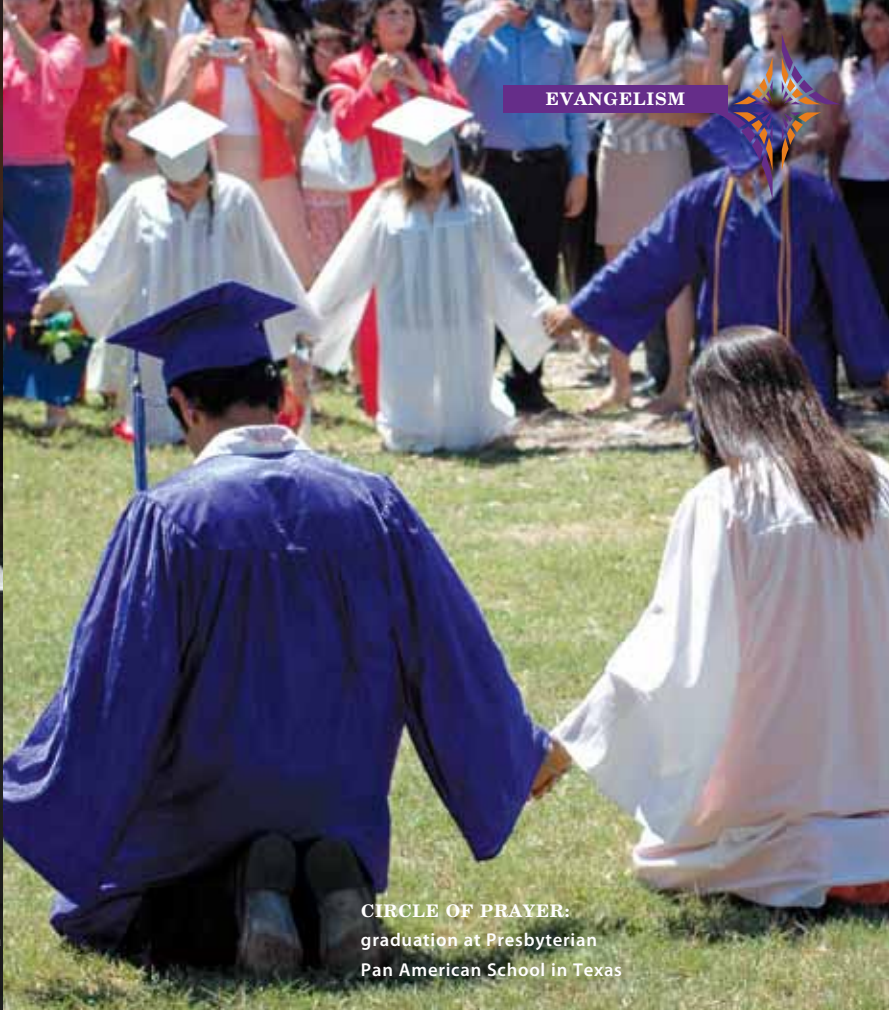




GRADUATE: Indra Moreno, who received a full college scholarship



CIRCLE OF PRAYER: graduation at Presbyterian Pan American School in Texas

Blooming in the desert

In the land of cactus and mesquite, high school students from around the world are learning to be Christian leaders.

By Gary Luhr

The students come from everywhere and their influence is felt in many parts of the world. That is the story of Presbyterian Pan American School, a Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)-related secondary school in Kingsville, Texas, which begins a yearlong centennial celebration in May.

“Each year at graduation, after they receive their diploma, I give each graduate a white rose and tell them, ‘Bloom where you are planted,’” says Pan Am’s president, Jim Matthews. Many bloom in the United States, others in places

ranging from Mexico and Latin America to Korea and China.

Today almost every graduate goes to college. This shows how far the school, which averages between 130 and 150 students, has come since its predecessor, the Texas-Mexican Industrial Institute (Tex-Mex), was started on 700 acres of cactus and mesquite brush in May 1912. The land was a gift to the Synod of Texas in the former Presbyterian Church in the United States from Henrietta King, daughter of a Presbyterian missionary and wife of Captain Richard King, founder of the

historic King Ranch. Established to educate Mexican boys and “contribute to the development of efficient Christian manhood,” the school had 50 students when it opened on Oct. 1, 1912. Twelve years later the synod and the Presbyterian Women’s Auxiliary opened the Presbyterian School for Mexican Girls (Pres-Mex) in Taft, 50 miles away. The schools were combined to form Pan American in 1956.

Intentionally Christian

Tex-Mex and Pres-Mex were trade schools, with a focus on teaching



SERVICE: Gabe Gomez raised a bull in a 4-H project at Pan Am. Now in medical school, he plans to join his father's Guatemala mission.

practical skills and preparing students to contribute to the church. Pan Am is a college preparatory school, but there is another dimension as well.

