

Mission Opportunity Grants

Making a Difference

Since 2013, thanks to Bishop's Appeal donors, Mission Opportunity Grants have helped congregations across El Camino Real get the support they need to face a rapidly changing world.

Training workshops led by The Rev. Eric Law of the Kaleidoscope Institute (right) are providing the tools and resources for all parishes to respond to cross-cultural, inter-generational and socio-economic issues. The Kaleidoscope training has developed a team of trainers and facilitators who now serve as a resource for churches throughout the diocese.

For parishes with innovative ministries, Mission Opportunity Grants have provided the financial stability to address the needs of their local communities, as well as the spiritual needs of their own members. For the past three years, three churches have received grants that are supported by the Bishop's Appeal. They include San Pablo Apostol in Seaside, St. George's in Salinas and St. Philip's in San Jose. Let's visit all three and learn about their experiences, challenges and successes.



St. George's Eucharist in the Park, Salinas

Reading group at San Pablo Apostol, Seaside



Left: The Rev. Martin Juarez with parishioners at San Pablo. Above: The youth choir practices. Below: The reading group.

San Pablo Apostol, Seaside

"I enjoy the time to read . . . my spirit is getting stronger."

"This book helps us to overcome difficulties that we've had in the past, so we have a new attitude on life."

"I understand more of my past and more of my present."

"I am more open with my family and I better understand the roles of my family...I also learn to listen better. This is another way to connect with God."

These powerful statements are made at the Wednesday night reading group at San Pablo Apostol in Seaside, a Latino congregation experiencing joyful growth and transformation.

The reading group started in 2015 and members are on their fifth book. The group includes about 15 members and meets weekly, explains The Rev. Martin Juarez, Priest-in-Charge of San Pablo. On a cool October evening, they're reading *La Revolución* by Sergio de la Mora and members rotate reading paragraphs until they've finished a chapter. It's opened conversations about life experiences, difficulties, and faith.

Reading is a strong aspect of Latinos' culture, explains



Juarez. "Few people used to read here, so the fact that we're reading together has encouraged them. It's a moment of liberation, to give relief from everyday life . . . it's something special to look forward to. We're closer, like a family." While some members work double jobs, they always make time for Wednesday nights.

San Pablo once shared space with the offices of the Diocese of El Camino Real, before Bishop Mary Gray-Reeves and her staff moved to the Sargent House in Salinas in December 2014. The congregation quickly made use of the new space, remodeling the offices, expanding the kitchen, and landscaping the vast outdoor space with brickwork and other improvements.

"Our facilities have undergone huge changes," says Juarez, "but the main change that I see is the attitude of the people. A lot of them are taking on different kinds of responsibility. They feel a part of this family. And they're taking more ownership. People are willing to step in and do more. It's helping us to motivate more leadership in the congregation."

While the reading group meets, the sanctuary is alive with the sound of the youth choir, one of four at San Pablo. The church has wifi and one member is taking typing classes; San Pablo hopes to offer computer classes soon. Two services take place on Sunday, with a youth group meeting on Saturday mornings, and more time is devoted for fellowship. San Pablo purchased bilingual Bibles so both parents and children can worship together.

"One of the biggest benefits we have received [from the Mission Opportunity Grant] is opportunity," adds Juarez. "It is incredible what is happening, because we have the resources to do what is good for the congregation. It's another opportunity to have more connection with God."



Above: The produce booth at St. George's Community BBQ in 2015.
 Right: Eucharist in the Park. Lower right: A parish night walk team.



St. George's, Salinas

For St. George's, the Mission Opportunity Grants gave the small-but-active parish the financial stability to launch a series of programs that tackled the needs of the Salinas community. When The Rev. Lawrence Robles arrived as the new rector in 2012, the congregation had already identified its top priorities in concert with diocesan guidance: develop a multicultural presence in Salinas, and raise the church's visibility by community outreach.

Despite a rollercoaster of financial challenges, St. George's is achieving its vision. "The grant enabled our leadership to look beyond the walls of the church," says Robles. "That can stir up a lot of emotions: it can raise curiosity, fear, energy – all of those things become possible because you're looking at the world in a different light."

