Transcultural Evangelism:

An Emerging New Paradigm

of Latino Ministry

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Transcultural Evangelism borrows a term in the psychology, medical, and sociology fields, which have their own slant or definition of the term that makes sense for those specific disciplines. In the sociological understanding, for example, transcultural might be another name for cross cultural, or one that accentuates a trait or cultural response that seems to be universal among many cultures. This is particularly helpful for understanding the various Latino nationalities and their sub-regional cultural groups that exhibit similar cultural responses to everyday life and family situations. Discerning the common cultural, religious, and spiritual threads among these groups is part of cultural competency, as is the ability to detect those cultural traits peculiar to the later Latino generations. This means that transculturation particularly involves the understanding how socialization and acculturation generally function in the Latino experience, being that that U.S. Latinos includes those just recently arrived from distinct Latino countries of origin to those historically settled Latinos who have been in this country for generations.

Understanding the U.S. Latino acculturation process, then, is pivotal to attaining Latino competency, because Latino ministry in the Episcopal Church and other mainline denominations seem to have a universal misguided perspective that Latino ministry naturally stops with those immigrants recently arrived and those of the first generation. Transcultural evangelism is my way of expanding the notion of what Latino ministry should be in the 21st century, and begin to get a realistic picture and cultural competency of the U.S. Latino world. Transcultural evangelism aims particularly to lift the cultural veil to better identify and understand the later Latino generations (second, third, fourth and later generations) because they represent two-thirds of the Latino population in this country that are virtually absent from the Episcopal evangelistic radar. I also like the term, transculturation evangelism because it involves examining the transcultural dynamics between the dominant white culture of the Episcopal Church and the culture that is Latin, Hispanic, indigenous, Afro-based and everything in between. Transcultural dynamics entails re-examining the culture of the Episcopal Church, its assumptions, and expectations about Latino ministry, with the aim of creating an evangelistic mindset that is based on the notion that both cultures bring their cultural and religious/spiritual value assets to the table. It is a process of establishing the interpersonal relationships that enable an authentic exchange of how each culture can learn from each other and come out with a more enhanced worshiping and religious experience. In short, transcultural evangelism is a partnership, not a ministry *to*, but a ministry *with*.

And to give a breathing and live example of transcultural dynamics, It is helpful to know my background as a third-generation Mexican Americanborn in San Antonio, Texas. I chose the term, transcultural evangelism, because the emerging paradigm of Latino ministry must make room for later generations of Mexican Americans like myself whose immigrant experiences are based on family stories, and if we’re so blessed, with interaction with our immigrant *abuelitos* and extended family. Culturally speaking, many of us are beyond the Latino exodus experience and many Mexican Americans do not relate to the notion of a Latino diaspora, or dwell on the “colonizer” atrocities of the U.S. occupation and conquest in Texas and the Southwest. For these reasons, I’m firmly convinced that the current model of Latino ministry that emphasizes the first-generation immigrant situation and experience has a self-limiting perspective and truncated future if it doesn’t make room for the English-speaking, later Latino generations who are acculturated to the U.S. lifestyle. Case in point, I self-identify with my Tejano background grounded by my northern Mexican and my family’s roots in Laredo, Texas. I also have no problem describing myself as a “*Hispanic”* because half of me is rooted in the Iberian Spanish and Portuguese peninsula. I identify with my Spanish/Indigenous *mestizo* identity, due to an equally strong percentage of Mexican indigenous blood, probably of Coahuiltecan and other northeastern Mexican indigenous origins. And with my Peace Corps experience in Venezuela and 35 years’ experience in Latino ministry on a local, diocesan, and national level, I also feel a strong sense of solidarity with the variety of Latino immigrants represented in the Latino ministry across the country. This bilingual, bifurcated identity has produced a sense of “liminality,” where I am culturally comfortable with living in the hyphen, which enables me, as an Episcopal priest, to navigate back forth on the Anglo-Latino spectrum. Although I purposefully choose not to totally assimilate and give up my Latino identity, I need both cultures and languages to be psychologically and culturally whole. It is this transcultural psyche and dynamic mobility, a trait found among many of the later generations of US-born, Mexican Americans and other Latino Americans born in the U.S., that provides me with the ministry lens to discern an emerging paradigm of Latino ministry that is desperately needed in the Episcopal Church. It could be argued that the current emphasis on Latino immigrant and first- generation emigres might fall victim to the patterns similar to the American ethnic churches which started to wane in the late 1950’s due to the various ethnic groups assimilating into the U.S. social mainstream. Latinos will tend to hand on much longer, given the constant migration from Latin American and the Caribbean, including the persistent and prejudicial stereotypes which impact some Latino’s acculturation access to the mainstream. This is a cultural dynamic that must be understood. Fortunately, we have a biblical precedent.

