

Building a Church, Finding a Home



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(Editor's note: Great thanks to Chava, FCM Northeast Region member and to her community <http://www.oscarrromerochurch.org> for submitting this latest segment of our ongoing series on FCM's group members.)



This week we will begin our seventh summer of Masses in our little Migrant Church, *Iglesia de San Romero*. Technically, that's a mission of Oscar Romero Inclusive Catholic Church; increasingly, it is the church. One gives one's "Yes" to God, and doors open, others close. The English-speaking part of our church is less and less, and the Spanish more and more.



In the past six years we have worshipped outside, with the sun setting and birds calling, grateful for summer breezes; and inside, in living rooms and borrowed space. For two summers we had a building to use. In 2012 there was an I-9 audit of the farm that employed our parishioners, and everybody lost their jobs. Some went home, some moved away; the few who stayed continued the church. The farm lost most of its workforce and had to switch to less labor-intensive crops.

The silver lining in the cloud was that now there were some empty migrant houses, and we asked the farmer if we could use one for church. It was great to have the use of a building! Right away, I set up a bookshelf so we could have a library. Folks would come to church, and pick out something to borrow. We had information on farm safety, "know your rights" pamphlets, books about faith, novels, children's books.

We celebrated birthdays there, and a graduation party when one of our guys got his GED. At Mass we were comfortable, with chairs for everybody instead of standing around outside, and a heater so we could worship into the autumn. We had a cupboard to keep candles and other Mass supplies, so for those two summers I didn't have to cart them around, using my car as a portable sacristy.

Our third summer, though, I came in to set up for the first Mass of the year, and found a bed in the middle of the church. Our chairs had been pushed to the side, and there was unfamiliar food in the fridge: someone was living there! In a typical example of God's great care, the man who was living there drove up just as I was figuring it out. He said someone had told him the house was empty and he could live there. I contacted the farmer, who was apologetic. He would be homeless if he didn't stay there, she said. His need outweighed ours, so we went back to being an itinerant church. It was possibly the first time in history that a homeless person threw out a church, instead of the other way around. Justice!

That was a year ago. Since then we have worshipped outside (but with folding chairs – hooray!), then in someone's living room. We are trying to buy a building to use for the church – a place where we can have that library again, and community suppers, and English classes. A place where people who are often strangers in this country can find a welcome, be known by name, be in community. A place to know and be known. A place to belong. May it be so!

