



Toward Effective Ministry with Hispanics

DANIEL M. LONG

Ministerios Hispánicos, San Antonio, Texas

If a Jewish Jesus of the first century cannot be expressed and confessed as the Christ through the diverse cultures, then he is not, in truth, the Christ. That which the crisis of proclaiming Christ in various cultures presents to the church is the question of what kind of Christ it believes in. Jon Sobrino

I now realize that it is true that God shows no partiality, but accepts people of all nations who fear him and do what is right. Acts 10:34

As the nation's fastest growing minority Hispanic-Americans are creating a crisis for both the institutional structures and theological integrity of many North American, Anglo-majority Christian denominations. This crisis can no longer be solved by more in the series of resolutions from national bodies and boards or by the production of written theologies or spoken sermons that proclaim the desirability of a more "inclusive" church. Already over the 20 million mark en route to a projected 42 million by the year 2000, Hispanics—citizens, immigrants, and illegals—are one of the most politically, economically and religiously explosive population groups in the United States. Searching for ways to express their own unique identities and pursue their own special dreams, they challenge every traditional institution in our land to find ways to accommodate their yearning and make room for their power, now. Thus, the challenge to the U.S. church is very practical and immediate: to find effective ways to assist Hispanics in expressing and confessing Christ, and to adapt, modify or change church structures so that Hispanics can participate in the mainstream life of the institutional church.

Those who wish to concentrate their efforts on the "conversion" of the Anglo majorities and their tendency toward exclusivity do well to remember that the first step in the conversion of the early church and of its chief leader, St. Peter, to a more "inclusive" notion of Christian ministry was not the calling of a theological conference, or a program of sensitivity training, or the publication of a new theological study. It was rather a confrontation with a very immediate and practical situation—the call of God to be Christ to a person from a

different culture (the story of Cornelius, the Roman Centurion in Acts 10). In the process of being faithful to his Lord and attempting to be effective in his ministry, against his own desires and in direct contradiction to some of his most cherished religious traditions, St. Peter was converted to a new awareness of his Lord and to a new understanding of the mission of the church. And Cornelius was blessed with the opportunity to know the true God for whom he had

been searching.

In similar fashion, the call of God to the church represented in the undeniable need to do ministry with Hispanic people, if heeded, could well lead to a profound conversion of the present church to more complete understanding and experience of the presence of Christ with us in this world. Even if existing members are hesitant, fearful, and quietly resistant, a more authentic expression of the true nature of the Body of Christ may be realized, even as many of the estimated 55-60% unchurched Hispanic persons find in this new partnership enriching ways to express and confess Christ. This essay will attempt to provide only the most modest of introductions to the key aspects of effectiveness in Hispanic ministries in hope of amplifying the modern “conversion” of the North American church.

I. DEFINITIONS AND LIMITATIONS

In order to match subject matter to the capability of this author, this essay will limit itself to addressing North American, Anglo-majority churches who are relatively new and inexperienced in Hispanic ministries. I will attempt to make suggestions as to effective models and strategies in only a “general” sense and only where there is evidence of such effectiveness from a wide spectrum of Christians doing ministry in the Hispanic community. This will probably raise more questions than it answers, reflecting the actual state of affairs.

There are many Hispanic individuals for whom our mostly Anglo, mainstream-culture congregations are adequate for meeting their needs. “Hispanic Ministries” will be used to mean only those ministries that intentionally attempt to incorporate Hispanic people into their membership or active participation, that focus attention on serving the specific needs of Hispanic people and that place a high value on incorporating the values of Spanish language and Hispanic culture as they exist in the place where ministry is being done. “Hispanic,” a term describing people whose culture of origin is rooted in Spanish language and culture, will have for our purposes the specific meaning of Hispanics whose cultural heritage comes primarily from Mexico, Latin America and the Caribbean.

“Effective” ministries will be understood as ministries that meet two primary criteria: 1) they involve adequate numbers of people so as to demonstrate acceptance by a significant portion of Hispanic people, and 2) they enable Hispanic people to have power within the institutional church. The second criteria is included to prevent effectiveness from becoming another word for patronization.

II. KNOWING WHERE THE GREATEST OPPORTUNITY EXISTS

It makes good sense for Christian groups and denominations who do not have a long history of ministry with Hispanic peoples to concentrate their initial efforts where the opportunity is the greatest. Those who study the “receptivity” of people and groups of people to the gospel indicate that people in transition and in crisis are among the most “receptive” to a gospel witness. Such factors as cultural change, political change, recent immigration, changing speech and language patterns, removal of oppression, political change, or change in family patterns cause people to search for new explanations and understandings of life and new groups to join. This information by itself would indicate that almost all Hispanics everywhere, are receptive.

