

Transcultural Latino Evangelism: An Emerging New Paradigm

ALBERT R. RODRÍGUEZ*

To more fully understand the underlying transcultural ministry focus of this article, it is necessary to lay out my background as a US-acculturated Latino born in San Antonio, Texas. I self-identify as a *Mexican American* due to my northeastern Mexican roots and the Laredo and South Texas family culture in which I was raised. Close interaction with the multiple Latino nationalities across the country has provided a rich layer of *Latinidad* (Latino awareness), which I now recognize as a transcultural experience, a concept introduced and developed by the Cuban scholar Fernando Ortiz, who, in 1946, introduced the unique concept of Latin American “pan-Americanism,” which he hoped would produce solidarity and connection among the Latino nationalities. I identify as a *Hispanic* because a good percentage of my DNA is rooted in the Iberian Peninsula, with a definite Moorish connection to northern Africa. And finally, I feel comfortable in my sense of being an acculturated, but not assimilated, *American*, a hybridized identity that has been fermented, distilled, and squeezed through the symbiotic filters, struggles, and clashes of the Texas confluence of cultures and language. This bifurcated identity has produced a sense of “liminality,” of living in the hyphen, which translates to “Ni de aquí, ni de allá” (neither here nor there), but allows me to choose which side of me to use at any one point.

“Hellenized Latinos”

For the past twenty-five years, I have been honing the notion that US-born, English-dominant Latinos closely parallel the Hellenistic

*Al Rodríguez served for fifteen years as rector of a dual language Anglo/Latino congregation and is currently Curriculum Coordinator for Latino Ministry Competency training provided by the Church Center's Office of Latino/Hispanic Ministries. He previously served as Interim Director of the Latino/Hispanic Studies at the Seminary of the Southwest, his alma mater, and has three decades of close interaction with traditional Latino ministry at the local, diocesan, and national levels.

Jewish contemporaries of Paul of Tarsus. Hellenized Jews were ethnic Jews who had acculturated into the Greek-speaking cultural world, thus minimizing their Hebrew or Aramaic language and identity. Paul evidently read the paradigm shifts taking place in the Jewish population, and, combined with his evangelistic vision and dramatic conversion, determined that the Christ message was too universal to be contained to the traditional Christian Jews in Jerusalem and Judea. My first attempt in developing the Hellenist-Latino parallel was in a seminary term paper advocating for US-born and acculturated Mexican Americans to be finally recognized and included in Latino ministry circles and as worthy targets for evangelism by the Episcopal Church.

So, it was a pleasant and much welcomed surprise to see that this “Hellenized Latinos” parallel is one of the foundational concepts developed by Daniel A. Rodriguez (no relation), who wrote the book *A Future for the Latino Church*.¹ Rodriguez builds his case for multi-generational Latino evangelism based not only on the demographic and linguistic shifts in the Latino population, but also on the striking similarity of US-accultured Latinos to the Hellenized Jews of Paul’s time.

The Existing Paradigm of Latino Ministry

In this second decade of the twenty-first century, it cannot be denied that a paradigm shift is emerging in Episcopal Latino ministry. For those with eyes to see and ears to hear, the drumbeat of change in the Latino world is occurring. One sees it in the following:

- the sociodemographic data concerning the Latino population in the United States, which clearly shows the long-term, continued decline in Latino migration to the US
- Latino clergy feeling the pressure from their US-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 represented within them

¹ Daniel A. Rodriguez, *A Future for the Latino Church: Models for Multilingual, Multigenerational Hispanic Congregations* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 16–18.

- the adoption of English as the lingua franca among the US-born Latinos/as, as well as those immigrant Latino children educated in this country
- the accelerating and unrelenting pace of Latino acculturation among native-born Latinos, reflected in their US lifestyles and their steady upward trend of social and economic mobility
- the fact that there is a significant increase in Latinos/as marrying or partnering with non-Latinos/as, an increase that doubles as it goes up the generational ladder

Looking at the de Facto Purpose of Latino Ministry

A critical part of recognizing this paradigm shift is to first recognize and describe what the existing paradigm of the Episcopal Latino ministry is and is not. This starts with first acknowledging that the existing Episcopal Latino ministry is still very much an immigrant-based ministry that has had a tough, upward climb, but with remarkable missionary results in the US over the last fifty-five to sixty 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 long-time residents with established families. The overwhelming majority of Latino parishioners are first-generation, foreign-born, mostly Spanish-speaking Latinos who seek a sanctuary, a safe place and a religious environment where they can be who they are and worship in the language of the heart. Our Latino congregations provide such comfortable safe havens and serve as cultural “cocoons” for wearied people trying to make a living and raise families in the midst of a caustic environment.

