

The Church and Latino Immigration: What a Pastor Can Do

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The testimony of Pentecost demonstrates that, from its very inception, the church crossed borders. The original disciples may have all been from the same place and spoken the same language (Acts 2:7), but the moment they came into contact with the Spirit, the disciples invited into the church people from at least fifteen different areas, languages, or ethnicities (Acts 2:9-11). While scriptures throughout the Old and New Testaments bear witness to God's mandate to love the alien (Leviticus 19:33-4, for example), the story of Pentecost should compel pastors to consider how their churches might be in ministry for and with local Latino immigrants.

Pentecost begins in homogeneity and in a single room: twelve Jewish males, all from Galilee, gather together in one place (Acts 2:1). Their uniformity is not unlike the state of most mainline Protestant churches in the United States today. The twelve were also not part of the neighborhood where they were meeting. They were a "commuter" rather than a "community" church. Their neighbors knew this fact about them, too, when they insisted, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" (Acts 2:7b). Nevertheless, God used the disciples' homogenous backgrounds to create a miraculous preaching opportunity to launch the church.

Like the crowd around the disciples, many of our congregants are filled with perplexity, skepticism, and even animosity about new Latino immigrants in our communities. For most, it is inconceivable that in forty years (by 2050) Latinos will constitute 25 percent of the U.S. population.¹ Like the crowds at Pentecost, our congregations raise at least two key questions for their leaders to answer: first, "What does this mean?" (Acts 2:12), and second, "What should we do?" (Acts 2:37). An issue as contentious and complex as Latino immigration demands courage and clarity from church leaders, but an issue as human and urgent as Latino immigration commands a Christian response.

Over the past five years, I have had the privilege of working with pastors and congregations in Charlotte, North Carolina, and in Atlanta, Georgia, as they have prayerfully discerned their involvement with the burgeoning Latino immigrant population in the southern United States. Without a doubt, talking about immigration as a church is difficult. For any one church member, the topic can instantly link to divisive issues such as politics, race, ethnicity, national security, the economy, the rule of law, education, and health care. The concerns are legitimate, but so is God's call to care for the least of these in our communities—the foreigner, the criminal, the disenfranchised, the day laborer, the child—the undocumented immigrant. The job of the pastor is not to be an expert on immigration. Indeed, most of us do well to remember a little high school Spanish or to make it back from the Mexico mission trip with all of our youth. What Pentecost challenges every church leader to do in relation to Latino immigration is to help their congregation answer the questions "What does this mean?" and "What should we do?"

It is no accident that God gave birth to the church among sojourners in Jerusalem

who spoke many languages. The contemporary American church's task is to figure out how God calls the U.S. church into relationship with America's sojourners who do not speak English as their first language, all the while remembering how the church and its members are also sojourners. As a pastor, attaining a starting point to engage immigration with the church may seem daunting. You may know little about national and local immigration. Your Spanish may, at best, be rusty and elementary. Chances are your parishioners hold divergent and potentially clashing views on the topic. Why bring such a politically, racially, and economically charged issue into the church? Because, for the church, this is not primarily a political, racial, or economic issue; for the church, undocumented Latino immigration is a humanitarian crisis unfolding in our backyards.

People on all sides of the immigration debate agree that America's immigration policy and border security are broken. Whether the solution is for more visas or for more border patrol agents, the fact of the matter is that somewhere between twelve and twenty million children of God are in the United States without papers. Every single day, one to two people die trying to cross the 2,000-mile U.S.-Mexico Border.² Many Latino immigrants in the U.S. are performing jobs that "involve toxic chemicals or pesticides or dangerous equipment."³ Local law enforcement agents are acting as immigration officials, which leaves undocumented individuals afraid to report crimes committed against them. America's current border and deportation policies are separating children from parents and husbands from wives. In all this brokenness, the church is called to be present. Christians are to see Christ in "the least of these" because, when God judges the nations, the questions will be: Did you feed the ones who did not have food in their home countries; did you clothe the ones who arrived here with only a shirt on their backs; did you help the ones who were sick or pregnant and had no medical care; and did you visit the ones society has labeled "illegal" in detention prison? (Matthew 25: 35-37).

From Abraham and Moses in the wilderness, to Mary and Joseph in Egypt, to the man the Samaritan finds somewhere between Jerusalem and Jericho, God consistently demonstrates God's concern for the migrant, the alien, the wanderer, and the sojourner. The early church thrived on radical hospitality as they followed Jesus' parable to "go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame" (Luke 14: 21b). In her book *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, Christine Pohl claims modern "people view hospitality as quaint and tame partly because they do not understand the power of recognition. When a person who is not valued by society is received by a socially respected person or group as a human being with dignity and worth, small transformations occur."⁴ How then should the socially respected institution of the church recognize the unseen and unvalued immigrants in our society?

