

Ruben Saenz, Jr.

## Evangelism within the Hispanic Community

# A COMPLEX CALLING Un Llamado Complicado

**T**wo realities need to be mentioned (although they need a lot more attention than I can give here) before we can examine our motivation and methods in this vitally important ministry. First, Hispanics are not a homogeneous group. They come from many countries and with varying years of residence in what is now the United States. Some are first-generation immigrants; most others are second, fourth, sixth or more generation residents of the United States. Some are monolingual Spanish-speaking, others are bi-lingual, and others are monolingual English speaking. Second, in this article I am primarily addressing evangelism within the non-aculturated, non-assimilated Hispanic community. You should know that my experience of doing evangelism within the Hispanic community has been primarily with the Mexican—American population in Texas and parts of New Mexico.

Given the complex nature of the Hispanic reality in the United States let us consider the church's motivation for evangelizing the Hispanic community. The first rule of evangelism within the Hispanic community is that it must be sincere. The primary task of evangelism is to make Christ known, call persons to faith in Christ and usher people into and sustain people in the kingdom of God. We must be careful that our motivation for evangelizing the Hispanic community is not born out of a need to sustain the institution nor should it be born out of xenophobia, that is, fear of the alien. Evangelism to the Hispanic community must be born out of love and concern for the salvation of others and guided by this theological premise which Peter arrived at in Acts 10:34—"God shows no partiality."

Evangelism that has as its priority the sustaining of an institution is self-centered instead of other-centered. For example, some churches today find themselves in areas where demographics have changed and where the surrounding population

has over the years become predominately Hispanic. Churches in such areas experience the flight of its parishioners to the suburbs and/or away from the inner city. With dwindling economic resources, the surrounding Hispanic community can be looked upon as a potential economic resource for the sustenance of the institution. A church that is "forced" to minister to the Hispanics for survival reasons objectifies the Hispanic and sees them as a means towards their own ends. This type of evangelism is lacking in integrity. It is often times accompanied by paternalistic gestures such as the giving away of food and clothing so as to create in the Hispanic consciousness a guilt that passively coerces them to reciprocate the benevolent gestures

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by reluctantly getting involved in the church so that the generosity can continue. If the Hispanic community does not reciprocate with a commitment to attend church, the people who do the outreach ministry may feel taken advantage of because their generosity has not

been translated into church growth. In the end, the church can be hardened, the ministry shutdown and the Hispanics are written off as ingrates. When this breakdown occurs, it hinders the evangelistic ministry of the church to the Hispanics by creating distrust between the two communities. This distrust is bred by a misinterpretation of the other's intentions. The giver thinks it is making disciples in a round-about sort of way and the receiver thinks the giver is concerned for their temporal well being.

To evangelize from a position of fear is to reach out towards the other under the guise of evangelism, again, for the sake of safeguarding one's culture and value. A church reaching out to the Hispanic community out of this posture might say, "Our community would be a safer place if everyone was a Christian." Evangelism then is exercised as a tool of acculturation and assimilation and/or as a social pacifier to safeguard the dominant culture's own values and political interests. Evangelism from this

# Rising Growth of Hispanic Population

The 2000 census revelation that the Hispanic population had spurred to 35.3 million stunned even those Christian groups already reaching out to Hispanics. These churches, seminaries, and other organizations—and those in traditionally non-Hispanic areas like Georgia, where the Latino presence quadrupled—are fast learning how to catch up.

Half of all U.S. Hispanics live in just two states, California and Texas, but the census figures caught many churches off-guard with news of dramatic increases during the 1990s in areas not synonymous with Hispanic culture: from 109,000 Hispanics to 435,000 in Georgia; from 98,000 to 214,000 in Indiana; from 76,000 to 379,000 in North Carolina; and from 32,000 to 124,000 in Tennessee. During the decade, California's Hispanic population swelled from 7.7 million to 11 million, and Texas's from 4.3 million to 6.7 million. The next largest Hispanic states by populations are New York (2.9 million), Florida (2.7 million), Illinois (1.5 million), Arizona (1.3 million), and New Jersey (1.1 million).

Mexican immigration contributed most to the rise. The U.S. Hispanic population increase from 22.4 million in 1990 to 35.3 million in 2000 amounts to a 58 percent increase (12.9 million). About 7 million of those 12.9 million are of Mexican origin, raising the total number of Mexican-origin Hispanics to 20.6 million.

—From “Catching Up with Hispanics” by Rodolfo Carrasco in *Christianity Today* (Nov. 12, 2001, p. 66)

For more information, contact Eli Rivera, Interim Coordinator, National Plan for Hispanic Ministries, General Board of Global Ministries, 212/870-3693 or [www.gb-gm-umc.org/programs/hispanicmin/](http://www.gb-gm-umc.org/programs/hispanicmin/)

posture lacks integrity because it is at root socio-cultural imperialism masked by Christianity.

Evangelism with integrity to the Hispanic community, and to all peoples for that matter, begins with deep mourning for the spiritual state of persons who are separated from God. It is entered into with “fear and trembling,” and with humility guided by an openness to be led by God and openness to be changed by the encounter with the other. One enters into an evangelistic context first as a learner and receiver.