Interestingly, the Episcopal Church must borrow a page from the evangelism strategy devised by Paul of Tarsus around 50 CE when he and Peter and James (brother of Jesus) came to the reluctant and conflictive compromise that the latter two apostles would continue to focus on conversion of the Hebrew/Aramaic-speaking Jews of Jerusalem and Judea, while Paul would carry the Christ message to the dispersed Hellenistic Jews and Gentiles found throughout the Mediterranean regions. Since seminary days, I have been exploring the notion that US-born, English-dominant Latinos closely parallel the Hellenistic Jews of Paul’s time. Hellenized Jews were part of the Jewish diaspora outside of Palestine and other parts of the Greek-Roman regions who had acculturated into the Greek-speaking cultural world but retained a strong Jewish identity. Paul understood that the Christ message had to expand beyond the Hebrew/Aramaic-speaking Jews, so he set out to radically recast the Christ message to appeal to the acculturated, Hellenized Greek-speaking Jews and the multicultural Gentiles. The Mexican Americans, plus the other early Latino immigrants from Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic who emigrated to the U.S.in the late 1800’s and 1900’s, largely to the Southwest, the Midwest, Florida, and the Northeast, are the modern “Hellenized Latinos.” This is a term that Daniel A. Rodriguez, author of *The Future for the Latino Church*, so ingeniously coined to describe the notion that I had been exploring.

While initially hostile to Paul expanding the Christ message to include a non-Jewish form of Christianity, the early Church finally recognized the wisdom of intentionally devising a multi-faceted, transcultural evangelism strategy that considered the reality of a multi-lingual and multicultural world. Quite astounding, and belatedly, the Episcopal Church is finally coming to the realization that the U.S. Latino world is really made up of the recent monocultural immigrants from Latin America, the bilingual second generation who are closer to the Latino culture, and the Later Generation Latinos (LGL’s) who are English-prone, or dominant and totally acculturated into the U.S. lifestyle.

*A Caveat: There is still an Absolute Need for the Existing Model of Traditional Latino Ministry*

The existing traditional Latino ministry currently carried out by The Episcopal Church is alive and well and producing good results and will continue to be the dominant form of Latino ministry for the foreseeable future. Clearly, this article advocating for a new paradigm of Latino evangelism should not be misconstrued as questioning the need for the Spanish-speaking ministry or the vital support it must continue to receive. We must, however, acknowledge that the existing Episcopal Latino ministry is predominantly an immigrant-based ministry that has had a tough, upward climb over the last fifty years. Most definitely, traditional Latino ministry was, and will continue to be, motivated and driven by the need to address the spiritual, religious, cultural, and linguistic needs of the Latino brothers and sisters just coming into the country, as well as those who are just establishing their lives in the U.S. Our Latino congregations provide such comfortable safe havens and serve as cultural “cocoons” for wearied people desperately trying to make a living and raise families amid a hostile environment and draconian immigration policies and policing.

In large part, traditional Latino ministry in the U.S. still has a strong feel and look of foreign “missionary work.” In many respects, our current Episcopal Latino ministry in the U.S. is an extension of the Latin American missionary efforts in Mexico, Central and South America, and the Caribbean. Quite understandably, for the great majority of Anglo Episcopalians, it is quite logical to assume that Latino ministry is a ministry carried out among immigrants, primarily in Spanish. In truth, given the inertia this missionary model on the part of the Episcopal Church, traditional Spanish-speaking Latino ministry will remain strong as a functional model in the Episcopal Church because this is what we know.

