



Into the city

MIAMI

WHITE SAND BEACHES — 35 miles of them — outline the edge of Miami, a city that never sleeps. From the turquoise waters of the Atlantic to the vibrant hues of Little Havana, “colorful” is a word that fits.

Six million people live in the tri-county area of Miami-Dade, Broward, and Palm Beach making Miami one of the most populated regions in the nation. A city where two-thirds of new residents come from another country and the Spanish, Creole and English languages dominate equally, Miami is a gateway to the world.

But for New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary students and alumni who serve and live among the city’s diverse population, Miami is a place where God is at work. ■

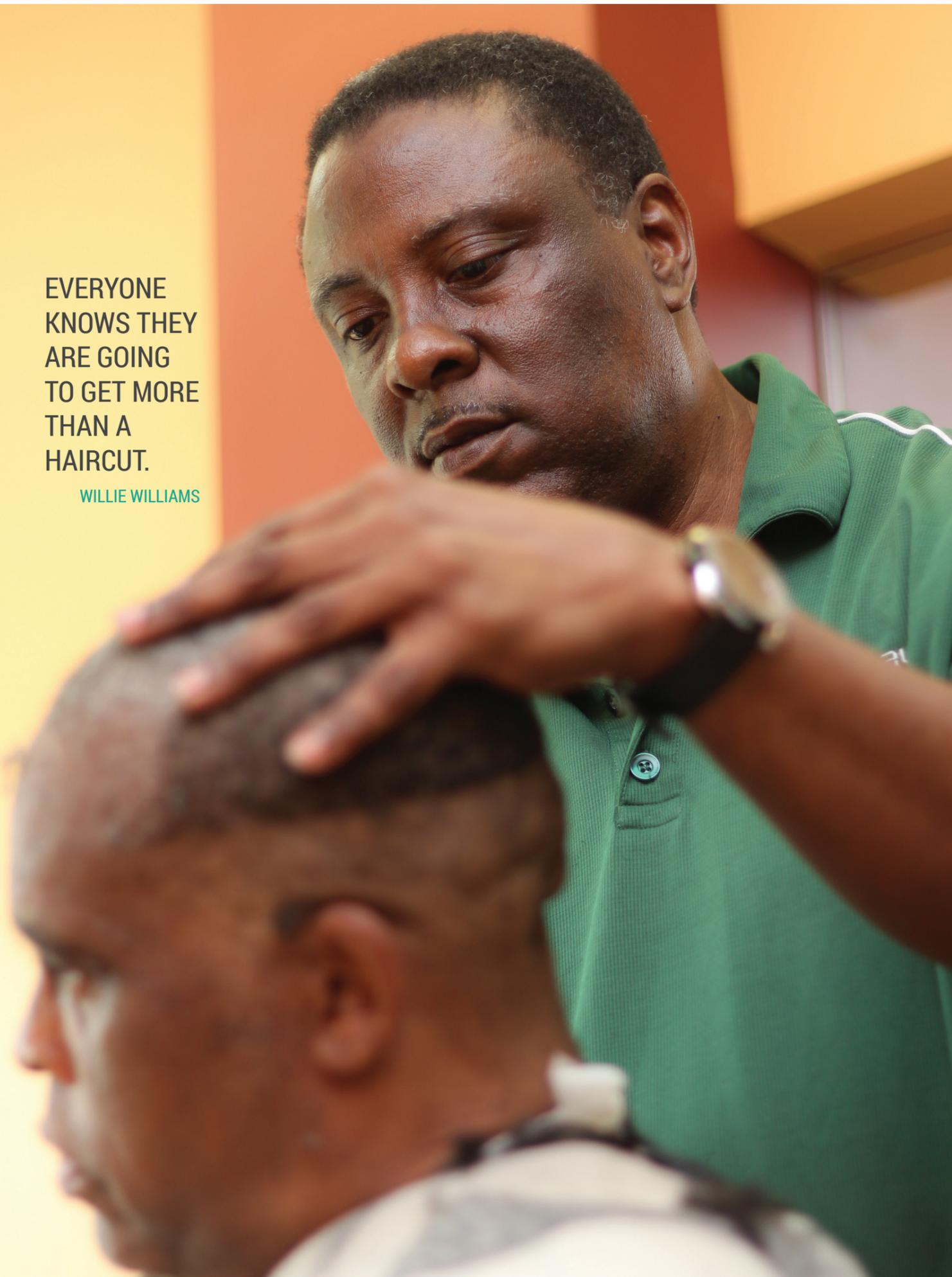
Stories by Marilyn Stewart

BARBERSHOP GRADUATES FINDING NEW LIFE

by Marilyn Stewart

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WILLIE WILLIAMS



THE PULPIT WILLIE WILLIAMS, preaches from most often isn't found at Greater Mercy Missionary Baptist Church where he serves as pastor. His most-used pulpit is the barber chair he stands behind at the Just Right Barbershop in Miami's Overtown every day of the work week.

Neighbors who drop in from Miami's most crime-plagued neighborhood don't mind. Conversation is one reason they come. When guidance or encouragement is needed, William's shop is the place to go.

"Everyone knows they are going to get more than a haircut," said Williams, NOBTS/Levell College South Florida student. "They are going to get a word from the Lord."

From sun up to sundown, often into late evenings, Williams listens to neighbors' needs and speaks truth into their lives. The shop has proved so effective for ministry Williams dubbed those who have grown in faith or gone on to successful lives, his "barbershop graduates."

The church next door is a 900-square-foot facility that seats 60 and was once a bar. Born in Overtown but raised elsewhere, Williams returned with wife Creola to the neighborhood 12 years ago to revive his aunt's barbershop. Securing the storefront property next door that is now the church came later, an answer to prayer.

Overtown's rich heritage of music and culture has been eclipsed by decades of decline, earning the neighborhood the label "overdose hot zone" recently by the Miami Herald.

