

LIZ MOSBO VERHAGE

# OPENING DOORS TO A World of Learning



Elizabeth Flood plays a literacy game with her student Porsha Garland at the Fresno Covenant Foundation's tutoring program.

First Covenant Church in Fresno, California, started a tutoring program in response to the needs of a neighboring school.

Every morning before school, eight-year-old Joel Pacheco used to ask his mom the same question: “Why do I have to go?”

“Joel didn’t like school,” Joel’s mother Alma says. “He was embarrassed because he didn’t know how to

read. Because he couldn’t read, he had trouble with other subjects and he was far behind in school.”

Joel’s teacher recommended that he enroll in the Fresno Covenant Foundation’s (FCF) tutoring program, a ministry of First Mission Covenant Church in Fresno, California. When he first arrived at FCF, Joel was reading two grade levels behind his age and says he was bored at school. A year later, he reads at a second-grade level and says he enjoys going to school.

“My tutor helps me a lot,” Joel says. “Now I can read three chapters in one

day! When I grow-up, I want to be a tutor. I also want to be a policeman.” His mother reports that Joel now reads to his younger sisters every night.

Joel’s story is just one of many at FCF. Last year, 270 first- through sixth-grade students were tutored by about 166 tutors who volunteered more than 19,000 hours with FCF. In three years of operation, only two students have dropped out of the program.

FCF opened in March of 1999 in response to the needs of the diverse neighborhood surrounding First Covenant in Fresno. It started after Luis

Santana, a member of First Covenant and now executive director of FCF, began speaking with families in the neighborhood and with staff at a neighboring school.

"The demographics of the area were changing," Santana says. "Many middle and low-income families that did not speak English moved in the neighborhood and told us that they were interested in getting educational assistance for their children."

Santana learned that 80 percent of the elementary-age school children in the community (about 800 kids) were below the reading level for their grade. First Covenant's response was to create an after-school tutoring ministry focused on literacy.

FCF provides one-on-one and small-group tutoring that demands high accountability from students, parents, teachers, and tutors. Students commit to attending tutoring sessions

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at least twice a week for one year if they enroll, although the average attendance is four times a week. Parents meet with Santana to discuss their role in helping students do their homework and attend the tutoring sessions.

Most students are referred to FCF by their teachers, who are in regular contact with FCF so that the tutoring compliments what is being taught in the classroom. Tutors keep logs of the work done with each student and receive regular training by FCF to increase their skills.

FCF has recently expanded to eight tutoring sites and partners with another church, a local nonprofit group, and a mentoring agency. "We have become known as a model for how to do tutoring that gets results," says Santana. "We do this by continually listening to the community and having high standards for everyone."

Santana says that support from the congregation at First Covenant has been crucial of FCF's success. "We would never have been able to do this if the church was not 100 percent behind us," he says. First Covenant, with an average weekly attendance of just under 100 people, donated almost \$50,000 in start-up money to FCF and provided the facilities for the original site, including the classroom, administrative space, the cost of utilities, and tutoring supplies.

"Our church took a step of faith to financially make (FCF) possible," says Don Larson, chairperson of both First Covenant and the FCF board. "We were given an incredible opportunity and the finances, leadership, and expertise to make the program work."

work, but the thing that is important for us to realize is that the mission field starts right outside the doors of our church." Larson, who was a college history teacher for forty-five years, received an award in 2002 from the United Way for his work with FCF.

Santana's background—he's a native of Brazil and former Covenant short-term missionary to Colombia—has made him comfortable working with the diverse student population of FCF. Sixty-eight percent of the students are Hispanic, 10 percent are Asian/Pacific Islander, 12 percent are African Amer-



Sara Bonilla with her student Fily Llamas



Seng Vue with her student Margarito Martinez

Larson says that the ministry of FCF compliments First Covenant's support of Covenant missionary work in other countries. "One of the Covenant's greatest strengths is foreign missions, but [FCF] has given us a new opportunity to work with our own community," Larson says. "We will always continue our support of foreign mission

ican, 9 percent are Caucasian, and 1 percent is Native American.

Several families of children involved in the tutoring ministry have started attending First Covenant and some have expressed interest about the children's Bible club offered by the church. "Whether

[FCF] will do anything to increase the membership of the church we do not know," says Larson, "but that is not our motive. If they see that we care and are

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interested in them . . . who knows what effect that will have on their lives.”

Adam Edgerly, director of holistic ministries and churches planting ministries for the Pacific Southwest Conference, says that FCF is an example of how churches can meet the needs of their community. The program “provides a powerful model for all churches on how to respond to the unique needs surrounding them in a way that honors Christ,” he says.

FCF now has two full-time staff, Santana and program director Matilda Soria. Soria began as a tutor with FCF and then joined the staff position after earning a master’s degree in human development and psychology at Harvard.

“I came back because I truly believe that [FCF’s] mission is similar to my own—helping low-income students actualize their potential,” says Soria. “You can tell right away when you speak to the people at [FCF] that there is a passion for their students and their mission. They are not just doing it because it needs to be done.”

Santana, Soria, and their volunteers continue to listen to the community. In response to the requests of their students and families, FCF now offers English classes for adults and refers families to agencies to receive health insurance and immigration services. Recently FCF also began a recycling education program and added sports and recreation to their tutoring ministry.

“We are always talking to parents and kids to hear what they need to learn and we adapt to that,” says Santana. “I think that is part of what a church can give to its community.”

“Statistically we are doing very well, but even more than that I am most struck by the thanks that I get from the students, teachers, and parents,” says Soria. “I sometimes get notes, sometimes a bag of apples from a parent who is a farmer. And I can see the hope and positive look on the students’ faces—that is what really makes my day!” □