As a practitioner of transformational ministries my prayers, hopes, and dreams are about experiencing and sharing the ways that the Holy Spirit moves, inspires, guides, and helps us to join as one body in the healing of this broken world through actions of justice and love. My mission in ministry has been to establish, grow, and sustain Hispanic ministries in the Episcopal Church while integrating English- and Spanish-speaking members into one bilingual, multicultural congregation and community. With the support of the Episcopal Church Foundation fellowship, we created two women’s ministries programs—Abuelas, Madres y Más (Grandmothers, Mothers, and More) and Ruth and Naomi. I collaborated with Ema Rosero-Nordalm, a committed lay Episcopalian, experienced grassroots leader, and candidate for ordination to the diaconate, to create a type of “seminary for lay women,” initially at Grace Church and subsequently at Iglesia San Pedro in Salem, Massachusetts.

The Hispanic ministry in Salem came about because the Diocese of Massachusetts is intentionally seeding Latino ministries. With the support of the Right Reverend M. Thomas Shaw, SSJE, Grace Church, and other collaborators, I landed in Salem and launched a Hispanic ministry. I became interested in starting a women’s ministry program while exploring, listening, and getting to know the largely Latino community of The Point neighborhood. Ema and I believed that any new ministry we could offer in Salem would grow out of the needs and interests of the community. Therefore, with faith as our foundational principle, we drew on our years of combined experience working in public health, counseling, grassroots leadership development, 

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training, and community organizing to become part of la comunidad (the community).

During the assessment phase we learned that Latinos in Salem were mostly of Dominican descent and that this demographic shared values of faith, hope, and spirituality as a resource in their daily lives. However, they found themselves without many basic physical and relational resources because of their immigrant situations. While there were several churches of diverse denominations with Spanish-language worship ministries, something was missing for them. The women we interviewed expressed interest in starting peer groups to support one another; they were hungry for a “present” Christ. A year prior to applying for the transformational ministry fellowship, Ema and I decided to launch a five-week pilot program that integrated faith, spirituality, mentoring, and companionship for women raising children—Abuelas, Madres y Más (Grandmothers, Mothers, and More). This program eventually grew into the two programs that the Episcopal Church Foundation supported in our community. Both offered immigrant women raising children in Salem and neighboring communities a safe place to explore their gifts and talents, address their concerns about raising bilingual/bicultural children, and find resources to help cope with the stress of raising children in a foreign environment and different culture. Initially, the primary difference between the two groups was generational; at present there is one intergenerational ministry program for women. This shift had two unexpected outcomes. The first was the participants’ decision to receive training to facilitate charlas (workshops) for teenage mothers in the community—they became mentors and companions. The second was that 90 percent of the program participants and their family members became Episcopalians. These two remarkable outcomes grew out of our ministry of presence, listening, and response to the needs of the people.

In order to respond to the community’s needs we integrated the use of participants’ spirituality and faith as resources in the charlas. We helped the participants recognize their strength and wisdom in order to fortify their self-esteem and empower them to share their values in support of other caregivers. In designing the curriculum for the two programs Ema used the Paulo Freire methodology of participatory education as a formational model. A reciprocal process between facilitators and participants, where simultaneous training and learning occurs, is characteristic of the Freire methodology. Through
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The participants learned Freire’s pedagogical philosophy of popular education. Freire firmly believed that knowledge acquired from oral traditions and daily life experiences, as well as knowledge passed down from one’s ancestors and one’s cultural values, are the basis for community wisdom. The role of the facilitator using the Freire methodology is to affirm, validate, and integrate the wisdom and knowledge of all participants while suggesting new knowledge from other sources in order to reach a group consensus and act upon the issues of concern. We believe, like Freire, that sharing knowledge, wisdom, strengths, talents, and dreams informs cultures and educates societies. This is an organic model of community-based education that integrates the divine nature of all people and it is a mechanism for groups to recognize and affirm the experiences of its participants.

Ema and I gleaned three fundamental theological premises from Freire’s methodology of popular education and our experience in the community: faith, hope, and love. We put our faith into action by trusting wholeheartedly that every participant had knowledge and wisdom to share; we embraced the possibility of change with hope; and finally, we found that without love there cannot be transformation. We learned this from Jesus Christ and from the women in our program. In Abuelas, Madres y Más and Ruth and Naomi, transformation occurred because women of diverse generations, their children, and their families were willing to be present with one another and to use their faith and spirituality to navigate the obstacles of daily living in their adopted country while rediscovering their dignity, their voice, and their self-worth.

