

VOL. 1 • NO. 2 • WINTER 2010
**HISPANIC MINISTRY WHERE LANGUAGE IS NO BARRIER:
CHURCH GROWTH AMONG U.S.-BORN,
ENGLISH-DOMINANT LATINOS**

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abstract

During the past one hundred fifty years of mission and ministry among Latinos in the United States, most denominational and local church leaders have assumed a “Spanish-speaking immigrant-church model.” This model still dominates the landscape of Hispanic ministries among evangelicals in the United States. Unfortunately, this model is generally not successful when targeting U.S.-born English-dominant Latinos. This study explores how linguistic, cultural and social-economic factors have re-shaped ministry paradigms and practices in several churches across the country that traditionally targeted foreign-born Spanish-dominant Latinos but now *also* successfully target U.S.-born English-dominant Latinos.

During the past 150 years of mission and ministry among Latinos¹ in the United States, most denominational and local church leaders have assumed a “Spanish-speaking church model.” This model still dominates the landscape of Hispanic

¹ *Latino* and *Hispanic* will be used interchangeably throughout this study to refer to all individuals of Latin American ancestry who reside either legally or illegally within the borders of the United States of America.

ministries among evangelicals in the United States. Unfortunately, this model is generally not successful when targeting U.S.-born,² English-dominant Latinos.

This study explores how linguistic, cultural, and social-economic factors have reshaped ministry paradigms and practices in churches that traditionally targeted foreign-born, Spanish-dominant Latinos but now *also* successfully target U.S.-born, English-dominant Latinos. The remarkable success of these “multi-lingual” and “multi-generational churches”³ reveals that a commitment to serve, evangelize, and disciple U.S.-born Latinos obliges church leaders to embrace more contextually-appropriate ministry models for English-dominant Latinos who often feel out of place or even unwelcome in churches that are exclusively Spanish speaking, but who are also reluctant to assimilate into English-speaking dominant group churches. The article concludes by identifying strategic implications for church leaders committed to becoming all things to all Hispanics.

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the moment of transition

In Exodus 17:1–7, shortly after their deliverance from Egyptian bondage, the people tested the Lord, grumbling against His servant Moses because they had no water to drink. Moses is then instructed by the Lord, “Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink.” Numbers 20:1–13 describes a similar situation forty years later when a second generation of Israelites grumbles against Moses because there is no water to drink. Once more God instructs Moses to take his staff and leads him to a rock. However, this time the instructions are modified slightly. Instead of striking the rock, Moses is instructed to speak to the rock, which will then produce water to quench the people’s thirst. Unfortunately for Moses and the people, he fails to recognize what Dave Serrano, pastor at Thessalonica Christian Church in the South Bronx, calls “the moment of transition,” thereby losing his privilege to lead the people into the Promised Land.⁴ Moses may have been the first pastor to respond with the so-called seven last words of the church, “We’ve never done it like that before!”

It is the opinion of a growing number of Latino pastors that like Moses in Numbers 20, many of the older and often foreign-born leaders of Hispanic churches in the United States fail to recognize that their neighborhoods are in a

² *U.S.-born* and *native-born* Hispanic/Latino will be used synonymously in this study to refer to Hispanics who were born in the United States of America including second- and third-generation Latinos.

³ Reverend Samuel Rodriguez, President of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, prefers the term “trans-generational churches” to “multi-generational churches” because it implies the passing on of the faith from one generation to another as in the case of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and Lois, Eunice, and Timothy (Personal interview, July 2, 2008).

⁴ Dave Serrano, personal interview, May 21, 2008.