A pastor can begin by helping the congregation ask: "What does this [Latino immigration] mean?" Sometimes the origin of understanding is as simple as noticing. Notice if there are Spanish-speaking radio stations on the dial tone. Notice what areas around town have clusters of signs written in Spanish. Notice what language the people who work in restaurant kitchens or hotel housekeeping are speaking. Notice who landscapes the neighborhood's lawns or who builds the city's buildings. Notice what words the nightly news, politicians, and service providers use to describe

undocumented immigrants. Notice if your church headquarters has a Latino ministry division. Just notice.

The first time I visited Central America, I had the privilege of staying in a rural farming community in northern Nicaragua. In the evening as most of the community gathered together to relax after a long day, I looked at each person and noticed the absence of men from age fifteen to fifty. Surprised, I asked some of the women where their husbands and sons were. Some replied, "Mexico." Others, "Texas." Still, others responded, "Carolina del Norte"—North Carolina. When I returned to Charlotte a week later, I could not believe my eyes. People who had simply been part of the wallpaper of my life suddenly became Olga's son constructing my new academic building and Maria's husband grilling my chicken sandwich. The relationships I had formed forced me to notice. The relationships I continue to make oblige me to speak out.

Informed noticing becomes awareness, and responsible awareness promotes recognition. To help the congregation ask, "what does this mean," pastors can begin to bring what they notice into worship. Replace the communion white bread with tortillas from a local Mexican bakery. Wear a stole or drape the table with colorful fabrics from Peru or Guatemala. Refill the candy jar on your desk with exotic treats from a nearby Hispanic "tienda." Incorporate hymns with Latin American origins, like "Lord, you have come to the lake shore" or "Cuando el pobre/ When a poor one." As certain members of the congregation notice local immigration also, invite one of them to offer a "minute for mission" about a local Latino service provider. In the prayers of the people, include migrant workers, oppressed laborers, families split apart by borders, and migrants living in fear.

Most important, preach about immigration. However small the allusion may be, what matters is that we break the church's silence about immigration and create safe space for our parishioners to wrestle with all sides of the debate. Immigration has been painted as an economic, cultural, and safety issue through sound bites and half-truths. The church needs informed leaders to nuance and balance the community's conversations about immigration.

The Bible provides plenty of archetypal characters as migrants—Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Ruth, and Jesus, to name a few. Additionally, the Scriptures give paradigms to consider some of the longer-term immigrant humanitarian crises. For example, how might Mary and Joseph's flight to Egypt inform the family values of immigration policy (Matthew 2)? What does the parable of the laborers in the vineyard say about the U.S. business sector's treatment of Latino workers (Matthew 20: 1-16)? If Jesus said, "go and sin no more," to the adulterous woman, what would he have the U.S. say to undocumented immigrants already in the U.S. (John 8:11)? No matter what scripture and exegetical angle a sermon takes, what the church must do is educate its members so that immigration is, first and foremost, a human issue, a family issue, a Christian issue.

To be clear, there are many faithful political, programmatic, and legal responses to undocumented immigration. The pastor's job is not to run headlong into the policy debate in a sermon. Rather, the pastor is uniquely situated to reveal the human face of immigration. Undocumented immigrants are in too vulnerable a position to tell their own stories, but a pastor can expose the precarious, fearful, and oppressed life journey of a migrant. Lift up just one person's story—someone who came to the church for

help or a family you met in the grocery store or even someone mentioned in a local newspaper article. Help the congregation think about the situations from which these immigrants have come. Inform them of the precious few options the family's breadwinners had. Bring to light the types of work and services these immigrants are providing for the community. The interconnections between undocumented immigrants and everyday Americans are infinite, but well hidden. As the congregation and the pastor grow in awareness, they will together answer the question: "What does this mean?"

In the narrative of Pentecost, after Peter has shared the gospel message, the multilingual crowd is "cut to the heart" and unanimously asks, "What should we do?" (Acts 2: 37). Undoubtedly, the powerful Holy Spirit worked both in Peter's words and in the hearts of the crowd. If after hearing about the human side of immigration, the Holy Spirit is calling a congregation into relationship with local Latinos, there are rich possibilities for outreach and partnership.

Just as the disciples prepared for Pentecost by defining their own group (Acts 1: 12-26), any congregation should first look inward and outward before beginning a new effort. As they encounter "the other," the congregation needs to ask, "Who do we want to be?" before answering, "What do we want to do?" Each congregation's self-understanding and theology of outreach will be unique. The skills represented in the congregation should influence the shape of its service. That is to say, a congregation's vocational gifts, including education, medical, technical, and legal skills, should be the ones that they offer in their outreach. In addition, responsible outreach must take into account the area around the church. Even if congregants are passionate about offering English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, they will need to reconsider if two other churches in the area are already teaching them. Similarly, if the church is located miles away from the city's Latino population, any outreach efforts must travel to the Latino neighborhood, not visa versa.