St. George's quickly joined the city's "Night Walks" program, fielding a walk team for years that offered a peaceful presence to the Acosta Plaza neighborhood in East Salinas. This was followed by a Sunday "Eucharist in the Park," where Robles and congregation members traveled to a large soccer complex and offered blessings and Communion to parents and players between games. A food pantry at the church feeds up to 50 local families a month, and monthly "Touchstone" luncheons for seniors are held in the parish hall.

For the past two summers, St. George's has hosted a Community Fair and BBQ that draws hundreds to the church and raises funds for community programs. The parish also hosts diocesan leadership development events such as Kaleidoscope training and a Saturday evening service was established for Spanish-speaking residents – many attracted to St. George's by the "Eucharist in the Park" services.

The "Dragon Slayers" youth group also played a role in raising St. George's visibility, with colorful floats in the Salinas Parade of Lights during the holidays.

Yet challenges have become part of the St. George's story, as membership has steadily dropped. Robles acknowledged that too much community outreach overextended the congregation and created a drop in pastoral care.

"Transformation is hard work," he said. "You can get so outward-focused that you lose your balance and lose the inward strength. The strength of our family was being pulled in such a degree that we lost the identity of family." The tempo of change is a key learning for congregations. "Don't blow up the balloon too fast because you'll lose your center."

The diocese is assisting parishioners as they regroup and renew their commitment to the community and each other. While the city quietly abandoned the Night Walks program, the parish's "Eucharist in the Park" recently ended the soccer season with its biggest Sunday morning ever: more than 70 blessings given and nearly 50 children and parents sharing in Communion on the field complex.

With its food pantry, Touchstone luncheons and other programs, St. George's is determined to continue its legacy of reaching out to the people of Salinas.





Left: The Rev. Lucie Thomas at St. Philip's.
Above: The church's clothing exchange center.

St. Philip's San Jose

For St. Philip's, a small parish in a diverse East San Jose neighborhood, the Mission Opportunity Grant helped the church get back on its feet financially and its leaders are eager to minister to the community.

In 2014 the church suffered a loss when a longtime group of members who lived in a residential area called The Villages petitioned to move to Trinity Cathedral in downtown. The church applied to the Mission Commission for help.

"At first, the aid was largely to help us through losing a third of our congregation," explained The Rev. Lucie Thomas, Priest-in-Charge, who arrived in August 2014, a few months before the Villages transition.

The Mission Opportunity Grant allowed the church to regroup and regain its financial footing while fixing a leaky roof, replacing crumbling gutters and other structural needs. Now that the physical and financial needs are met, the congregation is looking outward.

Two priorities have emerged, according to Thomas. The first is to develop outreach programs that serve the multicultural neighborhood of largely Hispanic and Asian families, along with longtime Anglo residents. Two Sundays a month St. Philip's offers separate English and Spanish speaking services, while the other two Sundays are combined bilingual services. Spanish speaking members are increasingly joining the vestry.

One outreach program began in March: a clothing exchange for preschool and first grade children in needy families. St. Philip's shares its five-acre grounds with Mandala Children's House preschool, which was founded by Marilyn Drino in 1975. Mandala collects good used clothes from members and gives them to the church, which is talking

with other community groups to expand the program.

The congregation also plans to launch an ESL class (English as a second language), for which they'll begin advertising soon. Another idea is to host a "family night out" near the holidays. Church leaders are also considering sending volunteers to Santa Maria Urban Ministry where they can participate in classes and evaluate programs that St. Philip's might adopt locally.

The second priority is to increase St. Philip's visibility. "We're not that well-known in the neighborhood," says Thomas, adding that "everyone thinks we're a preschool, because they see families bringing their kids and picking them up . . . we don't look like a church from the street, even though we have a sign."

The founders of St. Philip's in 1957 built the original structure with plans for a bigger church later. Those plans were never realized, so there's no traditional church building. The parish is working to overcome the perception problem with banners and signs, going to neighborhood meetings, and sharing the word on online sites such as Facebook and Nextdoor.

With help from Canon Jesus Reyes, St. Philip's is talking with area Episcopal churches who have offered support in developing a stewardship program and building membership. The church hopes to host a capital campaign in time for its 60th anniversary next year. St. Philip's continues to brainstorm, and while many of the original ideas have changed, Thomas stresses it's all positive. "I think it's good that we've been in the morphing process because we'll be more successful than just charging off and doing things. It's been good to talk."