

{PROFILE}

HISPANIC COMPASSION MINISTRIES

Reaching Teens in Houston

EL TABERNACULO

By Amy L. Sherman



faith
IN
COMMUNITIES
A Hudson Institute Initiative

Reaching Teens in Houston

E L T A B E R N A C U L O

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Church Name:

El Tabernaculo

Location:

Houston, Texas

Size: 700

Compassion Ministry:

Crossroad Youth Ministry

Year Started: 1986

Estimated Yearly Budget: \$ 60,000

Paid Staff: 1 full-time

Volunteer Staff: 15 part-time

Brief Description

Crossroad Youth Ministry attempts to evangelize and disciple teenagers from families regularly participating in the life of El Tabernaculo Assembly of God as well as from unchurched families in the area. Youth Pastor Max Torres' principal strategy for reaching teens is to penetrate the public school campuses where they spend so much of their time. For 25 years, Max has been a visible community leader on campus and in the streets, reaching out to troubled kids and gang members. One of the most powerful fruits of his ministry is that today there are some sixty adult members from El Tabernaculo who have caught his vision for seeing the public schools as a mission field. Many of them are former students whose lives were radically turned around through the Crossroad ministry. Today, they are on campus as teachers, administrators, and counselors who can help current students avoid the lure of the streets and become successful, productive citizens.

Jose Contreras knew that “something was up” when he saw Hector’s pants rolled up above his knees. The 7th grader was prepared to fight. The shortened pants would permit easy kick-boxing. The 30-year-old Contreras, a street-wise administrator at the tough Patrick Henry Middle School on Houston’s north side, had already heard the rumors of impending violence. The rapport he has built with students has enabled him to win the kids’ confidence, and—anonously—some tip him off about scheduled fights. Jose headed this one off by placing Hector in in-school suspension for the day. Then, 15 minutes before the close of the school, he picked up Hector and made him tag along with him through all his late afternoon campus duties. Finally, at 5:30, Jose called Hector’s parents to alert them that he was going to drive their son home and that they should keep him indoors for the night. Jose repeats interventions like this every week, and the result is a safer school.

As El Tabernaculo youth pastor Max Torres likes to laugh, “Nothing gets by Jose! He knows all the tricks.” Max can remember 15 years ago when Jose was like Hector—always ready for trouble, ready for a fight. Back then, Jose says, he didn’t have time for Max or “his Jesus.” But Max would not let him go. He even singled out Jose for special opportunities, like traveling with Max to youth conferences outside the state. At one of those events, Jose finally owned up to the fact that his life was going nowhere. He says he gave himself over to God at that point, and from then on, everything changed.

Jose’s friend Arthur Lopez, now serving as assistant vice principal at Patrick Henry Middle School, has a similar history. Max Torres helped to rescue both of them from self-destruction, and now they zealously work in the schools to positively influence the “bad” kids who remind them so much of what they were like at that age.

Jose and Arthur are just two of dozens of young Hispanic adults disciplined by Max and his team of volunteers at El Tabernaculo over the past quarter century who are now positive change agents among troubled youth in the Houston Independent School District. Their changed lives and current ministries are the most visible fruits of El Tabernaculo’s Crossroad youth program.

The ministry’s impact can also be measured in terms of innumerable tragedies averted. Sergeant Frank Escobedo, a Houston police officer who has worked in the neighborhood around El Tabernaculo for 24 years, reports that “absolutely” the youth crime rate in the community would be

higher if Max and “El Tab” weren’t there. “Without him doing what he’s doing,” Escobedo says, “those kids would wander off and end up having to deal with the police.” He says he’s never met a kid in the community who is not familiar with the church. “They’re quick to point out it’s on Bauman [Street] and they can give you directions,” Escobedo laughs. “Max really has these kids’ attention,” he continues, admiringly. “It’s hard to find an individual [like him] who is willing to take the time and energy and channel it into something positive, because to gain a teenager’s confidence—that’s really a task. And he’s good at it, and it’s paid off.”