If we put this information about “receptivity” together with common sense and U.S.

census demographics, it is easy to see that the greatest opportunities for reaching the most Hispanics with Christian ministry are in areas of urban concentration of Hispanics who are first or second generation immigrants, poor (poverty being a severe crisis), and who still prefer to use Spanish as a primary language. The second most receptive group would be young adults and couples who are moving to the suburbs, the first in their families to complete U.S. high school or college, and who use English as a primary language.

This essay will concentrate on ministry with Hispanics who are more recently arrived here in the U.S., poor, and still use Spanish as a primary language. This includes working-class poor and middle-class neighborhoods in urban settings as well as smaller concentrations of Hispanic farmworkers in rural areas. Where the greatest opportunity lies, also lie the greatest barriers to effective ministry and thus the greatest difficulty for the church. For this reason, the church has the most to gain in learning and the most to give in terms of meeting human and spiritual need and ministries of empowerment.

III. CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

Father Virgilio Elizondo, president of the Mexican-American Cultural Center in San Antonio, Texas, accurately describes the heart of the Hispanic experience in the United States in his doctoral thesis. "Mestizaje: The Dialectic of Cultural Birth and the Gospel":

Mestizaje refers not only to the biological mixture and unity of various peoples, but even more than that, it refers to the cultural offspring which has come about through the mixture of at least two great cultural traditions...the uniqueness of the mestizos is that, at once, they are and are not members of the same human group. This will be both their suffering and their potential...as mestizo they will not be fully accepted by either group. Each side tends to look upon the mestizo as having too much of "them" and not enough of "us."...The personality of the mestizo is a complex one because of the double rejection.

While Elizondo's analysis applies particularly to Mexican-Americans who have suffered through two major Mestizajes which have involved considerable physical, social, psychological and spiritual violence, it is descriptive of the central

cultural reality for all Hispanics who live in the Anglo-dominated culture of North America. From this central reality flow most of the crucial cultural understandings essential to understanding both the pain and the promise of the Hispanic-American.

While it is important for churches beginning Hispanic ministries to have a good understanding of Hispanic culture in its historical dimensions (an area of inquiry for which I am not prepared to serve as guide), for effectiveness in ministry the following considerations may well be more important:

1. Hispanic culture in the United States is incredibly diverse and, therefore, the only reliable source for defining Hispanic culture is the local Hispanic community. There are major differences in culture between national groups (for example, Puerto Ricans celebrate the "Three Kings" festival as a major Nativity fiesta while Mexicans have a tradition of celebrating "Las

Posadas”). The degree to which Hispanics express, reject, react to, or attempt to embrace their cultural heritage varies greatly from generation to generation. Within one nuclear family there can be severely differing levels of cultural awareness. All of this indicates that the best strategy in doing ministry is to have an open mind, allow the local group to determine what cultural components of ministry are the most important to be included in the local ministry, and restrain from making value judgements about how much culture Hispanics ought to want to retain or not retain in their lives. Many a local ministry has failed from the beginning because the Hispanic people in the community did not fit rigidly pre-determined notions of who they ought to be.

2. Hispanic culture is in process in the United States. New cultures are being born in California, in Florida, in South Texas and in other locations where Hispanics, aware of their history and fully engaged in confronting the Anglo mainstream culture are making new decisions about who they will be. This reality is the cause of some pain and the source of much creativity. For example, the realities of life in the United States have caused severe upheaval in the traditional family patterns of Hispanic families. It is important for effective ministries to be prepared, on the one hand, to address this pain in a pastoral way, and, on the other hand, to make a positive and creative contribution to the process of change by creating the atmosphere within the faith community for cultural heritage to be remembered and newly appropriated in creative ways. Because of the uniqueness of the mestizo’s heritage, Hispanic-Americans, according to Elizondo, can play a unique role in the development of the human identity because they have within them the on-going struggle of the *we* versus *they* and the *defeat* or *victory*. Elizondo’s hope is that Christian faith will assist Hispanics in creating anew person in which “the various divided groups—Espanoles, Creollos, Mestizos, Indios, Negros, Mulatos—will be able to move from the WE versus THEY, to the experience of a new US.”

3. It is important not to confuse the culture of poverty with Hispanic culture. Since many Hispanics suffer economic and social marginalization in our country, there are some common characteristics of Hispanics which are related to this dynamic of repression, rather than to their Hispanicity. For instance, alcoholism is a critical social problem in many poor and working-class Hispanic

neighborhoods. This problem is related to the culture of poverty in the United States and not to some inherent default in Hispanic culture.