*The Relentless Paradigm Shifts Affecting the U.S. Latino Population*

However, in this second decade of the twenty-first century, it cannot be denied that cultural/linguistic paradigm shifts have emerged within the U.S. Latino world that cannot be denied or disregarded. For those with eyes to see and ears to hear, the unrelenting drumbeat of change in the Latino world has occurred, however, most Episcopal dioceses and Anglo congregations have slumbered during these socio-cultural changes taking place. Cursorily, one sees it in the following:

* The undeniable fact is that Latino immigration has crested and is in decline, according to the Pew Research Center. Where once the diaspora surge of Latino immigrants coming into the US was primarily responsible for the dramatic increase in the Latino population in the country, Latino U.S. births now account for the present and anticipated upward climb of the Latino population. It is true that the great number of the Central Americans currently seeking asylum and the throngs of Venezuelan emigres coming to Florida and other key urban centers will register an upward tick to the migration numbers; however, this will not significantly alter the fact of the downward trend of Latino immigration, according to Pew.
* English is now the lingua franca among the US- born Latino/as, as well as those immigrant Latino children, e.g, the “Dreamer” children brought in at an early age and educated in this country.
* The accelerating and unrelenting pace of Latino acculturation among native-born Latinos is reflected in their very visible U.S. lifestyles and their steady upward trend of social and economic mobility. Socio-demographic data indicates that about one-third of these acculturated Latinos strongly prefer assimilation as their end game.
* Acculturated, bilingual and English-dominant Latinos have captured the attention of the business and advertising world. The Nielsen Company, for example, has concluded that US-acculturated Latino/as will play a prominent role in the future of the US. The Nielsen report states, “Hispanic population and labor force growth are setting pace to be the next demographic phenomenon, with Hispanics accounting for over half of the U.S. population growth from 2016 to 2020 and up to 80% by 2040–2045. Nielson concludes that Latinos will increasingly become a prime driving force in the U.S. economy for decades to come.
* The significant pattern and increase in Latino/as marrying or partnering with non-Latino/as, a pattern that doubles as it goes up the generational ladder.
* Latino clergy in charge of traditional Latino congregations are now intensely feeling the pressure from their congregational, U.S.-born children and adolescent youth to include English in their congregational life, especially in those maturing, transitional congregations that now have second and third generations that have been born into the congregation.

*An Inherent Limitation of the Existing Latino Ministry Paradigm to Evangelize the LGL’s*

Ironically, Latino congregations, in providing the necessary comfort zones to immigrant Latinos looking for a familiar worship in Spanish, do not normally consider the native-born Latinos as targets for evangelism. For one, there is a vast world of difference between the first-generation immigrant Latinos and the later generations particularly the third and fourth generations. Later-generational Latinos, LGLs as this article will refer to them, include the second, third, fourth-plus generations of Latinos born and acculturated into the US milieu who are predisposed to bilingualism, or are English dominant. The reality is that many LGLs do not fully understand Spanish and feel embarrassed because they cannot fully engage in Spanish-speaking worship. Many revert to English, or Spanglish, which is grating to the native Spanish speaker’s ear and further accentuates the cultural divide between themselves and the average Spanish-speaking Latino.

So, it is not an exaggeration to say that Latino congregations, with few exceptions, do not normally interact with, or reach out to the “at large,” U.S.-born Latino population, outside of those second or third generation children born to immigrant parents who are already part of the Latino congregation. Neither do most of these Latino congregations contemplate adding English to their congregational life. For the great number of Latino congregations, there is also stiff resistance on the part of their key lay leadership to make any linguistic changes. This resistance is not surprising, for in the traditional Latino congregation, the great majority of parishioners still function in a monocultural mode when it comes to family life and worship. In truth, for a number of these Latino congregations, the importance of maintaining their culture and the Spanish language overrides any evangelistic concerns. No question, the reality of the Latino world in the US is that it is complex, diverse, multicultural, multilingual, multigenerational, and multiracial, which makes defining what a Latino is in these United States a challenge.

*English-Speaking Episcopal Congregations will be pivotal in the New Paradigm of Latino Ministry*

To be fair, Latino ministry, as it has evolved in The Episcopal Church, was not designed, nor was it ever envisioned, to realistically reach out to U.S.-born, acculturated Latino/as who are more at home speaking English or speaking a polyglot of Spanish and English that switches back and forth in a micro-second or speaking Spanglish. This means that it will be the Anglo congregations who will have the major role to evangelize the LGL’s, since they are the logical worshipping home for the vast numbers of English-dominant Latinos/as, especially Mexican Americans in Texas and the Southwest. For starters, it must be understood that there is a reluctance by the majority of LGLs to segregate themselves into a totally Spanish-speaking congregation. LGLs, especially those of third generation upwards, tend to resist being relegated, or “pigeonholed,” into what they consider to be segregated or immigrant settings. Additionally, for many Mexicans Americans in particular, this reluctance to join a totally Spanish-speaking congregation is seen as a step backwards. Plus, many Hispanics want to distant themselves from the negative and prejudicial notions held by the Anglo dominant group toward the Latino immigrants. Culturally and linguistically, the LGL’s, especially from the third generation upwards, are more comfortable in an English setting. The major hurdle, however, is for the Anglo congregations to acquire the cultural competence necessary to begin establishing meaningful relationships with these LGL’s who reside in and around the parish area. Many LGL’s will join Anglo congregations if they feel welcome and if they feel that their Latino identity will be honored and respected. This cultural competence on the part of Anglo congregations, however, must also include the understanding that a significant portion of the LGL’s will resist being invited as “Hispanics” or told they are part of a Latino ministry campaign. A good number want to be invited and welcome as just “regular” people looking for a spiritual and sacramental home.