Adrian Garcia, director of the Houston mayor’s anti-gang office since 1994, is also quick to give Max credit for contributing to the enormous drop in gang-related violence in the community that has been achieved in the last several years. Max has served on the city’s Gang Violence Reduction team since 1999. Garcia says Max has “demonstrated extreme success” in working with gang members. “We embrace the work that Max does, and his leadership,” Gonzalez emphasizes. “It takes courage to work with some of these kids, and that’s not [something] everybody has.” Max has encouraged the city to work with faith-based organizations, and Garcia has become a true believer in the positive impact the churches can make. “The churches are already community outreach centers,” Garcia notes, “so we don’t have to reinvent anything.” Max has helped Garcia to develop training for the church leaders on how to reach out to gang-affiliated youth. The city’s efforts have proved fruitful—gang crimes overall have dropped between 50 and 60 percent over the past seven years. Garcia acknowledges that faith-based groups have been a vital part of that success.



GENESIS

Torres, now 47 years old, grew up in a Christian family and became a follower of Christ as a teenager. He remembers having a vision of himself preaching before a sea of dark brown faces, and assumed that one day he’d end up a missionary in Africa. In college at Texas A&M, though, his life began to fall apart. He started experimenting with drugs and eventually ended up in a depression so dark he seriously considered committing suicide. A letter from an old sweetheart arrived just in time, convincing him that life was worth living and that he could change. He returned to Houston and recommitted himself to Christ. He began attending El Tabernaculo, where his girlfriend’s father was senior pastor. He married her a year later. Then he started volunteering in earnest with the church’s children’s and youth ministries and discovered he loved the work. In 1986, the pastor offered him a paid position as youth minister. Max has been serving in this role ever since.



MISSION

With over 25 years experience in youth ministry, Max is a much sought-after speaker for conferences that gather youth pastors and workers. When asked his philosophy of youth ministry, he responds that it is really very simple: “Discipleship! My goal is to work myself out of a job so I can do another job.” It’s all about relationships and perseverance.

Max’s strategy of penetrating the public school campuses, though, is unique among many conservative Hispanic congregations. His friend and fellow pastor, Charlie Rivera, explains that Max has been an innovator in the Assemblies of God denomination in terms of his philosophy of ministry. And Rivera should know, considering that he has served for over 11 years as the district youth director for the 360 churches in the Assemblies of God Gulf Latin American District. “Ten years ago it was almost unheard of to develop any type of campus ministry [within Spanish-speaking congregations],” Rivera reports. The prevailing approach, he explains, was the idea that “you bring them to church; you bring them *here* and this is where we’re going to reach them. That was the standard.” But Max has created a feeling of looking at the public school campuses as a mission field, and has stirred up excitement for going out to where the kids are instead of waiting for them to come to church. As Max shares that approach at the annual conferences of youth pastors, more and more are beginning to imitate his approach. Rivera starts listing churches in San Antonio, Dallas, and Brownsville where youth leaders are volunteering in their local schools and launching creative outreaches to woo “street” kids into church youth group activities.

“Ten years ago it was almost unheard of to develop any type of campus ministry,” Rivera reports. The prevailing approach in Spanish-speaking congregations, he explains, was the idea that you bring them to church; you bring them *here* and this is where we’re going to reach them. That was the standard.”



PROGRAM

SCHEDULE OF ACTIVITIES

The Crossroad youth ministry hosts a Monday night basketball league drawing young men inside and outside the church for sports and fellowship. TNT on Tuesday nights is the main outreach to neighborhood teens. Publicized regularly by Max and his protégés at the schools, TNT provides teens with a safe haven. They gather to play basketball and eat pizza, with plenty of opportunities to just “hang out” with volunteer youth leaders from the ministry. Max or one of the youth leaders offers a short devotional mid-way through. Crossroad holds its youth church service each Wednesday night. Most often, teens from families who attend El Tabernaculo are present, but sometimes the meeting also draws neighborhood teens who are seeking a closer relationship with Christ. Every other Saturday, youth can participate in the church’s community service projects. Crossroad also offers a Fine Arts team where teens can express their musical and acting abilities. The team competes in various denominational competitions each year and helps to put on El Tabernaculo’s annual Easter production.

