



Super Iglesia

New Birth Missionary Baptist megachurch hopes to break Sunday segregation with Eddie Velez's new Latino ministry.

IT COULD BE IGLESIA GRANDE or even iglesia enorme. Both super iglesia and mega iglesia are technically accurate. But it's debatable whether there is a true Spanish translation for the term "megachurch." Regardless, the label doesn't usually conjure thoughts of the Latino community, despite the fact that most Hispanics in the United States—roughly 74 percent—are Catholic. And what's more "mega" than the Roman Catholic Church?

Undaunted, the far-from-conventional New Birth Missionary Baptist Church in Lithonia has taken on the challenge of wooing the metro area's Latino newcomers away from their religious roots and into its 25,000-strong fold. New Birth,

already Atlanta's largest congregation, has launched a weekly Spanish-language service as the centerpiece of its New Birth Latino ministry. The Sunday service includes Christian music performed by a Latin band that craftily melds the musical styles familiar to the diverse mix of attendees, including Cubans, Dominicans, Mexicans, Colombians, Nicaraguans, and other Latin cultures. The church's flamboyant leader, Bishop Eddie Long, insists that the ultimate goal is to bring the word of God to an ever-growing population, but outreach to the Hispanic community by a black suburban megachurch breaks more than new religious ground; it is a significant connection between a high-profile institu-

tion in Atlanta's black community (New Birth hosted Coretta Scott King's six-hour, nationally televised funeral) to the area's fastest growing minority group: Hispanics. New Birth's program is reportedly the country's only Latino ministry run by a black nondenominational church.

More than thirty years ago, Martin Luther King Jr. famously observed that "eleven o'clock Sunday morning is the most segregated hour and Sunday school is still the most segregated school of the week." By aggressively courting Latin Americans, however, New Birth could ease tensions that have inevitably arisen as the city's demographics have shifted. The Hispanic population in metro Atlanta grew by more than 50 percent between 2000 and 2005. In 2003, Latinos surpassed African Americans as the largest community of color in the United States.

"It's about time. Predominantly white Catholic and Protestant churches have had Latin ministries for years," notes Michael Brown, an associate professor of theology at Emory University. "Many churches claim to be so open, but this is actually an example of one putting its money where its mouth is. It's definitely a good investment that will pay off down the road. As the number of Latinos go up, [Latinos] will gain increased political power and wealth."

Eddie Long hired Eddie Velez, a member of New Birth for more than fourteen years, to help him recruit Latino members. Velez, pastor of New Birth Latino, has a David vs. Goliath optimism about his charge. "At first people were surprised that an African American megachurch was opening up to the Latino community, and some still are, but at New Birth we're used to doing innovative things," says Velez, a former youth minister at the church and host of a popular local radio show, *Holy Hip-Hop*.

For Velez, reaching out to the Latino community meant reaching back into his personal heritage. "I never dreamed of ever doing something like this. I always ran from my culture—I wasn't even fluent in Spanish," says Velez, the son of

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Puerto Rican natives. "When Bishop Long approached me about this, I wasn't really sure if this was for me, but then I began to feel like it was my calling."

Velez has created his own backup team—New Birth's maintenance supervisor, Albert Rodriguez, and the Latino Ministry's director of music, Joey Gonzalez. Bishop Long first unveiled the ministry idea at a church leadership meeting in March 2006, Velez was officially on board by that July, and the plans were announced to the full congregation in August. The following months were a blur of planning meetings that culminated in the first service on January 28, 2007. About 1,500 people showed up for the extravagant affair, including media outlets such as the national African American lifestyles magazine *Jet* and *Primera Hora*, a popular newspaper in Puerto Rico.

Now the service, held Sundays at 3:30 p.m. in the New Birth chapel, draws from a few dozen to about 200 people each week with its motto: "Nuestra casa es su casa," or "Our house is your house."

Pastor Velez has gone to great lengths to remove the formalities of traditional church services. He uses graphics-laden PowerPoint presentations during his sermons and sometimes sports blue jeans. The ministry's band infuses the sounds of salsa, merengue, bachata, mariachi, and even some hip-hop and reggae into the service. Sometimes spirited dancers move between the chairs in colorful costumes.

"It's not all about following church rules and regulations, it's about loving God," says Gonzalez. "As Latinos we love our culture and our music, and we're trying to show everyone they don't always have to separate what they do outside of church with what they do inside the church. What we're playing in church is not a 'church beat.' Music is universal—it's about going with what you feel in your heart. I add a little flavor to the beat. We have a great time!"

The ministry has also been targeting pockets of Latino communities in hopes of drawing more fies, or worshipers. For example, Velez and his group have been actively recruiting contractors to volun-



A JOYFUL NOISE New Birth's Latino services incorporate music such as salsa, merengue, and mariachi, as well as hip-hop and reggae.

teer their skills to help rebuild a dilapidated community center in a Conyers mobile home community made up mostly of migrant Mexican workers. "Our success is not necessarily based on having a big number of people—church isn't just about this building," contends Rodriguez. "It's about living your life through the attributes of God. My goal has always been about helping people with their needs. If the community is completely unaffected, then our work is not complete. We want to reach beyond these walls of the church."

Last June, the ministry hosted a unity prayer service focused on peaceful immigration reform. Velez hopes to eventually host quarterly seminars aimed at better educating the Latino community, particularly undocumented workers, about how to properly apply for citizenship.

Velez says the key to his ministry's success will be his ability to bridge understanding between the Latin and African American cultures, a relationship that has recently been strained in the ongoing immigration debate.

"The powers that be are trying to foster a

division between the African American and Latino communities, but it's wrong," says Velez, whose wife of nineteen years is black. "Many of the plights African Americans once faced are being repeated now within the Latino culture. Much of America's infrastructure was built on the backs of African Americans in terms of labor; now the country's current infrastructure is being sustained on the backs of Latino laborers. We need to come together. America is a haven for immigrants."

Professor Brown of Emory agrees. "If anything it has been the white community generating this myth that the Hispanics are coming over to take *our* jobs, but this misconception needs to be addressed in the black community," says Brown, a New Testament and Christian Origin specialist who is working on a book on African American biblical principle interpretation. "We [blacks] need to be more sensitive to the plight of others. Our immigration to this country was very complicated. These people are risking their lives coming across the water to make a better life for themselves, and we need to be more sensitive to that."

Beyond bridging the black and Hispanic communities, Velez has his hands full trying to find common ground among a congregation that hails from a diverse mix of Latin cultures. "I'm still working on my Spanish, and when I can't express myself in Spanish I say it in English," he says. "There have been times I have said some words that are okay to say in the Puerto Rican culture but are offensive to others like the Mexican culture. Some words don't mean the same thing. I got a lot of looks like, 'Huh?' I'm still trying to better familiarize myself with all the nuances."

For now, he and his team seem content with the strides they've made. "We're just building it up right now," adds Velez. "It's going well, but we still have a lot of work to do." ■

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