*How Can the Church Respond to This Emerging New Paradigm of Latino Multicultural Evangelism?*

These are just a few points for consideration:

* First order of business: The various levels of the Episcopal Church must become more culturally competent and aware of the LGLs, beginning with the diocesan staff and seminarians, the latter who should receive Latino cultural competency courses as a matter of fact and requirement. The Church must come to terms that a “one-size fits all” approach to Latino ministry is not only passé (a holdover from the last century), but self-limiting in terms of evangelism. Given that the 61 million Latinos in the United States come in an array of nationalities, races, cultures, languages, and ethnicities, and possess unique acculturation levels, and language propensities, it is a self-defeating mindset to assume that a Spanish-speaking ministry will suffice for all. It is time that the Episcopal Church take lessons from the advertising and marketing industry and intentionally engage in niche evangelism that addresses the varying acculturation levels and language characteristics of the various Latino generations. The Episcopal Church in general must be made aware that the English-speaking, multigenerational Latinos/as are not evangelized by the traditional Latino ministry outreach. This evangelistic strategy entails treating them not as targets for missionary conversion, but as invited, religious co-partners who bring an inherent sense of religiosity, a feel for ritual and sacramental liturgics, music, and above all, young families.
* The U.S. Episcopal Church, as is reflected in the Anglo congregations, must own up to the reality that it has functioned as an Anglo or northern European “ethnic” church and must reclaim its world-wide character of being a universal Anglican Church that is multicultural and aspiring to reflect today’s multicultural world. After all, the natural world for the average LGL is a multicultural setting: they live in it, they marry into it, they work in it. Plus, LGL’s will gravitate to those Episcopal congregations that exhibit a rich catholicity character that is so appealing to many LGL’s, but who are looking for a church with a more progressive theological and spiritual bent. This includes providing training to interested Anglo congregations on key Latino religious events and sacramental rites, such as Quinceañeras, Las Posadas, Instructed First Communion, etc. This is all part of the cultural competency scenario that is so vitally needed.
* There is a need to develop a social media strategy that must be directed at the LGLs in the metropolitan areas of a parish area to address the invisibility factor of the Episcopal Church. The reality is that the LGLs are almost completely oblivious to the existence of The Episcopal Church as a church of choice. Most interesting is also the fact that many LGL’s make themselves invisible so that they can melt into social fabric.This clearly points to the need of knowing the contextual social media approaches and message consumption patterns of these acculturated, English-prone Latinos to reach them. We must borrow a page from the Latino-focused advertising industry, which has minutely dissected this Latinae population.
* We must be particularly focused on identifying local Anglo congregations that want to explore a more creative form of Latino transcultural evangelism that is intentionally English-based and who would benefit from cultural competency training to enable these congregations to develop a transcultural evangelistic approach. These congregations need guidance and technical help for assessing the feasibility of their involvement for bringing a multigenerational evangelism into play in their settings. This can be done by developing cohort clusters of like-minded congregations assisted by an experienced Latino mentor who understands the dynamics of transcultural ministry aimed at LGL’s. The training resources are there from the National Church’s Latino Ministries Office.
* To a large extent, Transcultural Evangelism to LGL’s starts with the young in the form of an intentional strategy of formation, starting with the high school youth and college age adolescents. Strategically, Latino youth leadership development is the name of the game. With that come leaders – lay and ordained – necessary to start developing future generations of Latinos who would naturally mix in with Anglo congregations without any fanfare. The Episcopal Church already has the ministry infrastructure for this approach in the campus ministries, the EYC’s and the church summer camps. Unfortunately, these ministries leaders do not receive training on cultural competency to be able to recognize the fact that they are literally in the front lines of transcultural evangelism for LGL youth.