

## WHAT A CHURCH NEEDS TO KNOW ABOUT MINISTERING TO LATINOS IN THE U.S.A.

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A personal voice

In this presentation I would like to allude to my multi-faceted background: (1) I have been raised in the poor and populous district of Rimac at Lima; (2) I have my pastoral experiences working with established churches and starting a new church. These urban ministries were at Lima, Perú; Buenos Aires, Argentina and Charlotte, NC, and; (3) I have studied in several theological schools (baptist, catholic, interconfessional and methodist).<sup>1</sup>

I have four assumptions about this work: (1) an anglo church with a desire to minister to latinos “should know” certain basic things about them;<sup>2</sup> (2) “minister” is the pastoral action of the church in reference to the members as well as its area of influence in the city and outskirts, reaching out to the spiritual and social needs;<sup>3</sup> (3) the category “latinos” -in this pamphlet- refers to the new Latin American Immigrants in the U.S.A.;<sup>4</sup> (4) the pastoral methodology used most adequately has been

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<sup>1</sup> I want to let you know some of my resources of my deliberative theology. See: Howard W. Stone and James O. Duke, *How to think theologically* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), chapter 1.

<sup>2</sup> Juan Gonzalez, *Harvest of Empire, A History of Latinos in America* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Orlando Costas, *La iglesia y su misión evangelizadora* (Buenos Aires, Argentina: La Aurora, 1971) and C. René Padilla, *Misión integral. Ensayos sobre el reino y la iglesia* (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Nueva Creación, 1986).

<sup>4</sup> See the noun “Hispano-americano” used by Segovia to refer to the Latino immigrants’ children. See: Fernando F. Segovia, “Aliens in the Promised Land: The Manifest Destiny of U.S. Hispanic American Theology” in *Hispanic/Latino*

presentated in the Medellín Conference in 1968, which has three stages: see, judge and act .<sup>5</sup>

My work has the purpose of exposing the multidimensional situation that the Latin Americans in the US face every day, to think about it and propose a way to minister to them in the U.S.A.

### I. The reality of the Latin Americans in the U.S.A. (to see)

In this first part of this work I present the situation of the Latinos and I try to answer why they are in the US. Jesus said: “*I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd*” (John. 10,16).

A. *Migrating Conditions.* The Department of Immigration of the US have developed a different policy for the Latin American countries as opposed to the European countries. We have received a more restrictive treatment as immigrants as opposed to the Europeans. Within the Latin American countries, Cuba has received a more favorable treatment as compared to other countries. The reasons why Latin Americans migrate to the U.S.A. include: (1) economical problems; (2) political reasons; (3) family-related issues; (4) study-related issues; (5) working conditions.

*“We had a family from Mexico in our Church that came to the US in order to save enough money to build a house in Mexico. After working hard for three years they have returned to Mexico and now live in their own house”.*

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*Theology. Challenge and Promise*, edited by Ada María Isasi-Díaz y Fernando F. Segovia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), pp. 15-16.

<sup>5</sup> CELAM. *Documentos finales de Medellín.* II Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano. Medellín. Setiembre de 1968 (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Ediciones Paulinas, 1971). I have worked following that methodology by planting a Hispanic Church in Charlotte, NC. See: “Ministrando a la comunidad latina”, in *El ministerio latino en USA. Perspectivas teológicas y pastorales*, edited by César G. Carhuachín (Charlotte, NC: International Minute Press, 2002), pp. 117-123.

Although we have had several similar situations in our church, it is certain that many people migrate to the U.S.A. for the reasons mentioned above, but they decide to remain in this country.<sup>6</sup>

B. *Working Conditions.* Without doubt, the number one social related reason why Latin Americans migrate to the US is to find a job. Far from realizing the “American Dream”, for many years the Hispanics have worked doing jobs that the majority of people from the US are not willing to do. These types of jobs include construction, gardening, house cleaning, restaurant sanitation, harvesting, etc. They suffer in abusive situations due to language barriers and immigration policy.

