

Pentecostal Church Stronger After Shooting, Pastor Says

A Pentecostal pastor says his Texas congregation has grown stronger since a church member's son walked into a youth service last month and shot the youth pastor in the face.

"We did cry, we did weep, but our church is stronger," said Mauricio Elizondo, senior pastor of Walnut Park Asamblea de Dios church in Garland, a Dallas suburb. "Something crazy is happening here. Revival is breaking loose. People are coming more to prayer. People are loving more, reaching [out] more."

Youth pastor Eddie Contreras is expected to make a full recovery from injuries he sustained in his cheek, neck and left hand Sept. 24 when a gunman shot him in the church.

Contreras was preaching about persevering through adversity when Josue Pablo, 20, walked into the Friday night service with his 3-year-old twin boys, screaming obscenities and calling Christianity fake.

"I was in the middle of saying: Don't let nobody or nothing stop your praise. It doesn't matter what's going to come against you," Contreras recalled. "And all of a sudden he opened the door."

Contreras, who has been the church's youth pastor for six years, tried to calm Pablo down. But he pulled out a gun and fired at the youth pastor, putting a bullet through his hand and cheek.

The roughly 35 youth attending the service scurried for cover. One called 911; another called Elizondo, who was preaching at a conference in Mexico at the time, to tell him the youth pastor had been shot.

Elizondo said Pablo's mother struggled with him and was able to jerk the gun from his hand. "That was a miracle as well because it helped the kids run out and also not to get hurt because his intention was to hurt other kids," said Elizondo, who founded the 1,700-member church in 2001.

Elizondo said the gunman left the church and fired again outside, saying, "So where is your God now?" He was apprehended by police blocks away and has been charged with attempted murder and aggravated assault with a deadly weapon.

Elizondo said he knew of Pablo through his mother and sister, who have been longtime and active church members. But he describes the youth as a loner who had been fighting with his family about attending church.

Contreras underwent eight hours of surgery and will need physical therapy to regain use of his left hand. He said the bullet pierced the palm of his left hand, then entered his left cheek and went down into his neck and crossed to the other side.

Remarkably, no bones or teeth were broken in his face, his voice box was untouched, and no major arteries were pierced. Contreras said his doctor told him had the bullet moved a quarter-inch in either direction, he likely would have died instantly. The youth minister believes the Holy Spirit prompted him to lift his hand, which helped deflect the bullet.

But Elizondo says an even bigger miracle is the love and forgiveness the congregation has shown the shooter's mother and sister. Both families are still attending the church, Elizondo noted.

"They're worshiping, praising God, and the world needs to know that," Elizondo said. "Our faith and our God teaches forgiveness and teaches love."

Contreras said he didn't want any harm to come to Pablo. When police and paramedics arrived at the church, he kept asking if Pablo was OK.

"I didn't want nothing to happen to him because I believe he can have a second opportunity when he gives his heart to Christ," Contreras told *Charisma*. "I never, ever held any bad feelings against him at all or his family."

After the shooting, parents and pastors from other churches provided counseling to help the youth deal with what happened. Instead of being afraid to return to the church, Contreras was anxious to attend worship services Sunday. Since the shooting he said the youth have been more united and are seeking God like never before.

"I just want to go praise and worship God with them too," Contreras said. "I want to shout at the devil and tell him he messed again. He messed up big time because whatever he tried to turn into pain, whatever he tried to turn into death and to fear, God just has been ... turning it to blessing and joy and unity, people giving their life to Jesus because of my testimony."

Elizondo, who was a youth pastor himself for 12 years before founding the church, said the shooting has deepened his compassion for hurting people.

"When stuff like this happens, you don't have any more resentment; you don't have any prejudice," Elizondo said. "You just really come to the reality ... that you need to love people and hug people and just reach out to people regardless of the color of their skin."

"And our church is better for it honestly," he added. "I don't want it to happen again, but I myself as a pastor, I'm very broken."