

Liberty Christian Center History

Updated 7/17/2022

Rev. William Vazquez grew up without a father and mother and surrendered his life to the Lord at the age of 19. His wife, Rev. Emilia Vazquez, was raised in a foster home and met her husband while serving the Lord in a Defender of the Christian Faith Church.



Rev. William & Emilia Vazquez (Founders of Liberty Christian Center)



Rebecca, William, Emilia, & Jonathan

He attributed his success to God and is a testimony and graduate of the *Teen Challenge* program. He and his wife founded Liberty Christian Center over thirty-five years ago. They married for 41 years before his passing in 2021 and are parents of two adult children, Jonathan and Rebecca.

Pastor Willie & Millita, as they are affectionately known by many, served in ministry for over 40 years. During the first 11 years he was the Associate Pastor of Canaan

Church in Chicago. He served as Senior Pastor of Liberty for over 30 years until he passed on to eternal life with Jesus in 2021. Rev. Emilia currently sits on the board as director and founder of the ministry. Their legacy in building leaders and spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ have resulted in successfully launching multiple daughter churches and a multitude of ministry leaders in the Chicagoland area who pastor their own churches or lead their own ministries. Pastor Emilia & Willie firmly believed in helping others fulfill their maximum potential in Christ. Their parental characteristics have been demonstrated in their joy and love for the things of the kingdom and people.



First home owned by William & Emilia Vazquez & where Liberty Christian Center was born. (1987-1988)

Our church story began in August of 1987 when Pastors William and Emilia Vazquez answered God's call to begin a small group. They met with only two teenagers in the basement of their Northwest side home in which they Emilia and her daughter still reside today.

The youth gave their lives to God and a fire ignited in their lives which resulted in the spreading of God's word among their peers. These young people invited their friends who also invited more friends and Liberty Christian Center was born.

After meeting in their home for two years, they launched their first official storefront church location on the corner of Fullerton & Lowell in 1989. As a young church, they continued to share the Gospel message with people throughout Chicago. They began holding regular services during the week, discipling new believers in Christ, and building a ministry focused on community with the mission: *By Serving the People, We Serve the Lord!*



First official location at 4324 W Fullerton Ave, (1988-1990)
Image of location as it exists today.



Canaan Church location at 2421 W Division St.
(1990-1991)

young people began to flock to their ministry from high schools all across Chicago. Before they knew it, they found themselves as the only adult leaders surrounded by more than 80 youth that would become known as *"Willie's Kids"*.

their growth led them to network with local pastors in search for a larger meeting space. They met Pastor Ray Maldonado from Vineyard Christian Fellowship establishing a relationship that would open the door for them to rent space in their church on the corner of Maplewood Ave. and Shakespeare Ave. Here the ministry continued to grow forming small groups, a worship team, community outreaches, Jesus march walks, and bringing peace to a community riddled by gang violence.

As the ministry grew, a need arose for additional space to conduct leadership trainings and meetings to form leaders. Through a relationship with local pastors within our church denomination (Defenders of the Christian Faith Movement, Inc.) we were granted access to rent space at *Iglesia Canaan* church in the Humboldt Park neighborhood pastored by the late Rev. Dr. Raul & his wife Naty Marrero.

During the mid to late 80's there was a revival taking place among high school teenagers throughout Chicago, in part due to the ministry of Rev. William & Emilia Vazquez. As more and more teens began sharing the gospel with their friends,



Vineyard Christian Fellowship location at 2145 N. Maplewood Ave. (1991-1998)

SAVING OUR CHILDREN: Block by block



By George Papajohn
and Byron P. White
TRIBUNE STAFF WRITERS

Willie Vazquez worships with his congregation. Vazquez, a heavy-equipment operator and a former gang member, tells the many youths who attend his small church: "Don't betray your conscience."

Multiplying by one

The temptation is to think one person can't help a destitute community. These individuals thought otherwise. If there's any doubt about the results, check with the kids.

Pastor sees himself in troubled youth

The memories are three decades old but searingly crisp for Willie Vazquez.