I take the slogan of our Episcopal Church very seriously: “La Iglesia Episcopal le da la bienvenida—The Episcopal Church Welcomes You.” At San Pedro everyone is invited and encouraged to “dar la bienvenida—welcome others” and use our Latino charisma and traditions of hospitalidad to let the church flow into the street and allow the world to flow into the church. While the women’s ministry in Salem has trained Latinas to become mentors, companions, friends, and evangelizers, the participants have also learned to be more comfortable with different people in the name of Christ while breaking down some of the cultural and language barriers that divide us in order to come together, be together, and grow together. Laboring together has meant following the example of the early church mothers and fathers who took the church to the people wherever they found themselves. Mentors and companions share las Buenas Nuevas (the Good News)
at their workplace, in the supermarket, with neighbors and family members, even where they get their hair and nails done! The idea behind Abuelas, Madres y Más and Ruth and Naomi came from our philosophy of being church in community and putting faith into action.

I am often asked, “How did you start the ministry?” As I said earlier, by inquiring from members of the community, we asked stakeholders and the immigrant residents how the church could be relevant to them and to their community. First we asked questions in the places frequented by the people of the community; we talked about their lives, asked for contact information of mothers and caregivers, held Bible studies in local restaurants, and made lots of phone calls and house visits—many cups of café con leche were consumed! Before we had any participants, Ema and I created a curriculum that had enough meat on its bones to form a group, yet was open enough to integrate the ideas and wisdom of the participants—that was Freire’s idea, not ours. We organized a five-week curriculum and we found a location (the local community health center offered us free space), but nobody attended for the first two months despite promises received that women would be there the following week. We finally learned that going to the community health clinic for charlas implied that we were offering group therapy, so without missing a beat we found a new location. The local immigration services agency opened its doors to us and the executive director became our ally and spokesperson in the community. We also changed the time so that it would not conflict with the schedule of working caregivers. Word of mouth was very important: you invite two people, and you ask them to invite one person each.

Eventually we gathered a group of ten women, the first disciples, who reflected on their personal stories with one another; they shared very intimate and private details of their lives and faith journeys, perhaps for the first time. These experiences shaped them into the women they had become, but there was something transformative and powerful about recognizing, out loud, how God had been present in their joys and struggles, in every step of the way. Many women in our community are single parents, they have minimum wage jobs without benefits, and they usually have more than one job while attempting to learn a new language and culture. They are also isolated from their family members back home and they are challenged as they communicate with their bicultural and bilingual children. With this
in mind our guided discussions included the following topics: understanding our identities; understanding our cultural roots; exploring our emotions; affective relationships; power and empowerment; intimacy, sensuality, and sexuality; physical and spiritual health; and women of the Bible. The training components of the curriculum included effective intergenerational communication, understanding their rights in the public education system, and more. We all realized together that the participants were beatitude people, people who while marginalized by the world felt blessed by God. As facilitators we witnessed the presence of the Holy Spirit in the eloquent ways in which the women told their stories, the manner in which they looked at one another, how they held each other when they cried, in their laughter, and as they prayed together with such fervor and passion. That was the first group of Abuelas, Madres y Más. Together they found ways to support each other through their life challenges as immigrants in this country. It was not by chance that a five-week program stretched into ten and it is not surprising that five years later these women are the foundational rock on which our ministry stands.

The Abuelas, Madres y Más participants experienced such profound transformation that they asked to be trained as mentors and companions to other women. They first thought that they wanted to reach out to peers raising children, but during their summer training sessions they saw many adolescent girls pushing baby carriages in their neighborhoods, and were able to identify at least forty-five teen and young mothers. This opened their eyes to a need that they had not realized they could address until then, so the Ruth and Naomi program was born. The participants collaborated with Ema in creating a new curriculum which addressed the needs of young women, and they were trained to be the mentors and companions of adolescent and young mothers. The program that started that fall was named in honor of the Hebrew Bible story in the book of Ruth which honors the relationship between two women of different generations who became mentors and companions to each other. Our participants recruited the young mothers by talking with neighbors and asking girls in the street to consider attending. With the financial resources that the ECF fellowship provided we were able to offer a small financial stipend to participants and speakers and to provide food, materials, babysitters, and transportation. In that first phase of Ruth and Naomi three pregnant teenagers joined the group in addition to other young mothers with children. The Holy Spirit was at work!
As the *Ruth and Naomi* program evolved the young mothers requested a workshop that addressed domestic violence. We invited HAWC, Inc. (Healing Abuse Working for Change), a local domestic violence advocacy agency, to do a presentation for the participants as well as for the men and children in their lives. The *Ruth and Naomi* participants invited these boys and men because they recognized that this public health issue affected entire families. Over twenty people attended that forum, and by popular demand the presenter was invited a second time. As a result of the presentations, one of the *Ruth and Naomi* participants confided in me about the domestic violence in her home. I directed her to HAWC. Soon thereafter, her husband attempted to kill her, and with the help and counseling of one of her *Ruth and Naomi* mentors, she sought the assistance of the local police and of HAWC, who moved her and the children into a safe transitional home. The participant later informed her *compañeras* (partners) in the group that their support and the power of the Holy Spirit had been her rock throughout this ordeal, the source of strength that she needed to say “no more abuse.” By God’s grace she did not become another statistic. In this process I realized that public health is a spiritual health concern, and that the presence of the church in the community saved a life. As a result of that situation the women encouraged me to launch a men’s ministry in order to provide men with a support network similar to theirs.

