

Migrant Workers Impact Small Towns

Gary Farley

05-03-02

On May 5, the small town of Aliceville, Ala., will add another event to its community calendar—a Cinco de Mayo celebration. The fun begins at noon with a soccer tournament, followed by a worship service and then a traditional Hispanic meal.

The event is sponsored by Aliceville's Hispanic congregation and the Baptist, Presbyterian and Episcopal churches. The churches, town and county have welcomed the growing number of men from Mexico, Guatemala and other Latin American countries who are finding employment in the area's forest products industries.

Presently, the Hispanic community is rather fluid. Men arrive and work hard in these plants, making flooring and lumber from locally harvested trees. Many move on after a few weeks or months. However, more families are coming and a few are settling in for a longer stay. Aliceville's leaders are working hard to welcome Hispanic workers and help them become good citizens.

Luis and Jenny Oliva began ministering to Aliceville's Hispanic community a year ago. Luis conducts home Bible studies two evenings a week and prepares music for Sunday worship on another. He also works two or three days a week as a mechanic.

Jenny operates a café, which has become a gathering place for the Hispanic community. The Pickens Baptist Association stocks a food pantry and clothes closet housed in the café's back room. These items are distributed to Hispanics in need.

Both Luis and Jenny translate for Hispanics seeking medical care or governmental services. They have also served as ombudsmen, helping workers and employers communicate.

Communication continues to be a critical problem for both the Hispanics and the established Aliceville community. In response, the Family Resource Center of Pickens County is offering conversational Spanish classes, in which roughly 25 government and community leaders are enrolled. The Board of Education offers English as a Second Language on Friday evenings. About 20 Hispanics attend.

Hispanic workers—and others from across the world—are changing hundreds of small towns like Aliceville in the United States. Typically, migrant workers are employed as seasonal laborers who plant, cultivate and harvest fruits and vegetables. They provide a fluid work force. Other rural agri-industries, including meat-packing, poultry and forest products, rely on a similar work force.

For the most part, Aliceville's migrant population has had a positive impact on the community. The workers are productive. They live frugally. And they send a large portion of their income back to family in their home country.

The Bible repeatedly instructs God's people to be hospitable to strangers in the community. Aliceville Christians are seeking to follow this commandment. In so doing, they confront a set of ethical issues, including:

- Some of the workers may not be here legally.
- Employers may be tempted to exploit the workers financially.
- Injured workers may have difficulty receiving medical treatment and benefits while unemployed.
- The migrants/immigrants may violate the law and cultural norms.
- Law enforcement may at least appear to be prejudiced toward Hispanics.
- Living arrangements may be costly and not well-maintained.
- Merchants and service providers may be tempted to over-charge migrant workers.

- Others may try to exploit the workers, who are far from home, by offering them drugs, alcohol and sex.
- As more families settle in the area, the community's institutions will need to include them, which will mean sharing power.

The future will require Aliceville's long-time residents to practice, test and reflect on the central ethical teaching of the Christian faith. And Cinco de Mayo will, it is hoped, become a broadly celebrated event on the community calendars of the Alicevilles across the country.

[Gary Farley](#) is partner in the Center for Rural Church leadership, Carrollton, Ala.