STAFFING

Max is assisted by about fifteen volunteer youth leaders, including some who have been partnering with him for over a decade. Many of the leaders are products of the Crossroad youth ministry—either kids who grew up in the church or teens that Max helped to rescue from a wasted life on the streets. Max also seeks to involve college students and young married couples as youth leaders.

T E S T I M O N Y

As many heartbroken Christian parents know, even kids raised in the church can “go wrong.” David Alfaro was one of them. He came faithfully to El Tabernaculo with his parents and siblings as a child, but began drifting away during his teenage years. Speaking of the neighborhood around the church where he grew up, David says, “There’s a lot of good things we can do around here and lot of bad things.

I made some bad decisions, some bad choices, and ended up in bad places.” Prison, for one—David was arrested at age 16 for drug possession. He recalls the neighborhood as a “hot spot,” complete with the drug scene, lots of drive-by shootings, gang activity, and opportunities for skipping school and stealing cars. “You grow up in that and you just see it around you, and you can just get caught up in the whole wave,” he explains.

What David remembers most about Max Torres, El Tabernaculo’s youth pastor, is his tenacity. He says Max never gave up on him or other guys from the church who were running headfirst into self-destruction. Max pursued them with an aggressive love that wasn’t judgmental, but that challenged the young men to recognize the consequences of their choices. David laughs recalling the many ways Max “came after” him and his friends. “Max would show up at our high school and we would run away from him during lunch. He was always in your face—in a good way.” He remembers being out drinking with his buddies at nightclubs, and Max would show up at 1:00 a.m., “picking up the kids who were drunk and

loving on them.” What impressed David was how Max’s message wasn’t a condemning one. “It was a ‘come home’ message,” David explains, “not an ‘I can’t believe you’re doing this’ message.” That message finally sunk in to him. Early in his senior year, David says he “did a 180 degree turn” and returned to his Christian faith. This had a domino effect among the others in his peer group, who also left the streets. David began attending classes faithfully, and managed—just barely—to graduate from high school. With vigorous support from Max and the El Tabernaculo family, David and some of the other young men, including his brother Joaquin, went off to the Latin American Bible Institute in San Antonio. Some also pursued studies at Southwest Assemblies of God University.

Once troublemakers on the school campuses, most of these young men became youth pastors who began imitating Max’s model of servant-leadership in the local schools. Today, some continue to minister in San Antonio and Dallas while others have returned to Houston, and even to the old neighborhood, to be a force for good.

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—Sergeant Frank Escobedo, Houston Police Department



KEY RESOURCES

Max likes to emphasize that effective youth ministry doesn't have to cost a lot of money. For most of the years of his ministry, the church lacked the big multi-purpose building it now enjoys (complete with indoor gym and classroom and office space). Most of the various programs took place around the basketball hoop in the church parking lot. "This stuff is easy and replicable," Max shrugs. "It costs maybe \$35 a week, for pizza and sodas." Other resources are more important:

<1> Committed and discerning volunteers. The real key, Max says, is finding the right kind of volunteers to partner with in reaching out to teenagers at the schools. "We are looking for that person who is not religiously minded, those [who] have to say 'Jesus' every other word or they have to lay hands on somebody or speak in tongues out in public," he explains. "Those are not the people we are looking for. We are looking for somebody who may be a highly animated Pentecostal in the right place, but is comfortable with being in the professional workplace and knows how to walk with love and with compassion toward students and faculty."