The task of evangelism within the Hispanic community must be carefully thought through. Another question that must be addressed is, “How long does one intend to sustain the ministry to the Hispanic community once evangelized and incorporated into a community of faith?” Evangelism within the Hispanic

community cannot be a short-term experiment; it must be a long-term commitment. A large number of Hispanics claim an allegiance to the Roman Catholic faith. To evangelize a Hispanic from a Protestant posture is to move the evangelized away from Roman Catholicism and from a familiar socio-cultural community life. **To be Hispanic and protestant in the U.S. is to be a minority within Anglo-Protestantism and a minority within the socio-religious life of the Hispanic community.** A Hispanic Protestant is part of both, but not fully integrated into either. That is why evangelism among the Hispanic community is a very serious undertaking. To do evangelism in the Hispanic community with short-sighted goals and ministerial objectives is to not take into consideration the tearing of the socio-cultural and religious fabric of a Hispanic.

Allow me to use this illustration. I graduated from a high school in South Texas among a class of 230 students. My home church, First United Methodist Church of Rio Grande City established in 1875 and a member of the Rio Grande Conference, honored Omar Peña and myself with a baccalaureate ceremony. While this was happening, the rest of my 228 classmates were at the Roman Catholic Church down the street celebrating their baccalaureate service. **As a Hispanic Protestant, one must learn the skill of differentiation at a very early age to cope with the estrangement brought about by the difference in faith practice between one and one's friends.**

Preparing a church for Hispanic ministry takes intention and it necessitates frank talk about uncomfortable issues. All too often the church's task of evangelism is hindered because the church has yet to transcend its own elitist attitudes toward persons of other cultures. In Acts 10 we read that God had to deal with Peter's conservative social and religious prejudices before Peter was able to attend to the call to visit Cornelius and his family. Peter had to come to grips with the truth that “God shows no partiality.”

Now that we understand whom we are evangelizing and why, I pray that you have not been discouraged from the task of evangelism within the Hispanic community. It is very important. The task of evangelism to the non-aculturated and assimilated Hispanic is two-pronged; the first prong has to do with spiritual care and nurture, the second, with advocacy.

The Hispanic community, by and large, is a relationship-based community; one enters into it and is accepted by the community often times only through introduction and by becoming familiar with the primary web of relationships of the individual doing the introducing. Once attaining access into the community, the patient ministry of presence is necessary to continue gaining the confidence and trust of a community. The ministry of presence can be exercised by attendance at family celebrations and/or other social settings without any particular agendas other than relationship building. Trust is engendered with presence with someone undergoing a personal or family crisis. While this may seem like a lengthy way to go about the task of evangelism, it is a proven way to

establish the foundation for building a community of faith.

Once trust is established, the ministry of prayer is offered to persons and their extended families and friends. The ministry of prayer opens up opportunities to speak about real life issues that are happening in the lives of people. The ministry of prayer also awakens a hunger to know more about the Christian faith. Once the person is ready to receive teaching, a cell group made up of family, friends and close neighbors can be organized. Evangelism through Bible study should be intentional and direct, that is, if our intention is to bring people to saving faith in Jesus Christ, then we must declare it from the beginning of our study time together.

The cell groups should be no more than six to eight weeks in duration. I have found that the encounters between Jesus and the persons in the stories from the Gospel of John resonate with the human experience of people and invite them into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. A call to faith should be offered after each Bible study.

Once a nucleus of the community of faith has been organized, one should then seek to work deep within the nucleus by identifying a person within the group who would be willing to host a gathering at his or her home. Ideally, this ministry would grow exponentially if the church had teams of persons employing this strategy on three or four other fronts. Once three or four nuclear groups have formed, a fellowship supper is provided. Every effort should be exercised to get all cell group members there. During the fellowship times, there can be icebreakers, Christian music specials, introductions and recognition of leaders. A short message sharing the vision of the ministry can be shared. Everyone leaves with a word of encouragement and with an assignment to team up with persons outside of their nuclear group to pray for each other. The process is repeated. The people of the church community who understand what the ministry has meant to them now become assistants and teach and train others.

The second prong of evangelism con-

cerns the ministry of advocacy. The Hispanic community, while soon to become the largest minority within the U.S., is virtually invisible. Its presence is absent from the film industry, the television industry and society in general. With the exception of a few sports stars and entertainment icons, the Hispanics are to be seen but not heard. This ethos of invisibility opens a door for exploitation and social marginalization.

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Ministry to Hispanics has often taken the shape of handouts of food and clothing and/or school supplies. While these ministries meet an immediate need, they fall short of providing life skills that will economically sustain a family. One way to advocate on behalf of the Hispanic com-

munity is through ministries of economic empowerment. Low wages are a reality among the Hispanic community. Hispanics are often times forced to borrow money at oppressive, high interest rates from pawn shops, loan shark finance companies, and other exploitive lending and renting institutions because of job instability and/or low earned incomes. Ideas for economic empowerment ministries can include free computer literacy courses to persons transitioning from industrial to technical jobs, English as a second language classes, G.E.D. and citizenship classes, after-school tutorials, and training for adults on how to set up a small business plan and borrow money to begin it with. These ministries have a long-term economic impact on the present and future community.

Legal advice and health care are other possible areas. A legal clinic offered by a church to help Hispanics deal with their legal questions would be most gratefully welcomed and appreciated. Mobile health clinics and health fairs could make a big difference as well.

**Evangelism within the Hispanic community is a calling—and a complex one at that. It is a call that should be entered into prayerfully, carefully and with honest transparency.** Paul understood his call to be to the Gentiles. He became all things to others so that he might win them over to Christ. At the

same time, his evangelization efforts were fully supported by the Jerusalem council and some critical accommodations were made to signify that faith in Christ was not initiation into the Jewish customs but into the Kingdom of God. The eschatological vision that can enable us to transcend ourselves and reach out in love to the other with the saving message of Jesus Christ is that one day we will comprise a part of that "great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb" shouting in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb" (Revelation 7:9a, 10, NIV). □



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