

Vision & Purpose: Staying Connected

Vernig Suarez is the pastor of **Iglesia del Camino**, First Baptist Church of Norfolk's Hispanic ministry. Like most Hispanic churches, Pastor Suarez's congregation tends to change every three or four years due to immigration. The church is also in a port area, which leads to even more changes with people coming and going. However, God has used Suarez to help grow the church to an average attendance of 130 people.

Last fall, Iglesia del Camino experienced spiritual and numerical growth. They were excited to see God bringing in new families with more people getting involved. When COVID-19 began, Suarez knew he needed to make sure his congregation would remain safe. They quickly shifted to an online presence through Facebook Live, Facebook groups, and Zoom meetings during the week. But Pastor Suarez thought the congregation needed to see him and "be" with him. So, he visited the members, called them from the driveway or parking lot, got out of his car so they could see him, and then prayed for them on the phone. Little gestures like this meant a lot to church members.

The church's discipleship groups during the week had a steady attendance and, most importantly, the members were engaged in sharing on their social media platforms

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what they had learned. Because of the discipleship systems that were already in place, explained Pastor Suarez, “The church has been united and expectant to be together again. The key has been to stay focused on the hope of the vision God has given.”

“We want to be a community of disciples committed to Him and His Kingdom from Hampton Roads to the ends of the earth,” said Suarez. “As leaders of the church, this is what we have in our minds and hearts, and that is what we work for. We want our members to come back to God and connect with Him and obey Him. During COVID-19, I had to

switch methods, but not the vision or purpose. That's why it was important to move beyond Facebook Live and to be connected on the phone and through groups.

The church made itself aware of the needs of the community. “We had a group of people intentionally praying for these needs every day at noon, praying for people who were infected with COVID-19, etc., and we saw God answering our prayers with great power,” Suarez said. “Prayer has been the key to reaching the community.”

“We have also served our community. We have used our facilities to do COVID-19 tests for the Hispanic community on two different occasions,” he shared. The church helped Centro de Recursos Hispano (Hispanic Resource Center), who brought in nurses from Sentara Hospital in early April. Around 150 people were tested, and many received boxes of food because they had lost their jobs. There was a second health fair at the end of May, and other health agencies came to explain to the community about the benefits they could receive. Over 400 attended!

The discipleship systems at Iglesia del Camino helped the disciples connect with God and to one another, and the outreach activities connected them with the mission. Pastor Suarez believes that everything that has happened is thanks to their intentional prayer—their greatest investment. Financially, the church only had to use \$30 of its budget for all of these outreach opportunities! Instead, God provided through the resource center and health agencies.

Quarantine has been a time to sow. When Iglesia del Camino opened services again, four new families came—people who had been working in the agencies and saw how the church served the community. Other visitors came because they had been served by the church during the pandemic.

Iglesia del Camino is a beautiful example of a church that has remained focused on its mission through this season. They have remained connected to God and to each other and have been intentional about serving their community to reach the lost with the Gospel. ■