

A FIESTA IN THE LORD

— David Blanco —

It is evident that the growing Hispanic population in the United States presents awesome ministry opportunities. With these ministry opportunities come various challenges in reaching this emerging Hispanic population. Many factors affect reaching out to Hispanics in this country, among them are understanding and defining the Hispanic community; identifying contextual realities and presenting a relevant, Christ-centered and meaningful ministry within this contextual reality.

In attempting to minister to the emerging younger Hispanic generation, it is necessary to ask, “Who are they?” Over the decades various terms have been used to describe this group we call “Hispanics,” including Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, Spanish-speaking, Chicanos, and Latinos. While the majority of Hispanics are of Mexican descent (66.9%), others are from Central and Latin America, Cuba, and Puerto Rico. And then, there are Hispanics who do not come from anywhere else; they have been here for generations and generations. While it is commonly believed that Mexicans are here because they crossed the border, the reality is that for these Hispanics “the border crossed [them].”¹ In other words, it is not that so many Hispanics have migrated to this country, but that this country migrated to Hispanic lands.²

Statistics show that as of 2002, 34.4% of Hispanics were under the age of 18, while only 5.1% were age 65 and over. Furthermore, 33.2% of all Hispanics are between the ages of 25-44.³ So, this emerging Hispanic generation is indeed a “younger” group that demands a fresh look as to the way they are to be reached.

This younger Hispanic generation is a diverse group of Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Central/Latin Americans, and others. They hunger for interactive ministry where personal relationships lead to a growing, strengthening relationship with God and with others. As one professor once

said, “Not all Hispanics eat tacos, nor do they all like jalapeños.” This rather humorous statement reflects a reality among Hispanics. It is not simply “one size fits all.” There is a contextual element in reaching this young Hispanic generation. Addressing this diversity of culture among Hispanics is an issue churches must deal with as we contemplate ministry among the younger Hispanic generation.

There is another key issue to consider in how we do ministry among this younger Hispanic generation. In 2002, 40.2% of all Hispanics were foreign born, and a good number of this percentage are between the ages of 25-44. Therefore, a very sizable percentage of young Hispanics are first-generation Hispanics.⁴ And they may have significantly different needs, issues, and contextual realities than second or third-generation Hispanics.⁵

These differences range from cultural customs and language preference to socioeconomic and academic diversity. A first-generation Hispanic may prefer the Spanish language, but the second or third-generation Hispanic may have lost the Spanish language altogether. A first-generation Hispanic may have strong feelings about preserving native religious, cultural, or social customs, while a second, third, or fourth-generation Hispanic may or may not deem these things essential to his or her identity. When ministering to this younger generation of Hispanics, the church is challenged to wrestle with its ministry approach to such a diverse group of people.

For example, the Río Grande Conference of the United Methodist Church in Texas and New Mexico is made up of Hispanic churches that embody this diversity phenomenon. In Río Grande Conference churches, there are first, second, and third-generation Hispanics. While some of the younger generation may be bilingual, the majority of the youth are predominantly English speakers. On the other hand, our abuelos (grandparents) want to hear the Spanish language in the worship

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service and many first-generation Hispanics need to hear the message in Spanish. So, will they have a bilingual service requiring a bilingual pastor? Will they have two services, one in English and one in Spanish? Will the church target first-generation Hispanics, third-generation Hispanics, or both? These are some of the issues and challenges of diversity.

In ministering to an emerging young Hispanic generation, one should make use of a cultural asset that can enrich their Christian experience—the concepts of familia and fiesta. Generally speaking, Hispanic families are larger than the average American family. The familia experience is vital to the life of Hispanics. It is what shapes, forms, and gives meaning to our existence as persons. The idea of the extended familia is very much alive and well among Hispanics. The extended familia is made up of father, mother, children, their children, the abuelitos (grandparents) of the father and mother, plus tíos, primos, and compadres (uncles, aunts, and cousins).⁶ When Hispanics come together for a fiesta, it is understood that the extended familia is always welcomed. The church must create space for family gatherings/fellowship where a fiesta spirit can enrich the Christian experience.

Jesus told his disciples, “The harvest is so great, but the workers are so few. So pray to the Lord who is in charge of the harvest; ask him to send out more workers for his fields” (Matt. 9:37-38 NLT). The emerging young Hispanic generation is a great harvest in the making. Many have been reached, but many more have still to be touched with the love of God. The issues related to reaching the young Hispanic generation are not obstacles, but rather opportunities and challenges that can be

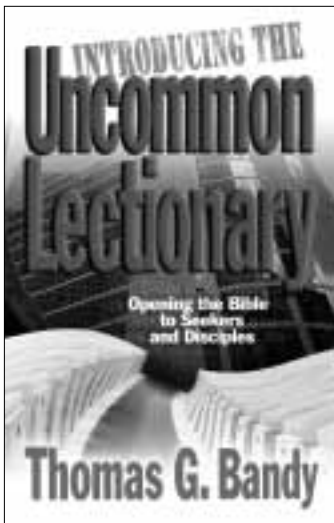
overcome to better present Christ in a transformative, enriching, relevant, and meaningful way. May God make us instruments in introducing them into God’s familia so that together we may enjoy a tremendous fiesta in the Lord!

1. Pedrito U. Maynard-Reid, *Diverse Worship: African-American, Caribbean and Hispanic Perspectives* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000).
2. Guston L. González, *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998).
3. Robert R. Ramírez and G. Patricia de la Cruz, *The Hispanic Population in the United States: March 2002, Current Population Reports, pp. 20-545*, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington D.C.
4. Ibid.
5. For more detailed information on the growing Hispanic population, a helpful website is www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hispanic.html
6. David Maldonado Jr., *Protestantes/Protestants: Hispanic Christianity within Mainline Traditions* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999) 241-2.



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