



# URBAN CURRENT

## A Miami model

I can't read this."

The earnest 16-year-old held his Spanish Bible out to the pastor. The pastor hesitated. Not only the 16-year-old but also his parents worshipped in the Spanish-language congregation. The young man, not unlike most second-generation immigrants in the States attending American schools, spoke primarily English. The Spanish spoken at home with his parents, relatives, and maybe here and there on the street was not the Spanish of scripture, theology, and Bible study.

The pastor gave the young teenager a King James Bible and sent him home. Quite soon the young man returned holding out the KJV to his pastor saying "I can't read this either." The pastor handed him a New King James Version. The teenager reported back "I can read this." How could the pastor know that this encounter would lead him into a great adventure?

Russell Johnson, with wife Beverly, came to Miami in September 1977 and founded Iglesia Biblica Bautista. A missionary kid from Peru, he led the church for the first 12 years, functioning in Spanish. His encounter with the teenager started some wheels turning. The next year, they counted 79 visitors who needed the Spanish service translated for them at the back of the auditorium. Checking local census information they discovered their community was only 33 percent Hispanic while the remainder was 33 percent Anglo and 33 percent African American. "If we reach every Hispanic in our community," Johnson told his congregation, "we will only reach 33 percent of our area."

Johnson realized something had to change. "If we start an English church for the English speakers, we will be bringing division to many families. That can't be a good thing," he reasoned. "If we start an English service, we can continue as one church ministering to the whole family even though families have different language needs." In 1989, the congregation started an English service.

Miami! Multifarious vice! Multinational

variety! A multicultural vortex! It's challenging enough to function in any urban environment. The city of Miami, colorful, volatile, transitory, presents a unique challenge. Yet right in the middle of it all is International Bible Baptist Church — thriving, preaching the Word, reaching people, making a difference. Calling themselves IBB, their name now matches their reality.

"Miami is always changing," Pastor Johnson says. "During our 36 years we have witnessed entire neighborhoods change from primarily Anglo, to Cuban, to Haitian. Every political and economic upheaval or environmental event within the western hemisphere can bring about an immediate influx of immigrants that are absorbed into the fabric of our community. The immediate area around our church has maintained a very even level of diversity for several decades with changes coming as younger generations move west or north to newer neighborhoods but with recent arrivals taking their place in the community. In the early years of our ministry, the Hispanic community was primarily Cuban. However, over the course of the years, even though Hispanics are the largest group in south Florida, today non-Cubans outnumber the Cubans."

I asked Johnson about challenges to his family when they moved to Miami.

"I grew up in a much bigger city than Miami so the diversity and pace of the city was a welcome thing for me," Johnson replied. "My wife, however, had to make some early adjustments coming from a much smaller town. The pace of life and the changes of an evolving ministry presents a constant challenge that never really allows us to get too comfortable in any situation.

"Our children grew up in very diverse public schools where they were often the minority. That has been a positive for them and allowed them to have a much larger perspective of the world around us. Our daughter married a young man from El Salvador. My son has recently moved his family to London, an even more diverse city, to plant a church."

I was interested to hear Johnson explain how a Spanish-language congregation could expand its heart and mission and reach not only second-generation Hispanics who speak English, but Anglos and African Americans as well. He summed up what I know had to be a great leadership challenge in a simple statement. "We set about to create an environment where everyone is comfortable." Clearly with the present makeup of the congregation, they have achieved significant success. There is a lot to pay attention to in the IBB story.

Johnson was clearly prepared by God to lead this effort. However, even with divine preparation Johnson had to do community exegesis, be creative, and take risks. I can't help but wonder if some of the brethren Spanish and English didn't eye these developments askance.

We don't always appreciate innovation when it first emerges from its cocoon. A second language congregation, instead of a new church, keeps families together, leverages strength, broadens outreach, and displays unity in an increasingly fractured world. It seems like a win-win to me.

One church, two congregations, two languages, 30 nationalities, support for 24 missionary families around the world, and engaged in strategic partnerships with other gospel-focused organizations ... don't you think this is what Jesus had in mind when He said I will build my church?

Oh, that 16-year-old who handed the pastor the Spanish Bible? His name is Marcel Sanchez. He now co-pastors with Russell Johnson.

Ain't God awesome?

by Charles Lyons, Pastor  
Armitage Baptist Church,  
Chicago, Illinois  
[charles.lyons@armitagechurch.org](mailto:charles.lyons@armitagechurch.org)