They receive a higher demand in work production yet receive the lower end in salary. For these reasons, their economical stability is not very solid. In addition, they have a moral responsibility of sending money to their family in her/his country of origin and the need to save money in order to buy a home. This socio-economic experience worsens their work condition.

*"A long time ago I talked to the father of a household that had worked for three weeks and had not received his pay. The reasons his supervisor gave, a contractor, was that he did not have any money, yet the owners of the company had confirmed that they had paid him for his services."*

This type of abuse in the workplace is very common within Hispanic immigrants. It is done by Anglo and Latino people, Christians and non Christians.

C. *Legal Conditions.* The legal migration situation of the majority of the Hispanics is irregular, reaching almost 66% of the Hispanic population in the US. In other words, more than half of the Hispanic population lives in the US without a legal residence visa. In addition, there are a large number of Hispanics that live and work with “crooked” or false Social Security Numbers. In many cases, the Social Security Number is false but the document is authentic. In other cases,

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<sup>6</sup> See more about Immigration problems at: Dana W. Wilbanks, *Re-creating America. The Ethics of U.S. Immigration & Refugee Policy in a Christian Perspective* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996).

they use someone else’s Social Security Number or the number of a deceased person.

They also drive their cars without a valid Drivers License and without insurance. The legal way out for employment and financial standing for many without legal residency has been with the ID Tax Number (W-7).

*"When I arrived to Charlotte I spent several days at a Hispanic family’s apartment. One day, as I was sitting at the porch entrance a guy approached me in a car and asked if I was new to the area. When I said yes, he then proceeded to offer me a Driver’s License for \$100, a Social Security Card with a number for \$300 and a Green Card for \$600”.*

This personal experience I had happens every single day within the international residencies. Yet, this reality must be interpreted as one way of survival by immigrants in a strange land instead of a lifestyle of delinquency (1 Sam. 21).

D. *Educational Conditions.* The educational experience for the Hispanics in the US is the most critical in the nation. According to the 2000 Census, the Hispanics represent the largest ethnic group for High School dropouts. Reasons vary from premature births, the desire to have money, lack of motivation and the undermining of education. Consequently, the Hispanics find themselves in first place in ethnic groups not entering Universities. Although various Hispanics exist in the educational realm, the future of the Hispanic community is alarming in respects to education.

*“With great sorrow I have had to pastor youth ages 14, 15, 16, 17 that have abandoned their studies with hopes of working in construction in order to have money. They do not find enough strong reasons to return to school”.*

In reference to these educational conditions, a Latino theologian says: “Nowhere is the denial more obvious that in the *educational system*.”<sup>7</sup>

E. *Psycho-spiritual Conditions*. I believe this is the poorest dimension among the Latinos. Low self-esteem is a common reality. They need to be loved and understand that God loves them and accepts them with or without legal documentation. They need to be freed of guilt imposed by some religious groups that affirm that breaking Immigration laws is equivalent to breaking God’s law.

They need groups that meet their needs of “belonging”, of “family”, of “motivation”, of being “appreciated”, a “sense” and “purpose in their lives”. Having come from countries that are Roman Catholic they live with a traditional religious mindset seeing themselves “without a need for a Church”. A great number of them have hearts open to the gospel.

*“I recall visiting a family that had recently relocated to the Charlotte area. When speaking with the mother of the children, I stated: God loves you. And God loves you because you are important. God has a plan for your life and for your family. Her eyes swelled up in tears and she thanked me for my words”.*

These legal, educational and psycho-spiritual conditions are intrinsically related. When a Latino does not have legal residency with an appropriate Social Security Number, he/she cannot be accepted in a College. This sad reality frustrates and discourages the parents and children in finishing High School. For them, it is like living a life condemned in the US with a lower standard of life. This socio-political and economical problem produces an enormous low self-esteem within the immigrant community.