Quite understandably, for the great majority of non-Latino Episcopalians, “Spanish-speaking and immigrants” summarize what Latino ministry is presumably all about. In their minds, these two descriptors are invariably tied at the hip, and are the fundamental *raison d’être* of what Latino ministry symbolizes. Moreover, this stereotypical response should not be surprising, for, in many respects, our domestic Episcopal Latino ministry is virtually a satellite extension of the Latin American missionary efforts in Mexico, Central and South America, and the Caribbean. However, this missionary field began to seriously move northward into the United States beginning in the late 1960s, and continued unabated until the early 2000s.

The fact is that Latino immigration has crested and is in decline. 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 native 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 in the 2019 migration numbers; however, this will not significantly alter the fact of the downward trend of Latino immigration. This downward trend is not a temporary aberration, according to the Pew Research Center; it is projected to continue for the next generation. Pew reports, "After increasing for at least four decades, the share of the Hispanic population that is foreign born began declining after 2000."²

Unfortunately, another external driver that is exacerbating this decline is the current chaotic and draconian national immigration policies and enforcement, which further negatively impact the resident immigrant population and especially the migrants attempting to cross over. There is no question that the Episcopal Latino ministry is, and will continue to be, dramatically impacted by what happens in the immigration public policy and national political arena. Fueled by the current shrill voices of nationalism, white supremacist rhetoric, and the nativist outcry, not to mention the relentless raids by the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), there is also a perceptible downward slide in the church attendance of Latino worshipers, according to anecdotal remarks from a number of Latino clergy.

Fortunately, our Latino congregations are working mightily in spite of these setbacks. Even if negatively impacted by border and immigration policies and politics, plus the downward sociodemographic shifts, Latino congregations will continue to mature. Given the continuing Latino migration to this country, wall or no wall, legal documentation or not, and in spite of the loud and bullying political voices, traditional Latino ministry will continue to develop. This migration, albeit in smaller numbers, will continue to reinforce the existing Latino congregations and cause new ones to be established. In effect, the

² Pew Research Center, "Facts on U.S. Latinos: Statistical Portrait of Hispanics in the United States," 2017, pewhispanic.org.

traditional Spanish-speaking Latino ministry will remain the “bread and butter” ministry in the Episcopal Church for the foreseeable future.

An Inherent Limitation of the Existing Latino Ministry Paradigm

Ironically, Latino congregations, in providing these necessary comfort zones to immigrant Latinos looking for the familiar, or attempting to worship with other Latinos of their own language, culture, or nationality, 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, not only in language, but also in sociocultural dynamics, acculturation levels, and worldview and perception. 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. Second, 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.

Nevertheless, there are a few emerging Latino congregations, which can be referred to as “transitional Latino congregations,” that are beginning to confront the acculturation realities of today’s US Latino world. These congregations are led by pastors who are young enough to have children or teenagers impacted by the shifting sands of change. In discussions with these pastors, they express a concern about the restlessness among a good number of children and adolescent Latinos/as, who are increasingly pressuring for a worship service that meets their propensity for English as part of their normal communication. These pastors are beginning to see the need to add bilingual or English to their formational and worshipping life in order to meet the language needs of the bilingual children and youth. Also, anecdotal reports coming out of the Office of Latino/Hispanic Ministries indicate that college-age Latinx youth still favor a Latino-flavored worship service, but one that at least has a sermon and readings in English; however, they insist that the “mystical” aspects of the liturgy such as the consecration of the bread and wine, the Lord’s Prayer, and the music, be Spanish-based. These pastors have concluded that, at

least for them, their future must include some level of English, and they are willing to risk upsetting the status quo to keep the youth in church.

The Latino Ministry Dilemma

Imagine a huge iceberg floating in a sea of water, with a small ship named the *USS Episcopalia* sailing around the iceberg. All the ship sees is the tip of the iceberg and not the much larger, submerged base below the water's surface. This image captures the dilemma of the current Latino ministry of The Episcopal Church, which is almost exclusively focused on the tip of the iceberg, which represents the one-third foreign-born segment of the US Latino population. Not easily seen by the *USS Episcopalia* is below the surface, where 65 percent of the Latino US population lies, amounting to 38 million native-born Latinos/as acculturated into the American lifestyle. These Latinos/as are mostly bilingual among the second generation, but slide into becoming English dominant as they ascend the third- and fourth-generational ladder, speaking little or no Spanish. Yet even if they gradually lose the language, the great majority fiercely retain the Latino culture.

