
Immigrant Clergy in the Promised Land

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This article is based on an ethnographic study of a new wave of missionaries doing cross-cultural work in the United States without the preparation, orientation, or support systems available to most Western missionaries who go overseas. Some of these missionaries experience intense personal turmoil in the immigration process. This significantly affects their ability to do ministry. The study finds that immigrant pastors pay a heavy personal price for the "blessing" of coming to America. The final section begins a dialogue on how this challenge can be addressed.

El impacto de inmigrar para ministrar en esta cultura nos afectó en sentido social, cultural, familiar, ministerial, económico, y educacional.

The impact of immigrating in order to minister in this culture affected us socially, culturally, in terms of the family, the ministry, economically, and educationally.

These words were spoken slowly and with authority by Rev. Castillo.¹ He and his family had been brought from a Latin American country to the United States by their denomination to plant a Spanish-speaking church. His statement encapsulates the feeling of all the pastors who participated in the study about the impact that moving to the United States had on themselves and their families.

The participants in the study were nine pastors from Latin America who, with their families, were transferred by a denomination for the purpose of pastoring or church planting among Latinos in the United States.² It excluded clergy couples who immigrated to America on their own and, after settling here, either attempted to start a church or were hired by a local congregation.³ The qualitative study was conducted over a period of two years.

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The article calls attention to the major personal turmoil experienced by each of these pastors during their first few years in the United States. This, in turn, greatly affected their ability to do the ministry for which they had come. The internal sense of chaos was caused by loss of status, stigmatization, and role confusion. This led to feelings of hopelessness, loss, confusion, distrust, and guilt. Many of these jolts are what any professional from a hierarchical, non-English speaking culture would feel. This is one of the first studies to apply this general finding to pastors. The article concludes by offering positive suggestions and ideas on how to diminish the negative impact and to increase the fruit from the ministry of immigrant pastors. The results of this study have direct implications for global missions.

The ministers who participated in this study are not isolated examples. Existing Spanish-speaking immigrant communities continue to grow in numbers, and new ones spring up even in unexpected parts of the country. In response, some denominations with strong ministry in Latin America import indigenous personnel to come to the United States to help reach the Spanish-language population here. In some denominations, this is a widespread phenomenon. Others do this only occasionally.

This study has particular relevance for agencies or denominations that invite indigenous pastors to come to this country as a strategy to minister to ethnic communities in the United States. The study also has relevance for the American church in general. The church has a spiritual responsibility to reach the large ethnic populations already here, as well as those likely to immigrate in the future. Through ministry in American ethnic communities, local congregations in the United States have the possibility of beginning or expanding their global mission. For that reason, this study is also relevant to many American congregations, denominations, or parachurch agencies in their global mission planning and strategizing. Similar circumstances are found in other countries; therefore, the conclusions of this study may be applicable to a variety of other contexts overseas.⁴

The United States Census Bureau estimates that there are now 31.5 million Hispanics in the United States (1999). Latinos will very soon comprise the largest minority population in the United States. Already the United States is the fifth largest Spanish-speaking country in the world.⁵ Nearly one of every four Americans will be Hispanic by the year 2050 (Robinson 1998:27). The largest number of Latin Americans in the United States live on the East and West Coasts, in the Southwest, and in Illinois, but a fast growing Spanish-speaking presence is spreading into smaller cities and rural areas throughout the entire country.

This burgeoning Latino population in the United States can create the impression that Hispanics form one monolithic cultural group. However, this is not the case. The failure to recognize the multicultural diversity within this population group in the United States has significant missiological implications.

Latinos in the United States include Spanish speakers from every culture in the Spanish-speaking world, as well as from every point in a very wide spectrum of people from those countries. The variety of ways of referring to these people partially reflects that diversity. The labels Latino/Latina, Hispanic, Hispanos, Latin American, and Spanish-speaking have geographic, political, historic, and economic implications (Shorris 1992: xvi). I have chosen to use Latino/Latina because these words have gender, which is characteristic of the Spanish language.

Not only is the Latino population in the United States highly multicultural with-

in itself, but immigrants are also at different stages in their adaptation to and assimilation into the new country. These differences also require missiological adjustments.