4. Being Anglo is different from being Hispanic: it is not better or worse to be Anglo, only different. Anglo Christians involved in any aspect of Hispanic ministries need to recognize that Anglo values are not equal to Christian values. Nor are Anglo values necessarily better than Hispanic values. Knowing one’s own culture in both an appreciative and critical way is as important as knowing Hispanic culture in order to effectively participate in Hispanic ministries. This may seem like a rather obvious point, but the truth is that Anglos, and therefore the mainly Anglo-dominated decision-making processes and decision-makers of the church, do not consciously take into account the Anglo-ness of their ways. They universalize and deify values which are really extensions of their very particular (and therefore limited) history. To be honest, we must add that Anglo-Americans have a deeply ingrained history of valuing their own race and their own values as the best. Anglo culture was egalitarian but racist—equality amongst Anglos. While this mentality has started to change in more recent times, it is deeply woven into the fabric

of the historical collective consciousness of the Anglo majority in the United States.

IV. HISPANIC MINISTRIES ARE LIKE A FOREIGN MISSION FIELD

Because most traditional American Christian churches are mostly Anglo in values and mostly middle- and upper-income class in membership, entering into Hispanic ministries is more like doing mission work in a foreign field than like extending American missions to include Hispanic-Americans. What North American denominations have learned in missions outside the United States is often more applicable to effective Hispanic Ministries in the United States than are the lessons from North American missions. A good body of knowledge exists from foreign mission experience as to what constitutes effective ministry with cultural groups different from the culture of the sponsoring church. In brief fashion, drawing upon this work, we can describe effective Hispanic ministries as 1) ministries that affirm their members as they are, not asking them to change appearance before making a commitment to Christ; 2) ministries that establish patterns of organizational life congruent with the cultural history and values of the people they serve; 3) preaching, teaching and witness in the “language of the people”; 4) a message that engages the deepest felt motives and needs of the people; 5) ministry that fits the culture of the people with no class or cultural imperialism; 6) ministry that employs appropriate personnel; and 7) ministry based in a theology and interpretation of the Bible that is done from the perspective of the people being served. For our purpose we will treat the language, the message and the personnel factors in greater detail.

Language. Doing ministry in the “language of the people” means more than speaking and writing in Spanish. Language, which is a primary carrier of culture, is a key component in effective ministry. However, language usage again varies dramatically from community to community, from generation to generation, and even between parents and children. Add to this the fact that

Hispanics are developing new strains of language like Tex-Mex and it becomes clear that effective ministry is ministry that has the greatest possible access to and flexibility in the use of various levels and usage of Spanish and English and all the variations in between. There is no pattern of language usage that has proven to be more effective than others, except that language usage congruent with the language patterns of the community is always more effective than usages that utilize much more or much less Spanish than does the community or types of Spanish foreign to the local community.

Spanish translations of English written materials are very ineffective because these materials tend to communicate in ways unfamiliar to Hispanics. They use symbols that come from Anglo experience, and answer questions raised by cultures that have different primary concerns than Hispanic cultures. Some of the most effective materials produced today for Hispanic ministries are materials produced at the grassroots, written by lay members of local ministries, and published in very humble, yet appropriate formats.

Finally, it must be said that in many communities a little bit of Spanish goes a long way toward establishing credibility. Even in Hispanic communities where English is the primary language, a little bit of Spanish is a very clear and powerful witness to the willingness of the Anglo Christians to take Hispanics seriously.

Message: One of the most prevalent barriers to effective ministry has to do with the perception of Anglo ministers (or Hispanic ministers trained in Anglo institutions) as to the primary motives and needs of people in their community. For instance, most Hispanics do not need to have God's presence proved to them as more secularized Anglo, middle class, highly educated persons do. God is assumed in traditional Hispanic culture.

Recognizing that the deepest felt motives and needs of people can change dramatically from one location to another, some of the common motives and needs often discovered in Hispanic communities are: to fit into the mainstream life of the United States while maintaining Hispanic identity; to have a working knowledge of English; to respect and care for grandparents, uncles, aunts and other relatives; high aspirations for children to get an education and a good job; legal or para-legal advice on immigration matters; a high degree of confidentiality in terms of the actual legal status of individuals; to worship, pray, and express faith in the most comfortable form of Spanish language; understanding money-management appropriate for U.S. realities; and job training and placement.

