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Bolstered by Relationships

Jesús Escamilla knows the power of relationships. Over 15 years, he's seen God provide for his congregation through faithful partners across the church and within his community.

"What God wants, if you believe and trust in how he wants to do it, it will get done," said the pastor of San Gabriel Lutheran Church in Alvarado, Texas.

Escamilla came to San Gabriel in 2006, when future congregants were holding Bible studies weekly in worshippers' homes. To worship, they drove more than 30 miles north to San Miguel Lutheran Church in Fort Worth. He joined the Bible studies, then became the faith community's official worship leader a year later, ministering in homes for both Bible study and worship. In time, the growing faith community needed a building in Alvarado.

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A deal with a local supporter allowed the congregation to begin renting a plot of land, where it worshiped outdoors and eventually built makeshift indoor worship space.

"Everyone was dusty, but they didn't care because they had a place to worship — their own place," Escamilla said.

Over time, partnerships with local congregations allowed San Gabriel to build a permanent church. Gifts from Calvary Lutheran

Church in Richland Hills allowed San Gabriel to put in flooring, and pews were donated by St. John Lutheran Church, a closing congregation in nearby Grand Prairie. Later, St. John's council gifted funds that helped San Gabriel take ownership of its land.

Since then, the church has grown, adding a fellowship hall that serves as a community hub for the area's largely Mexican immigrant population. But like so many congregations, San Gabriel struggled to maintain a sense of community during the worst days of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States.

The church closed and pivoted to virtual worship on Zoom and Facebook, with Escamilla, lay leaders and a small contingent of choir members recording services in person at the church.

But with virtual worship, collecting offerings became a challenge. Some congregants sent money through the digital-payment network Zelle or even left their offerings in the church mailbox, but many couldn't contribute monetarily. So the church began hosting weekly food sales to raise needed funds and provide members with a way to give back.

Escamilla believes that San Gabriel has been built up by the generosity of others — church members, nearby ELCA congregations and, through Mission Support funds, the ELCA Northern Texas-Northern Louisiana Synod.

"It's been a conjunction of [congregations] working together to help a community that was struggling," he said. "We have this wonderful community that is working together to work with what the Lord wants us to do."

