



The Invitation

A Means of Grace for Hispanics

Dottie Escobedo Frank

So you want to reach out to your neighborhood, which includes a new people-group: Hispanics. You've walked your community, visited the schools, and perused the malls and you notice the browning of the population. You've even checked out the census data and, yep, your eyes are correct: there are more Hispanics in your neighborhood than the last time you looked.

The only problem is, the "browning" isn't occurring in your own congregation. In fact, it seems down right pastel in comparison. (My fourth grade teacher didn't like it when I did my picture in all pastels. "Where are the dark colors and the vibrant colors and the bold ones, Dottie? What you have created looks all the same!")

So, Pastor, what do you do now? While many of us have wondered about the age-old question of how to bring any other group into our church, we have also been the ones to stop at the biggest obstacle yet-named to church inclusivity: "It can't be done." We have bought into the church growth specialist's claim that churches (especially growing churches) must be of like-group-

ings. We think that stripes want to worship with stripes, polka dots with polka dots, and squiggles with squiggles.

Then, there's the language and cultural barrier, which, God-only-knows, "we'll never get beyond!" So, best bet, we've been told, is to go build separate churches for separate people groups.

(Don't get me wrong here, I believe that we need, for example, Spanish-speaking churches for first generation Hispanics, but what about the second and third and fourth and original first-generation-to-America Hispanics?) I thought we stopped believing that in the sixties, but then again, maybe that was just for the schools.

So, pardon my "attitude" but I've been living the life of being a "both/and" for a long time. I was born both white and brown, Lutheran and Methodist, English and Spanish, Mexican and German/Irish/Scottish/French. According to the *USA Today* report on millennials, the young people of today grew up with "diversity" and "multicultural as buzzwords." (June 29, 2006, Page 2D)

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Like them, I don't live a separate life, but a life that is a mix of the stuff of my day. So, it makes sense to me that when I go to my children's schools, I see the fullness of colors; and when I go to the mall or the grocery store or the library, there are many browns mixed in with all the other beautiful colors of the rainbow. It made sense to me (in the sense that it broke my heart) when my young daughter asked me, The Pastor-Mom, why the church folk were all white. She noticed the difference in church from her everyday life.

There are currently 14.3 percent (2004) Hispanics in the United States and they/we are the fastest growing demographic in the United States. In some states, the concentration of Hispanics is between 25 and 42 percent (California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas). In your neighborhood, you may be seeing increasing pockets of Hispanic population. Which means, when I see my uni-colored church, I know from the depth of my soul that someone is missing at the communion table. (Pew Hispanic Center, 7.1.2006)

So, let's address some things relative to Hispanics. First of all, we (Hispanics) mostly live out of the culture of grace. Graciousness means that we don't "bulldog" our way into a group, but we wait patiently to be invited. It means we sit and observe and wonder when we'll be asked to lead, oh, say, the Small Group program, since, culturally, we have lived in small groups since the beginnings of time (pre-Methodist classes?). So, for us, we are seeking the *Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors* of the United Methodist commercial to be lived out in the circle of your church. And if it doesn't come, well, we will form our own "church" in our neighborhood of friends and family. We want in, but we don't want to fight our way in.

Now, I've heard the rumor that since we Hispanics are culturally Catholic, we won't have any interest in becoming Methodist. It's a rumor with partial truth. We might be culturally grounded in Catholicism, and some of our extended families might not understand the breadth of Protestantism and the connection we have to our Catholic brothers and sisters in Christ, but that doesn't mean our hearts are closed. In fact, because of our low attendance in churches in general, the Methodist church with its mainline theology and experiential worship, may just be

the ticket we are looking for. We understand Wesley's words that "my heart was strangely warmed," and we want our Bible studies to be grounded in the tradition and orthodoxy that is familiar to United Methodists.

I've also heard that you'll require me to join your church. Well, maybe I will and maybe I won't. The family pressure to marry, bury, and baptize in the Catholic Church can be overwhelming at times. And when it comes time for our children to be confirmed, will you handle our questions with respect and honor? Will you let my child stand up with the confirmation class, even though as a parent, I cannot go against my parent's wishes for him to be only a Catholic? Will you grace my teen's decision with the freedom to both love the Methodist way and to love the parental history? Can you invite me in knowing I come with my heart and my questions?

Those are just some of the questions that I've heard along the way of being a pastor, and a Hispanic, who seeks to bring the browning of culture into her congregation. It is my heartfelt belief and hope that in my day, I will live to see churches reflect the culture and colors of their neighborhoods so my granddaughter doesn't even notice that there's any difference between her school and her church.

So, here are a few things we can do:

- ① *Invite Hispanics into church.* Invite them in because we want to be in relationship with them because they are our neighbors. Invite them to dinner and to the Bible study and to the worship service. Extend the hand of friendship and see how others follow your example. Be graciously inviting and lavishly welcoming.
- ② *Ask Hispanics to lead in ministry in our churches.* Put them on committees and in service and in visible leadership areas. Find out what their areas of giftedness are and place them in ministry.
- ③ *Put Hispanics up front.* Up front in leading worship and in reading liturgies and in lay preaching. Let the rest of our people see (make visible) the gifts among us. Hire your next staff person (if possible) from the people-grouping you are trying to reach.
- ④ *Tell the stories of Hispanic families.* Include them in the newsletter "meet-a-friend" section or ask them to give a witness in worship.

⑤ *Address your vision/mission statement and be intentional about growing in diversity and reflecting the fullness of God's glory in your church.*

⑥ *Canvas your neighborhood with invitations to events such as VBS, Christmas worship, or after-school programs.* Walk the area, inviting with flyers and with conversation. Better yet, invite through relationship with your children's friends and your community events.

⑦ *Prepare your congregation in a study of multicultural hospitality with books like Multicultural Manners by Norine Dresser and Becoming a Multicultural Church by Laurene Beth Bowers.* These seven things are just the beginnings of what can be done as you begin to diversify the cultural and colorful spectrum of God's folk in your church.

In closing, however, I must mention just three more ways to grow toward inclusion of Hispanic souls in our congregations:

- ① *Learn Spanish.* Say a few words of welcome from the pulpit.
- ② *Become bicultural.* Everyone, even those who struggle with learning languages, can learn the values, mores, and context of culture. Grow yourself culturally and stretch your comfort level outward.
- ③ *Love a Hispanic.* That's really the foundation of it all. When we love them (us), we find ways to overcome previous notions of barriers. So, there, that's ten. Good enough to start. Good enough to end. □



DOTTIE ESCOBEDO FRANK is pastor of Crossroads United Methodist Church in Phoenix, Arizona. She is author of several books, including *Sermon Seeds: 40 Creative Sermon Starters* book with

DVD (Abingdon Press, 2005). See Easy Order Form at www.circuitrider.com to order.