

# Disolved church donates building to multiplying Hispanic ministry

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In 2021, six remaining members of a dissolved church congregated. Over the past few years, the three couples of Oak Grove Church had watched the numbers dwindle as elderly members passed away and families moved on. With a well-maintained and fully furnished church building, the few who stayed behind had no desire to cut the power and walk away.

“We wanted to do something that was God-honoring. That was the number one thing,” one of the six recalled about their prayerful deliberation over the next several months.

Nearly 40 years earlier in 1982, not far from Oak Grove, Liberty Church in Waynesboro began its journey. A pastor and his wife, Phillip and Peggy Gandy, started their ministry at Liberty, until God called them overseas to Chile, where they served as missionaries for six years. When the couple returned in 1990, the Gandys resumed their service at Liberty, tending to the church for a total of 33 years.

Having lived and worked among the Hispanic people of Chile, the Gandys developed a deep connection with the Hispanic community in Mississippi. For years, they tried to start a ministry, but most of the Hispanic people in Wayne County were transient, working in industries like timber and poultry before moving elsewhere. The ministry seemed fruitless. However, one day a woman from the Wayne County Health Department called Gandy to say her family was looking for a Hispanic church to join.

Late in the afternoon, as it grew dark, Gandy visited the family – a husband and wife, their children, and the wife's brother and sister. "They were very interested in our vision to begin Hispanic work, and they jumped in with all their heart," said Gandy.

After Wednesday night service, the Gandys started a Bible study with the family. As they reached out to extended family and friends, more people were saved. The husband, Uzziel Reyes, studied alongside Gandy, and as the ministry developed, God was preparing Reyes for a greater role in it.

As the ministry grew, Gandy contacted Paula Smith, the Mississippi Baptist Convention Board Multicultural Ministries director, for English as a Second Language (ESL) materials. Smith trained 20 church members to teach ESL. Through this, the ministry made many more contacts with the Hispanic community.

When the group outgrew its space, Liberty converted a building on its campus into a worship center and Sunday school space for the Hispanic outreach. The children from these families, who often understood more English than their parents, attended the English Sunday schools and Awana ministry. As God prepared him, Reyes pastored the church plant, but the ministry struggled with the limited space. Even with the use of Liberty's gym and fellowship hall, the Hispanic church plant quickly filled every space.

Gandy, Reyes, and Liberty began to pray that God would provide a property where the church plant could stand on its own and become an independent local church. Over a year, they prayed, and prayed, and prayed.

Meanwhile, just north of Waynesboro, in Clarke County, the six remaining members of Oak Grove Church congregated. The three couples elected to close the church but agreed not to sell the property to a business or donate the building to just any

nonprofit. They wanted to honor God with the building He had blessed them with.

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“We have never looked back,” said one of the six members, who all wished to remain anonymous. “We knew it was the right thing. There’s no credit for doing the right thing.”

On Sept. 8 of this year, Iglesia Bautista Libertad officially became a church. They met in their own building and started with 27 charter members, led by Pastor Uzziel Reyes.

“Over time, studying with Bro. Uzziel and guiding him, I saw the Lord preparing him for this role,” reflected Gandy. “I wish I could say it was something I did, but I would be dishonest. It’s something the Lord did. He just let me witness it.”

Around 15 years ago, a pastor met a family and began a Bible study with them. Now, around 60 people attend Iglesia Bautista Libertad every Sunday, all because one evening a mission and a passion were shared.



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Members of Iglesia Bautista Libertad gather for a fellowship<sup>US</sup>

meal at their new church building. (Photo credit: Iglesiae  
Bautista Libertad)

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Liberty and Libertad continue to pray that God will open

opportunities for more Hispanic ministry in Wayne County. "There's a large need in this area for another church without infringing on the one we just organized," Gandy said. "There's certainly room for two Hispanic churches, or more, so we're praying, if the Lord wills, for another open door."

"My prayer," said Reyes, "is always that God brings people and uses us to give the Gospel, and that when we preach, people can feel in their hearts that God is speaking to them."

Each Sunday on his way home from church, one of the Oak Grove donors and his wife pass by Iglesia Bautista Libertad to count the vehicles. He is pleasantly surprised when each week seems to hold more than the last.

"We've never doubted our decision," he said. "They stay busy at that church. They take care of the grounds, the facilities, and they're always doing something. They keep the grass cut, raked, limbed, and trimmed, and I appreciate that. I just want to clarify that it wasn't ours to give away or sell. Everything belongs to God. We just don't acknowledge that enough."