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Church expands its talents \$1,000 for Katrina victims has already multiplied.

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SANTA ANA – It's the little church that could, poco a poco- little by little.

Gardeners, maids, plumbers and high school students are raising money in what has become a modern-day Bible lesson. On Sept. 18, the Rev. Jose Mendoza of Getsemani Church in Santa Ana gave 20 church members \$50 each and told them to go forth and do good.

The money came from former Aliso Viejo pastor Denny Bellesi and his wife, Leesa, who had a \$50,000 profit from selling their house. The couple is giving \$1,000 to a church in each state. So far, 19 churches have signed up.

The money was given on one condition: That it be used to help Hurricane Katrina victims.

MISSION: Denny and Leesa Bellesi give a check for \$1,000 to the Rev. Jose Mendoza for his Santa Ana congregation to use for Hurricane Katrina relief.



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If this story sounds familiar, it is. In 2000, when Denny was the pastor at Coast Hills Community Church, he gave out \$100 bills to 100 churchgoers and told them to multiply the money in the name of God.

They shocked the nation, raising \$1 million and spawning generous acts at every turn.

Now Getsemani Church is on a similar mission, except on a smaller scale. Getsemani, a stucco church with a peeling steeple, is humble. The church members, whose prayers are punctuated with amens, are young. It is a church built on faith, not resources.

Mendoza, originally from El Salvador, recently stood before the congregation and made one thing very clear: The money didn't come from Mendoza. It didn't come for the Bellesis. It came from God.

"It's a privilege," he said. "You will ask God to use your talents and multiply the money."

"Oh wow. I'm speechless. I can't believe God chose me," Wendy Martinez, 20, said after being given \$50. "When (the pastor) said my name, I felt the excitement come out. I felt a big old smile."

The lesson is based on a Bible parable in Matthew 25:14-30. A master gives three of his workers a certain number of "talents." Two of the workers multiply the money, while one buries it until his master returns. The master rewards the two workers while chastising the third for not increasing it.

The parable shows that everybody has a gift and is held accountable for how the gift is used. The congregation is taking the lesson seriously. Mendoza gave them two months to double the financial gift to \$2,000.

They've already hit the mark.
Church expands its talents

AN OPEN DOOR: The Rev. Jose Mendoza and his wife Patricia sing at Getsemani Church in Santa Ana. Mendoza gave church members \$50 each and told them to go forth and do good.



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Erbin Wilfredo Olmedo raised \$2,000 with a raffle for a camera. "This will go to the people who need it," Olmedo said. "We can't go there ourselves, but God has opened a door for us to reach them."

As soon as the money was handed out, Elena Cedillo of Brea called her husband and asked him to pick up some ingredients. She made more than 100 tamales and sold them to her neighbors and to her employers, who hire her to clean their homes. Her \$50 has become \$200.

Her financial resources may be tight, but she feels sorry for the victims of Katrina, especially the undocumented immigrants who are having difficulty receiving assistance.

"It is hard and you get tired, but I did it for God," she said. "When I see all those poor people ... people without (legal) papers, it makes me sad. If we could do something, I would do it with pleasure. One has to help."

Santana Zacarias Jr., a gardener, is raffling a \$40 blender he got at Sav-On. Tickets are \$5 and he's raised \$150 so far. Isaac Amador, a plumber, has raised \$500 selling bowls of black beans at the church. And Jeanette Leon, 16, is selling lollipops and chocolates at Anaheim High School. She has impressed classmates with her mission.

"I have been telling people it is to help people from Katrina, and they think it's cool that we're helping them out," she said.

She has raised \$175 and is confident she'll raise more.

Mendoza said the money will either go to the Red Cross or a church in Houston that is working with the victims.

Leesa Bellesi said the congregation has the right spirit. "It's the multiplication idea. That's what it's all about. Everybody has some creative and thoughtful ideas that God gave them."

This isn't about money, she said. "It's more than that. It's the heart and soul. Giving changes their hearts."