

Small Texas Church Has Big Community Impact through Communities of Shalom

Pharr, Texas, February 14, 2006—A small grant can generate a lot of hope in a community when it goes to a ministry that really cares about the local people.

The Pharr Community Outreach Project/Shalom was able to use a grant of \$9,000 from the General Board of Global Ministries to leverage enough funds to hire a full-time director.

Now the seven year old project, which has a total of four staff and many volunteers, is able to expand its work in the town of 47,000 where poverty is the constant reality. Emphases are on literacy, home improvement, health and wellness, intercultural relations, and building a broad-based community of faith.

Pharr is six miles from the US-Mexico border. Thirty-one percent of the families live in poverty. Hidalgo County, where Pharr is located, is one of the poorest counties in the United States with an average per capita income of only \$9,899, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Before the community outreach project could do much in the county, it had to build a firm foundation. It started as an initiative of the Pharr United Methodist Church, but shifted to the Shalom model along the way.

“If we had not become a Community of Shalom we would not have the impact we have now,” said Elva Michal, a volunteer with the project since its outset. In 1999, she and her



Fellowship night at Community of Shalom site in Pharr, Texas.

Image by: Community and Institutional Ministries



Before and after photos of a house repaired through the auspices of the Community of Shalom in Pharr, Texas

*Image by: Courtesy Communities of Shalom
Source: Community and Institutional Ministries*

husband, along with other church members, took action to face the realities of the congregation in a changing neighborhood.

Ms. Michal recalls sensing that God was telling here that “if something doesn’t change, this church will die.” The area had become predominantly Hispanic. Pharr United Methodist Church was a shrinking Anglo-American congregation. Could it survive and grow by reaching out to the community?

The process was slow and challenging. The initial outreach project switched to the Shalom model in 2003 and received training through Global Ministries. That training is guided by four principles:

- *Faith in action*
- *Asset based community development*
- *Collaboration*
- *Systemic change*

The basis for this model of community development is the passage Jeremiah 29:7: "Seek the shalom of the community for it is in it's shalom that you will find your shalom."

“Up until Communities of Shalom training, the church was GIVING to the community,” Ms. Michal said. “Once we went to training we found out that the church’s giving alone was not going to make a difference. We needed to INVITE our neighbors to be on the Shalom committee, and become a part of our church and our outreach.”

This attitude reflects the principle of asset-based community development that is built into the Shalom model. By recognizing the strengths and gifts that exist in a community, Communities of Shalom engage in mutually beneficial ministry.

When talking with neighbors the Community of Shalom learned that education, housing, and health/wellness were three primary concerns in the community.

To address these concerns, the project, following the Shalom model, is now a partnership among the church, local workforce and education programs, schools, and several other United Methodist churches that provide volunteer workers.

The membership at Pharr United Methodist Church has grown significantly since its outreach ministry began. Average attendance has increased to between 65 and 105 people from 45 people. The 130 person membership of the church is now over 50% Hispanic. The Pharr Community Outreach Program/Shalom projects a \$157,500 budget for 2006.

There are five focused program areas that are part of the Pharr Community Outreach Project/Shalom:

- *Pharr Literacy Project*, featuring satellite sites located throughout the community;

- *The Learn and Reach Out Program*, providing opportunities for English immersion and intercultural relationship building;
- *Home Repair Initiative*, organizing volunteer work projects in the neighborhood;
- *Community of Faith*, offering space for spiritual practice without denominational affiliation and Christian education for children; and
- *The Health and Wellness Program*, increasing awareness of health concerns and integrating health and wellness into all the other projects and programs.

Pharr Community Outreach Program/Shalom also received a grant of \$13,000 from Global Ministries' Office of Ministries for Women, Children and Families.

Limited funding for existing Communities of Shalom and training for new projects are available through the Community and Institutional Ministries Unit of Global Ministries. New Communities of Shalom receive seed grants upon completion of training. Second-tier funding is available following one year of operation and the achievement of selected benchmarks.

The Communities of Shalom Program is coordinated through the General Board of Global Ministries with the consultation of a National Shalom Committee. Major funding comes through an allocation from the General Conference, the highest legislating body of The United Methodist Church.

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