

CASA VIDA UNITED METHODIST MISSION INC,
WAHNETA-WINTER HAVEN

HISTORY OF CASA VIDA

(JULY 2018 - OCTOBER 2021)

CASA VIDA GALA - OCTOBER 2021

The spring of 2018 brought excitement and enthusiasm to the Wahneta community of Winter Haven, Florida. At this time, the former Methodist Mission located in the community reopened its doors with an emphasis on refocusing its ministry and mission to meet the needs of a changing community. The Florida Conference of the United Methodist Church asked St. John's to assume responsibility for the Mission/Ministry endeavor. After approval by the St. John's United Methodist Church Conference in May of 2018, Pastor Rodolfo Martinez was appointed as the local pastor to serve the new mission called Casa Vida (House of Life).



The Wahneta community has historically been a Mexican migrant community heavily involved in the citrus industry of Central Florida. At the time of the Missions original opening in the 1950's, the citrus industry was thriving. But as years went by this began to change for several reasons. Freezing weather which severely affected the crops, as well as the Citrus Greening fungus which also affected growth and production, the citrus industry was forced to sell off groves, and in some cases, move its production overseas. When groves were sold, jobs were lost. Those who came to the Wahneta community hoping to make it their home base were forced into a difficult situation. With limited job skills, education, and language barriers, there was nowhere to go. As an underserved community in greater Polk County, Wahneta began to go into further decline and the Wahneta Mission was forced to reevaluate its mission and vision.

At present, the Casa Vida property consists of two older buildings located near Winter Haven in the greater Polk County area of Central Florida. The mission is a part of the East Central District of the United Methodist Church of Florida. It continues to be a rural area of 5,000 people with 70% of the population being Hispanic. In the past, the majority of Hispanics were Mexican, but today the population is made up of those who have come from Mexico, Central and South America, Cuba, and in recent years from Puerto Rico. The increase in those coming from Puerto Rico is partly a result of the effects of Hurricane Maria which devastated the island several years ago. Each of these ethnic groups brings their own heritage and tradition to the Wahneta community. Bringing these groups together presents interesting challenges for the community of which Casa Vida is an integral part. It is toward this end that we seek God's guidance in refocusing the ministry and mission efforts to clearly meet the present day needs of the community.

Once the decision was made to reopen and refocus the mission and ministry of Casa Vida in terms of evangelism, spiritual growth, and educational programing, the Florida Conference of the United Methodist Church contributed money to the refurbishing of the existing buildings in order to bring them up to code including the Fire Codes.

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During the 2018 year and on into 2019, much work was done by volunteers from St. John's United Methodist Church, to redo the bathrooms, kitchen, floors, plumbing, electrical, painting, and yard maintenance, etc. Work was also done on classrooms to make them safe for children and youth. The NOMADS Organization of the United Methodist Church also helped extensively to upgrade the buildings and the property. The NOMADS travel the country helping communities/individuals who are recovering from various disasters and problems. They generously helped the Wahneta Mission as it rebuilt itself into the Casa Vida Mission.

Pastor Rodolfo Martinez and his family moved to Winter Haven in July of 2018 and took residence in one of the rental properties of St. John's. The home that existed on the Casa Vida property was also brought up to code in order to be rented to bring in income for Casa Vida. While work was being completed on the buildings, Pastor Rodolfo worked hard to get to know the members of the community including those who had left the previous Mission for various reasons. He reached out to the local elementary school and many business leaders in the Wahneta community and beyond into the greater Polk County area. He also reached out to other pastors in the community regardless of denomination or ethnic background. It is important to know that Wahneta has several small community churches and that most of these pastors are part-time. Community outreach has not been a significant part of this community for many years. It is at present a highly underserved part of Polk County. But with much prayer and hard work, Casa Vida was able to open its doors for its first service of worship on December 9, 2018. There were fifteen in attendance at that first service; but as of the middle of February 2020 regular attendance has increased dramatically to around 40-50 a week. Due to the COVID-19, Casa Vida is now reaching over 75 people for on-line services of worship. Casa Vida continues to thank God daily for his guidance and grace.

When Pastor Rodolfo arrived in Winter Haven to begin work, an advisory committee of St. John's members was called together by Pastor Averill. This committee became the first Casa Vida Board of Directors with nine members and the Rev. Dr. Phil Granger as its Chairperson. They were asked to oversee the refurbishing of the buildings, begin talking about programming, and oversee finances provided by the Florida Conference of the United Methodist Church. Pastor Rodolfo, with the help of the Board, began working on establishing worship services on Sunday morning, weekly Bible Study, and the development of a music program which began to bring in the youth. He also reached out to the Spanish radio station which provided him airtime for a devotional/inspirational moment. Programming during the fall of 2018 and into the winter of 2019 included a Health Fair, Trunk-or-Treat and Easter Egg Hunt for children, Mom's Fest for Mother's Day, a Youth Music/Worship Experience, several yard sales as fund raisers, and a "Back to School Bash" for the children of Wahneta. In the spring of 2019, the Mexican Consulate from Orlando, Florida was invited to Casa Vida to conduct a workshop with the assistance of JFON (Justice for our Neighbors) to help meet both legal and medical issues for the community. Almost 300 people attended this event.

The fall of 2019 saw Casa Vida's first GALA as a fundraising event. This was led by Jim Hammond, a member of the Board of Directors. The event gave the community an opportunity to learn about Casa Vida and become involved through financial giving and volunteering. There were 150 in attendance and almost \$20,000.00 was raised. Much of this money was designated to provide programming for Casa Vida and the community of Wahneta. As a result, in January 2020, Casa Vida was able to begin offering one class in computer technology, two classes in Language Skills, and was set to offer a computer class in a program entitled "Job Skills for Life."

However, as so often happens with life - it can change in a moment. In February, Casa Vida and the country began hearing about the COVID-19 virus. Almost before we knew what was happening, the country, our state and community, and the world began to shut down for safety reasons. Very quickly everyone learned that worshiping inside a building, as well as any other type of programming, was not longer possible. For Casa Vida to stay connected to its members and the greater community, we would have to use today's technology to continue to worship, pray, and study through online communications. Pastor Rodolfo has responded to this challenge by providing online Sunday worship and weekly Bible Study and prayer time. He is reaching between 75-100 people each week. Many of them have said they look forward to coming to Casa Vida when the medical crisis is over. And Casa Vida will welcome them with in a spirit of Christian love.

During all the changes that took place at Casa Vida from 2018-2020, Pastor Rodolfo completed the course work necessary to become a Licensed Local Pastor in the United Methodist Church. In June of 2019, this event took place in the presence of the Florida Conference of the United Methodist Church with Bishop Carter of the United Methodist Church of the State of Florida presiding. At this time (2021), he is continuing his education to become a fully ordained minister in the United Methodist Church.

God has been and continues to be the guiding force in developing the mission and vision of Casa Vida. It began small - actually, no members - and has grown as each month and season has gone by. Even though COVID 19 has effected programing and attendance, the mission and vision have always involved evangelism and educational programing and continues to do so. As Casa Vida responds to the immediate medical emergency, the implementation of the mission and vision have changed and most likely will continue to change. Pastor Rodolfo and his family continue to reach out into the community to better understand the needs of the people in the hopes of being able to positively respond to their needs, both spiritually and educationally.

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