



(Staff photo by BILL SANDERS)

Rev. Miguel Fernandez' chapel replaces quonset hut church.

It belongs to the people

Migrant church 'more like a second home'

By Helen Rojas

Miguel Garcia rises from her folding chair at Our Lady Queen of Peace church and reads from the gospel to the Sunday crowd — first in Spanish, then in English.

Mrs. Garcia, only 27, remembers when mass was said in a quonset hut 10 years ago, largely by migrant workers who settled in the area west of Delray Beach.

Today, services are held in a small church next door, but the spirit of the earlier days remains.

Mass is still said in Spanish to emigrants who gather from Delray Beach, Palm Beach, Boynton Beach and Lantana.

The church is much the same with prayer pews that consist of folding chairs. And migrants working the farm circuit will always be welcome to worship at the church, located at 9204 N. Atlantic Ave.

"The church belongs to the people here," said Danka Sharma, president of the parish council. "It's more like a second home."

"We don't say it's a church — it's our church."

Mrs. Garcia grew up with the church. Her parents decided to settle in the area when she turned 6 so she and her brothers and sisters could get an education.

Although she was just a small child when she traveled the farm circuit with her parents, who are from Texas, she knows a migrant's life.

"I remember sleeping under trucks because there was no place else and working in orchards picking apples," she said. "From what I hear, people are still living the same way."

She and her parents have been coming to the church since it was built in 1962. The original quonset hut it was housed in was replaced by the current structure in 1970.

Although Our Lady Queen of Peace operates under the Archdiocese of Miami, it is mostly left to run its own operations and find much of its own funding, said church secretary Gloria Marcus.

The church offers religious classes, prayer meetings, a day-care center and a youth group.

During the farm season, however, when migrants make up about 25 percent of church attendance, special needs arise.

Many of the migrants are single males who are illegal aliens trying to get work, Father **Rafael Fernandez** said. Often they need medical care to treat severe cases of malnutrition and other problems.

Although the church's main function is to provide religious services, it also tries to help people get visas.

"We try to encourage them to legalize the situation here," Father **Fernandez** said.

Sometimes the church becomes the only agency the migrants feel they can trust. One Nicaraguan woman paid \$700 to a Chicago-based company that promised to get her a work permit. When the permit never arrived, she sought out the church for help.

Mrs. Marcus tried to contact the company for a refund, but admitted that she doesn't usually have much luck getting money back.

Besides trying to legalize their status in this country, education is stressed in the youth groups on the bus way end of the migrant lifestyle. Mrs. Garcia, who heads the youth group, said two teenage church members now attend college and a career day for other young adults is starting.

One of the reasons the family-oriented church is so popular is because the migrants and even the settled families, tend to keep matters within the family.

One of the highlights of the church's social calendar is the once-a-month get-together of families in the parish after services, Mrs. Marcus

said. Each family brings one dish to contribute to a pot-luck supper and the meal becomes an international affair with black beans and rice, potatoes, salad, guacamole, tortillas and arroz con pollo (chicken and rice). Once a year, a celebration called the Fiesta teaches the children more about their native heritage and culture in special classes.

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