

# Progreso ministry brings smiles, full stomachs

August 27, 2009

PROGRESO—A food ministry in the Rio Grande Valley draws in the community by meeting physical needs, but its operators hope their neighbors stay to be fed spiritually, as well.

Ismael Gaspar, pastor of Iglesia Bautista Sublime Gracia in Progreso, works as director and coordinator of Puerta Abierta, a food-distribution ministry of the church.



Ismael Gaspar brings food from the food bank to restock the Puerta Abierta pantry in Progreso.

“My life is serving the community,” Gaspar said. “God has blessed us.”

Church members distribute food Wednesday, Friday and Sunday. On Wednesday, people receive items like beans, rice, oil and canned goods. They receive fresh vegetables and bread on Friday and warm meals on Sunday. Hygiene items also are available.

About 1,600 people come to Puerta Abierta each month for food, and about 10 volunteers unload, stock and give out supplies.

“Someone in the community will always say, ‘You can always go to Sublime Gracia, and they’ll be able to take care of your physical and spiritual needs,’” Gaspar said.

Volunteers invite people to church services, and afterwards, they distribute food. Although people do not have to attend to receive food, 90 percent of the people who come for food also attend the services.

“It’s a ministry outreach for our church, and it’s what we need to be doing,” Gaspar said. “There are a lot of people in need and without jobs.” The biggest reward is seeing families’ faces when volunteers meet their needs, Gaspar said.

“I tell people this is a high-paying job,” he said with a laugh. “Giving people food and then seeing them walk away with a big smile is worth so much.”

Brenda Aguilar, a volunteer from Sublime Gracia, prepares boxes and serves to help people in her community get through tough times.

“I see we’re doing God’s work,” Aguilar said. “It’s a way to bring people to church.”



Nazario Badillo unloads supplies from the McAllen Food Bank for the Puerta Abierta ministry in Progreso. PHOTOS/Lauren Heartsill

Nazario Badillo, member at Sublime Gracia, helps by storing food, doing electrical work through the storage building and making the church sign. He wants to help however he can.

“They see the love of God through what we’re doing,” Badillo said.

Groups outside of the Rio Grande Valley see the needs and want to help.

Kevin Allen, minister of youth at Manchaca Baptist Church in Austin, came with seven youth and 10 adults from his church for a second year to Progreso. They hosted a Vacation Bible School at the church and did construction projects at local houses.

“This church is awesome,” Allen said. “Whatever they need, we want to be

able to help.”

Allen learned about the needs in the Rio Grande Valley through Bukner and his pastor.

“These are people who need to hear good news and know there’s hope,” Allen said.

This group understands their efforts affect the long term, and they want to come back each year to support the church, Allen said.

“What a great place,” Allen said. “It’s making a difference in this community.”

Maria Lopez, interpreter with Manchaca Baptist Church, was amazed to see how many people came through the food ministry.

“I feel like it’s a blessing to me,” Lopez said. “Hopefully they’ll understand God’s powerful.”

The ministry, which opened about four years ago, costs \$1,000 a month to run, and it receives \$125 from the convention. Puerta Abierta also receives money from love offerings and fundraisers. Baptists around the state support the ministry through gifts to the Texas Baptist Offering for World Hunger.