

SPOTLIGHT

Finding a common language

Brazilian soccer players help unify Oklahoma community.



SOCCER CAMP BEGINNERS: members of the mission team from Brazil with the youngest participants in this year's soccer camp organized by First Presbyterian Church in Guymon, Okla.



FLAGS UNITED: flags of the United States and Brazil on either side of a banner created for the Guymon soccer team showing the unity experienced by 100 children and teens from 8 nations



BEGINNING THE DAY WITH PRAYER: Robson Gomes, pastor of Brazil's Igreja Presbiteriana Missional (Mission Presbyterian Church), leading a time of prayer with the young soccer players



AWARDS DAY: Brazilian soccer player Gabriela Serranegra, center, with Myron Matengenzara, left, and Rylan Johnson

Situated in an isolated area known as “No Man’s Land” in the center of Oklahoma’s panhandle, First Presbyterian Church in Guymon seems an unlikely spot for a burgeoning international community. Yet members believe that God is bringing a new Pentecost to their doorstep, as immigrants from around the world arrive to work at regional feedlots and a local meat packing plant.

“Our community includes Mexicans, Central and South Americans, Sudanese, Burmese, Somalians, Nigerians, Zimbabweans and Vietnamese, among others,” says First Presbyterian’s pastor, Deborah Hollifield. “There are something like 19 languages in the high school alone. The community has been under some pretty significant stress as it copes with these changes.”

As the congregation considered how to reach out to their increasingly diverse neighbors, they realized that the various groups were isolated from one another by culture,

language and economics. Hollifield, who had traveled to Brazil and had connections with a Presbyterian church there, wondered if a team of Brazilian “missionaries” might help bridge the gaps between Anglos and new immigrants in Oklahoma.

“I couldn’t imagine what all of these people might have in common,” Hollifield says, “until it struck me that the ‘common language’ of the world is soccer.”

For the past five years, the church had hosted an end-of-year banquet for the high school’s soccer team. Building on that relationship, the church offered to sponsor a free summer Brazilian Soccer Skills Clinic for children and teens, hoping that adults from different cultures would come together to enjoy a familiar sport and cheer each other’s children on. The pastor of a Presbyterian congregation in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, agreed to bring a team of 10 people to Guymon to help with the soccer clinic.

This summer’s clinic brought together 100 children and teenagers from eight nations for a week of fun activities on the soccer field.

“The school district allowed us the use of their field, equipment and field house without any fees, so our only expense was insurance for the camp and meals for our guests,” says Hollifield. “The Brazilians brought suitcases full of Brazilian soccer souvenirs and equipment. Each participant received a certificate and a jersey, and coaches for each age group gave special awards.”

The 10 Brazilians stayed in the homes of the church’s members, sharing meals, sightseeing, shopping, participating in evening devotions and Bible study with their host families and leading worship on two Sundays.

“It was a wonderful experience,” says Hollifield, “that has energized our small church and encouraged us to do more local mission with an international focus.”