His rank in his section of the gang: "vice president."

His code on the streets: "The meaner you were, the more reputation you had."

The effects of the LSD and marijuana: "I was suffering—how do you call it?—a mentality of persecution. I saw cops everywhere."

He laughed at that one. Then there was the pivotal night he struggled with leaving the gang and joining a church: The shakes and coldness. The jumbled thoughts: "You're going to lose all your friends. You're going to lose the girls."

Vazquez's duel with alienation and confusion has turned out to be a blessing for the young people who seek counsel at his Liberty Christian Center, where everybody knows that Pastor Willie is the former gangbanger who shoots straight and has been where they've been.

"I don't consider him a pastor. I consider him more of a friend," said Ernesto Velez, 17, who heard of the church from a cousin two years ago, at a time when the street was more alluring than scripture. "You figure most grownups would push you to the side. He greeted me with open arms."

Like Vazquez, Velez came only reluctantly to religion.

Then he experienced one of the foot-stomping, charismatic church services at Liberty Christian in an area bordering Bucktown on Chicago's Near Northwest Side.

Electric guitar, drums, congas and keyboards provide a soundtrack mixing the fervor of gospel with the rhythms of salsa. Vazquez, 44, a heavy-equipment operator for a utility company during the week, stands in a front pew, while the church's young people take center stage—singing, exhorting and testifying in English and Spanish.

Velez was gripped by his first experiences under the fluorescent lights of the rented church hall. "I was on my toes," he said. "I was anxious to hear what was next. I'd be like, 'What are they going to do now? You going to sing again? Are we going to jump?'"

But when church calms down and the service is over, it is Vazquez's quiet manner that can have the biggest influence.

"I think why we break down to him is that he'll listen," said David Rosario, 30, a parishioner who quit his gang and now does youth outreach for the Logan Square Boys and Girls Club.

"A lot of people are too busy giving opinions to these young brothers and sisters. He doesn't label them right away."

For a long time, Vazquez gently encouraged Rosario to leave his high-ranking position in the gang. Then, at the funeral of Rosario's brother, who was shot by a rival gang member, the pastor's words finally hit home.

"I heard my pastor's voice: 'You have to choose one or the other,'" Rosario said. "I decided I had to go straight and stay straight."

Vazquez comes from a broken family and arrived in Chicago from Puerto Rico with his father at 16, a stranger to the language and culture. He's been high, he's been jailed, he's been desperate.

"Because those guys are from the street, they know when you are faking," said Vazquez, who lives in a tidy West Side bungalow, where he and his wife, Elena, are raising a son, a daughter and a niece. "They don't care about your preaching. They care more about how you feel about them."

When he does preach, he said, he tries to keep it simple. "I say, 'Don't betray your conscience. If you did well, your conscience is going to let you know.'"

Even after finding some refuge in religion, Vazquez still did not feel completely comfortable in more conventional churches.

Finally, seven years ago, it was time to follow his personal vision. He and his wife held their first service in their apartment. Two teenagers attended. Their church now reaches 200 people, including college students, professionals and more than a few worshipers like Lazaro Melendez.

On a recent Sunday, Melendez, 22, performed a gospel rap with lyrics praising Jesus Christ. Afterward, dressed in a double-breasted sport coat and tie, he talked about his introduction to the church three years ago.

"The first day I came I had my hat, my earring, gold chains, beeper, Starter jacket. Kickin' back. I was a straight-up hoodlum. When I used to pray, I used to be like, 'Hey, God, you got to hook me up, God.'"

What rang true about the church was what wasn't happening. Nobody was questioning his attire, and the pastor was in a front pew most of the service, not behind a pulpit.

"Pastor Willie, he sits there with us," Melendez said.

The "Maplewood church", as it was referred to, was really where Liberty saw its greatest growth and made a significant impact in the community. The membership and leadership grew, youth small groups began meeting in homes, and the worship team grew with passion and talent.