“moment of transition.” Older Hispanic *barrios* in cities like Los Angeles, San Antonio, Miami, New York, and Chicago, once dominated by first-generation, Spanish-speaking *mexicanos*, *cubanos*, and *puertorriqueños*, are now dominated by U.S.-born Mexicans, Cubans and Puerto Ricans. Even more significantly, a growing number of Latinos are not only English dominate, but they also do not speak Spanish at all. Furthermore, they often feel little or no allegiance to their ancestral homelands or to the cultural and religious commitments their parents or grandparents brought with them from Mexico, Cuba or Puerto Rico.⁵

a generation often overlooked

Many Americans, including many Hispanic church leaders, assume that the overwhelming majority of Hispanics in the U.S. are immigrants, for whom English is a second language and for whom American society and its core values are foreign. But according to the recent U.S. Census figures, sixty-one percent of the thirty-five million Hispanics counted in the 2000 census were born in the U.S.⁶ In 2005, a study published by the PEW Hispanic Center found that sixty percent of all Hispanics in the U.S. were native born. The same study revealed that sixty-one percent of all native-born Latinos were English dominate, and thirty-five percent were bilingual, while only four percent indicated that they were Spanish dominate.⁷ These findings were similar to those published in 2005 by a multicultural market research firm that found English is the undisputed language of preference among 1.5-generation⁸ and second-generation Latinos, becoming nearly absolute among third-generation Latinos.⁹

Unfortunately, the overwhelming majority of Hispanic ministries in the U.S. rely almost exclusively on Spanish, and therefore by default primarily target first-generation Latinos (i.e., immigrants). That leaves the majority of Hispanics in the United States off the evangelistic radar screens of most Great Commission churches. Like the Hellenized Jews described in Acts 6:1–4,¹⁰ U.S.-born,

⁵ The churches highlighted in this study primarily target Latinos of Mexican, Cuban, and Puerto Rican ancestry. Together these three sub-groups represent 79.1 percent of the Hispanic population in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, “The Hispanic Population in the United States, March 2000,” accessed on November 8, 2008 at <http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/hispanic/p20-535/p20-535.pdf>).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Pew Hispanic Center, “A Statistical Portrait of Hispanics at Mid-Decade,” accessed on May 30, 2008 at <http://Pewhispanic.org/reports/middecade/>.

⁸ The term *1.5 generation* refers to people who immigrate to a new country before their early teens.

⁹ New American Dimensions, “Made in America: Communicating with Young Latinos,” accessed on November 8, 2008 at <http://www.newamericandimensions.com/downloads/NADAcculturationStudy.pdf>.

¹⁰ Justo Gonzalez, *Santa Biblia: The Bible through Hispanic Eyes* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 82. According to Gonzalez, in the book of Acts, Hellenists are “Jews who were more at home in Hellenistic [Greek] culture and language than in Aramaic, and who therefore were regarded with askance by all ‘good Jews,’ no matter what class or social standing.”

English-dominate Latinos are being overlooked, at least insofar as most Spanish-only evangelical and Pentecostal churches are concerned. The present study addresses this problem, highlighting several churches that traditionally targeted Spanish-dominate, mostly foreign-born Latinos but now *also* successfully target U.S.-born, English-dominant Latinos. Several questions will be addressed in the case studies that follow. Why did these churches make the decision to begin programs, ministries, and services in English? What obstacles did leaders face at the beginning of this paradigm shift? Finally, what results have been observed in those churches that respond to the linguistic needs and cultural preferences of U.S.-born, English-dominate Latinos?

iglesia del redentor/church of the redeemer, baldwin park, california

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Established in 1961, Iglesia del Redentor was one of the first Spanish-speaking, evangelical churches in Southern California to transition to a multi-lingual, multi-generational model. The catalyst for change was founding pastor Aureliano Flores, who as early as 1962, began to sense “the moment of transition.” As his children began to grow and attend local public schools in Baldwin Park, Pastor Flores noticed a trend he had been observing in other Hispanic families—his children were becoming acculturated and assimilated into the dominant group, preferring to speak English instead of Spanish.¹¹ Later, as pre-teens and teenagers, the Flores children often preferred to visit the English-speaking churches of their school friends rather than attend their father’s church.

