

Article and photography
by Scott Harrup

New. life in Whiteriver

Until just a couple of years ago, there were no street addresses in Whiteriver, Ariz. Typical instructions to a UPS driver were to “take the third street north of the Assemblies of God church and find the white house.”

Pastor Robert Jimenez of Whiteriver Assembly of God tells that story to illustrate his congregation’s central role in their community. Whiteriver AG has been a landmark in the town for nearly 60 years. Robert and Sharon Jimenez have served as pastors for 10 years and multiplied the church’s outreaches.

Today there are street addresses throughout the town, but an aura of isolation remains. A drive to Whiteriver from Phoenix follows Highway 60 east then northeast into White Mountain Apache Reservation. Central Arizona’s saguaro cactus, vast expanses with sparse vegetation, and omnipotent sunshine give way to forested mountains and high-altitude breezes. Whiteriver, at a mile above sea level, is home to about 7,000 Apache and 2,000 non-Apache residents of the reservation.

The region is a naturalist’s dream, with stunning cliffs, gently flowing streams and abundant wildlife. Black bear, mountain lion, elk, mule deer, bobcat, bighorn sheep and javelinas (wild pigs) roam freely. Roadside signs warning of animal crossings are taken seriously.

But natural splendor can’t erase the real-life challenges Whiteriver’s residents face. Unemployment is above 70 percent. Alcoholism and drug abuse plague lives young and

old. Suicide, particularly among the young people, is the highest per-capita in the nation.

That’s why Robert and Sharon Jimenez are here.

Neighbors of light

On any weeknight, less than a block from Whiteriver’s high school, The Kennel offers one avenue of escape from the depression that has driven the juvenile suicide rate to such heights. The small building offers pool, foosball and other games. The music is loud and Christian, and the volunteer staff are available if a visiting teen needs to talk.

Robert joins a game of pool and offers a smile and hug.

“The young people named The Kennel,” Robert explains. “They said they felt like abandoned reservation dogs, and this was a safe place where they were welcome.”

Whiteriver AG is a ministry partner in The Kennel outreach. The church helps fund and man the center, and coordinates a schedule of worship services and Bible studies. Immediately next door in the same building, The Hope Center is completely underwritten by the church.

Deborah Moore, another non-Apache with a burden for this community, lives at the center. Besides overseeing food and clothing distribution (Whiteriver AG distributes more than 40 tons of food from regional agencies each month), Deborah mans a 24-hour crisis hot line.

“A lot of kids who call are suicidal,” she says. “I’ll make a pact with them. If they make it through the night, I want them to call me the

next day. We go day by day until they are through the crisis.”

If she feels a teen is not responding, she will refer him or her to a suicide task force. Sometimes no measure of intervention is enough.

“You can be the best counselor in the world,” she says, “and still lose some. We’ve lost some even from the church. It’s tough.”

But there are many more successes than failures at The Kennel and Hope Center.

Building families, offering shelter

Sharon Jimenez, an R.N., volunteered in 2000 at a crisis pregnancy center in a nearby town. She began to pray a similar ministry would open in Whiteriver.

“In God’s timing, it happened,” she says. “In 2004 and 2005 we approached the tribal council and health board.”

The Head Start building in Whiteriver became available and was remodeled. The Women’s Choice Pregnancy Clinic’s Whiteriver branch opened in May 2005.

Although the center is nondenominational, the evangelistic focus is clear.

