



CONNECTIONAL MINISTRY TAKES GOD'S LOVE INTO FLORIDA'S MIGRANT CAMPS

Marcial Carranza and his congregation at Samoset United Methodist Church in Bradenton are following in the footsteps of John Wesley. Not content simply to bring people into the church, they have created an “open air” ministry that takes the church to the people.

During the height of the tomato season, roughly mid-May through August, Carranza and members of his church family visit Bradenton area migrant camps at least twice a week. Partnering with Missioner Roberto Mancillas of First UMC Palmetto, they preach a “message of hope” to workers whose families often lead nomadic lives as they follow fruit, vegetable and tobacco harvests in Florida and the Southeastern United States.

Connectional Giving from the churches of the Florida United Methodist Conference supports a portion of the missioner’s salary and much of the materials and equipment used by the ministry.

“We are trying to reach people who may be intimidated by our culture and by the notion of attending a traditional church service,” he said. “Most of the workers are here on a temporary work visa. Usually they are not familiar – or totally at ease -- with our culture, and don’t have a formal church home. Through this ministry, we try to let them know that ‘God loves them.’”

Equipped with chairs, musical instruments, podium and a sound-system, the pastors and volunteers set up an informal outdoor gathering near the center of the camp. They form a “circle of prayer” to ask God to deliver his message through them. They announce the worship service over a loudspeaker system and then go door-to-door, inviting people to join in. Services are conducted in Spanish, and music has a distinctive Latin flair. During the season, there are as many as 10 services per month.

“We feel welcome in the camps,” Carranza said. “Sometimes we take food and clothing, and try to minister to a variety of needs. We have conducted services outdoors, in homes and in storefronts.”

According to Carranza, God is changing the lives of these people. “We reach 100 people a week who do not come to church,” he said. “We try to give them the hope and support they need to make the transition to a new life.”

Both Carranza and Mancillas have first-hand knowledge of what migrant workers face when they arrive in the U. S. At age nine, Carranza left the small village of Michoacan, northwest of Acapulco, to join his parents who already had immigrated to Florida.

“I lived with my grandparents in Mexico until I was old enough to work in the fields,” he said. “I have picked oranges, tomatoes, watermelon, cucumber, peaches and tobacco. I know exactly what the work is like and how it sacrifices families.”

A goal of the ministry is to try and help migrant families establish a more stable lifestyle. “We try to help them find permanent jobs, so that children can stay in school and families can begin to put down roots,” he added.

“People in the community call me when they need to hire someone,” he said. “Sometimes we are able to place people in factory or construction or landscaping jobs. With a permanent job, people can stay here and get involved in the church and community. They end up raising better families.”

“For many migrants, the church is their family,” he said. “It is where they feel the love of God.”