This reality for the Latino community is nationwide and will only be changed if the US government changes their policy to resolve these problems. In others words: (1) some sort of temporary or permanent amnesty for undocumented people must be provided by the U.S.A.

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<sup>7</sup> Virgilio Elizondo, *Galilean Journey. The Mexican-American Promise* 2<sup>nd</sup>. Edition (Maryland: Orbis Books, 2002), 26.

Immigration Department (2) the Colleges must accept the undocumented people as normal full time students.

Obviously these five conditions mentioned above are not exhaustive. I only want to state that it is necessary to see “to whom” and “with whom” we want to share the gospel to. I am certain that the conditions can be amplified and extended.

## II. Current problems of the Hispanics in the U.S.A. (to judge)

This second portion has the purpose of reflecting over the social and spiritual situation of the Hispanics in the U.S.A. Jesus said: “*But I tell you, take a good look at the fields; the crops are now ripe and ready to be harvested!*” (John. 4,35)

A. *Difficulties in understanding the differences among Latinos who come to the U.S.A.* In general, there are more than 21 Latin American nations and with each one of them exist particular traditions that distinguishes one from another. These differences are evident if you try to group them. There is not only one Hispanic culture, but many Hispanic cultures with different practices, believes and attitudes. This is evident in the food, music, clothe, accent, talk style, etc.

*“On a certain occasion I was asked from what part of Mexico I was from. I stated that I had never been to Mexico. I was then asked how I had learned Spanish. I said: I was from Peru and we speak Spanish also”.*

These differences are more intensive than what we realize. Latin America has never been one country. Every country has its own distinct history, national coins and national symbols. We also have different kinds of food and music. Yet, at the same time, we have the same history of dependence of the European and North American countries. This is true not only on political and economical matters but also in philosophical and religious concerns.

All these differences continue to exist and are not overcome while residing in the US. They are still a cause of division in the Latino community. The only common denominator among them is the issue

surrounding legal residency. Lack of legal residency is “the cross” that all the undocumented Latino immigrants carry.

B. *Human rights abused by those who have political power, economical and cultural.* In these last years, it is evident that the politicians use Hispanics as an important ethnic group in order to gain millions of votes. It is evident among people in Hollywood, musicians and some religious leaders.

Currently, hundreds of companies and agencies in the U.S.A. have as their objective to service millions of Hispanics because they know it is a huge market. Yet there have been no proposals toward resolving the social problems that they suffer when taken advantage of. It is a shame to say that within the same Hispanic community some have taken advantage of other Hispanics that are illegal making having them work with only a partial payment or without pay. And as if that were not enough, if they do not speak English they find themselves at a disadvantage in defending themselves.

*“In a conversation, a brother told me with great joy: “Pastor, in some markets they love the Hispanics. There is a big sign that states “Hispanics are welcome”. After I asked him a couple of questions, he said: “It is evident that for the businesses, clients that mostly pay with cash are very welcome. But if you are having problems with your documents, you are surely not to be hired”.*

Many Latino immigrants’ social human rights or material rights (economic, education and health) are abused on one hand. On the other hand, they are enjoying their fundamental human rights (religious freedom and speech freedom). The U.S.A. government and private offices must recognize and respect the social human rights of the immigrant community within their policies and practice.

C. *Uncertain future in leadership.* The Hispanic community has a need of leaders committed toward their whole development including their family problems, legal and social economical problems. In other words, we need leadership that are interested and involved in the struggles of organizations and institutions that work to improve the level of the conditions in which the Hispanics live.

Currently many leaders take advantage of their votes for a political position. Others take advantage of their needs such as the attainment of the W-7. In many cases, the problems that Hispanics face become opportunities for some Hispanic leaders to take advantage of in the social, economical and political realm.