Some Latinos feel uncomfortable outside their own ethnic circles. They do not speak English and, for a variety of reasons, tend to adopt very selectively anything in their new country that is different from the way of life in their country of origin. When these people attend church, they look to it as a citadel and to their pastor as a primary agent to help them preserve their culture and to resist Americanization.

Other Latinos have mixed cultural affinities. They feel generally comfortable in their own culture and also in the larger American cultural context. But in the process of going back and forth between two languages and cultures, these "cultural migrants" find that they are not completely accepted or fully comfortable in either. They are part of a third culture that has emerged in their new country and feel at ease only among similar Latinos. They need their pastor to help them find their level of comfort, and they expect the church to be an ethnically and culturally safe place.

Still other Latinos prefer the American way of doing things. They have no intention of returning to their native country and are willing to abandon their national culture (Shorris 1992:130). They want to belong in their new country. However, since many do not feel accepted in "American" churches, they look to the ethnic church for their spiritual needs.

There are some people who also identify themselves as Latinos who have lived on this land since before it was America. Latinos are segmented, thus, by national origin and by degree of adaptation or assimilation. Because the Latino population in the United States is so diverse, ministry among Latinos here must cross cultural boundaries even if all groups speak Spanish.

Many denominations desiring to reach Latinos in the United States bring pastors from Latin America to start or to pastor existing churches here, but often do so without understanding that this new wave of missionaries must do cross-cultural ministry. The multicultural setting requires them to think and to act like missionaries without the preparation, orientation, or support systems available to most Western missionaries ministering overseas.

Missions literature includes many studies of culture shock experienced by missionaries going from Western countries to minister overseas. This new wave of missionaries moving to minister among Latinos in the United States faces some similar challenges and many unexamined challenges as well. Observing this occurrence in a variety of areas in the United States led me to do an ethnographic investigation as to how this new wave of missionaries interprets their immigrant experience and how their immigration experience affects their ability to fulfill their calling. This article is a product of that study.⁶

The pastors who participated in this study dealt with the tension and the pain experienced in a variety of ways: emotional detachment, nostalgia, or a negotiated adaptation. How they responded had a significant effect on their ministry and on their ability to achieve what they had come to do.

Experiencing a Loss of Status

All the pastors in the study spoke about their loss of ministerial status, perceived as a non-recoverable loss as long as they remain in this country. "A Hispanic like me," said Pastor Hablante, "will never be elected in this country to the positions of church

leadership I had before coming here.”

Another participant said, “In this country, I will never become a [denominational leader].” Even though they used a language of status, their concern seemed to be more related to their ability to express fully their God-given giftedness in leadership.

The depth of this loss came as a realization, said Rev. Urenia, that they must start *a complete rebuilding of a name, a reputation, a testimony, a work, a fame. And I always [have] to prove, even to other ministerial colleagues, that I didn't come here for economic reasons, to find money.* The breadth of this loss of status was felt in several areas.

Their relationships with Anglo leaders and the denominations that hired them emphasized their lowered status. Several of the pastors who participated in the study, all of whom are monolingual or had very limited English skills, spoke of misunderstandings with denominational supervisors, all of whom were Anglos who spoke no Spanish. In each case, the specific disagreement over a particular issue was overshadowed by philosophical and cultural differences in the way each of them approached the conflict. Time and again the pastors remembered circumstances when not only had a conflict not been resolved, but also they had left a superior's office feeling offended and humiliated as Latinos. The types of issues over which there were conflicts included the handling of finances, strategy development, and criterion for measuring progress.

I would be willing to bet that they would not do that to an [American]. . . . If they did that to an [American], probably he would take some sort of action and would say, "I'm leaving the conference." Or he would write letters and somehow call attention to the unfairness of the situation. But here I am, a little Hispano man, and the attitude toward me seems to be that they will do whatever they please. And if I don't like it, I can go back to where I came from. That hurts.