Perhaps the greatest impact was that "Centro", as it was widely known, was being recognized as a place of peace and neutral grounds for rival gang members. Being a former gang member himself, Pastor Willie knew how to reach the gangbangers, and that he did. Not only did rival gang members accept his invitation, but they were transformed by Jesus!

Article written by the Chicago Tribune in 1994 about the impact Pastor Willie and "Willie's kids" were making in the community.

As the ministry continued to grow Pastor Willie & Emilia saw that they were outgrowing the Maplewood Church. Through a relationship they had with Pastor's David & Noelia Rivera, they



Bethesda Church location at 4538 W Fullerton Ave (1998-2000)

were given the opportunity to rent space in Pastor David's newly acquired and renovated church named *Bethesda Church*.

From 1998-2000, their time in Bethesda consisted of more membership and financial growth along with the birth of the first daughter church Pastored by John & Noemi Figueroa named Liberty Christian Center #2.

History of 5447 W Addison Building Purchase

(Translated from sermon given by Rev. Emilia Vazquez on 8/25/2019)

In 1999 the Lutheran church was consolidating and decided to auction off 8 existing churches in Chicago. At the time, Liberty consisted of about 45 young adults, most were students and young professionals. One day as Pastor Willie sat in his home church office, he read the newspaper article about the public auction held by the Lutheran churches. They told him in a week you can place your bid. A \$100,000 minimum bid was required.

The leadership team gathered at Tommy & Luly's apartment on Central Park to pray. A prophetic word was given by sister Nancy Ortiz at the meeting. "The Lord is saying to offer \$500,000! We all gasped as we thought to ourselves "where are we going to get \$500,000?" Pastor Willie has always had an admirable faith. He called to inquire about the buildings. He agreed to follow thru on the prophetic word and submitted our bid at \$500,000. Because it was a public auction, there were many groups who placed bids looking into buying the building, including a group from Asia. A week later we received a call telling us that we had won the bid!

We visited all eight churches and the building at 5447 W Addison was preferred because it had onsite parking, a banquet hall, large kitchen and classrooms. We found it to be such a big place for us. We just had to figure out where we were going to get \$100,000. By God's grace, we were able to raise all the funds in one year!

During this time, we met at the former Bethesda Church building on Fullerton Ave. We met once a week for 2 hours until God opened other doors. Once Sunday, a young woman by the name of Linda Otero approaches Pastor Willie and asks, "*Brother Willie how much is owed for the church?*" Pastor replies, "*girl...allot!*" Linda approached Pastor Willie the following Sunday and asks, "*Brother Willie, I want to know how much is owed for the church?*" Pastor replies again saying, "*girl it's allot of money. You don't worry about it.*" The following Sunday Linda again approaches Pastor Willie and says, "*Brother willie, I want to know how much is owed for*

the church building because I want to pay for it!" That day Linda Otero wrote a check for \$326,000 to pay off the mortgage balance of the church before we even moved into the building! In honor of her generous gift, the banquet meeting space of the church was named "Linda Hall."

The sale contract also stated that we had to wait 5 years to move in because the existing church members purchased another location and had to wait until it was ready to move in. We moved in two years.

How did we pay the other \$100,000? When they sold us the building, they requested to lease the space back from us. They paid us \$7,000 a month to use the space. We collected an additional \$3,000 a month and within a year were able to pay off the other \$100,000! Only God can do that!

Many of us had doubt and fear about how we would get the money, but God did it! We believed God and He came thru! He is the God of the impossible!

10 Saturday, December 19, 1998

Chicago Sun-Times

METRO

Congregations' new homes

8 Lutheran churches go at auction

By MARY HOULIHAN-SKILTON
STAFF REPORTER

God clearly came out the winner on Friday.

In what was labeled "the largest one-day sale of churches in the city's history," seven of eight Lutheran churches on the Northwest Side were purchased by other religious denominations—small churches that had been renting and are moving up. Only one was bought by a developer.

