SERVANT CHURCH

Fuente de Gracia (Fountain of Grace) Church in Sanger, CA, is a joint church plant of the San Joaquin Presbytery and our Sierra Pacific Synod, the first such joint plant for our synod. Pastor Alex Gonzalez loves to plant churches, and the congregations he has planted all have a certain personality; they are servant churches. Pr. Alex says, “God has placed in our hearts a deep desire to have a place where children, youth, and families can be empowered to grow spiritually, socially, physically and emotionally healthy. Our vision is to provide a place with activities and services that will create positive youth development and build stronger families which can actively influence their community by getting involved in it to help others get to know, to love, and to serve Jesus.”

Fuente de Gracia has literally been a fountain of gifts for their neighbors. Last year they gave to area children 100 back packs filled with school supplies, served Thanksgiving dinner to 75 families, and surprised 100 neighborhood children with gifts at Christmas. Fuente de Gracia regularly receives and distributes free food to neighbors in need, and now during the pandemic has been a key player in distributing $32,500 worth of grocery store gift cards to area farm workers and others who are food insecure. Pr. Alex reports: “I am very proud of the witness Fuente de Gracia is giving by serving those who have been hit hardest by COVID-19, and by our cooperative efforts with Presbyterians and Lutherans.”

While the COVID-19 pandemic has in recent months interfered with some of those ministries, it has also created new needs and another fountain of gifts: face masks. Masks have been provided to church members, who passed other masks along to families and friends. The congregation came to understand that farm workers were not provided with masks, but had to purchase their own; Fuente de Gracia has provided many masks to farm workers and their families. The congregation also provided masks to homeless people who live nearby and interact with the congregation, for instance at the regular food giveaways. One local school, hearing that Fuente de Gracia was distributing face masks, requested a supply for students and staff.

But where did Fuente de Gracia get all those masks? Who “primed” the fountain of grace? I will let Margie Back, long time leader at Trinity, Fresno,
“My story actually begins with Lutheran Social Services. Early in March I received a call from LSS asking if the women at Trinity would be willing to make masks for their staff and clients. Their work being ‘essential,’ staff would be with clients all day, and masks were strongly recommended. As I sought women to sew, I learned that our lead quilter was ill and that group was unable to help. Two other women joined me, and we each began searching for a pattern and material. There was a learning curve, as well as decades old, dusty-from-non-use, sewing machines. One of the women soon moved on to another project, but Marilyn Boline and I pressed on. As we moved toward the first group of 250 masks for LSS, we also began making masks for friends and family, and for the families of our congregation. In the midst of that I got a call from Pr. Tita Valeriano, Director for Evangelical Mission for our synod, telling me that Fuente de Gracia congregation in Sanger needed 20 masks by Sunday. Having already mailed out the fruits of that week’s work, I quickly made the 20 for Pr. Alex; his wife picked them up and they had them for use on Sunday – the start of a new partnership. I offered to make more if needed, and a few days later I made 20 more which would be used as a little ‘gift’ when visiting and inviting new people to their mission. Fuente de Gracia was finding good use for the masks, able to give out hundreds of masks, including some special masks for school children (in their school colors and with school logo).

About that same time Jerry Bailey, leader of Trinity’s food distribution program, suggested it would be ‘really nice’ to include 4 masks in each food bag on the next distribution day; he anticipated preparing 300 bags. Marilyn had moved on to other tasks, but I was enjoying the challenge and wanted to continue. I had pledged 100 masks to Lutheran World Relief, who had already sent 75,000 masks overseas, and was seeking help to provide 75,000 more. We were also able to offer masks to Our Redeemer/Nuestro Redentor in Livingston, a bi-lingual ministry of our synod. The total at this time has surpassed 3,500 and the sewing continues.

It has been a fun challenge, and rewarding. It has made us feel we are contributing to the healing of the pandemic – and we pray the Lord’s blessing on each mask as it goes on its way.” Pr. Alex says, “Not every superhero swears a mask; some make them! We are very grateful to Margie Back and her volunteers for providing us with the masks and, as the need continues, we hope and pray that our partnership carries on into 2021.”

Sometimes a servant church needs partnership with other servant Christ-followers. Fuente de Gracia Church has found those partners in Marilyn and Margie and others at Trinity, Fresno who have been a “fountain of grace” providing for Margie and Marilyn fabric, thread, elastic and encouragement. We pray the partnership between their two congregations, as well as the San Joaquin Presbytery/Sierra Pacific Synod partnership, will continue to grow and bear fruit for Christ.

Do you have a story that you would like to share? Send any Church Together story requests to mic@spselca.org.