<2> Networking. Spend a few days in Houston with those who know Max, and you quickly learn another key asset to his ministry: he is a consummate networker. Joanna Dawkins, a health teacher at Sam Houston High School, jokes that Max knows everyone. She has worked with him on a variety of special programs that help teens to learn leadership skills in creative ways. "Things happen when you get Max involved," she explains. Through his connections, Max has brought volunteers, dollars, and access to private and public programs that have enhanced her efforts. The "Shattered Dreams" program put on by high school students at Sam Houston for their peers is one example. The program aims at discouraging teens from drunk driving. Seniors, with the help of professionals recruited by Max, re-enact a drunk driving accident and all the subsequent scenes that follow—the booking of the guilty driver by the cops and his hearing before a judge, the emergency rescue team on-site, complete the with the "jaws of life" extraction technology, and the physicians in the ER who are unsuccessful in saving the life of the passenger. Participating students meet real judges and cops and observe real-life emergency procedures at the local hospital. The re-enactment is filmed and the video played at a special assembly for the school's senior class. There's not a dry eye in the place following the showing; and the tears continue to flow as the student-actors who portrayed the teens involved in the fake accident share their reflections about the experience. This hands-on, real-life participation makes for the kind of activity that even hardened street kids get excited about. Max's connections with the police department, the juvenile justice system, and the fire department helped to make it happen.

<3> A partnership-friendly climate in the school district. Max's work on the school campuses has also been facilitated by the "collaboration-friendly" attitudes prevalent at the Houston Independent School District (HISD). Jaime de la Isla, the District's Assistant Superintendent for Student Engagement, explains that HISD "philosophically believes that we are not just a school system [that] has a mission to provide teaching and learning opportunities to children. We strongly believe that as a school system, our success is inextricably linked to the community we serve." The District desires community partnerships and has built positive relationships with the business community, local government, community-based



Two students from Max Torres' youth group hanging out at TNT.

organizations, and the faith community. “We can’t do it alone,” de la Isla says simply. “Our ability to serve our students requires the involvement of partners, of community, of business, of all those who share the mission. So in that context, someone like Max Torres can come in, in a friendly context, and be welcomed to the table as we look at opportunities...to work together with the school system.”



LESSONS LEARNED

The current and former youth leaders disciplined by Max report that their mentor instilled in them many lessons and guidance that they now put into practice in their own youth ministries. Juan Gonzalez is a 31-year-old furniture salesman who has been volunteering as a leader with the Crossroads program for ten years. When asked what lessons he has learned from Max about effective youth ministry, he highlights three. First, Juan reports, Max emphasized forgiveness. The effective youth leader can forgive himself for mistakes made, and extends grace to teens who stumble. Second, he says, he has learned to be proactive. “Max taught us that when something is needed, we shouldn’t delay,” Juan explains. “Don’t move away from the hard kids; be the leader, take the first step”—these are the comments Juan recalls hearing regularly from Max. Third, Juan says he has learned the importance of faithfulness. “Whatever your responsibility is—big or small—be faithful to it.” He himself has faithfully led the Sunday afternoon prayer group for teens at El Tabernaculo for three years—even on weeks when he hasn’t felt like it.

David Alfaro says the creative programs he implemented as a successful youth pastor in San Antonio were all copied from Max. For example, Max had developed a fancy “junior-senior gala” as an alternative to the public school’s proms. The proms “are a big deal,” David explains, and are often viewed as the occasion for students to lose their virginity. The prom culture also promotes drunkenness. Max created the gala as a safe alternative to these pressures that would still capture the pomp of a prom. In San Antonio, David had his church sponsor the student gala on the top floor of the city’s most elite hotel. His brother, while in Houston, organized a dinner cruise for his senior gala.

David reports that he also learned the importance of networking from Max. “He taught us to work with everybody—Catholic, Methodist, faith-based and non-faith based groups, social workers, schools. He modeled being partners with the schools.” David imitated that as well, volunteering at the local public high school and building friendships with teenagers in the cafeteria.