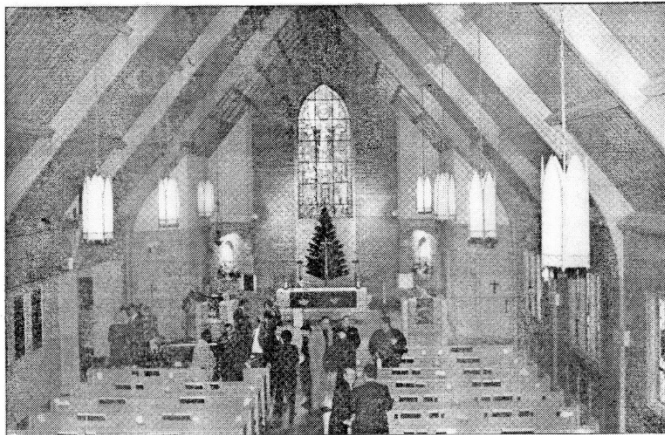
"Deep down, we really wanted the churches to be bought by other churches," said Dorothy Goos, council president of United in Faith Lutheran Church, the combined congregation behind the silent auction. "It makes our tough decision to consolidate into one church much easier."

What amazed Goos even more was that the new buyers represented a virtual cross-section of world religions.

The new owners ranged from St. John of Rila Bulgarian Orthodox Church to the African-American Living Witness Apostolic Church to Marantha Romanian Church to the Bangkok, Thailand-based Dhammakaya International Meditation Center of Chicago.

More than 300 inquiries about the properties were received and 54 sealed bids were submitted, said Steve Good of Sheldon Good & Co., Auctions.

William Vazquez, pastor of Liberty Christian Center, said he was thrilled that his bid won. His young Hispanic congregation will take over United in Faith Lutheran Church. Plans are to use it as a



JOHN H. WHITE/SUN-TIMES

ABOVE: United in Faith Lutheran Church, 5447 W. Addison, was purchased by Liberty Christian Center. LEFT: Liberty Pastor William Vazquez and his wife, Emilia, will use it as a community center.



training and community center. "We are happy that we will be able to expand our ministry. We are not church-oriented but rather community-oriented," he said.

"We offer support where it is needed."

For 20 years, Bishop David Jackson's Living Witness Apostolic Church has been at 3520 W.

Sacred spots, new owners

■ Gladstone Park Lutheran Church, 6200 W. Foster, bought by the International Pentecostal Assembly.

■ Peace Lutheran Church, 5944 W. Cullom, bought by St. John of Rila Bulgarian Orthodox Church.

■ Our Saviour's English Lutheran Church, 4149 N. Laramie, bought by Living Witness Apostolic Church.

■ United in Faith Lutheran Church, 5447 W. Addison, bought by Liberty Christian Center.

■ Medill Avenue Lutheran Church, 4917 W. Medill, bought by Abundant Life Christian Center.

■ Our Lord's Lutheran Church, 6224 W. Gunnison, bought by Dhammakaya International Meditation Center of Chicago.

■ Holy Communion Church, 3010 N. Laverne, bought by Marantha Romanian Church.

■ Nebo Evangelical Lutheran Church and parsonage, 3914 N. Menard, bought by Peter Construction and Development Co.

the buildings held was hard, Goos said.

"But the memories will always be in our hearts," she said. "My hope is that at some point members of our congregation will stop by their old churches and see how things are going for the new owners. Our dream is coming true. We hope theirs will, too."

Ogden. Soon it will move to Our Saviour's English Lutheran Church in the Portage Park neighborhood.

"This is a great Christmas present," Jackson said. "With the help of God, we plan on doing great things. We want the neighborhood to be uplifted by our presence."

The combined Lutheran congregation will stay on the Northwest Side and build a new church with proceeds from the auction. For now, the congregation will lease the church at 5447 W. Addison from the new owner until its new quarters are completed.

Saying goodbye to the memories

Article from the Chicago Sun-Times on Liberty's special day in 1998.

After bouncing around the city between locations for 14 years, they finally had a place they could call home. Through sacrifice, sweat, and tears Liberty was finally able to stabilize their identity in Chicago. Here they would continue to serve the people through community outreaches/ events, neighborhood cleanups, counseling, networking with community partners, and providing a place in the community that people can freely access for spiritual guidance and human needs.