*“A month ago I spoke to a family of 6, the parents and 4 children. They had paid close to \$ 2,000 in order to receive orientation and services in completing the W-7 Form@. W-7 Form consist of 7 personal questions. You can have a copy in Spanish and send it by regular mail”.*

D. *Fragility in the configuration in the family structure and its relationships.* If there is one area in which the Hispanics suffer most, it is in reference to the family structure. Marriages torn apart, children abandoned, infidelity within the couples, problems arising from alcohol abuse and drugs, are all serious and alarming problems within the Hispanic community. It is evident that within the majority of the families, personal and financial well-being overrides the family’s well-being, stability and the care of the children.

*“Over a year ago I talked to a gentleman, head of household, that had been living here for 7 years. He was married and had three children. In all of those years he had minimum two extra-marital relationships while his wife and children were in their country. He was faithful in attending church. Although he knew it was not right, his defense was that his family in Mexico was in need for him to be here and send them money”.*

E. *Lack of self-esteem and purpose in their lives.* The deepest spiritual need within the Hispanic community is lack of self-esteem. Many of them consider themselves to be unable to do some things and they see themselves “less than” the Americans because they do not speak English. Others have professional careers in their countries yet are working in other fields with low paying salaries. Many of them do not have legal residency. The majority of them live in constant worry and demands of daily life, living in fear that they may lose everything if they were to be deported. Illegal Residency is the cross that the Hispanics

carry day after day. Because of this, they do not have a purpose that transcends the immediate demands of the day.

*"Four years ago I received a survey prepared by a Hispanic pastor. On that survey he was asking pastors if we allowed illegal immigrants to be leaders. He also wanted to know if an illegal immigrant could be a deacon".*

If a church wants to minister to Latinos, she must understand that there is a multidimensional mission to do. A mission only touching the psycho-spiritual needs will fail in ministering to their whole being. Jesus said: "Man does not live on bread alone –nevertheless, bread-, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Mat. 4,4).<sup>8</sup>

### III. Current challenges for the churches in USA. (to act)

The purpose of this last part is to offer some suggestions in terms of pastoral activities for the churches that can help in bringing a global transformation in the life of the Latinos. Jesus said: "As the Father has sent me, I also send you" (John. 20,21).

A. *Develop a new Christian and Human perspective about the Latinos.* The Hispanics are immigrants and not "illegals". Illegal is a term that is used by the U.S.A. Immigration and Naturalization Department and is not a biblical one. Churches should focus in the overall needs of the Hispanics to whom they minister instead of their migratory status. Churches have to avoid the "illegal" terminology from their messages, statements and announcements and use other words like "immigrants", and/or "undocumented".

Churches should engage in activities that promote multicultural integration in their worship services, deacons' body, committees, etc. Hispanics should be seen as "subjects" in the pastoral mission of the church and not as mere "objects" of it. It is very important to develop the perspective of working "with" the Latinos rather than working "for" the Latinos.

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<sup>8</sup> The underlined is from the author of this paper.

B. *Respect the rights of the Latinos to live with dignity and demand that respect from the U.S.A. institutions.* Churches need to expand their commitment toward the Latino community, from a mere spiritual one to a commitment to change their situation and the structures that keep them in disadvantaged situations in the society. In others words, we have to provide social services and be committed with social actions.

Churches and Christian organizations alike should support any political proposals that would make justice to the situation of millions of Latinos in the U.S.A., such as amnesty, work permits, student visas, affordable medical services for people with low income or without US residency. Also, support the right to receive benefits of Social Security regardless if they are U.S.A. citizens or not if they pay taxes.

C. *Promote high school and college education among the Latino community.* In conjunction with the previous point, churches need to support every effort that would allow Hispanics to go to college in spite of their residency status. Also, churches need to motivate and support Latinos to overcome any personal or financial obstacle that would prevent them for finishing school. The Latino educational problem will be resolved in great sense with the migration problems resolution of the Latinos and the low self-esteem problem.

