

By Ryan Brinks
Times Republican

Marshalltown's growing Liberty Baptist church on South Center Street welcomed a new Hispanic pastor Friday to help lead its congregation. Israel Becerra and his wife Paola Ledesma completed the drive from San Antonio, Texas at the end of last week.

"We were praying for more than just a nice building and nice ministries. We wanted a pastor and church who walk in faith," Becerra said. "For us, it's not about success. It's about how much you know Jesus."

The church's head pastor, Randy Mason, speaks Spanish but has seen more response from English speaking residents since starting Liberty Baptist in January 2005.

Becerra will start with a Spanish-speaking small group that meets at the church every Sunday, he said.

"Our work here will be to reach the Hispanic community with the gospel. There are not much churches working with the Hispanic community," he said. "It's a big challenge for us, to help them grow spiritually. But I believe if a person grows spiritually then they can grow in all areas of their life, and only Jesus can do that (for them)."

Becerra met his wife at Texas' Rio Grande Bible Institute and both have parents who are pastors. They were married Dec. 30, 2005 - and celebrated in three locations: San Antonio and their hometowns of Mexico City, Mexico, and Lima, Peru.

In the midst of praying about their search for a place to serve, the couple noticed a bulletin board post of the position in Marshalltown a year and a half ago.

They thought, "Iowa?" We don't know about Iowa. It's too far away from San Antonio and we don't know anybody."

So they continued to look until earlier this year, when they took a spring break mission trip to Wisconsin and drove through Iowa.

When they got back to Texas, they looked for the job posting and it was still there. Becerra sent a resume, came for a visit and accepted the position.

"I asked the Lord if you want me there, I'm going. I'm ready to serve You," he said.

He was also not initially aware of Marshalltown's large Hispanic community - just the predominance of corn and soybeans, he joked. So far, though he has taken a liking to the friendliness of the more rural community, he added. But he still has to get used to the one-way streets and find the cheapest groceries, he noted.

Particularly in order to cook up a special meal for his wife's birthday today. Contact Ryan Brinks at 641-753-6611 or rbrinks@timesrepublican.com