Tensions also develop when previous relationships with important denominational leaders inexplicably fade. Many of the Latino pastors had previously worked with people of international influence in their denomination when those people had visited their countries for church functions. In just about every case, when the clergyman first arrived in the United States, some of these influential leaders initiated contact with them, showing a personal interest and welcoming them and their families to the country. However, after the initial courtesy call, hopes for a collegial relationship in every case did not materialize. Almost every immigrant pastor lamented, *“and he never called me again.”*

Their loss of status was further underscored by the devaluation of the title “Reverend” in the United States and the associated de-professionalization of their calling. The immigrant pastors had followed the process required by their denominations as a prerequisite for ordination. Only after meeting specific requirements, resulting in an ordination ceremony representing the affirmation of the church on their calling could they use the title “Reverend.” In contrast,

*Here in the United States, anyone can hang a shingle that says, “I am a Reverend.” Many people do that in the Latino communities. You may be barely literate, but you can start calling yourself Reverend. This affects the way insiders **and** outsiders see all of us.*

These pastors felt that the United States Latino population that they were trying to reach could not appreciate the many years of study, preparation, and private as well as public affirmation by the church leading to their ordination. They felt devalued by that.

Often circumstances and denominational policies thrust these highly trained professional pastors into a bivocational mode. This further diminished their sense of status. For example, most denominations offer salary supplements for a new pastor. But in the case of each of the groups the immigrant pastors belong to, this subsidy does not exceed four years. When that time expires, the local church is responsible for the pastor's total salary. Since Latino churches are usually located in poorer neighborhoods in large urban areas, often a Spanish-language church cannot afford to pay a pastor a salary that will allow that person to support a family, even if the spouse is also employed. When the local church cannot afford that, the pastor is expected to find secondary employment.

By their own admission, this had been communicated to the immigrating pastors both before and since their arrival in the country. However, when the denominational grant was about to be discontinued and they were informed of the need to find secondary means of support, to a person, they were angry and felt betrayed by the people who had courted and invited them to immigrate to the United States.

I was told that if, in three years, this church is not self-supporting, then I will have to become a bivocational pastor. That's the rule. A rule that I reject. It was very hard for me to even hear these words being said to me. I am very sorry. I will absolutely not do that. Under no circumstances will I become a bivocational pastor. I do not ever want to be separated from the ministry.

With a great deal of anger in his voice, still another pastor explained,

On one occasion, [my denominational leaders] sent me a letter telling me that I needed to find a part-time job. I answered them that I did not come to this country to work part-time. If I had wanted to work secularly here, I would have done it. But that's not what I came here for.

It was not just the pastors who felt this way. A wife explained why she did not want her husband to become a bivocational pastor,

One of the things that really makes me very sad is that [my husband] now has to look for a job, a paying job, a secular job outside of the ministry. [It] saddens me, because it is a job that in two or three years is going to place him in a very strong position. And that in itself makes me sad, because I know that [my husband] is going to be very successful. And once that happens, that is going to be a temptation for him away from the ministry. He has a lot of abilities for business.

Several of the immigrant pastors had taught either in church schools or *seminarios* in their home countries. None of them, however, regarded such side employment as making them bivocational. They all saw those involvements as income-producing extensions of their ministry.

Even if they had wanted similar types of secondary employment, they would not

have been available to them in this country. The language barriers (most of the clergy who participated in this study are not fluent in English) and teaching degree requirements render them ineligible to teach here. In the United States, the option left for most of them is manual work—often at a factory. The matter of bivocationalism ultimately became a demeaning factor affecting issues of prestige and class, identity and self-worth. That explains their unequivocal rejection of bivocationalism as a positive option for them.

Loss of Status through Stigmatization

Correlated to the problem of the loss of status is the process of stigmatization that intensifies the sense of that loss. Erving Goffman, in his classic, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963), discusses the situation of people who do not conform to the notion of societal “ideals.” According to Goffman’s theory at the time of his writing, the “ideal” or the “normal” in American culture was a white Protestant male, five feet nine inches tall, who liked sports. Those who do not fit the ideal join the ranks of the “stigmatized.” The degree of stigmatization is in proportion to the divergence between the ideal and the reality.

With the exception of the men from Mexico, the pastors who participated in this study claimed to have left behind a society that regarded clergy as the “ideal.” Latin American mothers, explained the pastors, dream of giving birth to sons who will grow up to become priests. The ideal transfers to the Protestant context, with the model son becoming a member of the clergy. According to the Mexican participants, to a much lesser extent this is also true in Mexico.

The pastors in this study had achieved an identity as members of an important group in their countries of origin, not necessarily in terms of the size of the group, but in terms of prominence and prestige. In their journey to the United States, they left behind the favored status of clergy. When they arrived, they joined the ranks of the “stigmatized” at many different levels.