In addition, as we speak, churches can help the international immigrants in their educational problems. They can offer specific services like English as a Second Language, tutoring for children and other related services in order to support them in their assimilation process. Praise God, many churches are currently doing it around the country.<sup>9</sup>

D. *Work toward a better communication and strengthening of the new types of families of the XXI century.* The pastoral work of the churches should include a ministry to assist the Hispanic families in their most crucial needs like childcare (especially with single parents), pastoral counseling (domestic violence, divorce, alcoholism and drug

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<sup>9</sup> David Sikkink and Edwin I. Hernandez, *Religion Matters: Predicting Schooling Success among Latino Youth* (Notre Dame, IN: Institute for Latino Studies at the University of Notre Dame, 2003), 9-11.

abuse) and conferences for family enrichment. Also, churches should work toward achieve families permanent changes in marital relationships (avoiding machismos and disclosing bigamy practices), and parent-child relationships (violence and sexual abuse). These ministries would reshape future Latino generations and therefore future Latino churches.

E. *Ministering the gospel to the Latinos in a solidarity practice in material aspects (solidarity in times of migration)*. Churches should implement ministries that can supply their most immediate needs such as clothing, food, furniture and health. Churches should guide their Latinos missions to implement discipleship programs for children, youth and adults. Latinos know very little about the Christian faith. Latinos are more nominal religious than daily followers of the teaching of Jesus Christ. It is important to make a distinction between religiosity and a true faith experience, since is the church's mission to guide them toward a personal relationship of faith with Jesus Christ.

The big challenge for the church is to work “with” Latinos rather than working “for” the Latinos.<sup>10</sup> It means to be involved in their daily problems that they face and include them in every stage of this work. It means a fraternal attitude instead of paternalistic attitude on the pastoral work. The church needs to do these through her message, practice and attitude on a regular basis.

#### Some conclusions

Working “with” Latinos/Hispanics in the US is a great opportunity from God to change their life and not merely to grow numerously in your denomination only. You have to be aware that America's face is changing right now and the Christian face is suffering the same transformation. We are a multicultural nation. A church for a new century has to see her in this sense to follow the movement in the whole nation today and reach out to Latinos.

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas B. Maston, *Of One: A Study of Christian Principles and Race Relations* (Atlanta, GA: Home Mission Board of Southern Baptist Convention 1946), 32-33 and *The Conscience of A Christian* (Waco, TX: Word Books Publishers, 1971), 118-119. These principles may are applied to the ministry to the Latinos today. Its include respect and trust them and to accept to them as a full partners.

Ministering to Latinos will include opening your arms and budget, but opening your heart and denominational structure also. It may mean reviewing your cultural approach to the missionary work and adding new ministries that you are not used to. This new mission adventure will enrich the church. You will see yourself and experience a new revitalized church when you empower others. Revival always means new life for new persons in the whole sense.

Ministering to Latinos is being aware what the Church's mission is in the new century is reaching out to the international community in our own city and not only going to some far countries. The world is inside of USA in the fullest sense of the word. There is an exodus of Latinos/Hispanics in different states of the U.S.A. living in an exile experience.<sup>11</sup> They need to re-build their life and families, their cultures and values, their self-esteem and purpose in life. You and your local church and denomination can make the difference if you share the gospel of Jesus Christ with them.

There is no doubt that the new socio-economic level of life for Latinos in the US depend on the Anglo community. The Christian Anglo community has the opportunity to be a divine instrument in helping the Latino community reaches their dreams, to have a brother and partner in the kingdom of God and empower the first minority ethnic group in North America.



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<sup>11</sup> Justo L. Gonzalez, *Santa Biblia: The Bible Through Hispanic Eyes* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), chapter 4 and Fernando Segovia, “In the World but Not of It. Exile as Locus for a Theology of the Diaspora” in *Hispanic/Latino Theology*, chapter 11.