During this time Pastor Flores wrestled with the difficult options he faced. He could maintain the status quo and inevitably see his children leave for an English-speaking church. Worse still, he could watch them leave the church altogether, a common occurrence among children of other families in the congregation. On the other hand, he could make the necessary and painful changes to adapt his ministry to the linguistic and cultural preferences of his children and other U.S.-born Latinos. Torn between keeping his family together and maintaining the status quo, Pastor Flores sought the guidance of the Lord. According to Pastor Flores, the Lord reminded him, “I didn’t call you to preach the Gospel in English or Spanish. I called you to preach the Gospel.” So for the love of the Gospel and for the love of his family, he was compelled to change, resulting in a dynamic and thriving 500 member, multi-lingual church where three generations of the Flores family now

¹¹ Daniel R. Sanchez, *Hispanic Realities Impacting America: Implications for Evangelism & Missions* (Fort Worth, TX: Church Starting Network, 2006), 82–83. Sanchez highlights three important factors that contribute to assimilation among the children of immigrants: schooling, media, and peers.

serve the Lord together in a Hispanic church. This church offers worship services and Bible classes simultaneously in Spanish and English at different locations on their three acre urban campus.¹²

When asked what made the initial decision so difficult, Flores responded, “I knew that I would have to become proficient in both languages, and since I didn’t speak English very well, I would have to be humble, disciplined, and work very hard.” Pastor Flores’ decade-long commitment to become proficient in English was driven by his belief that jealousy and distrust were certain to plague a multi-lingual church if it became necessary for him to delegate responsibility for the English group to an assistant. Instead, he chose to make himself vulnerable, learning to laugh at himself whenever he made mistakes while preaching and teaching in English.

Today, Pastor Aureliano Flores is completely fluent in English and an inspiration to many other pastors, especially to his son Paul, who has served as associate pastor for more than ten years. When his father announced that he would be retiring in 2008, Paul was asked to assume the role of senior pastor. Anticipating his future role as senior pastor at Church of the Redeemer, Paul Flores has dedicated himself to become as proficient in Spanish as his father became in English. Like his father, Pastor Paul Flores is convinced that in order to maintain unity in a two-language church, there must be one vision, and it is the pastor’s duty to cast and nurture that vision, which he cannot do unless he is fluent in both English and Spanish.¹³ Like his father, Pastor Paul Flores now leads a multi-generational Hispanic church where language is no barrier.

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new life covenant ministries, chicago, illinois

Pastor Wilfredo de Jesus, a second-generation Puerto Rican, was born and raised in the Humboldt Park neighborhood of Chicago, where he grew up a Roman Catholic in a working class family with an alcoholic father. In 1977, at the age of fifteen, Wilfredo landed a summer job with the city of Chicago. To his surprise, Wilfredo was assigned to assist Templo Cristiano Palestina, a small Hispanic Pentecostal church offering a Vacation Bible School (VBS) for inner city kids. During the VBS, he was impressed by the commitment and passion of the church’s youth. Not long after that summer, Wilfredo gave his life to the Lord and began attending Palestina, where he soon became a lay youth leader. In 1988, Wilfredo married his high school sweetheart, Elizabeth Marrero, the pastor’s daughter.

¹² Aureliano Flores, personal interview, June 6, 2007.

¹³ Paul Flores, personal interview, June 6, 2007.

A year later, because of his commitment, charisma, and leadership skills, Wilfredo was invited to become the church's youth minister as well as the youth director for the Assemblies of God in the Midwest. In 1998, Pastor Ignacio Marrero announced his plans to retire in 2000. Wilfredo was asked by Pastor Marrero, the board of elders, and the congregation of approximately 125 members to assume the role of senior pastor upon his father-in-law's retirement. However, before Wilfredo would agree to serve as Palestina's new pastor, he proposed a fundamental shift in the church's traditional approach to ministry. He insisted that if the church was to reach and serve the community, it must immediately begin incorporating English in all its programs and services to meet the linguistic preferences of Latinos who love "*la comida criolla*" (Puerto Rican food) but prefer to speak English. Initial fears, resistance, and reluctance to agree with the proposed changes were mitigated by the trust and confidence earned by Pastor Wilfredo during twenty years of faithful and loyal service to the church and his mentor, Pastor Marrero.