"The students know we are intentional about being a Christian



COMMUNITY SPIRIT: Members of the track team at Presbyterian Pan American School like to pray before meets. Senior Karla Gonzalez says Pan Am students are "like a family."

life to caring for Central America's indigenous people. His four children are also Pan Am graduates. One works with Gomez's missionary team, another is completing a Ph.D. in chemistry at Texas A&M University, the third is a medical



GRADUATE: Vanessa Ebiaca, from Equatorial Guinea, is now studying engineering.

Many Hispanic Presbyterian churches throughout the Southwest are led by Pan American graduates. The school is affiliated by covenant agreements with the Synod of the Sun of the PC(USA) and the National Presbyterian Church of

Spiritual development is an extension of education. Teachers and staff try to be role models for students and share their values and beliefs.

institution," says Barbara Stottlemyer, Pan Am's dean of academic and student affairs. "All are required to take classes in Old and New Testament, go to chapel on Wednesdays and worship on Sunday." At Pan Am, she says, spiritual development is an extension of education. Teachers and staff try to be role models for students and share their values and beliefs.

The result can be seen in former students like Hugo Gomez, who graduated from Pan Am in 1974 and returned to Guatemala to become a physician and devote his

student in Guatemala and the fourth is a nursing student at Schreiner University, a Presbyterian-related school in Kerrville, Texas.

The ripple effect of two or three generations of a family attending Pan Am has long been part of its history. Isaac de Lugo, a Puerto Rican who met his wife while teaching at Pres-Mex, served the Presbyterian Church for many years in New York City and sent all six of his children to Pan Am. One became a pastor, one a lawyer, one a teacher, one a counselor, one a police captain and one a missionary in Africa.

Mexico. Currently all but one of its trustees are Presbyterian, including nine elected by the synod and two by the church in Mexico.

"We meet the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20) not by going into the world but by asking the world to send us their kids. Most go back to their home countries to be leaders," President Matthews says.

The call to mission

The Pan American experience is highly structured. Students are in class weekdays from 7:45 a.m. to 2:55 p.m. Study hours are from



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7:30 to 9:30 each night. “Lights out” is at 10:30 p.m. during the week (11 p.m. for seniors) and midnight on weekends. Students wear uniforms in class, and every student is required to work at a campus job six hours each week.

The curriculum meets Texas state standards and includes math, science, social studies, fine arts, English, language arts, spiritual development,

agricultural science, career education and physical education. Since about half of the students come to Pan Am knowing no English, the curriculum also includes English as a Second Language. About one-third of the seniors take classes at a nearby community college, for which they receive both high school and college credit. To attend costs around \$15,000 a year. Ninety percent of students receive financial aid but all are required to pay part of the cost.

Like most institutions beginning their second century, Pan Am has had its hard times. When Matthews came in 1998, there were 70 students, the roofs leaked, and the trustees had hired a consultant to assess the viability of both the school’s finances and mission. Students could not afford to enroll. Mexico, which still supplies the most students, had devalued the peso. Gifts from churches and church governing bodies, which contribute 20 percent of Pan Am’s revenue, were down.

“My charge the first year I was here was to save it or close it,” Matthews says.

What saved the school was refocusing on its mission while becoming much more international, says James

Currie, pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Pasadena, Texas, who is writing the history of Pan Am. He credits Matthews for much of the turnaround. “He’s worked very hard,” he says, “to publicize the work of the school.”

“It didn’t take me long to hear what I can only label a call to mission,” Matthews says. “I heard it the very first day in the faces and voices of 70 kids huddled in a chapel, and I’ve heard it nearly every day since.”

Like a family

Asked what they like about Pan Am, students talk about receiving an education that prepares them for college, having opportunities for leadership and service, becoming independent and learning to be responsible. But what they like best are the students themselves.

“They’re like brothers,” says Paul Vilchez, a senior from Peru, who is president of the student council. “It’s like a family,” says Karla Gonzalez, a senior from Mexico, who adds, “I like the fact that it’s Presbyterian and has a spiritual life.”

“What makes a school is the quality of its students and what they do,” Matthews says. “Every year I make a promise to the kids that as long as I’m here, there will be a school for their kids to go to.”

That is the goal of Pan American’s master plan and its current \$15-million capital campaign, the first since the school was formed more than 50 years ago. Most of the buildings on campus date from the 1960s. Enrollment has been at or near capacity in recent years. School leaders would like to double enrollment to around 300 students.

“We envision more young men and women taking their place in boardrooms and hospitals, in corporate offices and pulpits, here in this country and back in their home countries,” Matthews says.

“Our goal,” he says, “is to ‘plant trees,’ the fruit of which the world will enjoy. If Pan American did not exist, the global landscape would be more barren.”

Gary Luhr is executive director of the Association of Presbyterian Colleges and Universities.

SUPPORT racial ethnic education

Presbyterian Pan American School receives money from the annual Christmas Joy Offering of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Half of the offering supports Presbyterian-related racial ethnic education, and the other 50 percent provides support for retired and active church workers and their families.

» Learn more about the Christmas Joy Offering:
www.pcusa.org/christmasjoy

» Learn more about Presbyterian racial ethnic schools and colleges:
www.pcusa.org/resc

» Learn more about Presbyterian Pan American School: www.ppas.org