



PROVIDING A PATH TO MINISTRY

Irma Urbano always wanted to be a missionary. She and her husband, Bernardo, an accountant, raised their family in Mexico City where they were members of El Dorado Covenant Church. It wasn't until their friend Gwynn Lewis invited them in 1990 to come to Rolling Hills Covenant Church in California to start a Spanish-speaking congregation that she had the opportunity to fulfill her lifelong dream.

At the time, Irma was fifty-six and had no formal theological schooling. She and Bernardo had taken classes in Mexico taught by Covenant missionaries, but they needed more biblical and theological training. Lewis,

who was pastor of ethnic ministries at Rolling Hills, suggested that they attend the Centro Hispano de Estudios Teológicos (CHET), the one-year-old Covenant school established to train ministers and lay people for service in Spanish-speaking and multicultural congregations.

Irma never suspected that six years later she would become the first student to earn a diploma of ministry at CHET, or that two years after that she would become the first Latina to be ordained in the Covenant. Together she and her husband went on to pastor Spanish-speaking congregations in southern California and in Oakland, California.

Now retired, Irma says her ministry

Through the vision and sacrificial commitment of many individuals, **CHET** has educated ministers and laypeople for twenty years.

STAN FRIEDMAN

in the United States would not have been possible without CHET. "It gave me a new life," she explains. "I always wanted to be in seminary in Mexico, but I thought I was too old."

On December 5, CHET celebrates its twentieth anniversary with a graduating class of eighty-one students. In two decades the school has become instrumental for training pastors and lay leaders in a growing number of Hispanic and multicultural congregations in the United States and around the world, says CHET president Ed Delgado.

In 1985 denominational leaders were having conversations about how

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best to minister to the dramatic influx of Hispanic immigrants in the United States. The first Spanish-speaking Covenant church had been established in La Villa, Texas, in 1950. At the time there were 2.3 million Hispanics in the United States, Delgado says. Thirty-five years later, only six other Spanish-speaking Covenant congregations had been developed—three in California, and three in Illinois. But the Hispanic population in the United States had exploded to 17.3 million.

If the Covenant was serious about expanding its ministry to this fast-growing population, a training facility was needed for pastors and lay leaders, says Robert Johnston, who was provost and dean of North Park Theological Seminary at the time. “Many Hispanic leaders lacked the formal education, financial resources, and language skills to enter into a traditional college and seminary experience. Yet they were gifted and called by God.”

While many leaders had some training, they were often unable to complete degree programs in their home countries. Some had been forced to flee their homes due to war or economic crisis, explains Delgado. In the States, they found a context that was foreign and unfamiliar. Hispanic communities in the United States included people from many different countries and cultures, as well as multiple generations, each of whom was adjusting to life in a new country differently.

An alternate educational option was necessary, Johnston says. “It had to provide quality training at accessible costs and allow them to study in Spanish, the language of their birth and of their ministry context.”

So denominational leaders began to make plans to train a new generation of pastors and church leaders. David Mark, who is now regional coordinator for Latin America and the Caribbean for the Department of World

Mission, was extremely helpful to the group as they sought to understand the possibilities and challenges connected with moving forward.

Covenant president Paul Larsen suggested a partnership with First Covenant Church in Los Angeles, a congregation deeply committed to Hispanic ministry. The congregation had been reaching out to the Hispanics in their neighborhood as far back as the 1960s when they asked Eldon and Opal Johnson, former missionar-



CHET president Ed Delgado

ies to Bolivia, to become “missionaries at home.” Under their guidance, the church started La Primera Iglesia del Pacto Evangélico de Los Angeles in 1965.

Given the changing demographics in the area, the Spanish-speaking congregation eventually surpassed that of First Covenant. Then the existence of both congregations was threatened as the area became more and more commercialized. Eventually First Covenant decided to close its doors and sell its assets. Much of the money would be used to purchase a new home for the Spanish-speaking congregation in nearby Bell Gardens and to seed an endowment to fund the ongoing operations of CHET. The new school would be located in the church.

Partnering with North Park Theo-

logical Seminary, CHET became a Spanish-language pathway to full ordination within the Covenant. A planning team enlisted Jorge Taylor, pastor and professor at Northern Baptist Seminary, to serve as president of CHET and pastor of Primera Iglesia in Bell Gardens.

Twenty-five students enrolled in classes the semester the school opened in 1989. Now, twenty years later, more than 5,000 students have attended CHET, and more than 700 have graduated from its lay leadership, ministerial, lay family counseling, and bachelor’s of Christian ministry degree programs. Much of the growth occurred under the passionate and entrepreneurial leadership of Jorge Maldonado, who served as the president of CHET for thirteen years and designed much of the training program and curriculum.

Today the Covenant has fifty Spanish-speaking churches, nearly 70 percent of which are led by pastors who have graduated from CHET or received orientation studies through the school, says Delgado. CHET is endorsed by the Asociación Teológica Hispana, an Association of Theological Schools initiative, and also offers courses at satellite locations in Mexico, Spain, and other cities in the United States. The satellite campuses support the ongoing work of the Covenant in nine primarily Hispanic countries outside the United States.

