

NJ Ministry Uses Artful Evangelism to Reach the Lost

Plays. Concerts. Gallery shows. Dance performances. Hip-hop. Lectures. Dinner theatre. If it has to do with performing arts, The Hope Center, an Assemblies of God urban ministry, is using it as a vehicle to reach the lost.

Founded by Mario Gonzalez and his wife, Leigh, 12 years ago, the ethnically diverse ministry operates from a former warehouse in Jersey City, N.J., across the Hudson River from lower Manhattan. Its 10,000-square-foot building is not only home to a flourishing 600-member church, but also houses Hope Center Arts (HCA), a faith-based arts center complete with a gallery for paintings and sculpture, a playhouse, arts academy and cafe.

The Gonzalezes classify themselves as artists who preach a strong salvation message about the cost of following Christ. Both are accomplished musicians. He is a trained classical guitarist; she is a trained pianist and clarinetist.

“Every follower of Christ has a responsibility to communicate the gospel as the Bible presents it, unadulterated,” says Mario, senior pastor of The Hope Center. “We present the plain truth beautifully packaged in the arts.”

A fiery preacher, Gonzalez eschews feel-good sermons: “The church today is entrenched in a doctrine of comfort. Sin is sin, and the answer is the blood of Jesus. Only He can set us free.”

Every HCA activity promotes the gospel. As many as 25 people flock to the altar for salvation on a typical Sunday at The Hope Center’s three worship services.

“We constantly preach the truth and never hide whom we serve,”

says Leigh, associate pastor and president of HCA. The arts academy sponsors student theatrical performances that draw unchurched family members and local residents alike.

For example, a lesbian couple whose child attended the academy sat through an entire Christmas play. "They were brought to tears," she recalls.

The church's accent on the arts also attracted John Oviedo, a college student, to a play. "It was a pretty cool drama skit," he says. After attending several services he gave his life to Christ. In 2010 he survived a serious bout with lung cancer and is recovering. "God used it for Him to be glorified," he says.

Sam Cintron, a co-founder of the ministry and pastor of worship arts for Hope Center Tabernacle, is a high-octane singer/songwriter, sculptor and painter. "The Lord has called me to the generation that hears through their eyes," he says.

Cintron wrote the music and created fine art for *Standing in Babylon*, a multimedia theatrical concert interpreted by about 70 dancers, actors, singers, musicians and support staff. The edgy visuals, lyrics, dancers and up-tempo music convey a serious message. "The storyline is about the people of God rising up. But *Standing in Babylon* is also a story about self-deception, betrayal and redemption," Cintron explains.

The 90-minute show had six performances in 2011. God moved in a dramatic way among the 1,000 attending a March 2012 performance at Calvary Lighthouse Assembly of God Church in Lakewood, N.J. According to Cintron, "Many cried out, 'Forgive me, Lord. I'm repenting. I feel the conviction. I'm not worthy.' It was a haunting sound, like rushing water. The people just stood still and could not move."

Looking ahead, Cintron plans on taking the concert to other states, as well as throughout Europe. Meanwhile, Leigh is busy expanding HCA's intern program to mentor college students who

will spend five to six weeks, or up to one year, learning the arts ministry. "They have the energy and will to change this nation," she says.

Despite effectively reaching the arts community, the Gonzalezes say the ministry's novel tack has irritated some to criticize and spread rumors.

"It makes people uncomfortable," Leigh says. "The body of Christ needs to change. We have to live daily for the need to change ourselves."

But the church won't compromise its message. "We are not big on seeker-sensitive sermons," she says. "People want to hear the truth. The blood of Jesus is messy."