The fears of older, Spanish-dominant members were addressed patiently, respectfully, and directly. According to Pastor Wilfredo, their biggest fear was that they would be pushed aside and inevitably be left behind by the younger, English-dominant majority. Wilfredo assured them that as their new pastor, he would continue to serve every member of the church, but that he had been called by God to serve the entire community of Humboldt Park, including people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Interestingly, all the board meetings where this historic change was being discussed were conducted in English, reflecting the dominance of the native-born members of the church.¹⁴ Not long after the historic change, the church was renamed "New Life Covenant Ministries," reflecting the goal and source of the church's new vision, "To be a Christ-like Congregation that transforms the community into a NEW LIFE."¹⁵

In 2008, New Life Covenant Ministries now averages over four thousand in attendance for its five services offered in the auditorium at Roberto Clemente High School in the heart of Humboldt Park. Four of the five weekend services are offered in English. However, even in the English language services, one can easily perceive the *boricuan*¹⁶ influence in the music, prayers, and preaching. The one Spanish service averages over 500 in attendance, far more than the 125 members who were attending the Spanish-only services of Palestina in 2000. Pastor Wilfredo preaches weekly at all five services, staying true to his commitment not to neglect

¹⁴ Wilfredo De Jesus, personal interview, May 23, 2008.

¹⁵ New Life Covenant Ministries, "Mission and Vision," accessed on May 16, 2008 at http://www.mynewlife.org/Content.aspx?content_id=9545&site_id=10087.

¹⁶ Puerto Ricans commonly refer to themselves as *Boricuas*.

the Spanish-speaking members of the church. Nevertheless, the demographic makeup of the church is slowly changing, reflecting the diverse community in Humboldt Park. Today, eighty percent of the membership at New Life Covenant is still Latino, the overwhelming majority of who are native born and English dominant. But non-Latino friends and spouses of members are also finding Christ at New Life Covenant, where language is no barrier.

la iglesia alpha y omega/alpha and omega church, miami, florida

Miami is a city of three million people, half of whom are Hispanic, and the majority of those are of Cuban ancestry. So it is not surprising that Miami is home to over three Hispanic churches, almost all of them exclusively Spanish speaking. Among the largest and most visible Hispanic churches in Miami is La Iglesia Alpha y Omega, led by founding pastor Alberto Delgado, a former refugee from Cuba, who launched the church in 1984 with just twenty people. Today, Alpha y Omega is a church of approximately four thousand members, eighty percent of whom are of Cuban ancestry. Many of these are immigrants like their pastor. Considered one of the most respected, dynamic, and successful Hispanic pastors in the U.S., Alberto Delgado surprised many in his church, when four years ago he reversed his long-standing conviction and announced that the church would expand and encourage the use of English, especially among the youth. He also announced plans to begin a worship service in English to meet the needs of U.S.-born members of the church and their non-Hispanic friends and spouses.

When asked what caused him to initiate the unprecedented changes in his ministry, Pastor Delgado recalled attending a three day conference for Hispanic pastors in Long Beach, California, hosted by the Alianza de Ministerios Evangélicos Nacionales (AMEN), a multi-denominational association of Hispanic Protestant leaders in the United States. Pastor Delgado was surprised and equally disturbed when the entire conference was conducted in English, in spite of the fact that virtually every one of the more than one thousand people present were Latino. Interacting with dozens of participants at the conference, he learned that many of the pastors served Hispanic churches where English was now the primary language used. Like many other pastors and denominational leaders who are highly critical of Latino pastors who use or encourage the use of English, Delgado initially concluded that the conference reflected the context of Mexican-American churches in Southern California rather than a national trend that would anytime soon impact Cuban-Americans and other Hispanics in South Florida.¹⁷

¹⁷ Alberto Delgado, personal interview, June 27, 2008.

