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Anglo and Spanish-speaking church relationships:
a brief history and an Oregon case study.

The Anglo pastors say they want to start a Hispanic work but then they change their minds. They promise a salary that never materializes. There is cultural conflict between congregations. We need more than just them opening a building. Many churches reject having Hispanic ministries, we need mediation. – Hispanic pastor, Portland, Oregon

As the Spanish-speaking population in the United States grows, many churches desire to begin Spanish-speaking ministries, but as the quote above reveals, this process is not without difficulties. I am an Anglo follower of Christ who began attending a Spanish-speaking church some twenty-five years ago. Later, I married an immigrant from Chile who pastored several Spanish-speaking congregations. I have seen first-hand some of the conflicts that arise and have written this essay to provide information that can aid ministry and communication between groups. I first describe some historic patterns of Protestant Hispanic churches in the U.S. (the term 'Hispanic' is used interchangeably with 'Latino' in this essay, and the reader must keep in mind that not all Hispanics speak Spanish). Being an academic, I then review issues found in the literature on immigrant or specifically Hispanic churches. Finally, I share my own research on Latino Protestant churches carried out in the Portland, Oregon, metropolitan area.

Any church considering beginning or partnering with a Hispanic ministry needs to carefully consider its vision for this relationship. The church leaders and body should examine their own views in light of Biblical principles on immigrants, both legal and illegal.

How will this relationship be mutually beneficial? How will it challenge the congregation's view of personhood and God? Other questions relate to duration of the relationship. Does it seem possible that immigration from Spanish-speaking countries will be short-lived, and that this congregation may be only temporary? Do all expect that the Hispanics will learn English, assimilate, and be integrated into existing English-speaking congregations within a few years? Is the goal for the Spanish-speaking congregation to become separate, self-sustaining, and to eventually move out into its own facility? What is a realistic timeline for such a move, considering the sometimes migratory congregants and the low incomes that recent immigrants often earn?

Some historical background may help us consider these questions. The books and articles referred to in the notes are excellent resources for church leaders.

Latino churches often fit under the category of "immigrant churches", though all Hispanics are immigrants to the U.S.; many areas of what is now the U.S. were once colonies of Spain or the independent nation of Mexico. While the United States has been home to immigrants from many nations throughout its history, the body of literature on immigrant churches in the U.S. has appeared only recently, particularly in the past three decades.¹

Many Hispanics living in the U.S. are Roman Catholic, but recent research indicates that a

¹ See, for example, Won Moo Hurh & Kwan Chung Kim, "Religious Participation of Korean Immigrants in the United States," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 29, no. 1, (1990): 19-34; George E. Pozzetta, ed., Vol. 19 of *American Immigration and Ethnicity: A 20 Volume Series of Distinguished Essays* (Hamden, Conn: Garland Publishing, 1991); Ronald Lawson, "From American Church to Immigrant Church: The Changing Face of Seventh-Day Adventism in Metropolitan New York," *Sociology of Religion* 59, no. 4 (1998): 329-351; R. Stephen Warner & Judith G. Wittner, eds., *Gatherings in Diaspora: Religious Communities and the New Immigration* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998); Kwai Hang Ng, "Seeking the Christian Tutelage: Agency and Culture in Chinese Immigrants' Conversion to Christianity," *Sociology of Religion*, 63, no. 2 (2002): 195-214; Helen Rose Fuchs Ebaugh & Janet Saltman Chafetz, eds, *Religion Across Borders* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira, 2002); Helen Rose Fuchs Ebaugh & Janet Saltman, *Religion and the New Immigrants* Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira, 2000); Helen Rose Fuchs Ebaugh & Janet Saltman, "Dilemmas of Language in Immigrant Congregations: The Tie that Binds or the Tower of Babel?" *Review of Religious Research* 41, no. 4 (2000): 432-52.

significant number (between twenty and thirty-three percent) are Protestants.² Among these recent publications are many articles and books that focus specifically on Protestant Hispanic churches.³

In general, Protestant Hispanic churches in the U.S. have been established in one of three ways.⁴ First, and most commonly, they were started by Anglos (individuals or church groups) who had the desire to minister to Hispanics. The areas which have historically large Spanish-speaking populations have some of the oldest Spanish-speaking Protestant churches. Many were begun with the express desire to convert people to Protestantism from Catholicism.