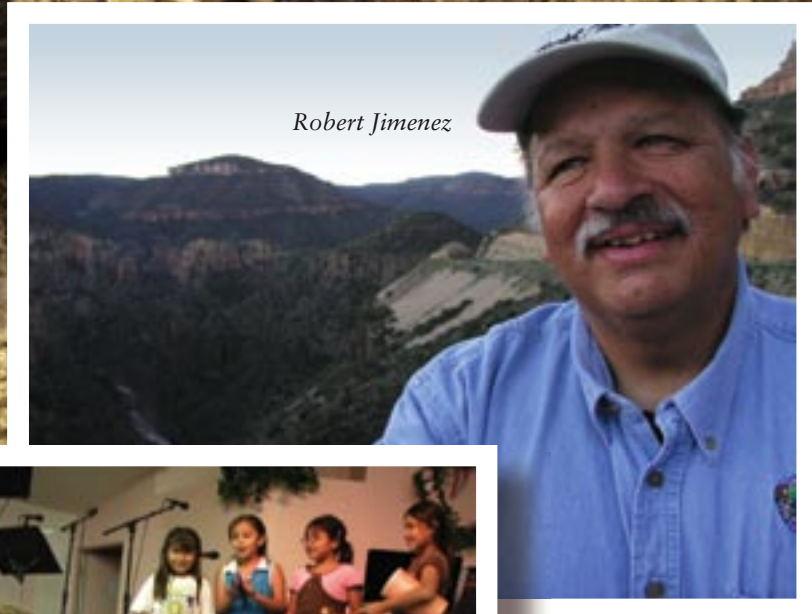
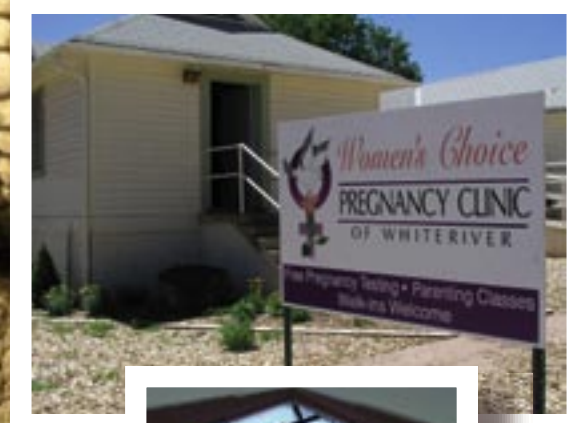
“We explain at the first visit our motivation — Jesus tells us to love people and care for them in difficult situations and help them meet the needs of their families,” Sharon says.

Meeting those needs includes educational tools for new parents as well as clothing and supplies for the arriving baby. Young men and women can earn “Daddy Dollars” and “Mommy Money” by taking video-based lessons on their child’s devel-

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Deborah Moore



Robert Jimenez



Sharon Jimenez

Their future,
your purpose

TEACH

Assemblies of God faculty positions now available

Assemblies of God Higher Education continues to develop a national database of all interested persons who would like to be considered for faculty positions at endorsed AG colleges and universities.

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Whiteriver

opment and health needs. They use earned points to buy everything from diapers to baby clothes to strollers.

A short drive from the pregnancy clinic, a former gymnasium houses a homeless shelter Whiteriver AG has helped establish.

"A bunch of churches helped out at first," says one man at the shelter, "but Pastor Robert and his people have kept coming."

A gaunt man with a wispy gray beard approaches Robert and quietly asks for prayer. Robert later explains the man (really just 41 years old) has remained alcohol-free for three weeks. When he receives his assistance check, he knows the temptation to buy a drink will be nearly overwhelming.

"We usually house about 20 people," Robert says. "We have services here on the basketball court as well as Sunday School classes and Bible studies for the men."

Churches of harvest

When Robert and Sharon came to Whiteriver AG, the church had fallen on difficult times. About 40 people were still attending.

Much has changed. The congregation has grown to nearly 300, with about 200 attending on a typical Sunday morning. The church is debt-free and prioritizes missions giving.

Robert points to a world map with missionary photos attached. "Every time we add a home missionary," he says, "we add a foreign missionary. Our church tithe goes to missions. We believe we are debt-free because we give — not just to missions, but to BGMC, Light for the Lost and other ministries."

The church's renewed life is powerfully evident during worship. Ordained Apache Evangelist Buster Beatty leads an Apache/English Sunday School class in the sanctuary, teaching alternately and powerfully in both languages. Children and youth enjoy age-level classes in English in nearby rooms.

Testimonies lead into morning worship. One woman rejoices that family members have found Christ as their Savior. "Don't give up praying for your loved ones," she says.

Worship leader William Harvey

moves the worship band from one heartfelt song to the next. The congregation joins in exuberant praise.

"I'm going to be 8 years old," William says after the service. "I played in the world with bands in bars and banquets. But on a Saturday night Labor Day Weekend eight years ago, I had a Road to Damascus experience."

The Holy Spirit overwhelmed William with conviction as his band prepared for one of their biggest concerts. Now he leads a worship concert every week at Whiteriver AG and dreams of training worship bands at churches across the reservation.

Robert also has a larger vision for the churches in the community. Whiteriver has come alongside other AG churches in the area.

Jerry Frawley pastors Indian Assembly of God in nearby Cibecue. His church was planted by Whiteriver years ago, and recently moved into a new building courtesy of a construction team from Mustang AG in Mustang, Okla. Frawley rejoices over the growth he has seen.

"In April 2004 my wife and I started with three women," he says. "Last Sunday we had 83 people."

Marvin Begay, a Navajo graduate of American Indian College, pastors Canyon Day AG in Fort Apache and relied on Frawley and Jimenez to build bridges with nearby churches.