Five years have transpired since the first *Abuelas, Madres y Más* and *Ruth and Naomi* groups were formed. To tell the stories of each woman that has been touched by these ministries is impossible because, as is the case with oral tradition, the information has gone places unknown to us. Nevertheless, some of the transformations that we are aware of in our community include participants of the program leading and organizing evening prayer services, pursuing their GEDs, paying attention to their spiritual development and self-care by attending spiritual retreats, finding jobs where their gifts and talents are fully used and recognized, finding the courage to learn how to drive a car, and advocating for the rights of their children with disabilities in the public school system. These are just a few of the ramifications that the ministry of presence has had in our community. Additionally, and most rewarding for me, is the self-sustainability and proliferation of the ministry. At present, two young mothers have been trained as facilitators in the curriculum and Freire methodology, as well as our seminarian and candidate for ordination to the priesthood Dr.
Lisa Fortuna, and have developed a series of workshops of their own creation.

One of the ECF fellowship stipulations included program replication. With this in mind we created a curriculum that can serve as an instructional guide for churches wanting to establish mentoring and support ministries. We took the request from the Episcopal Church Foundation to disseminate our knowledge and curricula very seriously. With the funding provided by my fellowship we were able to train leaders in South Carolina, New York, Connecticut, Alabama, California, and Puerto Rico. Ema also shared this methodology and curriculum with churches and public health organizations in Ecuador, Panamá, Honduras, México, and Colombia. In 2008 and 2010, we provided an educational forum at the Hispanic Ministries Nuevo Amanecer Conferences to train lay leaders interested in establishing women’s ministries using our model. Through the trainings that Ema offered in Honduras, the Harvesters Missionary ministry of the Branch Creek Community Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania requested the creation of a series of charlas for Sudanese women working in orphanages in southern Sudan. When we committed to sharing what God would give us through this work, we never imagined that it would go so far!

The infectious energy that has come from the participants to be less fearful and more open to life’s challenges is visible in their spiritual practices and in their fervor, which no doubt has affected their decisions to take charge of their lives and their families instead of seeing themselves as disempowered, dependents, and victims. Our work is far from over; Ema and other lay leaders of Hispanic/Latino ministries have been invited to create a guide that explains the methodology, provides examples of adaptable charlas, and offers a training guide for facilitators who wish to form spiritual support groups in their communities.

When we organized this women’s ministry I had not yet started a Spanish-language worship service at Grace Church. Eventually, these women began to insist on coming to la misa (the service), so I started a worship service in Salem. The participants of Abuelas, Madres y Más brought their children, family, and neighbors to church and within six months we celebrated the first baptisms, first communions, confirmations, and receptions. One of the personal gifts that will mark my ministry forever was giving the Eucharist for the very first time to two of the grandmothers who were program participants. Today one of those
women is an usher and the other is an active evangelizer who has brought her daughter, two grandsons, cousins, neighbors, and other family members to worship; many have become Episcopalians! This reminds me of the story of Lydia in the book of Acts (16:14–15) whose heart the Lord opened. She, like many of our participants, must have realized that if the message of Jesus Christ was good enough for her it had to be good for others in her life.

Is it possible for anyone in any church today to say that they have an edge on a new theological dimension for church practices in the twenty-first century? I do not believe that this is the case. We are doing what our ancestors did to establish Christian churches. We are following the models of Lydia, Paul, the Samaritan women at the well, Peter, and Mary Magdalene. We are indeed mentors and companions to one another. God is at work through us in the world, for we are the hands, feet, eyes, and ears of Jesus in our communities!