A second group of Hispanic Protestant churches started in the Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles in 1906. While the revival was initially multicultural, as churches organized they did so along racial and ethnic lines. One such group is the Apostolic Assembly, a

² Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The coming of global Christianity*. (New York: Oxford, 2002), 101; . William Lobdell, “Latino exodus from Catholic Church rising, study says,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 5, 2001; David Maldonado Jr., ed., *Protestantes/Protestants: Hispanic Christianity within the Mainline Traditions* (Nashville, Abingdon Press 1999), 9.

³ These include Carlos E. Cortés, ed., *Protestantism and Latinos in the United States* (New York: Arno Press 1980); Daniel R. Rodríguez-Díaz & David Cortés-Fuentes, eds., *Hidden Stories: Unveiling the History of the Latino Church* (Decatur, GA: Asociación para la Educación Teológica Hispana, 1994); Antonio M. Stevens-Arroyo & Gilbert R. Cadenas, eds., *Old Masks, New Faces: Religion and Latino Identities* (New York: Bildner Center for Western Hemisphere Studies (1995); Justo L. González, ed., *Alabado: Hispanic Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press 1996); Edwin D. Aponte, “Hispanic/Latino Protestantism in Philadelphia,” in Douglas Jacobsen, & William Vance Trollinger Jr, eds., *Re-forming the Center: American Protestantism, 1900 to the Present* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998) , 381-403; Anthony M. Stevens-Arroyo, A.M. *Recognizing the Latino Resurgence in U.S. Religion* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1998); Gaston Espinosa, Virgilio Elizondo, & Jesse Miranda, *Hispanic Churches in American Public Life: Summary of Findings. Interim Reports, 2003 no. 2* (Notre Dame, IN: Institute for Latino Studies); Arlene Sánchez-Walsh, *Latino Pentecostal Identity: Evangelical Faith, Self, and Society* (New York: Columbia U. Press, 2003); Juan F. Martínez-Guerra & Luis Scott, eds. *Iglesias peregrinas in busca de identidad: Cuadros del protestantismo latino en los Estados Unidos* (Buenos Aires: Kairos & CEHILA, 2004).

⁴ See Lindy Scott, “The Evangelical Free Church of America” in *Los Evangélicos: Portraits of Latino Protestantism in the United States*, eds Juan F. Martínez y Lindy Scott (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 76-93 for a similar classification of the origins of the Hispanic churches in that denomination.

'home-grown' U.S. Hispanic denomination that today has thousands of adherents and various derivations.

Finally, and most recently, there are many Hispanic congregations initiated by Latin American denominations to serve Latino immigrants. This is a phenomenon described by Sanneh, "Along with this immigration has come a steady inflow of new religious movements from Latin America, Asia, and Africa. Korean and Hispanic populations, for example, have established new communities of faith across the country. They have created new styles of religious life and undertaken programs of ministry among their own people."⁵

Whether in the 1800s or more recently, when the Anglo majority starts ministries for the minority, there are dimensions of inequality. Anglos enjoy greater economic power, including control of the ministry infrastructure, understand the culture, language, and systems of the U.S., and do not regularly face racial discrimination. Spanish-speaking ministries don't have some of the advantages Anglos have, and it is often hard for one group to understand the other.

A lack of cultural understanding and a paternalistic attitude has dogged Anglo efforts to start Hispanic churches. Barton claims, "The tension that has existed between Latino Protestants and Anglo-dominant denominations has a historical foundation in the Anglo American missionaries' embrace and promulgation of the idea of Manifest Destiny in the nineteenth century. Just as present-day Hispanics find themselves the objects of mission efforts based upon stereotypical views of them, so did the first generation of

⁵ Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003), 76.

Mexican and Mexican American Methodists discover that Anglo American church leaders had misunderstandings about their culture and abilities.”⁶

One area of cultural misunderstanding is the assumption that all Hispanics are a homogenous block. In truth, Latinos in the U.S. come from different nations, immigrated during different time periods and for different reasons (or were living in what became U.S. territory, as previously mentioned), and speak myriad variations of Spanish, English, and indigenous languages. Aponte mentions the “complexity which actually exists within the Latino/a community,”⁷ and Orozco-Hawkins observes specifically about Protestant churches, “within the churches our Hispanics are divided along class, social and economic lines.”⁸ Martín del Campo describes the first challenge for the 21st century in the Apostolic Assemblies as “to learn not only how to be a church for Mexican and Mexican-Americans but also how to be a church open to the participation and leadership of our ever-more-numerous Central American, South American, and Caribbean brothers and sisters.”⁹ He recognizes that there are divisions based on nationality and differences between generations. Pozzetta summarizes, taking a historical view:

Immigrant communities.....were far from the homogenous bodies so often envisioned by outsiders, but rather were replete with various ‘subethnic’ divisions based upon distinctions of class, religion, ideology, and local culture. The process of immigrant adaptation to America, therefore, was as

⁶ Paul Barton, “Inter-ethnic Relations between Mexican American and Anglo American Methodists in the US Southwest 1836-1938,” in Maldonado, Jr., 60.