For all intents and purposes, these 38 million native-born Latinos are off the evangelistic radar screen of the Spanish-speaking, immigrant-based Latino congregations. Moreover, the vast number of these native-born Latinos/as are generally unaware of The Episcopal Church as a church of choice. So, it is safe to say that Latino congregations, with few exceptions, do not normally reach out to the "at-large" US-born Latino population, nor do the majority of these congregations contemplate adding English to their congregational life. For the great number of Latino congregations, the pressure to add English is not there; there is also stiff resistance on the part of 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 the culture and the language overrides any evangelistic concerns.

However, not all the blame can be laid at the feet of Latino congregations. There are also a number of historical and cultural factors that prevent many US-aculturated Latinos from feeling comfortable attending totally Spanish-language services. The reality is that many

LGLs do not fully understand Spanish, and feel embarrassed because they cannot fully engage in Spanish-speaking worship. Many have to 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.

Furthermore, LGLs, in attempting to distance themselves from the negative and prejudicial notions held by the Anglo dominant group, tend to avoid being relegated, or "pigeonholed," into what they consider to be segregated or immigrant settings. Also, in some parts of the country, there exists an antagonism between immigrant Latinos and the LGLs. In the Southwest in particular, immigrants, especially those from Mexico and Central America, sometimes accuse the LGLs of lording their legal status over them and flaunting their better socioeconomic statuses. This significant sociocultural reality does not bode well for shrinking the evangelistic gap that exists in Latino congregations. To be fair though, Latino ministry, as it has evolved in The Episcopal Church, was not designed, nor was it ever envisioned, to realistically reach out to US-born, acculturated Latinos/as who are more at home speaking English, or speaking a polyglot of Spanish and English that switches back and forth in a microsecond, or speaking Spanglish.

Cultural Myopia Regarding the Later-Generation Latinos

To compound the massive evangelistic gap found in the existing paradigm of Latino ministry, the majority of Anglo Episcopal congregations are benignly and blissfully unaware of these acculturated, English-prone LGLs who could potentially be part of their English services. It's as if they have developed cultural "blindness" that shield them from seeing these vast numbers of English-dominant Latinos/as. The reason for the invisibility cloak of the LGLs is due to some of the following factors:

- The major news headlines and the highly charged political atmosphere surrounding immigration issues have captured the mind of the average person in the pew. Not surprisingly, for the past thirty years the major emphasis of The Episcopal Church, and most Protestant denominations, has been on the emigrating Latinos and the great need they bring with them.

- There is a stereotypical, but mistaken, notion that the majority of Latinos in the US are all practicing Roman Catholics.
- The US-born LGLs contribute to their invisibility cloak by becoming more mainstream in American society due to their evolving socioeconomic mobility.
- There is a deep, cultural myopia and unawareness about multigenerational Latinos that permeates the church at large, and it is due to the lack of having developed relationships with English-dominant Latinos and their communities. For the majority of Episcopalians, these LGLs are just part of the Latino Spanish-speaking world and are virtually invisible.
- And, foremost among the problems is the fact that the LGLs know very little about The Episcopal Church, or perceive it as a church being only for “white people.”

Daniel Rodriguez lays it out this way: “Even among native-born Latinos with high levels of assimilation and acculturation . . . often overlooked factors include the legacy and effects of discrimination and intercultural conflict, which help explain the hesitancy of native-born Latinos to embrace churches of the dominant group.”³ There are, of course, a small number of Anglo congregations that already incorporate LGLs into their worship settings, or have established some form of a relationship with a first-generation, Latino worshiping group. These exceptions are few and far in between. Regrettably, for the most part, LGLs are virtually in a “no-man’s land” situation, for neither the average Latino congregation or the Anglo congregation sees the LGLs as part of their evangelistic efforts.

Ironically, outside the church, 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-accultured Latinos/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. Hispanics accounted for 75% of all U.S. labor force growth between 2010

³ Rodriguez, *Future of the Latino Church*, 37.

and 2016, meaning their economic clout will grow exponentially as they enter their prime earning years. The relatively younger median age of U.S. Hispanics (27 versus 42 for non-Hispanic Whites) and longer life expectancy put a premium on their main acquisition years as they increasingly become a prime driving force in the U.S. economy for decades to come.⁴

