

STEPS TOWARD HOLISTIC “HISPANIC” MINISTRY

Notes assembled by Bob Young

[I am grateful to Dan Rodriguez of Pepperdine University. He has helped advance the conversation regarding effectively reaching out to the Spanish-speaking population that surrounds us. I was blessed to hear Dan's presentation and spend a little time with him at Global Mission Conference 2019 in mid-October. This article is in the form of notes – the notes I use when speaking about the need to develop holistic Hispanic ministries in our churches.]

If you have taken time to open this essay and begin reading, I presume you have some level of interest in Hispanic¹ ministry. Perhaps you are part of a “dominant group” church that is thinking about beginning such a ministry. Perhaps you are part of a “dominant group” church that is struggling with the inability of your present ministry to effectively reach Latinos. Perhaps you are reading because your heart is centered on sharing the gospel with everyone possible.

Hispanic ministry: whom are we talking about?

A first step is to agree on and understand the target group we are considering.

- Toward the end of 2017, 58 million Latinos represented 16% of the US population.²
- Of that 58 million, 63% are from Mexico
- 65.6% were born in the US
- 66% are white
- 68.4% are English-speaking (they speak English very well -- either totally bilingual or having a preference for English, although some are English-speaking only and do not speak Spanish)
- The importance of the previous bullet point should be emphasized – over 2/3 of Latinos speak English very well!

Equally important is knowing which generations you are dealing with – 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, or a combination of several generations.

- Many Hispanic families now have five generations of those who have lived in the US.
- The first generation is identified as the immigrant generation, those born in another country.
- Sometimes Latinos who were brought to the US as children are labeled the “1½” generation.
- The second and succeeding generations were born in the US.

Comparing the generations

- Research shows that the first (immigrant) generation is only 7% English-dominant, the second generation is 44% English-dominant, the third generation is 80% English-dominant.
- The first generation is 40% bilingual (speaking Spanish and English equally well), while the other 60% prefer Spanish (and some speak very little English).
- The second generation is 54% bilingual. The other 46% generally speak Spanish, although many can get by in English.
- The third generation is only 15% bilingual -- 85% are English-speaking only.
- To put these numbers in parallel form:
 - 1st generation, 60% speak mostly Spanish, 40% become bilingual, few prefer English.

¹ Following Dan Rodriguez, I will generally use the adjective “Hispanic” with reference to churches, ministries, or missions. I will use the word “Latino” to describe the people groups involved.

² You can access specific data about your own community from US Census statistics. Pew Research and the Barna Group are also good sources of demographic information.

- 2nd generation, 46% Spanish; 54% bilingual, the majority are as comfortable in English as in Spanish.
- 3rd generation, few are comfortable in Spanish, only 15% are bilingual, 85% prefer English, and many of these do not speak any Spanish.
- Latinos are a young population
 - While the average age of the white population is 42, the average age of the Latino population is 28.
 - The average age of Latinos born in the US is 19
 - 90% of those under 18 were born in the US
 - 75% of those under 30 were born in the US
 - If your Hispanic ministry is not populated by a healthy mixture of various generations, you are probably not reaching the Latino population. If your Hispanic ministry is not capable of meeting Latinos “where they are” in the Hispanic subculture, you are probably not reaching the Latino population.
 - In your experience and observation, how is your church doing in reaching the Latino population?

Anticipating the future

- By 2050 (within 30 years), the Hispanic population will be 111 million, about 28% of the US population. Some estimates are as high as one-third.
- The truth is that a majority of our churches are barely touching the Latino population around us
- What must we do to reach this exploding population?
- If we keep doing the same old thing, we can only expect to get the same results!

Understanding generational differences

- Language
- Language usage
- Place of birth
- Education
- Employment
- Marriage patterns
 - Second and subsequent generations have intermarried with non-Latinos
 - Ministry must address families in which one mate speaks no Spanish at all, and the children of such families seldom develop abilities in Spanish
- Level of assimilation and acculturation
- Vision of the USA
 - The immigrant generation is much like Jacob and his sons who went to Egypt to escape famine and difficulties, thus they see the US in parallel to Egypt.
 - The second and following generations are like the Israelites who grew up in Egypt, thus they see the US as the Promised Land.
- This list of eight generational differences is not complete. I have included a few examples of generational differences, but expanding each of these eight major points would make this essay too long.

Evaluating the status of our Hispanic ministries

The majority of Spanish or Hispanic ministries are focused on providing Bible study and worship opportunities in Spanish. These ministries have greatest appeal to first- or second-generation Latinos who speak Spanish very well.

- This option can accurately be called “the immigrant church” because it appeals to the early generations of Latinos. Generally, there is limited appeal to the second generation and virtually no appeal to subsequent generations.
- This option almost always fails completely to reach the 3rd generation of which only 15% speak Spanish.
- Churches interested in reaching Latinos much avoid “the immigrant church mentality”

We need a new kind of church if we are to effectively reach Latinos across the various generations.

- We must understand that we are trying to reach US-born Latinos for Christ
- We must understand that we are trying to reach English-speaking Latinos for Christ

HISPANIC MINISTRY IS NOT SPANISH-SPEAKING MINISTRY!!

Identifying the challenge

- When the “dominant group” church thinks of Hispanic ministry, almost always the first step is to identify and hire a Spanish-speaking minister.
 - This step usually results in hiring an “immigrant” minister because subsequent generations of Latinos in our society do not speak Spanish well, and they do not prefer to speak Spanish.
 - This step often results in hiring an “immigrant” minister who is imported from another country, giving an evangelist who has been an effective worker in his home country a “ticket” to the US.
 - The basic problem is that immigrant ministers do immigrant ministry.
- Hispanic ministry must become more holistic.
 - The second, third, and subsequent generations are too “American” to fit into immigrant churches
 - The second, third, and subsequent generations are too “Latino” to fit into English-speaking churches
 - Choices? English-dominant Latinos want something in the middle
 - Change our thinking: from immigrant ministry to ministry that can reach US-born Latinos
 - Change our thinking: from single generational to multi-generational
 - Change our thinking: from single ethnicity to multi-ethnic, with friendship patterns and family structures capable of serving people of various ethnicities

Alternatives

What alternatives are available to replace the single-language (Spanish), limited-generational model? I mention three ministry models that can serve as “steps” to move ministry toward God’s purpose to include all of the nations in Christ, in the church.

- Multi-lingual, multi-generational ministry that uses languages as necessary to bring generations of Latinos together, including a significant (but not exclusive) use of Spanish.
- English-speaking, multi-generational, a church with a Latino flavor, Spanish will be used but that use will be limited.

- English-speaking, multi-generational, multi-ethnic, capable of adopting its own mission to go “beyond the barrio” to build bridges, so that the multi-ethnic churches that result are genuine “mosaics.”

Challenges facing “dominant group” churches

- To understand the difference between being missional in our own backyard (which requires a high level of our involvement and interaction) and being mission-minded (which requires little or no continuing personal involvement)
- To understand the challenge of Hispanic ministry in the biblical context of passages such as Acts 6, Acts 15, et. al.
- To distinguish assimilation and accommodation
- To commit to doing missions right where you are, destroying the cultural preferences that are barriers to reaching the lost (whether own cultural preferences, or the cultural preferences of those we seek to reach with the gospel), to become all things to all people