⁷ Aponte, 381.

⁸ Orozco Hawkins, 119.

⁹ Martín del Campo, 73.

often marked by tension and conflict *within* ethnic concentrations as it was by friction between the group and the receiving society.¹⁰

Another enduring problem is discrimination. In 1934, Troyer described an incidence of this unfortunate reality, after one Anglo woman had given a warm welcome to a Mexican man who had just received Christ as Savior, “But two other women standing nearby remarked in his hearing, ‘Well, if they’re going to receive Mexicans in this Church, I’m not coming any more.’ He went away with a broken heart.”¹¹ Seventy years later, Orozco-Hawkins found similar attitudes of racism in Washington State:

The dominant Anglo churches are resistant, insensitive and even adversarial with regard to the process of empowering of our Hispanic constituencies. It is not an encouraging picture. The Presbyterian Church has begun to facilitate some ministry with Hispanics, but the racism, paternalism and fear of the white church makes authentic Hispanic ministry nearly impossible at this time.¹²

There are other ways in which Hispanic Protestants are communicated their inferior status. One is the physical location they are allotted if they share a church building. According to The Protestant Council of the City of New York, the common situation of the Hispanics in the basement while the Anglos have their ‘normal’ worship service upstairs in the sanctuary goes back to at least 1960.¹³ Some Anglos diminish their Hispanic counterparts by describing them as their “little brothers and sisters.”¹⁴

¹⁰ Pozzetta, vii.

¹¹ L.E. Troyer, *The Sovereignty of the Spirit. Revealed in the Opening of our Mexican Missions of the South-West*. (Los Angeles: Students Benefit Publishing Company, 1934). Reprinted in Cortés, 17.

¹² Olga Orozco Hawkins, “Hispanic/Latina Women in Agriculture,” in Rodríguez-Díaz y Cortés-Fuentes, 118-119.

¹³ Department of Church Planning and Research,, *A Report on the Protestant Spanish Community in New York City* (New York: The Protestant Council of the City of New York, 1960). Reprinted in Cortés, 89.

Some studies note that while Hispanic Protestant churches may participate in their denominational structure, it is an illusory participation. Machado details specific instances in her chapter entitled, “Latinos in the Protestant Establishment: Is There a Place for Us at the Feast Table?”¹⁵. Armendariz observes, “The Hispanic Protestant congregations also expressed the feeling of ‘Us versus Them’ with respect to their Anglo counterparts. While most Protestant Hispanic congregations belong and participate in denominational structures, it is only and mostly a formality.”¹⁶ Aponte agrees: “Hispanic congregations are formally included, but functionally marginalized.... placed on display as token Hispanics at denominational gatherings; ...allowed little input into denominational policies regarding ministry....Hence, they often feel like less than full partners in ministry.”¹⁷

Finally, finding Spanish-speaking pastors has been a challenge for English-speaking congregations that desire to start Hispanic churches. Many begin with former missionaries to Spain or Latin America, but gaining entry into an immigrant community requires more than language skills, and these people remain outsiders. Another tactic has been to identify outstanding pastors in Latin America and bring them to the U.S. This approach is fraught with difficulties. The pastor must learn English, go through culture shock, assume a new identity as a minority and an immigrant, and most likely will be working with a

¹⁴ David Maldonado, Jr., ed, *Protestantes/Protestants: Hispanic Christianity Within the Mainline Traditions*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 10.

¹⁵ Daisy Machado, “Latinos in the Protestant Establishment: Is There a Place for Us at the Feast Table?” in Maldonado, Jr., 85-106.

¹⁶ Ruben P. Armendariz, “The Protestant Hispanic Congregation: Identity,” in David Maldonado, Jr., ed, *Protestantes/Protestants: Hispanic Christianity Within the Mainline Traditions*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 250.

¹⁷ Aponte, 397-398.

congregation of a different nationality than his or her own. The sponsoring church faces difficulties in communicating directly with the new immigrant pastor. In many instances, the pastors never learn English and become ineffective and isolated, or are so overwhelmed by the multiple changes demanded of them that they leave the pastorate.

I now share some of my own research on Protestant Latino churches in the Portland, Oregon, metropolitan area, pointing to several trends. I was motivated by the lack of any studies on the Hispanic churches of this state, which did not have a historic Hispanic population but which saw exponential growth in it beginning in the 1980s.