There is a strong tendency among many mainline Protestant groups to downplay the religious motivations of life when they begin ministry with Hispanics, believing from their own experiences in suburban and urban Anglo settings that one cannot come on too strong with "evangelism" if one wants to establish credibility with new groups of people. Just the opposite is true in many Hispanic communities. Hispanic people expect churches to be religious, to witness to their faith, to have Bible studies, and hold worship services. Ministries with Hispanics which do not openly and fervently witness to faith are

ministries that will have to spend months, perhaps years, regaining their credibility as a religious ministry in the community.

Appropriate Personnel. Most Anglo, middle- and upper-class membership denominations will suffer from a severe lack of appropriate personnel for doing Hispanic ministries. This is complicated by the fact that these same churches usually do not have adequate systems for identifying the appropriate personnel they do have nor training programs that offer the kinds of skill and ministry development most appropriate for Hispanic ministry.

Assuming that most Hispanic ministry work is mission work, building a faith community from a group of people largely unfamiliar with the church, the following characteristics seem to be the most important to look for in appropriate personnel: 1) bilingual skills to meet all the possible language needs in a community, 2) strong pastoral identity since acting like a pastor means more to many Hispanics than does the certificate that says one has the education to be a pastor, 3) mentality of a learner and not an expert, 4) low need for personal support systems since Hispanic ministers tend to be marginalized along with their constituents, 5) mission-building skills of the kind needed to build a faith community from absolutely zero existing members. The last of these qualities is often the most difficult to find since most missions started by North American churches in North America are the "colonizing" kind—missions that start as a result of "our kind" asking the church to serve them in a new community.

For obvious reasons, between Hispanic persons and Anglo persons of relatively equal appropriateness the Hispanics will be more effective than the Anglos. Many church groups do

not have the privilege of having a ready pool of Hispanic pastors or lay leaders. Anglos can serve well until Hispanic leadership is developed. The fact of being Hispanic does not immediately qualify a person to do ministry with Hispanics either by skill or choice. Many Hispanic leaders are not suited in personality or capability for doing mission work. Many would choose not to work in Hispanic ministries, and still others are appropriate for some fields, but severely limited for others.

Almost all effective Hispanic ministries have discovered that appropriate personnel do exist, but often come from non-traditional sources: lay people who have appropriate gifts; recent immigrants who are willing to serve while receiving training to qualify for some level of officially recognized status as pastor; and lay and pastoral volunteers who are willing to give significant portions of time to the initiating phase of ministry.

Church groups that have relatively formalized criteria for who is a pastor and who is not will have the most trouble confronting the challenge of finding appropriate personnel. Changes and exceptions will have to be made to existing structures and guidelines. Hispanics still close to their Hispanicity will choose their leaders based on a very intuitive and precise sense of who a pastor is and will not recognize any pastor who does not “feel” and “act” like a pastor. Churches must find ways to identify these natural pastors and give them the training and status necessary for them to complete their ministry.

V. THE ONLY EFFECTIVE WAY TO BEGIN IS TO BEGIN

Many North American denominations are severely behind in the area of effective Hispanic ministries because they have waited too long to begin these ministries. Most effective ministry with Hispanics is the result of learning effectiveness by experimentation. Yet, churches persist in thinking that all Anglos must be sensitized, all systems in place, and years of planning and research completed before one can enter into an actual local ministry with Hispanics. The United Methodist Church has one of the most effective ministries with Hispanics of any of the mainline Protestant groups. One of the reasons for this is that 140 years ago a non-Hispanic priest decided to go do ministry with Hispanics. While research, planning and sensitizing are all needed and worthy, there is no substitute for actual experience as a teacher of effectiveness. Just one caution. Don't start without planning to be in these ministries for the long haul. One of the major differences between churches that have effective Hispanic ministries now and those who don't is that the ones with effective ministries entered into these ministries with the commitment to stay until they learned effective ways to minister. The others gave up at the earliest possible major failure.

VI. EFFECTIVE MODELS FOR HISPANIC CHURCH DEVELOPMENT

The Hispanic American Ministries Task Force of the Joint Strategy and Action Committee of the National Council of Churches has produced a very helpful booklet on “Church Development from a Hispanic Perspective” in which they describe six effective models for Hispanic church development. Three of these models have gained ascendancy:

1. The Hispanic Department of an existing congregation. The regular ministry of the local congregation is extended to Hispanics in their own language. There is one budget and one membership list although the Hispanic Department may decide, at a later and more developed

stage, to become an autonomous congregation. Advantages to this system are that it allows a ministry to begin for low cost, provides opportunity for much interaction between Hispanics and Anglos, and there are no building costs. A disadvantage is that the Anglo portion of the congregation will often restrict the size of such a department at which time a separation is necessary if the Hispanic ministry is to flourish.