For example, several of the pastoral couples were making the decision to immigrate at the time that California Proposition 187, an anti-immigration initiative, was being proposed and debated. The international media allowed them to be well-informed about the developments associated with Proposition 187.

Some other things were running through my mind about that time. People coming from the United States would tell me about the issue of the language here. And my wife used to say to me, “What about the language? We don’t speak English.” That was exactly during the year when Governor Wilson . . . was having all those very public discussions about his views on immigration from Mexico with Proposition 187. My wife used to be worried about that, and she used to tell me, “Listen to this. Watch the news. Do you realize what is happening in the United States right now?”

When they first arrived, the political climate in the country made them feel stigmatized. But still there was the ethnic community where they thought they could be “normal.”

On arrival, however, they realized that they had joined the ranks of the stigmatized even within their ethnic communities. They were the latest immigrants arriving. For reasons beyond their control, they were living in crowded neighborhoods of peo-

ple who largely saw them as “intruders who had come to join the struggle for a piece of the American pie.”

All of the pastors arrived with just a few suitcases holding their earthly belongings. They had either sold or given away most of their possessions.

I had probably 20 suits, and from 20 suits that I had back home, I arrived in the United States, where there are so much riches, and I have two . . . because, thinking that suits . . . grew on trees here in the United States, I gave them all away before I arrived here.

Their “poverty status” on arrival tended to reinforce their “intruder” role and further stigmatized them.

Still they hoped they could be “normal” through their role as religious leaders. Their spiritual knowledge and authority had characterized them as esteemed and distinguished in the eyes of the public in their home countries. But they did not experience this to be so in the United States. People in the United States did not necessarily believe that because they were members of the clergy, they knew more or knew better. One of the wives talked about a series of incidents with a church person who “did not know how to show respect” to her husband as pastor:

Here my husband even had to go to that church member and say, “At least, if you do not respect me as a pastor, you need to respect me as a man.” You know, when a person gets to a point like that, it’s because things are bad.

And so the stigmatization continued.

Especially among those who had immigrated here much earlier, there were many people who did not see the pastors as experts on morality or judges of goodness and sin in everyday life (Kleinman 1984:1). Their professional expertise had been demystified. They were not “normal” there either.

The pastors in this study felt still an additional stigmatization at the hand of the members of their church who had immigrated earlier. Many of them spoke more English, knew their way around in this country, and some considered themselves experts on all cross-cultural concerns. As a result, they sometimes treated their pastor as a child who needed to be told how things are done in America. This was vastly more painful and increased their feelings of stigmatization when it happened in front of their children. This, they were sure, would have never have happened “back home.”

As Wentworth and Anderson explain in their study on sex roles (1984:513-524), high status individuals are accepted as leaders and models, and low status people are devalued and ignored. The immigrant pastors used to be high status people. They no longer are. And people around them respond on such a basis (Brown 1991:33-50); thus, the pain associated with the parishioner’s question, “Pastor, since you do not work, could you take me to welfare?”

Clearly none of these pastors was prepared for the loss of status attendant with the transition from pastoral ministry in their home country to ministry among Latinos in the United States. People familiar with being in the cultural “center” find it difficult to be shoved to the margins.

Role Confusion

In *Stigma* (1963) Goffman poses the notion that people in power are the ones who define “normality.” The clergymen who participated in this study had been the people “in power” before their immigration. Now, those who are in power, along with a powerful American cultural context, seem to have defined normality in ways that exclude them. These men all came from backgrounds with clearly defined, strict roles. This included a division of labor in the home and a hierarchy in the church. They had never needed their wives to inform angry parishioners what was the proper way to disagree with a pastor and what church business was or was not appropriate to discuss in front of the children.

Further, once in the United States, assigned roles at home were not as distinct. Most of the pastors work out of home offices. That creates home-related expectations and assigned roles that did not exist in their pre-immigration lives. Another wife says,

He is able to spend more time with the children—for instance, sometimes when they are doing their homework. Also, many times, he is home when they get home. I mean he is not home—he is at his office at home—but, of course, he can keep an eye on them.

Her explanation of her husband’s home arrangement (he is home, although he is not really home) illustrated yet one more area of ambiguity and confusion in their lives.

