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*News Update*


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## Adventist Pastors Help in Amnesty Effort

by Raymond Tetz

While the midweek service is being conducted by his assistant in the sanctuary of the Central Spanish Church, Senior Pastor Soto Villa sits in a small adjacent office. Tonight Pastor Villa is a counselor for an amnesty center. He and five others have been working since 7:00 p.m. It will be 11:30 that night before the team of Adventist members will have seen all the applicants.

A man appears at the doorway. He clutches a small card with his photo on it. His face is beaming. He announces to the group, "Mi tarjeta temporaria!" ("My temporary card!") He is a member of the Adventist congregation, and has been in this country illegally since 1974. For a moment work stops, and everyone applauds. The man hugs his pastor, and shakes hands with all the rest of the workers. The other applicants waiting their turn to be processed congratulate him. His new status gives them all encouragement.

Since May, 1987, 14 Seventh-day Adventist Spanish churches in the Los Angeles area have become amnesty counseling centers. They help church members and community residents assemble the necessary documents needed to satisfy the terms of a new federal law permitting illegal aliens to become legal residents. More importantly, members of the congregations donate their time as counselors, secretaries, notaries, and other necessary personnel. As a result, the churches have been able to provide for \$60 the same services for which immigration attorneys downtown charge between \$500 to \$5000.

Pastor Villa says that "As early as August 1, 1987, we had interviewed nearly 1000 people

right here from the community surrounding our church. Only about 400 of those people come from my congregation. We are insuring our survival as a congregation while carrying out a much-appreciated service to our community." By May 1988 many hundreds of people will have been assisted by Adventist amnesty centers.

Hispanic SDA churches in the Los Angeles area have long faced the issue of illegal aliens in their congregations. One Southern California Conference Spanish pastor estimates that 80 percent of his congregation is illegal, and pastors freely share stories of members being deported, attempting risky border crossings, and living with the constant fear of the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Skirting immigration laws is accepted by these congregations as a fact of everyday life.

Since May 5, 1987, Seventh-day Adventist churches in the Los Angeles area have responded to a unique challenge to help their members and community residents during a one-year window of opportunity. Under the terms of the Immigration and Control Act of 1986, persons who resided in the U.S. before 1972 may become permanent residents, and persons who resided in the U.S. before January 1, 1982, may become temporary residents with the opportunity to change their status to permanent residents after 18 months.

Although start-up money came from the Southern California Conference and the General Conference, the success of the centers depends on the local congregations. Most centers are open on Sundays as well as one week night. All members of the team must be available every time the center is open. And the work is complicated and time-consuming.

Applicants must be interviewed by counselors acquainted with the new law and capable of determining with the applicant what proofs can be used to establish residency. Documents proving residence in the U.S. must be translated from Spanish to English, and notarized by a notary public fluent

in both languages. Applicants must be properly fingerprinted, and these prints submitted with their applications. Counselors must make certain that application for amnesty is complete, with no questions left unanswered, or the forms will be rejected. Applicants are issued an ID card stating that they are in the process of applying for legal residency. This card contains their photo, the name of the church, and is signed by the pastor. It will help applicants if they encounter the INS.

Participating churches must provide space for processing of the applicants, storage of the documents, and counseling. Because persons hoping to receive permanent resident status must pass a U.S. history test, as well as a test on the Constitution, the churches must provide the resources to prepare for these tests. Textbooks and instruction must be provided in Spanish as well as English to assist those who are striving to reach this goal.

The costs of developing the centers are being borne by the Southern California Conference and the participating churches. A special budget of \$10,000 has covered the costs of training counselors, developing materials, and the basic office materials needed to establish the centers. Attorney Don P. Chairez, an Adventist lawyer based in Sacramento who is also an expert in immigration law, was retained by the General Conference

as special counsel for this project. He has conducted the training for counselors and pastors; the General Conference provided for his fees.

Dan Robles, who pastored in Los Angeles for many years before becoming director of Urban Ministries and Community Services for the Southern California Conference, underscores the reason for a sense of urgency. "Amnesty poses not only an opportunity but a threat. Members who do not become legal may be deported, and will find it increasingly difficult to obtain employment. Imagine the effect of mass unemployment or deportations on our congregations. And the potential for disruption in our communities cannot be overestimated. We feel like we have to do this—for our communities, as well as for our own people."

Meanwhile, the pace is quickening at the Central Spanish and 14 other Seventh-day Adventist churches in Los Angeles. They have a sense of urgency and mission, knowing a date has been set when members and neighbors will have to be ready, a moment when the time of amnesty will have run out.

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