Closer to home, another factor was to have a strategic impact upon Pastor Delgado's decision to transform Alpha y Omega into a multi-lingual church. He had recently become a grandfather and observed sadly that in spite of his life-long insistence that his children speak to him in Spanish, his U.S.-born adult children spoke to one another, their peers, and to his grandchildren in English only. To those who questioned his judgment, Delgado responded frankly, "If we do not adjust [our approach] we run the risk of losing our children and grandchildren to the world."¹⁸

196 After three years, the Sunday English service at Alpha y Omega draws a little more than three hundred people, but attendance is slowly climbing as members now recognize that they have a place to invite their English-dominant children and grandchildren as well as their non-Latino friends and neighbors. Pastor Delgado is confident that the attendance in the English service will rise dramatically in the coming years. The Friday night youth service now draws more than four hundred teens weekly to a service that freely uses "Spanglish" and incorporates rock and salsa music to communicate the gospel to English-dominant Hispanic youth "*con el sabor latino*" ("with a Latin flavor").¹⁹ To those who raise objections about the use of English and contemporary music in youth gatherings, Delgado responds insightfully, "The message is more important than the genre of music used to communicate it."²⁰

Reflecting on his observations in California, Pastor Delgado insists "*vamos a llegar a pasar lo mismo aqui*" ("We are going to experience the same thing [in Miami]"). His vision is to build a church where multiple generations of Latinos (English as well as Spanish speaking) and non-Latinos will *sentir en casa* ("feel at home"), a place where language is no barrier.²¹

the rejected generation

Lay leaders and young Latino pastors including Dave Serrano in the South Bronx look at the examples of churches described in this study with hopes that other Hispanic churches including his own will respond in similar ways to the needs of younger U.S.-born Latinos like himself. However, he still imagines that most U.S.-born Latinos will find traditional Hispanic churches dominated by immigrants

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Manuel Ortiz, *Hispanic Challenge: Opportunities Confronting the Church* (Dowers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 62. Ortiz defines *Spanglish* as a new functional language that incorporates both Spanish and English by juxtaposing Spanish grammatical structure on English-based words, thereby permitting U.S.-born Latinos to develop an identity unique from those of their parents or the dominant group.

²⁰ Delgado, op. cit.

²¹ Ibid.

from Puerto Rico, Cuba, or Mexico who are often more concerned with preserving their language and cultural heritage, than with embracing the younger, native-born Latinos.²²

Daniel de Leon, senior pastor at Templo Calvario in Santa Ana, California, one of the largest multi-lingual Hispanic churches in the country, observes that the barrier between immigrants and native-born Hispanics is widened further when second-and third-generation Latinos experience rejection at the hands of immigrants who criticize them for not speaking Spanish or for speaking it poorly.²³ Consequently, native-born Latinos do not usually respond favorably to the evangelistic efforts of Spanish-speaking immigrant churches where ethnicity is most often determined by language use alone.

Equally surprising to many outside observers is the fact that traditionally white, English-dominant churches have also failed to attract the growing number of U.S.-born Hispanics. Though they usually prefer to speak English and have an affinity for things “American,” many second-and later-generation Hispanics nonetheless “perceive” that they are treated as second-class citizens in the country of their birth and often treated as “outsiders” in the churches of the dominate group. Unfortunately, many church leaders fail to recognize that even though the linguistic and cultural distance between U.S.-born Hispanics and the dominate group has been minimized due to a preference for English and higher levels of acculturation, the legacy of 150 years of cultural conflict, marginalization, and discrimination has not only alienated many U.S.-born Hispanics from many institutions of the dominate group, including the church, they have also reinforced ethnic identity.²⁴

Father Virgilio Elizondo, one of the most influential Hispanic Roman Catholic theologians of the past twenty-five years has summarized the shared legacy of U.S.-born Latinos: “We have always been treated as foreigners in our own countryside—exiles who never left home.”²⁵ Justo Gonzalez, a leading Hispanic Protestant theologian has noted that in spite of the fact that sixty percent of all Latinos are American citizens by birth, native-born Latinos are nonetheless “made to feel as if they are newcomers.”²⁶ This makes the burden of change in the

²² Serrano, op. cit.