Response to the Tensions

“Personality and identity,” writes P. Brown (1991: 37), “are deeply influenced by the social conditions which create marginality and stigmatization.” Rev. Fernandez reflects on his feelings a few weeks after his arrival:

For me, it was a race backwards in terms of my existence. I think that at that point, I started to go backwards in my life. Not a leisurely walk, but a race. I was running backwards in relationship to what I had achieved and who I was in my country. And in some ways—it felt like it was the end of the world. I don’t know if I have the vocabulary to express psychologically what I felt at that point, but I was seriously depressed for a while.

The social conditions that Rev. Fernandez and several of the other clergymen found themselves involved in led them not just to discouragement and melancholy, but also to a sense of hopelessness, gloom, and depression.

How have they reacted or dealt with the consequences of such feelings? In terms of their response, the pastors were just about equally divided in three groups:

Detachment

Some of the pastors made a deliberate choice that they would not allow the many different stigmatizers to shape them. This led to a feeling of detachment at many different levels. One person expressed it best:

I really don’t think that up to this day, I have lived in this country. I live here, but at the same time I am still there [in my country]. I don’t have roots here in this country, and I do not want to develop roots in this country either. Perhaps that’s very serious, and perhaps that’s not the way it should be—but I have no interest in developing roots here in this country.

In response to my silence, he elaborated,

There is a Mexican movie entitled "The Golden Cage" The theme that runs through this movie is "I'm not from here, but I'm not from there" No soy de aqui, ni soy de alla This movie deals with migrant workers who come to pick tomatoes and how they are treated, the injustices that they experience and the reality of how they feel That's how I feel Yo no soy de aqui, ni soy de alla

By and large, the pastors who dealt with the consequences of their new lives with chosen detachment admitted an unfortunate but unavoidable irony Even as they made decisions that kept them from developing roots in their new country, each year that passed with them away from their land meant a weakening of their "back home" roots as they remembered them

Nostalgia

There was another main response that characterized several of the pastors This other group held on tightly to the familiar ways of the old country They loudly proclaimed the superiority of its values and morality, emphasizing the value of the old and the traditional, presumably as a way of remaining anchored in the midst of great upheaval For these pastors, the maintenance of the culture of their country of origin had become inseparable from their interpretation and preaching of the gospel

Rev Urenia passionately recalled how upon arriving in the United States, he had heard that some men from his homeland cooked in this country He eloquently informed me and preached in public that neither he nor his son would ever do such a thing, for "*we are sons of God and as such could not involve ourselves in feminine activities, which would be abhorrent to God*"

Men who cooked, children carrying knives at school, teenagers who talked back to their parents, all these, in the minds of some of these pastors, were evil activities that existed in America, but they were unheard of in their land Nostalgia made them remember life in their country as "better," and regard life here as evil Since they were in the business of working against evil, this meant that apparent and public stands needed to be taken to make the point clear

Negotiated Adaptation

A third group decided to stay and *negociar nuestra identidad como Latinos* This literally translates to "negotiate our identity as Latinos" But Rev Castillo, who used this expression, wanted me to understand that in *negociar* there is an implicit "give and take" Moreover, the ongoing exchange of giving and taking needs to happen in the context of *saber quien eres, y saber a quien le sirves*—a context of knowing who you are and who you serve

I know who I am I know who we are And I have come here to serve God Listen We are here because God has brought us here If God brought us here, God is going to help us When I remember that, I'm okay When I forget that, it is too easy to let outside influences destroy me emotionally

This man and others like him drew on his faith and on God to find inner resources to help him deal with the changes and the shifts with which he continually lived as an immigrant

When prompted, “Who are you?” he emphatically explained,

Latin people are capable. [As] Latinos, we have our preparation, we have our pride. We are not people that are only good to drive taxis. We are worthy of doing other things. We are capable of doing other things. But here in the United States, some people see us as only capable of doing manual work, and so we are here and what do we do? We need to negotiate that. We need to know who we are to know that we can go beyond what people here think we can do. There are always barriers . . . and there are things that you win and there are things that you lose. . . . We have made an investment, and we are winning the battle. We are adapting little by little, but it has been very difficult.