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

The first inclination is to want to develop a prescriptive “how-to” set of guidelines and models to fashion an implementation plan for addressing this question. Needless to say, a “one-size fits all” approach is not possible, given that the 58 million Latinos in the United States come in an array of nationalities, races, cultures, languages, and ethnicities; are spread across different cultural regions of the country; and possess unique acculturation levels, language propensities, and immigration status. Nevertheless, the shift in Latino socio-demographics and cultural and language acculturation over the last sixty years now urgently calls for the development of a more inclusive and comprehensive Latino evangelism strategically designed to meet the religious/worshipping needs of *all* the US resident Latinos/as, whether they be Spanish speaking, English speaking, or in between. This urgency mandates an initial phase of identifying immediate priority actions and a strategy framework that can help guide the thinking and approaches that could be further developed on a macro and micro level. I have selected the title of this article, “Transcultural Latino Evangelism,” to be the working title for this broad strategy platform and evangelization plan that encompasses all Latinos/as, regardless of their generational status.

The first priority is to focus on the most glaring obstacle: the fact that there is a massive, gaping hole in the cultural awareness of The Episcopal Church at large about the cultural and sociodemographic makeup of the US Latino population as a whole. In addition, there is little understanding as to how reach out to this population composed of different generational and cultural

⁴ The Nielson Company, “Descubrimiento Digital: The Online Lives of Latinx Consumers,” Diverse Intelligence Series, Executive Summary, 2018, 3.

levels. For this reason, the Office of Latino/Hispanic Ministries in 2009 published *The Episcopal Church's Strategic Vision for Reaching Latino/Hispanics*, a publication that focused on what it called the "New Generation Latinos." More recently, this office has launched a series of Latino Ministry Competency training programs aimed at seminaries and diocesan staff to address this dearth of cultural awareness. However, it needs support to be able to cover all the different seminaries and dioceses, including technical support to generate written training materials, and financial support to enable the level of research that adds to the instructional quality demanded by this cultural competency training. Most needed is the means to take this training to the local congregational level as well, targeting the major metropolitan areas where most multigenerational Latinos are found.

Another major obstacle is the fact that Later-Generation Latinos are almost completely oblivious to the existence of The Episcopal Church as a church of choice. The reality is that even if The Episcopal Church could generate the most sophisticated evangelistic cultural-competence strategy to reach this population, if Latinos/as do not know about the Episcopal churches in their local area, particularly which churches are the more "Latino friendly," then it would be missing a critical part of the evangelism equation. What this tells us is that not only do we have to become more culturally aware and competent, but we also have to know the contextual social media approaches and message consumption patterns of these acculturated, English-prone Latinos in order to reach them. We have to borrow a page from the Latino-focused advertising industry, which has minutely dissected this Latinx population.

The second priority is to build on the existing foundation of the Latino ministry, which are the existing Latino congregations, particularly those emerging as transitional Latino congregations. These long-established congregations, which have an abundance of youth and young adults, are the pipeline for future Latino leaders. Strategically, we have to focus on youth leadership development for church ministry, either lay or ordained. Part of this leadership training—aimed at high school and college-level youth—might include a three-pronged strategy: developing a Latino cultural and language program that shores up the Latino culture; building upon the existing Christian formation and ministry discernment program, entitled "The Leadership Academy," carried out by the Office

of Latino and Hispanic Ministries; and supporting the needs of the parents of these youth by connecting them with educational programs dealing with English-language classes and other types of educational topics dealing with family life and negotiating school bureaucracies.

The third priority is to support those Anglo host congregations that have incorporated a Latino worshiping group or have established a bilingual pattern to their worshiping life. These congregations have the potential to evolve into intercultural congregations, which are the logical worshiping place for most multi-generational LGLs since their world is already multicultural, multi-racial, and bilingual. Their type of true bilingualism lends itself to developing a more authentic form of bilingual worship service. Part of this support entails bringing these Anglo host congregations into a more formal collegial group, which would provide a peer forum for the exchange and sharing of Latino ministry experiences as to what works and what does not.

The fourth priority is to identify local Anglo congregations that want to explore a more creative form of Latino ministry that is intentionally English based, and provide the training to enable these congregations to assess the feasibility of this form of Latino ministry. These congregations need guidelines and technical help for undertaking such an assessment process with the vision of bringing a multigenerational ministry into play.

The fifth, but not necessarily the last, priority is to institutionalize the concept of transcultural Latino evangelism in The Episcopal Church entities at the various levels, including the General Convention, the Church Center, and seminaries and dioceses. This starts with passing the appropriate resolutions at the General Convention to establish a budget that speaks to the rationale and urgency of implementing a more comprehensive and inclusive Latino form of evangelism, in addition to supporting the various forms of ongoing Latino ministries.