"We needed to fellowship more," Begay says. "We planned a fall gathering last year and it was attended really well. We had it here at Canyon Day and Brother Jimenez brought his worship band and Jerry Frawley came and ministered that night. I'm trying to get more churches involved. We've got to be together. We're sister churches."

Reaching out

When the worst forest fire in Arizona history charred nearly half a million acres in 2002, Whiteriver AG stepped in alongside The Salvation Army and American Red Cross. The church's reputation for community service caught the attention of state government agencies.

"We were giving out clothes and food and we were asked to provide

When the worst forest fire in Arizona history charred nearly half a million acres in 2002, Whiteriver AG stepped in.

housing and necessities," Robert says. "The State of Arizona brought in truckloads of food and provided people to help us cook and serve it. We set up 10 shelters and we had a total of 6,000 people we were feeding three meals a day for about a week."

It proved to be a powerful avenue for ministry. A team had come to Whiteriver to hold a vacation Bible school at the church. They ended up traveling from shelter to shelter doing VBS from 10 to 3 every day.

Whiteriver AG sent 28 Apache to Biloxi, Miss., after Hurricane Katrina. They helped serve three meals a day for about 1,000 people.

"We were able to clear houses of debris," Robert says. "Men cleared houses and ladies prepared food. Even the former chairman of our tribe, Dallas Massey, went with me and helped serve."

Chairman Massey recently completed eight years of service. He looks back on Robert's ministry during his administration.

"He was always at my side," Massey says. "We had prayer in my office every Monday."

The men remain close friends, and share a unique bond. Long before they met, both accepted Christ as their Savior in 1969 in Texas. Massey called out to God when a nearly fatal car accident covered 90 percent of his body with burns and doctors in San Antonio didn't believe he would survive 24 hours. Robert encountered his Savior through the simple faith of some boys in a Royal Rangers class he volunteered to teach at a Dallas church.

Golden years

Robert is an ordained AG minister while Sharon and both of their daughters are licensed AG ministers. One daughter has married and recently made them grandparents.

Two years ago, Robert suffered a series of physical ailments that reminded him his remaining years at Whiteriver are numbered.

"In August 2004 I suffered a heart attack followed by gall bladder surgery and a stroke," he says. "In February 2005 I had three herniated discs and in April my kidneys shut down."

But in the midst of all five crises, Robert only spent one night in the hospital.

"God miraculously healed me," he says.

Still, he is realistic about the future. He is working harder than ever to prepare young Native Americans for leadership among their people. Cheryl Stover, a young Apache mom who preaches on Sunday night, is currently working on ministerial credentials with the Assemblies of God. Cheryl was recently interviewed by the Arizona District for her certified minister's credentials.

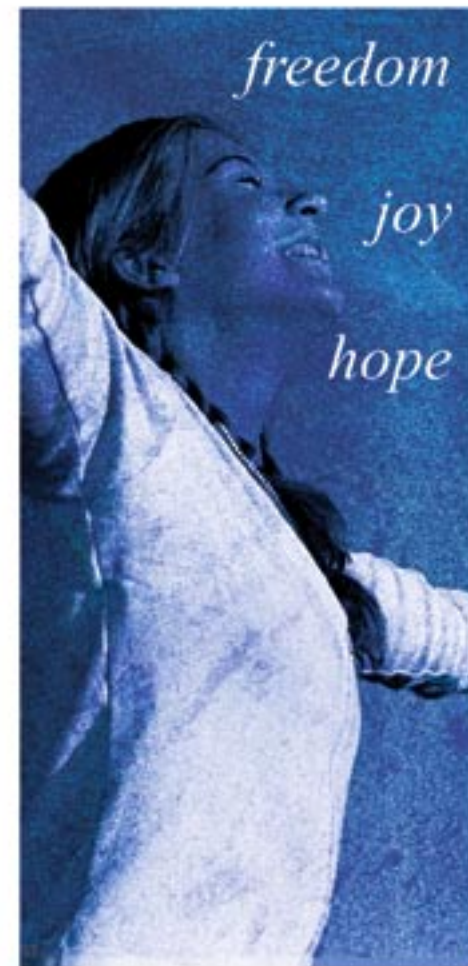
Raising up Native American leadership is the key to continued revival, Robert says. John Maracle, president of the Assemblies of God's Native American Fellowship, agrees.

"Brother Jimenez is doing a great work," Maracle says. "I would like to see our Apache churches become full New Testament churches — self-supporting, self-governing and witnessing churches full of the Holy Spirit."

Because what the Holy Spirit does among empowered Apache congregations, He is perfectly capable of doing among all 601 tribes across North America. **tpe**

SCOTT HARRUP is senior associate editor of *Today's Pentecostal Evangel*.

E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.



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