



Ministry with Immigrants: Blending the Cultures

PATRICK CABELLO HANSEL

“**W**hen we eat of this bread and drink from this cup, we proclaim our Lord’s death and resurrection, until he comes in glory.” We say that every time we celebrate communion at St. Paul Lutheran Church in Minneapolis.

When we eat of this bread, we also eat grain grown on land stolen from native peoples; when we drink from this cup, we drink wine made from grapes picked by farmworkers who are often exploited. Most of the earlier immigrants who took the land were “legal”; most of the latter-day immigrants who pick the grapes are “illegal.” That is the mill in which our grain is ground and the vat in which our wine is pressed. It is an incredible opportunity to proclaim God’s grace and justice, but this is scary for our church, for to speak in this way often puts us outside the approval of our own people.

We know the statistics: 12% of the population of the United States is foreign-born, up from 8% in 1990. Latinos are the fastest growing ethnic group, and will comprise 25% of the total U.S. population long before the entering seminary class retires from public ministry. Despite raids and deportations, that percentage will continue to grow.

I am often asked these questions: “What can our church do to reach Latinos? How can we be more inviting, inclusive, welcoming? Should we start a Spanish worship service, or invite them to our existing programs and services?” Good questions, and ones all congregations should ponder, be they in city, suburban, or rural settings.

But maybe they are the wrong questions. Maybe the question is not primarily one of tactics—whether to develop new approaches or integrate existing ones—but one of confession. That is, how will the Holy Spirit change us through the gifts of immigrants? We confess in Luther’s catechism that the Holy Spirit “calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth.” Do we believe that the “whole church” includes immigrants at its center, and not just at the margins? From where I stand, the Spirit works transformation of all our practices, not to be more “inclusive,” but to be more incarnational—to enable us to stand alongside the immigrants in our midst and to be transformed with them.

You may notice that we changed the communion acclamation to proclaim

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Ministry with Immigrants: Sharing the Mission

GLENN E. BERG-MOBERG

To integrate, or not to integrate? Is it even still a question? Jim Crow laws are long gone and good riddance. God loves all the world, so the body of Christ needs to work to be a place of welcome for everyone. Still, the Sunday morning worship hour remains quite segregated. What is the best way to welcome immigrant Christians, or for that matter, to welcome the non-Christian seekers who hail from other lands?

We know about the immigrant church. You can see it during our coffee fellowship. I have joked that every Sunday between November 1 and March 31 is “Norwegian Sweater Day” at St. Anthony Park Lutheran Church. In truth, we are not all Scandinavian—or all Caucasian, for that matter—but by and large we are a fairly homogeneous bunch. A Sunday morning visitor might think some of us just got off the boat from Oslo or Stockholm.

But if that Sunday morning visitor stayed on until afternoon, the visitor would see a congregation with a very different look and sound. Not one Norwegian sweater in view, and every word of this afternoon worship service is Mandarin. For over ten years now, St. Anthony Park Lutheran Church has shared its building with Minnesota Faith Chinese Lutheran Church. “Faith Chinese,” as we call it, is a separate congregation with its own pastor, council, worship life, and budget. They simply have used our building as their space for worship, Christian education, and fellowship.

This relationship was not a matter of coincidence. Our church is located a scant few blocks from the Saint Paul campus of the University of Minnesota. The U. of M. consistently has a big population of students from China. The call to house an immigrant church grew organically from our setting, nurtured by members with special skills and caring hearts.

At the outset, former China missionaries with ties to our congregation began a welcoming ministry helping Chinese students settle into U.S. life. For the Chinese student, finding housing, doing the shopping, and any ordinary daily task is complicated by a daunting language barrier. Having Chinese-speaking mentors to guide and answer questions makes the culture shock more manageable. Social gatherings and meals shared with groups of Chinese students makes up for some

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the Lord's death *and* resurrection. That was done to integrate two theological stances. My wife and co-pastor, Luisa, is a native of Chile who served among the poor in Mexico City for fifteen years. She speaks of the need to integrate Latin American practice (and therefore understanding) with that of North America. Many U.S. pastors bemoan the fact that churches are full on Easter, with relatively low attendance on Good Friday. In Latin America, it is often the opposite: churches full to celebrate the death of Christ, but relatively empty to celebrate his resurrection. There are reasons for this, dating back to the kind of Christianity brought by the colonizers. The practice also reflects where we are as peoples. Latin Americans know more of struggle and death; North Americans know more of triumph. It is not that we are ignorant of each other's reality (ironically, we may be more ignorant of our own!). It is that neither group has integrated the cross and resurrection fully in its theology. That is where the gifts of people from the South can be a blessing to us in the North, because they stand in a different reality.

We tend to follow the dictum that where our head is, our theology will follow. That is, if we understand things correctly, good theology will follow. Theologians from Mexico and Latin America have taught me that it's more likely that where our *feet* are, there our theology will be also. That is, it is not so important what we think about the challenge of immigration, it is where we stand, and with whom. Are we standing with families divided by a broken immigration system? Will we stand with Mexican farmers who have lost their land due to globalization? (And will we also stand with native-born workers who lose their jobs?) Will we stand on both sides of the border, and listen for the Spirit?

My experience of twenty-five years has taught me that immigrant people are hungry for a message of grace. It is something that we Lutherans know well. The challenge for us is living that knowledge. If we are so rooted in the gospel that we believe that Christ has accomplished all that is needed for our salvation and for the whole world, then we are free to love our neighbor without reserve. Then, when we eat of this bread and drink from this cup, we also proclaim that we are one with Christ and one with each other: one body, led by one Spirit. ☩

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homesickness. As that fellowship grew, many came to faith in Jesus and received baptism. The group recognized the need for regular Chinese language worship.

As a mission-minded congregation, St. Anthony Park Lutheran opened its doors to a second congregation. An open-ended arrangement began. The fledgling Faith Chinese had few resources, so the building was offered for free. The use of an established building means the immigrant church can focus its resources on ministry, not mortgages. This arrangement has continued through the years, and our congregation considers it a mission support commitment. The hosting congregation must have a strong commitment and firm consensus about supporting a mission in this way, because the potential exists for one group to begrudge the infringement of the other, which cannot work in the long term. This arrangement has been working because God has led us to see the building as a tool, not a monument. One of our staff members has remarked that every room in our building is a multipurpose room.

Housing two active congregations in one place offers unique challenges. With active programs in both congregations, we have competition for space that needs frequent negotiation. We have had a few joint activities over the years. Potlucks, an anniversary concert, and a few joint meetings for calendar coordination have all been helpful and well received.

Joint worship has been attempted, but the utter lack of similarity between the languages makes the language barrier unyielding. Switching from one language to another curtails how much will fit into the worship time allotted, since everything is spoken twice. Simultaneous translation makes for a very distracted feeling that intrudes on the need for prayerful focus. For these reasons, the two congregations mostly function on their own. We have not actively sought to integrate the two communities. This may seem counter to Jesus' vision "that they may all be one" (John 17:11), yet there is another way to see this ministry. The best ministry our congregation can offer immigrant Chinese is to support a ministry of immigrant to immigrant. The members of Faith Chinese are themselves Chinese nationals, most of them here to study. Who better to welcome and to evangelize the newcomers than those who really understand?

In our own history, the European immigrant churches—with their high commitment to Christ and low skills in English—were God's instruments for ministry to each of those ethnic communities. The same is true today. The unity Jesus prayed about is granted by God's love and mercy, which knows nothing of cultural or language barriers. The same Holy Spirit enlivens both. ⊕

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