Grieving Together: How Orlando's Hispanic Evangelicals Are Reaching Out

A local pastor shares on-the-ground efforts to pray for, comfort, and serve their LGBT neighbors.

Interview by Kate Shellnutt/ JUNE 15, 2016

For a Latino, Pentecostal megachurch just 10 minutes south of the Orlando nightclub Pulse, the scriptural call to “mourn with those who mourn” has become their heartbreaking reality in the wake of Sunday’s deadly rampage. This week, Iglesia El Calvario prepares to host funerals for victims, offer grief counseling, and conduct ongoing outreach for their city and its LGBT community.

The nearly 4,000-person Assemblies of God church prayed, gave blood, and passed out water on Sunday, while death counts climbed from 20 to 30 to 40 to 50. That evening, they heard from Governor Rick Scott and Lieutenant Governor Carlos Lopez-Cantera in a citywide vigil held in their sanctuary to remember the lives lost—many of them Hispanic and gay, at the club for Saturday’s Latin night.

Gabriel Salguero, a pastor at Iglesia El Calvario and founder of the National Latino Evangelical Coalition, joined his LGBT neighbors in relief efforts. He offered prayers in Spanish and English at an 8,000-person event hosted this week by Equality Florida, a gay advocacy group. When local reporters inevitably asked about the tension between evangelicals and the gay community,
he responded, “We’re called to be Christ to everybody, and we’re called to love our neighbor, every neighbor.”

It’s not the first time Salguero has pastored a community devastated by tragedy. He moved to New York a few months prior to the September 11 terrorist attacks. He had only been living in Orlando for six months before this weekend’s shooting. In between vigils and community events, Salguero spoke to CT about the church’s response to the attack that has left their city overwhelmed by grief.

Over the past few days, you’ve had the chance to pray for and with people who probably wouldn’t normally be in your church. What has your message been to the LGBT community?

The church loves you, God loves you, and Jesus loves you. We want to dispel the myth that evangelicals hate gays. We have a lot in common, not least of which is our shared humanity. We’re all moms and dads, brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews and grandparents, and that brings us together. I spoke to a young Puerto Rican gay man who grew up in the Pentecostal church, and he said, “I’m shocked that a Pentecostal Latino pastor led the prayer at this vigil.” I just said to him, “Jesus would have led the prayer. Jesus would have.”

There were a lot of tears on every side. If we’ve learned anything it’s that no matter what our disagreements are, God calls us to love our neighbor and to be Jesus and to mourn with those who mourn. I think they felt that genuineness, that authenticity of shared pain. We believe in prayer, and we believe the church needs to be a healing presence, as are the doctors and the psychologists. Everybody’s got to do their job, but the church has to be Jesus.

What have you learned about Florida and Orlando, your community, through the response to the shooting?

Like on 9/11 in Manhattan, I experienced an overwhelming capacity for kindness in the midst of tragedy and hate. I told the church to donate blood, to go give water, to go be Jesus. Hundreds of people responded. They had to say, “We don’t need any more blood.” And that’s not just our
That was happening all over Orlando, Florida. We didn’t care who was getting it—a first responder, a lesbian young woman, or gay young man—whoever needed blood, they were giving blood. And our church has flooded blood donation centers, the blood buses, the mobile blood centers. That was amazing. They took water and sandwiches.

A lot of things can divide this nation around politics and ideology, and we are ministers of reconciliation. That doesn’t mean we don’t have disagreements. It doesn’t mean we don’t have convictions. But at the end of the day, I am impressed by Floridians’ capacity to love their neighbors as themselves and for the church to be Jesus—not just to preach Jesus but to be Jesus to the hurting and the suffering. Nobody cares if you’re a large church pastor, small church pastor, or a parishioner; if you speak English, Spanish, or French; if you’re black or white; all of us were just trying to heal the city.

**Has this tragedy hit Hispanics in Florida especially hard?**

We do know that clearly the LGBT community was targeted; it’s an LGBTQ club. Whether the person knew it was Latin night or not, I don’t know. Maybe he did, maybe it was Latinos and gays or Latino gays, I don’t know. All I know is that it was fueled by an ideology that does not understand love. They don’t understand that we don’t kill people, that murder and massacre and mayhem is never acceptable and is not condoned, certainly not by the gospel of Jesus Christ and not by good people anywhere.

But I will tell you this. We have Latino Christians, evangelicals and Pentecostals that have gay relatives. They’re going to our churches, and some of their relatives or friends or coworkers have been killed. They’re going to ask us, “Hey, can we have the funeral of my gay nephew, my gay son, or lesbian daughter, or bisexual nephew at your church?” They’re going to be listening for how the church is going to respond. I think if we understand the gospel we’re going to respond by loving them and being a healing presence and mourning with those who mourn. That’s why we opened our church, and that’s why we’ve offered our counselors, and that’s why we sent people to donate blood.
How has God strengthened you and equipped you to lead your church and community through this?

I’m exhausted. There is such a thing as compassion fatigue. Pastors on the scene and first responders and police officers and doctors and nurses, we’re all tired. But I see two things that grab us and keep us going. First is love. We genuinely love this city and the people in this city. Second is prayer. We received calls from pastors in Texas, Chicago, all parts of Florida, California, Puerto Rico. We feel sustained by the prayers of the saints from all over the country. I can’t even tell you. They’re calling our churches and asking us if we need anything. Every morning I get up with my wife, and we pray. You can’t give if you don’t receive, and so we pray. We know that the intensive work will be for a season and then the work of recovering, healing, and mending hearts will be the long-term work.

A lot of people criticize, “Don’t tweet prayers.” Well, we’re not just tweeting; we’re actually praying. We’re on our knees praying because we know that we absolutely, absolutely need God in this situation. If there’s anything I learned it’s that we utterly depend on God, whether we’re the caregiver or the victim. It’s driven me more to prayer and contemplation and silence. It’s driven me to depend on other people because not one church or one person can do this. It’s going to be a collective effort.

Do you find yourself, like the rest of us, asking why this happened? Do you have those theodicy questions with it hitting so close to home?

I have rarely been overcome by grief the way that I have in the last couple of days. Again, I was in Manhattan during 9/11, so I feel the very same emotions of suffering and grief. My first question is not usually why this happens. My first question is What will we do now? What will God’s people do? How will we love people? And how will we heal?

I don’t ask the why question because I know that there are things that I won’t have the answer to, and sometimes when there’s murder, you just go silent out of grief and mystery. I’m just quiet because I don’t have an answer. I am working on the things I do have an answer to, which is what can the church do. How can I be Jesus? How can I lead my church to be Jesus? How can I
not worry about the backlash of being an evangelical pastor praying with and for gay people and their families? For the why question, I’m silent and I’m reverent to God’s sovereignty, but for the how question, I ask the Holy Spirit to lead me.