In addition to theological training, education at CHET focuses on practical training, and the class work is rigorous. The ministerial license program requires ninety hours of biblical, theological, and practical ministry studies. The bachelor’s program involves an additional thirty-six hours of further in-depth study.

Currently as many women enroll in courses as men. During any given semester, students represent at least

seventeen Latin American countries and an equal number of denominations and independent churches. More than 90 percent are leaders in their local churches and are engaged already in some form of ministry.

Carlos De La Roca will graduate this month after three years of studying at CHET. "Never have I imagined that I would be preparing for ministry in ways that are so simple, so profound, and so practical," he says.

"Every time I come to class, I leave newly motivated to continue to serve my church and our congregation."

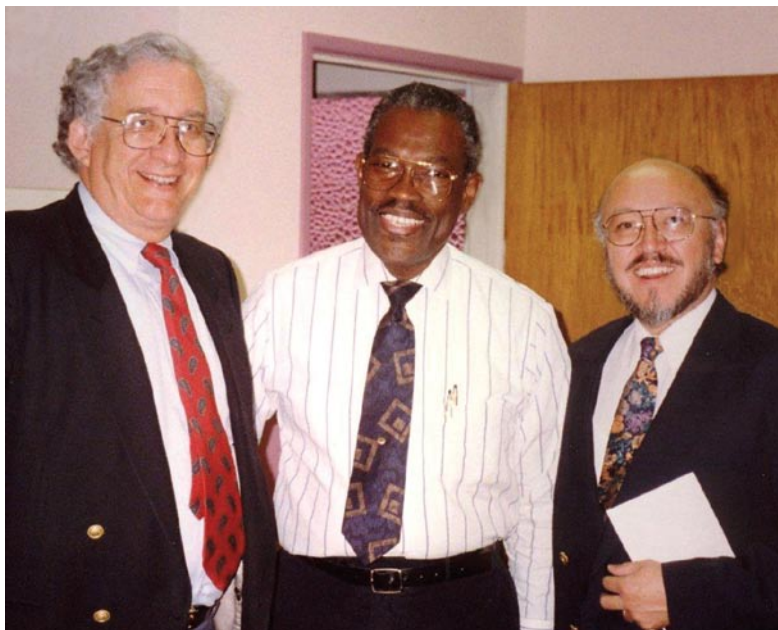
De La Roca's story is typical of many students. Originally from Guatemala, the father of two married children and three teenagers was an actively involved lay leader at the Covenant Church of the Redeemer in Los Angeles. He now is a co-pastor at the church, where he leads a worship service and ministers to Spanish-speaking members.

Seventy-five percent of CHET students are married with families and have a combined income of less than \$35,000. De La Roca does not work full-time at his church, and the company where he was a construction foreman laid him off when the economy bottomed out. Now, he says, "I work side jobs."

Many CHET students are finding that just making ends meet is difficult. Because students are struggling, CHET is experiencing its own financial challenges. As the school celebrates the past twenty years, there also are concerns about its immediate future.

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Paul Larsen, Jorge Taylor, and Jorge Maldonado

has subsidized \$440 of that cost. But with donations down from churches due to their own tight finances, the school's ability to offer scholarships has been dramatically reduced.

Enrollment dropped 35 percent this past semester, and the school, which always has needed subsidies and has a lean budget of \$365,000, is making cuts. All CHET staff members, including Delgado, have willingly taken a 20 percent pay cut until the situation improves, he says.

"Were it not for the CHET staff sense of call and commitment to equipping men and women to become pastors, missionaries, evangelists, counselors, teachers, and Christian leaders during good times or hard times, CHET would have years ago

thrown in the towel," says Delgado.

Today, nearly 47 million Hispanics live in the United States. Of the fifty Latino Covenant congregations in the United States, forty-two have been established since CHET began.

Delgado says it is the memory of observing his pastor while growing up in Arizona that inspires him to work for CHET's sustainable future. Serving churches in a string of three mining towns meant the pastor had

to develop and equip lay leaders to serve the congregations during his absence. "I saw him equip lay leaders to passionately and effectively share the gospel and lead the churches," Delgado says. "To this day that has been my model for recruiting, equipping, and sending leaders for kingdom service."

Delgado also says he has benefited from educational opportunities that generally are not available to many CHET students. He earned degrees from

the University of Arizona, Thunderbird School of International Management, and Fuller Theological Seminary, but he adds, "CHET student Benito, a former gangbanger, could be me. Elias, who only spoke an indigenous language growing up in Oaxaca, Mexico, and is now learning to speak, read, and write Spanish, could be me. Guadalupe, who lost her home yet never misses a class, could be me. Every student who comes through CHET's doors could be me. This knowledge drives me to want everyone to know and believe that God loves them, that God can forgive them and blesses them, and that regardless of their past or present story, they are worthy to be used by him." ■