Max himself reports lessons he has learned from the mistakes he has made. He admits, for example, that he did not take initiative to put into place good accountability systems for himself. To illustrate, he explains that he has had to learn to “make my wife part of my calendar. She has to help me make my calendar, and make decisions together.” He also urges youth pastors to cultivate a good accountability relationship with their senior pastor. And, he tells them he has learned that they need to have a good friend who can speak honestly into their lives. “I need a guy I can just be a guy with, and be accountable to,” Max says. “That’s helped me.” In addition, Max has also learned not to “run out in front of God.” Sometimes, he admits, “I don’t wait on God like I should. And you get going so fast and furiously down the wrong trail, and it’s hard to turn around and come back.” Finally, he encourages young pastors to get specific preparation and training in youth ministry. Most of what he has learned, he jokes, has come from the school of hard knocks, and you never graduate from that school. He wishes he had had more formal training.



CHALLENGES

Max is an innovator, and as a result faces at times a simple and common obstacle: commitment to traditions. Anyone trying to do something a new way will run into those who think the old way is just fine, he explains. He says that the way to overcome this is to show that the old ways aren't working, and that new things must be tried. And then, he adds, you have to be patient and committed.

Max has faced another challenge common to many youth pastors—concerns over worship styles. He has attempted to integrate more contemporary Christian praise songs into the Wednesday night youth service, as well as allowing the young people themselves to play instruments and lead the singing. Sometimes this would irk the older church members who tend to favor only hymn-singing.

Although Max stresses that money is not the most important resource for ministry, he does admit that financial limitations are sometimes a challenge. Given sufficient funding, for example, he would love to purchase church vans or buses to help with transporting the dozens of teens with whom he works. Additional funding could also be used for more “high-tech” multi-media equipment that could be used in special youth productions or concerts. “It’s a high-tech generation,” Max says, “but you’re trying to reach them on a low-tech budget.”

Max’s commitment to reach both the youth of the church and the teens outside, from the streets, has provoked some concerns over the years from parents. Crossroad events like Tuesday Nights Together (TNT) gather both groups of teenagers. Parents worry about the negative influence of the street kids. “People would say, ‘Why are you bringing those kids here? They’re messing up our kids,’” Max reports. He says he is sensitive to the concern, but believes that the need to reach out to the troublemakers outweighs it. Besides, he argues, the church kids are at school many hours every day with the “street” kids. Any bad influences those kids will have on the Christian students are more likely to occur on campus than they are on church grounds, when the troublemakers are surrounded by an atmosphere promoting good values and conversations about God. Max says he started asking parents, “At what point do you think [your kids] are being influenced negatively? In the schools, or here at church?” Max also thinks the integration presents a healthy challenge for the church kids. “They’ve been called out; they’ve been identified. Now they’re going to have to be a witness.” And, if gang kids turn from their violent lifestyles as a result of the church’s ministry, this promotes safer schools in the long run.



CHURCH CONNECTION

El Tabernaculo’s Outreach Pastor, Charlie Rivera, says the vigor of the Crossroad Youth ministry energizes the whole congregation. When the young people are visibly engaged in outreach, he says, it creates an atmosphere of excitement. He believes that the youth have set an example for the adults, so that now the whole church is more active in outreach in the community. Over one hundred adults, for example, now participate in El Tabernaculo’s “Adopt A Block” program. Through it, they provide practical help to neighbors in need.

Rivera also sees a close connection between outreach and church growth. “The churches that are catching on, saying ‘we need to go out’—those churches are growing. They’re seeing a harvest.” He continues, “If you’re not being real, if you’re not presenting yourselves out there

to the community, people aren't going to stop in your church." He argues that people don't care about a church's brand new sign or new gym. What matters is them seeing love put into action: "People are going to stop by your church if they know you care sincerely about them."

Concrete evidence from Max's protégés demonstrates the truth of Rivera's theory. Joaquin and David Alfaro, who have served as youth pastors in two different Assemblies of God churches in Texas, report that implementing Max's methods caused membership in their youth groups to skyrocket. David's San Antonio group, for example, went from about 10 regular attendees to over 100 kids weekly, in just three years. And often as these teenagers experience new life in Christ, they bring their families along. Soon, the congregation begins to outgrow its building.