"You have to get them out of their norm, because their norm has destroyed them," Williams said. "You have to show them a new way of life, the way Christ would want them to live."

At Thanksgiving, University of Miami football players partner with the church to provide food to neighbors and the church's popular four-hour Safety Night at Halloween has transformed an often violent night into an evening of community-building fun. At Easter, the church's annual Resurrection Day event features free haircuts and physical provisions.

While Williams' church is "the smallest church with the biggest heart," success isn't tied to a particular program, Williams insists. "Success" comes from something simpler.

"You have to get their attention through showing love: you've got to be that walking Bible," Williams explained. "They have to see enough of God in you and after they do, any program works."

photos by Nelson Diaz



Change and tension continue in the once predominantly African-American neighborhood through gentrification as whites and Hispanics move in. Williams' commitment to obeying God keeps him there. At night, he logs into "Rosetta Stone" to help him learn Spanish.

His advice to those wishing to reach the city for Christ is simple.

"Make sure you're a clean vessel and God will do the rest," Williams explained. "God has the ability to draw people to Himself. You just have to lift him up." ■

A DIFFERENT TYPE OF NIGHT LIFE

by Marilyn Stewart



MENTION MIAMI, and for some, the posh “night life” of Miami Beach comes to mind. But on Friday nights in the heart of the city, a different type of night life is underway.

When the clock strikes 11 p.m. — perfect for a city open 24 hours — the prayer meeting at Iglesia Bautista Palabra de Vida begins. Scores of members, from children to grandparents, gather in one room and by 1 a.m., the youngest ones are sound asleep.

Carlos Rodriguez, pastor and NOBTS South Florida master’s student, teaches his congregation that prayer is “like oxygen to their lives.”

From its beginning as a church plant nine years ago, the midnight prayer meeting has anchored the church’s ministry. In one case, church members saw answered prayer when a mother and daughter reconciled. Members’ commitment to fervent prayer continued to bless as the woman weathered a serious health crisis.