Ribbon cutting ceremony, Rev. Dr. Raul Marrero (left), Rev. William & Emila Vazquez (right)



Uturn Covenant Church, 35 North Ave, Northlake, IL (2010-present)

Their time here has birthed several pastors who have begun daughter churches in Chicago and Orlando Florida. In 2007 Pastor Willie launched Rev. Larry Perez to begin his own church in the basement of his home. Their church became known as Uturn Christian Center. Today they continue their ministry under the name Uturn Covenant Church with the covering of New Life Covenant.



Hermosa Community Church - Defenders, 1701 N. Tripp Ave, Chicago, IL

In 2007 Pastors Jose & Yolanda Garcia were also launched to begin their ministry known as Lifehouse Christian Center. They rented space in a Defender church named, Hermosa Community Church pastored by Rev. Job & Danette Ramos. After 10 years of ministry in the Hermosa Community, they entered into a time of sabbatical from the pasorate to pursue other ministry endeavors. Since their sabbatical in 2017, the church has disbanded and the membership dispersed into other churches in the community.

In 2008, a couple by the name of Claudio and Vivian Matos sought after the spiritual covering of Pastor Willie and Emilia.



Liberty Christian Center – Orlando, 6929 Narcoossee Rd., Orlando, FL.

After establishing a relationship and sometime of mentoring, they moved to Orlando Florida to begin Liberty Christian Center Orlando. Today, their ministry continues to thrive as they serve the community with a clothing ministry named *Hopes Closet*, and other events and services. Their growth has led them to prayerfully begin looking into acquiring their own facility.

During this time Liberty Christian Center #2, Pastored by John and Noemi Figueroa, met at Liberty's newly acquired location to continue establishing their ministry identity as a daughter church. In 2010 we united with them to help acquire their own property from the city at 3914 N. Menard in Chicago. Today they continue to live out the mission, *By Serving the People, We Serve the Lord*, in their community.



Liberty Christian Center – Menard, 3914 N. Menard, Chicago (2010-present)

Since their property acquisition in 2010, Liberty has been able to withstand the test of a rough economy and maintain financial stability. Their ministry membership levels reached record numbers topping 225 people. Over the years there has been an increase in larger church ministries moving into the area that have challenged their membership statistics. Through leadership efforts of ministry consolidation, vision casting, and the financial and physical commitment of foundational members who have been with Liberty since its beginning stages, they have been able to maintain a strong ministry with a current membership of over 200 people.



On March 12, 2020 our church suffered a fire in our meeting hall that destroyed our communal space, kitchen, and administrative building. A week later, a stay-at-home executive order was put in place due to the pandemic. After 2-1/2 years of working with the insurance company and contractors, and fundraising, our church community rallied together to reopen our administrative facilities in July of 2022.

In honor of our founding father, the meeting hall was renamed “*Willie Hall.*” Today, our administrative spaces are a place to serve the community as we endeavor to continue our founder’s vision of being a “*community-oriented church that offers support where it is needed.*”



During the season of restoring our facility and living through a pandemic, our founder, Rev. William Vazquez, passed on to eternal life with the Lord on September 7, 2021. He is survived by his wife Emilia, and three adult children. His legacy lives on as the ministry continues to flourish despite the challenges of our day. Upon William’s passing, his wife Rev. Emilia Vazquez has passed on the mantle of senior leadership to Pastors Tommy & Lourdes Molina. Currently, Rev. Emilia Vazquez sits on the church board as Pastor Emeritus and founder of the ministry providing guidance and spiritual counsel as necessary.



Liberty Christian Center at 5447 W. Addison in Chicago, Aerial photo taken by drone courtesy of church member Felix Mendez (2000-current)



Rev. Tommy & Lourdes Molina
Senior Pastors/ President
(2021 - present)



Rev. Emilia Vazquez
Pastor Emeritus/ Founder
(1987 - present)



Rev. William Vazquez
Founder
(1987-2021)