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THANK YOU, DR. MARIANO AVILA

# Leader of Hispanic Ministry Certificate Program makes a difference in his students and in our city

By **Natalie Hart**

“He has told us many different times that he had been praying for ten years for something, for an opportunity like this to happen to the Hispanic community. So I will say thank you and I will not stop saying thank you.”

Those are the words of Pastor Raquel Cordova, of Fuente de Vida Church, about her professor, Dr. Mariano Avila, who is the recipient of GoH's 2015 Community Service Award.

Ten years of praying the same prayer – that shows some holy perseverance.

Mariano says, “Yes, it was a long time of waiting and, at some point, I thought it was not going to happen. But I met Edwin and things started to fall in place.”

Edwin Hernandez was a Senior Program Officer for GoH when they first met at a Calvin Worship Institute (<http://worship.calvin.edu/>), but it took a few years of discussion, research, and a little trial and error to get their program off the ground. Hernandez says, “You couldn't spend but a few minutes with him without knowing you were with someone with the passion and knowledge to lead a program like this.”

The program Mariano runs is a two-year, expenses-paid certificate program for pastors of Hispanic churches in Grand Rapids: the Certificate for Hispanic Ministry (/Clergy-Training) (CHM), offered in partnership between Gatherings of Hope (GoH) and Calvin Theological Seminary. Last year it graduated its first cohort of thirty-nine pastors, several of whom are continuing with master's studies at local seminaries. Classes are conducted entirely in Spanish, but there

are English classes for those who want to improve their skills. Students range in age from 20s to 70s, and their educational level completed from elementary school to college. They come from 9 different countries and 11 different denominations. Yet they have become a thriving learning community, drawn together week after week to learn from Mariano, his distinguished guests, the Literacy Center of West Michigan – and from each other.

Ronald Feenstra, Academic Dean at the seminary knows what an accomplishment this is: “It is amazing that there are students in the class, some of whom had already gone through seminary, and some of whom had never had formal education before at any level. It’s really quite a remarkable program and he has been the center of it.” Hernandez spoke to this, as well: “He masters the content but also understands the pastoral needs of people who haven’t had formal education.”

As remarkable as Mariano and the program are, he is impressed by his students: “They are a source of energy and inspiration. When I see their commitment and incredible sacrifice just to be able to study, after long days of work and with many church, work and family commitments, I am always amazed to see how hard they work to study with us.”

When Mariano’s students talk about him, two themes emerge: **kindness and mission.**

Alberto Lopez, pastor of Dios de Sion Church, says, “What has caught my attention the most about Dr. Avila is his kindness, his focus on helping us understand the study, the Word of God.” Enrique Cuevas of Alas de Aguila Church notices Mariano’s humility: “It’s really nice to see someone who’s so highly qualified and can still just spend time with you and your family and the people of your congregation, and take time to encourage each one of them.”

Community involvement is one of the pillars of the CHM program, and the students are catching the fever. Cordova points to her dissatisfaction with how

she used to think about church: “Now, to me, it’s like, okay, there’s more. There is so much more that needs to be done. It’s not enough just to go to service, it’s not enough to just worship God some of the days of the week. We have to do something to reach this community.” Cuevas says, “[Dr. Avila has] been an example of putting it in practice that the Word of God is not only to make us grow spiritually, but also to challenge us to a mission.”

**As with every great learning community, they teach each other and they change each other.** Students like Alberto Lopez point to the difference his teacher has made in his life:

“Some of the brethren in my church have approached me and they tell me: ‘Pastor, we have seen some changes in your sermon. Before you didn’t do this, but now you are doing it.’ And you know why there had been change? Because I am receiving it and I am putting it into practice.”

And teachers like Mariano point to the difference they have made in *his* life: “I cannot just be a professor. I am forced to be also a pastor, and I thank my students for that. Far from being in an ivory tower, I am involved in the ministry of our students in the streets and homes in Kent County.”

Gatherings of Hope is thrilled to support the Certificate for Hispanic Ministry and to watch the difference it is already making, not only in the Hispanic community, but also in Grand Rapids at large. But we’ll let Mariano have the last word on that.

“My hopes are that the Hispanic/Latino church community becomes a ferment for positive change in our city. They are already but my hope and dream is that the training we provide will make them even better in what they do and more efficacious in changing our communities. When I see female and male pastors giving family counseling, preaching biblical messages, involved in transforming their communities my hopes take a firm ground. We are already seeing the future!”

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