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Leading Ideas

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Latino/a Ministry in the United States by Lovett H. Weems, Jr.

The growing Latino and Latina population in the United States is transforming the religious landscape in ways that will shape virtually all Christian traditions as this century unfolds. These communities, characterized by a shared language and culture, are not new to the country or to its religious life. The difference today is the size and growth of the Latino/a community.

Juan Francisco Martínez has written a book that should inform all congregational and denominational leaders who have a heart for the newcomer in our midst. *Walk with the People: Latino Ministry in the United States* (Abingdon Press, 2008, also available from Abingdon in a Spanish edition) gives a perspective on the past, the present realities, and lessons for planning for the future.

Those who do not come out of the Latino/a community need a book like this to orient them to basic social, cultural, and religious realities that must inform any new ministries. The profound diversity of the Latino/a people in the United States is one of those realities. There are no one-size-fits-all answers. But there are general principles and understandings that make mutual ministry more likely to occur.

Observations about Latino/a Church Life

The strong Catholic tradition of Latinos and Latinas is well known, especially among those with a Mexican heritage. One-third of U.S. Catholics today have a Spanish-speaking heritage. There is also something of a generational movement toward Protestantism—with those who have been in the U.S. for three or four generations more likely to be Protestant.

Today virtually every denomination in the U.S. has an outreach to the Latino/a community. Some of these have long traditions, and others only began recently. In addition, there are churches with no affiliation to U.S. denominations. These congregations, often Pentecostal, represent some of the greatest non-Catholic growth.

While the number of Latinos and Latinas attending predominantly majority population churches is growing, the largest number by far worship in churches rooted in their own language and culture. A Pew study found that most of these churches have three characteristics: services in Spanish, Latino/a pastors, and a strong Latino/a presence among its members. But keep in mind that most of the churches are multicultural in that they reflect the many differences among Latino/a people in the U.S.

The Protestant Latino/a congregations mirror other such congregations in the U.S. in terms of their small size, usually with fewer than 100 members. (The median worship attendance for all United Methodist churches in 2007 was 50, and for Episcopal churches it was 69). But there are also differences. Their constituencies are often much newer residents and sometimes transient. Various models of ministry have emerged such as multiple churches working together, sharing space with other congregations, and working with congregations in transition.

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The most dominant characteristic of Latino/a churches is that they are growing. Not all traditions are growing, but the religious witness of this community is very much alive.

Strengths and Challenges of the Latino/a Church

It is a mistake for those outside the Latino/a community to ignore the tremendous strengths these Christians bring to any church. They exhibit a high level of religious commitment with what Martínez calls a “live faith in God.” Latino/a congregations have shown a close identification with and service to their communities, great flexibility in adjusting to new realities, a willingness to work very hard, strong family ties, strong mission outreach, and a lively sense of God’s presence in their worship.

In the midst of their great strengths, there are also great challenges. The Latino/a experience in their communities and within U.S. denominations has been on the peripheries. They also have to find ways to function with limited financial resources requiring many of their clergy to serve bi-vocationally.

What Does This Mean for the Future?

Churches seeking to support outreach to the Latino/a communities need to understand that previous models based on a “deficiency” mindset are not helpful. While the Latino/a communities often do have great needs, they also bring tremendous resources that call for more mutuality and partnership than is often practiced.

Martínez challenges majority population churches to get clear on some basic assumptions, especially about what their vision for ministry is and what “success” means. For example, a growing number of Latino/a congregations are self-sustaining. However, if self-sustaining is defined using denominational assumptions designed more for majority population congregations, such a goal may be beyond their reach. Thriving Latino/a congregations are more likely to resemble Latino/a congregations across denominational lines than some other churches in their own denominations. Latino/a churches must have the opportunity to develop in ways consistent with their circumstances and culture to be viable.

The Martínez book helps those new to Latino/a ministry to understand the phases that congregations and denominations have tended to go through in their relationship with Latino/a Christians in the U.S. This should help prevent the perpetuation of some unhelpful and insensitive practices and show where there can be positive engagement across cultural and ethnic boundaries for more faithful and fruitful ministry in the name of Christ.

Walk with the People: Latino Ministry in the United States can be purchased online from Amazon or Cokesbury.

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