ADVICE *For Other Pastors/Church Leaders*

Max is passionate for discipleship and has invested years in leadership development. He longs to see more young adults commit themselves to reaching troubled teens he likes to call "at-promise," rather than "at-risk," kids. He offers advice for other church leaders who are concerned for the futures of today's Latino youth:

▶ **Don't be afraid of the public school campus.** It's a mission field. "The schools realize that they need to have character issues addressed," Max argues, "and they know that the church brings a lot of those solutions." Max guest lectures frequently on the school campuses, discussing Biblical principles that speak to character issues, without directly referencing the chapter and verse in scripture. He says that youth ministers who respect the school's agenda and do not directly evangelize on campus will have many opportunities to develop friendships with kids. Then, they can invite students to church programs where more explicit spiritual ministry can occur.

▶ **Go in with the heart of a servant, and do not be judgmental.** "Most [school] administrations know that they have problems," Max explains. "They have to look past them and try to find some solutions. Very rarely do people come and offer solutions. I came just offering myself as a servant...and that's basically what I've been doing for 21 years now. It opens up many, many doors."

▶ **Make an appointment with the principal.** Max warns that this individual is likely to be very busy and perhaps initially suspicious. Typically the principal will assign a staff person, such as a guidance counselor or school social worker or a teacher, to serve as your "host" on campus. By showing respect for school authorities, eventually you can earn the right to be heard.

▶ **Be present as long as it takes to be credible.** Max says this can vary radically, depending on the school. "It has happened as quickly as one lunch period and it has taken as long as three years," he explains. But once the school leaders trust you, you will gain access to many students and tremendous opportunities for ministry.

▶ **Don't initiate spiritual inquiries on the campus, but be prepared to respond to them.** "Legally we can't



David Alfaro (right) speaks with a teen at a Crossroad youth service.

go on to the campus and bring up the issue of Christianity,” Max says. But he finds that when he shares his personal history with kids, they will ask him how he got off of drugs and how and why he changed his life. “The questions inevitably go to things spiritual,” Max reports. “And the skill is to just learn how to address every concern or issue on campus from a spiritual standpoint without necessarily having to quote a scripture verse.”

► **Continue to integrate college students who grew up in the youth program back into the ministry during the summers.** David Alfaro says he’s enormously grateful for the way Max and other Crossroads leaders kept in touch with him during his college years. Church members would send care packages and even offer financial support. And in the summers, Max helped the college students to find work or internships and involved them in Crossroad programs as leaders. Max would include the college students in heading up different service projects or running the midnight basketball program. “Most people detach [from their church] during that college age,” David says. “But all these efforts [of El Tabernaculo and Max] kept us busy and kept us real active in the church.”

► **Don’t think about the money.** Trust God. “Some guys going into youth ministry are calculating their salaries and their benefits package and all that,” Max laments, “and that has to be the least of your worries. God’s going to take care of you!” He reports that he has not purchased a car for himself in over ten years—but God supplies people to donate reliable used cars to him. “God’s always taken care of it,” Max smiles. Youth ministry “isn’t a big money-making job,” he states simply. Youth pastors—and their wives—need to recognize that up front and think accordingly. He advises, “Don’t go into debt with a huge house or a new car. You get in debt and you’re going to have to work more jobs, and that leaves less time for ministry.”

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— *Youth Pastor Max Torres*

Who Could Do This, Too?

The Crossroad youth program has achieved visible results of the most valuable kind: transformed lives. These outcomes are products not so much of elaborate programs, complicated strategies, or expensive interventions. They are products of love, perseverance, and an attitude embracing the value of partnership. Max Torres has made a habit of working with others—inside the Christian community and outside of it—who share his passion for teens. This willingness has multiplied his effectiveness without compromising his commitment to spiritual ministry. His approach has already been proven replicable by the current youth pastors he discipled who are reproducing positive results among teens in other Texas cities. Clearly this model is a promising one ripe for imitation by even more churches.