I carried out research on seventeen Protestant Hispanic churches in two counties,¹⁸ visiting regular worship services and interviewing pastors on a wide variety of topics. Following are observations about how these churches are dealing with some of the difficulties mentioned above.

One way that several denominations have dealt with language barriers and disenfranchisement is to create separate but parallel administrative structures. Churches using this strategy include the Assemblies of God, Northwest Conservative Baptists, Southern Baptists, and Foursquare. This can further a disconnect between English- and Spanish-speaking congregations, since congregations meeting in the same building or just down the street from one another report to different boards. However, one Assembly of God pastor stated that the Hispanic churches have a strong voice when it comes to making denominational decisions, since “the fastest growing churches in our movement ...[have] been the Spanish speaking churches”.

¹⁸ The author gratefully acknowledges support for this research from George Fox University Faculty Research Grants in 2006, 2007, and 2008.

The churches in this study were actively identifying and training pastors who are already here in the United States. Half of the pastors felt a call to the pastorate after immigration and studied in the U.S. Five churches provide local training, while six encourage education in Spanish at denominational or other institutions in combinations of face-to-face classes and hybrid learning.

An interesting phenomenon was the presence of four large independent congregations that originated in Pentecostal Latin American denominations, including ELIM and the Puerto Rico-based Pentecostal Church of God International Movement. They did not start as official mission churches, but rather began as people from the large congregations of these churches in the Los Angeles area moved to Oregon, and called pastors from the California churches to Oregon. All four of these churches operate in financial and administrative independence from any Anglo church and three of the four no longer have official ties to those Latin American denominations. Two of them are strikingly independent, not participating in any ministerial association or occasionally joining with other churches for activities. Their independence is typical of the many Pentecostal churches of Latin America, which scholars have recognized as tending to schism; Espinosa terms it “chronic fragmentation”.¹⁹ Lack of accountability can lead to a dangerous type of power held by a pastor on the basis of his charisma. However, these independent churches have side-stepped some of the communication and cultural conflicts.

¹⁹ Gastón Espinosa, The Pentecostalization of Latin American and U.S. Latino Christianity. *Pneuma* 26 (2). Fall 2004, 262-292.

None of the churches in the study were relegated to the basement of the building.²⁰ Some used a gymnasium or large room set aside just for them, others used the sanctuary at times when the Anglo congregation was not using it. Only one of the churches in the study, the oldest (begun in 1973), had its own building. Interestingly, two Hispanic congregations rented space from other ethnic congregations, Russian and Korean, perhaps finding an ally in another minority group. While several of the pastors acknowledged occasional difficulties related to sharing space, the overwhelming attitude toward the congregations from whom they rented or borrowed space was one of gratitude.

Five of the pastors interviewed said they felt welcome in the greater Christian community of the area, and one of these noted that she had seen an attitudinal change over the past decade. Three others, however, did not feel welcomed or included in the broader Christian community. One attributed this rejection to the perception that they as pastors did not speak English, while he (and nearly all of the pastors in the study) did. If he is right, it is further evidence that false assumptions about Hispanics contribute to difficulties.

Three of the churches in the Portland area study had a vision for Hispanic ministry unlike any detailed in previous studies. They all see the Spanish-speaking members and pastor as an integral part of their church body, with equal access to the building, to participation in decision-making, and to shared resources and responsibilities. One church is Quaker, one is part of the NW Conservative Baptist Association, and one is part of a large non-denominational church begun in Portland. They affirm they are a single body, part of

²⁰ I visited a church not in this study recently, however, where the Anglo pastor was considering starting a Hispanic ministry in the basement “because it cost too much to heat the sanctuary” and didn’t seem receptive to my suggestion that the Hispanic congregation might be worthy of something other than a dark, out-of-the-way corner.

whom happen to speak Spanish. Two of these pastors were fully bilingual and bicultural, having immigrated to North America from Central America during their childhood. The third works alongside an Anglo pastor who spent his childhood in South America. I believe that the cultural understanding and unimpeded communication between the Anglo and Hispanic pastors is the key to this vision of one body. Two of these congregations have been in existence for just three years and it remains to be seen if this model is sustainable.

Cooperation for cross-cultural ministry is challenging on multiple levels. This essay has mentioned several historic problems and misunderstandings. I urge Anglo churches to “do their homework” by studying available resources and the Spanish-speaking population and churches in their area in order to prepare for collaboration. Even so, entering into this type of relationship will no doubt surface attitudes that will need to be refined by the Spirit’s fire and the truth of the Word.