

Doraville church moving to Lilburn

Hispanic congregation outgrew old quarters

HELIA M. POOLE

he@ajc.com
JENNIFER SUTCLIFFE

sutcliffe@ajc.com 6/22/06

Where does one go when one's not enough room in the house of God?

For some members of Our Lady of the Americas Catholic Mission, it's the front hall. For others, it's the parking lot or the door at the side of the building.

Archbishop Wilton D. Gregory celebrated the last confirmation and Mass at the church's current location in Doraville last Sunday, families lined up outside the overflow-sanctuary. Parents fanned out tired children while wiping their own sweaty brows. Teenagers took short naps, older men dozed at a screen that showed the Mass was happening inside.

The sanctuary built to seat about 400, a typical Mass at Our Lady of the Americas church, a former warehouse on New Peachtree Road, regularly drew double its 400-person capacity, forcing some members out of the pews.

At Sunday would be the last service anyone from this Hispanic congregation would see on a television. The Archdiocese of Atlanta bought the mission, a former Assembly of God church at 603 Lawrenceville Highway in Lilburn for \$4 million, according to Maureen Harty, administrative assistant at the mission.

It's the realization of a dream that our parishioners had for a long time," Rev. Fernando Molina-Restrepo of the mission said. "There was always this desire for a new church so we could celebrate our faith."

Along with the church building itself, he said, the mission will have about 8 acres to expand into.

Harty said Molina-Restrepo had raised \$1 million in the past nine months in an ongoing effort to fund the new-church project.

"We couldn't get the money [ourselves] that quickly," Harty said.

The mission will continue to raise funds to pay off the mortgage through a project called "Our Legacy of Faith," Harty said.

The first Mass at the church's new Gwinnett County home will be Friday.

The Doraville mission's expansion has mirrored the hypergrowth of metro Atlanta's Hispanic community. More than 381,190 Hispanics live in the metro area, according to 2004 census figures.

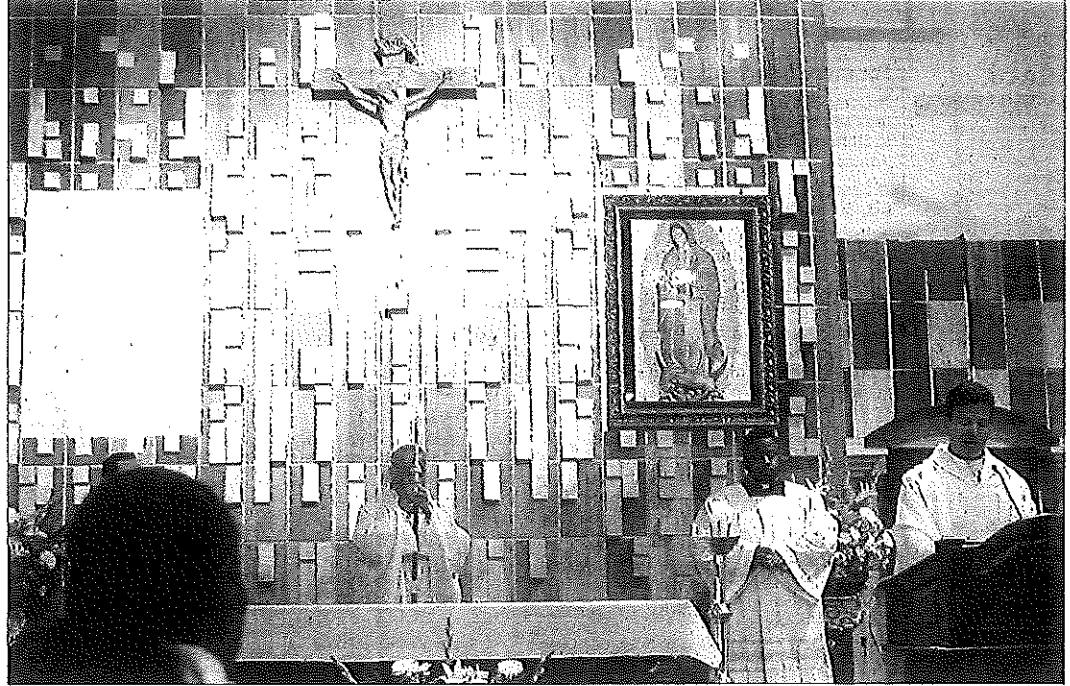
And most are likely Catholic.

According to the Washington-based United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 39 percent of Catholics in this country are Hispanic. Additionally, about 4,000 U.S. parishes have Hispanic ministries, and more than a fifth of all U.S. parishes have mostly Hispanic members.

Our Lady of the Americas Catholic Mission plays a critical role in the Latino community, offering programs to aid the homeless and provide religious education and English classes, church officials said.

The mission is named in honor of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the patroness of the Americas, who is believed to have appeared to Mexican peasant Juan Diego on Dec. 12, 1531, and inspired millions of Latinos to convert to Christianity. Juan Diego was later beatified. A chapel in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome has been dedicated in honor of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Colombia-born Molina-Restrepo has said he thinks the connection has drawn many Hispanics to the mission. He hopes to work out a



Photos by ELISSA EUBANKS / STAFF

The Rev. Fernando Molina-Restrepo speaks Sunday, the final day for services at Our Lady of the Americas Catholic Mission's Doraville quarters. Masses in the Doraville sanctuary, a former warehouse, regularly drew double its 400-person capacity.



Archbishop Wilton D. Gregory touches followers' heads with holy water during confirmation on Sunday.

deal with local transportation companies to provide service to the church in Lilburn. The Doraville site is close to a MARTA station.

"It will be a little bit challenging, but people will come," he said.

Standing at the edge of the church's small front park-

ing lot, Darlene Zet, 25, of Doraville said she plans to remain a member. But she added that the distance will make it more difficult for some.

"My husband can drive us, but a lot of people I know walk here," Zet said.

Sonia Sagredo, 31, who lives in Doraville and is originally from San Luis Potosí, Mexico, has been a member of the mission for three years. Despite the crowding, she said she was sad to hear about the move.

"I would never change [congregations] though," she added in Spanish. "I will always come here."

Molina-Restrepo said the mission had hoped to stay in the area, but the land costs were too high. He said some work needs to be done on the Gwinnett church, and wor-

shippers have readily pitched in to do landscaping and cleaning.

All the Masses now are Spanish, but Molina-Restrepo hopes to include at least one English Mass in the future, as well as education programs.

He also wants to add stained glass to make the church more traditional.

Children danced and marched music played as members of the congregation celebrated the move in the back of the mission after Sunday's Mass.

"We're so happy we're going to have a real church," Molina-Restrepo said. "I'd like to say we feel blessed to be here."

And he expects the church to grow even more. But all the effort to find a large church, he hopes that growth spurt won't come too soon.