²³ Daniel de Leon, personal interview, March 22, 2007.

²⁴ Carlos H. Arce, “A Reconsideration of Chicano Culture and Identity,” *Daedulus* 110 (1981):171–191. Arce discovered several factors that reinforce Hispanic identity among U.S.-born Latinos, including continued immigration from Latin America, the strength of familial ties, and discriminatory treatment in the U.S. The latter factor, discrimination, generates intensive intra-group reliance and interaction and inhibits socio-cultural contact with non-Latino-descent populations, and thereby has the inadvertent effect of reinforcing Latino ethnic identity.

²⁵ Virgilio P. Elizondo, “Mestizaje as a Locus of Theological Reflection,” in Arturo J. Bañuelas, editor, *Mestizo Christianity: Theology from a Latino Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), 9.

²⁶ Justo Gonzalez, *Santa Biblia: The Bible through Hispanic Eyes* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 93.

traditional Hispanic church all the more essential, because as Gonzalez has observed, “The church is part of the gospel itself. The gospel, the good news, is not only that our sins are forgiven and we are reconciled with God; it is also that we are *citizens* and *family* with the saints and with God! It is in the church that we experience that.”²⁷

becoming all things to all latinos

We began this study by noting the failure of Moses to recognize “the moment of transition.” Similarly, many leaders of Hispanic churches fail to recognize and adjust to the dynamic changes taking place in the barrio, where in many cities the majority of Latinos are now U.S. born and English dominant. In this new environment, the apostle Paul’s example is instructive.

198 In 1 Corinthians 9:19–23, the apostle Paul defends himself against accusations that he lacks integrity, acting one way and teaching one version of the gospel when in the company of Jews, but acting another way and preaching what appeared to be a different gospel when among Gentiles. To this mistaken understanding of his character, intentions, and message, Paul informs his critics that he is actually motivated by a desire to win more people to Christ, whether Jews or Greeks. He insists, “I do this all for the sake of the Gospel” (v. 23). Similarly, the actions and motives of the pastors described in this study have been questioned and second guessed by their critics. What did motivate the pastors and churches highlighted in this study to break from the status quo?

factors which influenced the transition

The pastors and churches highlighted in this study were influenced by multiple factors to begin programs and services in English. Most were motivated by a desire to keep Hispanic families (including their own) together under one spiritual roof. They were also motivated by a commitment to provide for the spiritual well being and development of the English-dominant youth and young adults rather than a desire to preserve Hispanic culture or fluency in Spanish. Each pastor was also motivated by a desire to grow, which each church did almost immediately, some remarkably.

Dr. Isaac Canales, senior pastor at Mission Ebenezer Family Church in Carson, California, identified additional factors not mentioned by the pastors in this study, including a desire to broaden the economic base of the congregation.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 109.

According to Pastor Canales, “You cannot build a great or financially independent church on the back of immigrants.” He insists that Hispanic leaders, who desire to be free of denominational control or the control of a sponsoring church, must reach out strategically to the upwardly mobile native-born Latinos.²⁸

objections that must be overcome

To those who were trying to pressure and manipulate the apostle Paul to conform to their cultural and theological preferences, Paul responds, “I am free and belong to no man,” yet for the cause of Christ “I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible” (1 Cor. 9:19). In *Hispanic Realities Impacting America: Implications for Evangelism & Missions* (2006), Daniel Sanchez has observed that in a similar manner many immigrant parents pressure their pastors to help them “preserve the Hispanic language and culture.”²⁹ In response to the pressure to assume tasks not given to the church, these case studies reveal bold, courageous leadership that is not afraid to upset a few to save many more. Frustrated and anxious immigrants often counter their determined pastors with, “We’ve never done it that way before!” In response to this objection, pastors try to help reluctant members recognize that they are often more concerned with conserving their ancestral culture and language than for the spiritual welfare of their children and grandchildren.