“Our ministry has two major priorities: prayer and education,” Rodriguez said. “The first leads to devotion, worship and commitment. The second equips with knowledge, instruction and ethics.”

Rodriguez, a Cuban native who came to America seeking religious freedom, leads his congregation of 150 to read books together, from devotional to practical. Rodriguez knows education can aid discipleship and build unity.

The 15 Hispanic nations represented in the congregation are celebrated in food and fellowship and respected as Spanish phrases are selected that none find offensive. Integrating Spanish and English into worship services helps members transition as they watch children embrace American culture.

“We pay close attention to how to access the American culture in a Hispanic setting while maintaining a Hispanic culture in an American setting,” Rodriguez said. “We respect that a lot.” ■



TRUE LIFE RATHER THAN BETTER

by Marilyn Stewart

WITH ATTENDANCE NUMBERS TIPPING 1,000 in four weekend worship services, Primera Iglesia Bautista Hispana de Coral Park is the largest Hispanic church in Florida. But not so many years ago, the numbers were very different.

Carlos Tellez, pastor (M.Div. ‘17), pointed back to the explosive growth that took place years ago under a former pastor who instituted a weekly evangelism initiative, an outreach the church faithfully continues.

The church’s emphasis on evangelism is backed up with a commitment to discipleship, Tellez explained, adding that a strong connection to the community is maintained through its church-sponsored elementary school, a medical outreach benefiting the uninsured, and its vibrant children’s ministry, food program, and thriving small groups.

Still, creating spiritually mature disciples who follow Christ with devotion is essential, Tellez explained.

“The people need to grow up in their relationship with God. In every trouble and situation, you find the same problem, the same factor. It’s the low level of spiritual life,” Tellez said. “And we are working hard on that.”

Tellez, a former pastor from Cuba who has been 5 years at the church, serves an area diverse in economics and need. The neighborhood is both middle-class and lower, Tellez points out, and always the

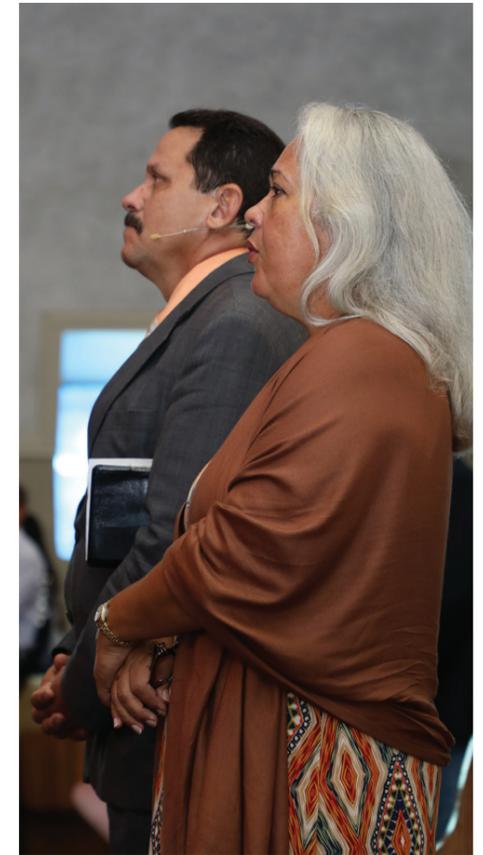
tension remains of reaching the second-generation, those born in America.

“Reaching youth is difficult,” Tellez said. “The world offers them too much. It’s really hard to say, ‘Look to Jesus Christ’ when they totally put their life in the world, in money, and other things.”

One family remained vigilant and faithful while facing difficulties in Cuba, but lost their fervor for the Lord with the easy life of America, Tellez said. Too often, people come to find a better life, and “forget Jesus” when they do, Tellez said.

While programs and special events can draw people to church, Tellez leads Primera Iglesia Bautista Hispana to stay focused on what’s important.

“If you offer today what they are looking for in the church, they are going to come,” Tellez explained. “But they are going to come to the church, not to Jesus Christ. And that’s different.” ■



photos by Nelson Diaz