2. A local congregation establishes a “mission” or “preaching post” in a neighborhood where the Spanish-speaking community is growing and in which some of its members are living. This is a model used by many churches in normal church development and is effective as a low cost and low risk way of beginning ministry. Advantages of this model are that start-up costs are low, many volunteers can be used, and there is good local support. A disadvantage is that volunteers can become disinterested, and the sponsoring congregation may lose interest. The Southern Baptist Convention, which does ministry inside the United States in more than 50 foreign languages, has a very effective variation on this model which involves bringing in both local and out-of-town volunteers

to do about two weeks of intensive evangelizing in several local neighborhoods of promise. The goal is to leave behind several beginning Bible studies to be watched over by interested and committed local churches until such time as the Bible study groups can be developed into more autonomously functioning mission congregations. For example, of 12 neighborhoods approached in the two-week blitz, 7 will have Bible study groups at the end of the two weeks, and of the 7 perhaps 3 will eventually develop into mission congregations.

3. The utilization of shared facilities in the development of a Hispanic congregation. In a community where the Hispanic population is growing, while the Anglo-Saxon congregation is still strong, the local congregation can explore the possibilities of developing a Hispanic congregation that can share the same facilities. The American Baptists have used this model to great advantage in Los Angeles where they are starting about one new ministry a month in existing facilities, using lay pastors who hold down a job to support their families, preach and teach on Sundays and Wednesdays, and go to school on Saturday to qualify to be certified lay pastors.

VII. PROTECTING THE INTEGRITY AND EFFECTIVENESS OF HISPANIC MINISTRIES

The most effective ministries with Hispanics have been those who have kept some distance from Anglo ministries. The most effective model for attracting significant numbers of Hispanics, building Hispanic leadership, and enabling Hispanics to exercise power in the church has been the model of establishing separate Hispanic congregations. Almost all denominations with significant Hispanic Ministries have developed parallel or alternative structural mechanisms within their overall organization to allow Hispanics to “do their own thing” in addition to participating in the regular structures of the church.

This aspect of effective Hispanic ministry has often been criticized as being discriminatory and a replay of the old “separate but equal” strategies of racists in the old days of the South. This criticism comes mostly from churches who have limited experience in Hispanic communities and very few Hispanic members. More experienced observers will recognize that this separation is necessary in order to protect the integrity of the Hispanic ministries, to facilitate

the more rapid development of Hispanic leadership, to prevent Anglos from unconsciously dominating Hispanics (a trait very familiar to “enlightened” Anglos), and to allow the space and time necessary for Anglos to rid themselves of prejudice and misunderstanding. The only alternative is to make Hispanic ministries captive to the patronizing will of the Anglo-dominated structures or to keep Hispanic ministries waiting in the outside corridor until we can sensitize all the Anglos to be more inclusive in their ways (something not likely to happen until Anglos have to meet fellow Hispanic members on an equal footing). There is a more important reason for using Hispanic congregations as the primary means of expanding Hispanic ministries: most of our church groups are ruled by some form of representation based on congregations. Hispanic congregations means Hispanic power in the structures.

VIII. CONCLUSION

In doing Hispanic Ministries there are six aspects of ministry that are almost universally accepted as effective components of ministry. They are, without further comment: 1) the old traditional door-to-door evangelism; 2) good, powerful and interesting Bible study; 3) good, lively; simple music in worship; 4) trusting local people to tell you what is most effective; 5) patience; and 6) good fellowship and food.

We have yet to mention the many changes, adaptations and modifications of structures that denominations will have to make in order to be really effective in Hispanic ministries. This author tries diligently not to be in the forefront of mentioning or suggesting such changes, but prefers to leave such things to the workings of the Spirit. Suffice it to say that everything from seminary education to strategies for funding missions and religious publishing house procedures will be severely tested as Hispanic ministries become more effective at the local level. More profoundly, the church could be converted to a more authentic representation of the body of Christ and thus enter into more profound understandings of Christ’s presence with us and his mission for us in the world.

Dr. Jürgen Moltmann once wrote: “It is only where Christ alone rules, and the church listens to his voice only, that the church arrives at its truth and becomes free and a liberating power in the world.” Hispanic ministries is one very important challenge to the church because the doing of these ministries is one very important way in which the church can incarnate its obedience to our one Lord, and therefore maintain its freedom to be a liberating force for others.