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Unconvinced, many members object to separate English services, insisting that “it will separate our families.” This is precisely what happened in 2002 when Victor Rodriguez, senior pastor at South San Filadefia Church in San Antonio, Texas, announced plans to abandon the church’s bilingual model and begin offering two services, one in Spanish and another in English. Rodriguez was convinced that the 150-member church was limiting its growth with bilingual services. In 2008, the 900-member South San Filadefia Church is one of the fastest-growing churches in the Baptist General Convention of Texas. Many of its new members are the children and grandchildren of the older immigrant generation.³⁰

Still others objected that promoting the use of English would open the door for Satan to enter via the decadent culture of the dominant group. Pastor Canales recalls hearing members object, “*El diablo habla ingles*” (“The devil speaks English”),³¹ revealing the sense of “cultural superiority” endemic among many traditional and conservative first-generation Hispanics. In *Hispanic Challenge:*

²⁸ Isaac Canales, personal interview, March 15, 2007.

²⁹ Sanchez, *Hispanic Realities Impacting America*, 85.

³⁰ Victor Rodriguez, personal interview, July 27, 2008.

³¹ *Ibid.*

Opportunities Confronting the Church (1993), Manuel Ortiz noted that the Latino ethnocentrism described by Pastor Canales brings with it an anti-American bias that inadvertently reinforces “the paradox of living in two hostile worlds.”³²

Many pastors also had to address Spanish-speaking members’ prejudices against native-born, English-speaking Hispanics. According to Ortiz, “Linguistic realities should never be used to exclude, remove, or alienate others, especially those of similar cultural roots. Only when we begin to accept others, listen, and learn from them with great interest and allow ourselves to enter into each other’s world will we be able to reverse the language limitations of the second and third generations.”³³

obstacles that must be overcome

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Once they determined that the transition to a multi-lingual, multi-generational model was God’s will for their ministries, pastors faced additional challenges. First, they had to face the reality that some of those who disagreed with their decision would leave the church. Second, Spanish-dominant pastors confessed that they were initially afraid of the hard work and humility required to learn to preach and teach equally well in English.

Still more challenging for many first-generation pastors was the need to recognize that the differences and barriers between English and Spanish-speaking Latinos is not just linguistic, but also cultural, requiring them to make adjustments in the music and style of preaching they were accustomed to using with first-generation Hispanics. During his teen and young adult years at Primitive Christian Church on the lower East Side of Manhattan, Pastor Marc Rivera recalls watching many young Latinos leave the church not so much because of the exclusive use of Spanish, but because they were turned off by the indefensible legalism and traditionalism that still characterizes many Hispanic Pentecostal churches.³⁴ Pastors and churches like those highlighted in this study revisited their historic stances on a multiplicity of subjects, including the prohibition against women wearing pants to church. Each ultimately made the bold and strategic decision to no longer bind culturally-informed traditions and prohibitions on its members and guests.

As he reflected on the arduous task of accommodating his ministry and message to different audiences, the apostle Paul reminds his readers that it was

³² Ortiz, *Hispanic Challenge*, 63.

³³ *Ibid.*, 87.

³⁴ Marc Rivera, personal interview, May 20, 2008.

worth the effort. “I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some” (1 Cor. 9:22). The profiles of the leaders described in this study reveal that it takes not just hard work, sensitivity, and flexibility to become all things to all Latinos, it takes courage, patience, and determination to meet the inevitable criticism from those who prefer that things stay as they are, even at the expense of their children’s and grandchildren’s spiritual welfare. Here again the example of the apostle Paul is instructive. He reminds his critics that his *modus operandi* may not win him their approval, but it will help him to share in the blessings of bringing more people to Christ (1 Cor. 9:23). Similarly, the pastors and churches highlighted in these case studies long ago gave up trying to impress their peers or denomination leaders. Their satisfaction appears to come from pleasing God, even if it means challenging their culture’s “norms of acceptability” (Luke 14:15–24; 15:1–2), for the sake of becoming all things to all Latinos in churches where language is no barrier.

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