The first element creates teams of leaders at the state, regional and local levels who will coordinate and collaborate with pastors, local churches and associations.



William Ortega, a native of Costa Rica, has established a church-planting strategy among Hispanic Baptist churches in North Carolina that has led to a multiplication of Hispanic church plants across the state.

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"Working with teams will help us to measure the process we are doing in the area of church planting in each region and zone," he said.

Through an annual church-planting conference, regional church-planting retreats and one-on-one meetings with pastors (which are now held online), Ortega and other leaders are casting the Hispanic church-planting vision. The responsibility of coaching and mentoring also falls to the state, regional and local leaders.

"[We want to] infuse and share the church-planting vision aggressively to local churches within the state," he said, "... [to] cast God's vision in a way that motivates, inspires, and encourages others to accomplish God's purpose in the state for Hispanic work."

There are currently 25 Hispanic church-planting centers spread across North Carolina. The courses offered are useful for church planters as well as those who are called to be part of a church plant team.

Ortega said the state has a strong mobilization culture among its Hispanic churches.

"We typically don't bring planters from outside the state," he said. "The planters rise up within the churches. When pastors catch the vision, they themselves give up names of men who they see as potential church planters. Also, during the conferences some men have felt the calling to plant."

"We know that without prayer we can do nothing. We can have the best plans and the best strategies but if it not bathed in prayer it is in vain."

To that end, Ortega has developed a 50-day intercessory prayer plan that starts off on Resurrection Day and ends on Pentecost. During that time, pastors, planters and churches engage in prayer walking and group prayers for their region and their state.

"This year, the 50-day prayer plan begins on April 12, and it could not come at a better time," Ortega said. "We have sent out the prayer guides and are encouraging our church planters to come together through Zoom meetings, phone conferences and the like. We are being bombarded with information that can be terrifying, and it is important for the planter to be a source of encouragement and hope."

The COVID-19 crisis has also created an opportunity for planters to become familiar with streaming their services live through social media platforms like YouTube and Facebook.

"There was no program for church-planting training in Spanish and creating a process has made the difference," Ortega said. "Churches have already planted into the fourth generation and that is what we call a mobilization of churches."

Arriola agreed, stressing the importance of having a plan.

"We need to learn how to be strategic," Arriola said. "Their strategy is changing their results. God is answering their extraordinary way of praying, but also God is honoring their hard work and commitment to the Great Commission."

The challenge that remains is to reach the more than 1 million Hispanics in the state.

The rate of Hispanic population growth far outpaces the Hispanic church-planting rate. Still, Ortega is hopeful.

"We believe God is Lord of the harvest and we trust that He will make His Kingdom grow by raising up leaders and pastors."

Keila Diaz is Hispanic life correspondent for Baptist Press.