The local United Way or community foundation may be very helpful in knowing what services are already being provided where and identifying possible areas of need where a church could help. Winning the trust of the Latino community and communicating effectively with each other can require quite a bit of time because of the vulnerability of some of the population and other language and cultural barriers. For this reason, churches may want to actively seek out partnerships with other churches or organizations that are already established within the Latino community. Good research not only makes the congregation a good neighbor; it also boosts the probability that the congregation's efforts will be needed and utilized.

Outreach to Latino immigrants requires a special sensitivity to their community's unique needs and lifestyle. Events should be scheduled outside of their working hours. Transportation and childcare are two concerns that must be addressed. If the congregation is using its own facilities, be sure to mark parking spaces, buildings, and other important areas with signs in Spanish, Portuguese, or the appropriate dialect. The congregation's specific outreach can vary widely. Some successful programs have included after-school tutoring for youth, since many are learning in a second language and foreign school system. All types of childcare can be helpful since many Latino families have two working parents. ESL classes are popular, but sometimes individuals also need basic literacy classes as well. Other successful programs have included classes on driving in America, health and nutritional information, parenting,

computer skills, Bible study, and community laws and services. If the immigrants' work is seasonal, the congregation may structure some services around the farming or construction calendar. For example, workers may have more time to attend an intensive class in the wintertime than a weekly class year-round. Families may also need extra clothing, food, or funds during the low-point in their annual work cycle.

Finally, if a church feels called to advocacy, there are specific local issues where congregants can have a maximum effect. Their engagement may involve supporting funding for ESL classes in public schools, asking for a Spanish-speaking career and social counselor in public schools, campaigning for a sheriff who does not want to enforce federal immigration law or racial-profile traffic stops, ensuring that basic water, electricity, and renting contracts do not require a social security number, and demanding the appropriate number of agricultural and work visas. Ultimately, congregants should explore and support faith-informed national comprehensive immigration reform.

The first harvest of Pentecost is the faith, fellowship, and food shared among the disciples and the crowd (Acts 2:43-47). Similarly, established congregations have plenty of faith, fellowship, and food to share in partnership with Latino immigrants. More than 90 percent of Latinos in the U.S. identify themselves as Christian, and of those, a growing 30 percent are Protestant, usually Pentecostal or Evangelical.⁵ Settled and immigrant Christians can always share prayers, songs and worship. Settled congregations can partner with a Latino group or congregation to alternate cooking cultural meals for the whole group. Churches have also successfully partnered for movie nights, service projects, festival/holiday exchanges, and Vacation Bible School. English speakers should also consider asking their Latino brothers and sisters to teach them Spanish or Portuguese. Some immigrants may feel comfortable teaching home maintenance or gardening classes in addition to traditional Sunday school or Bible study classes. With mutual respect and clear communication, the possibilities for helpful and creative partnerships are boundless.

The miracle of Pentecost and the testimony of the disciples ultimately led to the crowd's conversion and to the beginning of the early church. In that model, the work of the Holy Spirit and the witness of Christian pastors will help to convince our congregations of the humanitarian concerns around Latino immigration. In my experience, Christians begin to care about immigration, not because of a compelling debate or staggering statistics, but because an encounter with a Latino immigrant converts them to caring about a group of people and the unique struggles and injustices that that group is facing. The American church may never hold a uniform understanding of just and comprehensive immigration reform; we should all agree that Latino immigrants, regardless of their immigration status, are children of God who deserve respect and dignity.

At Pentecost, the disciples did not already know the many languages that they used to "speak about God's deeds and power" (Acts 2:11) or wield the skills to perform "many wonders and signs" (Acts 2:43). The Holy Spirit empowered their ministry. Likewise, the Holy Spirit yearns to empower today's Christian leaders and their congregations to reach across language, cultural, and social barriers to encounter where the Spirit is already at work in the Latino community and to embrace what the Spirit will create in their partnerships. Begin by noticing, continue by recognizing, and

live in service and love. Ultimately, the Holy Spirit will carry the church into the future as it continues to cross borders, testify to God's power, and share God's wonders, signs, and deeds with all of God's children.

Notes

1 "Table 1a. Projected Population of the United States, by Race and Hispanic Origin: 2000 to 2050." *Population Projections*. U.S. Census Bureau. <http://www.census.gov/population/www/projections/usinterimproj>. Last Modified: July 31, 2008.

2 Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, ed. *Religion and Social Justice for Immigrants*. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 11.

3 Ibid, 9.

4 Christine Pohl: *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*. 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1999), 17.

5 Arlene Sanchez Walsh, "The Mexican American Experience," *Introduction to the U.S. Latina and Latino Religious Experience*. (Boston: Brill, 2004), 40.