Knowing who they are and Whom they serve has protected these people from being like “many, many people who live in bitterness because of the way others treated them when they first arrived here.” This pastor and others like him draw on their faith and God for inner strength. But he also identifies himself with a larger group—Latinos. By doing so, he finds strength and encouragement to negotiate his new identity, something he may not have been able to achieve individually.

Perceptions of Self

From their accounts, all the pastors seem to have arrived in the United States with a positive self-concept. The social battering they experienced during their adaptation journey affected them much more than they ever expected. Some of the dominant feelings the immigrant clergymen experienced during their first few years were as follows:

Hopelessness and Pain

Rev. Urenia, who only a few short months earlier had told me that he would “never become a bivocational pastor . . . absolutely not . . . under no circumstance,” said with pain in his voice:

[My wife] needs a job but cannot find one. We just cannot live on the money that the church pays me. The money that I make is simply not enough for us. This is a very expensive city. And even if she gets a job . . . I might need to get a second job as well.

Loss

This was mainly experienced by the pastors who had made a deliberate choice that they would not develop roots in this country and by those who tightly held onto the familiar ways of the old country, proclaiming the superiority of its values and morality. This feeling came from “having left,” but not allowing themselves to “arrive.” It occurred at multiple levels: loss of country, loss of culture, and loss of national myths, language, class, and literary culture. They experienced an “uncomprehending sense of loss for a past which, however difficult, at least was known” (Rubin 1992:80).

Obsession

In *The Culture of Conflict*, Ross discusses how “once positions are invested with emotional significance, they are no longer trivial” (1993:66). The same can be said

of objects. In several of these pastoral couples, I observed an obsessive preoccupation with something specific—or the lack of it. This “something” had been assigned significance, a meaning, as what best expressed the depth of the frustration they felt as immigrants. It was something for which they could blame someone else for its existence or its absence.

With two of the families, the focus of preoccupation was a person. For the other couples, it was an object. In the case of one of the families, this object was a car. Without a doubt, they needed a car. They lived in a small city with inadequate public transportation, and even though it was only early fall, the weather was already colder than what they were used to. Life in the United States requires the use of a personal vehicle. They talked about it every time I saw them or spoke with them. They called me long distance to talk about it. Not having a car was the reason he was not doing as well in the ministry as he had back home. Many others had depended on them before. Now, not having a car made them dependent on the generosity of strangers. Owning a car would solve all of their problems. As a statement of their faith that God would provide for their need, the couple decided to get their American drivers' licenses. Since he had driven for many years, the pastor found it humiliating to have to be tested again. He was mortified when he failed the test.

Eventually they did get a car. But the illusion that it would solve many of their problems became a nightmare when it brought to the surface other problems, also wrapped up in their immigrant identity. They got lost. Back home they had always known their way around, and if they got lost, they could ask questions in their own language. When owning a car did not solve all of their adjustment problems and, in effect, compounded the stress in their lives, it was overwhelming.

In addition to the above feelings, the pastors typically felt *confusion*. There was role confusion at home and on the job. Men were washing dishes, and women were *pastoras*. (“Where can I be myself?!”) They felt *distrust* (“I do not trust the United States culture. I do not trust Americans.”) and *guilt* (“I have not told this to anyone. I really should not be telling you all this.”). For most, the memories of their experience as immigrant pastors were filled with a combination of all those feelings.

The last time that I met with each of them, I was often told that speaking about their experiences made them feel less alone, less distressed, and less angry. Talking, they said, helped them realize how long they had traveled on their immigration journey. It gave them, said one, “fresh hope for the future.”

Throughout the conversations with these pastors, there was an undertone of the strength they found in their own faith. They always returned to this spiritual dimension. They all asserted that they had come to the United States, and having come, they had stayed in this country because of a deep faith in a call from their God. However, the findings of this study indicate that the impact of immigrating and doing ministry in a foreign culture is such that immigrant pastors to the United States may also experience a deep sense of personal and ministerial chaos, while the goals of the receiving denominations are not accomplished as hoped.

Missiological Implications

If the great commission will be fulfilled, the church needs to be very intentional about reaching the people who immigrate to the United States from around the world. The current wave of immigrations to the United States may be interpreted as God's

assistance in fulfilling the great commission by bringing some of the peoples of the world to this missionary-sending country

Mission literature includes many studies of the experiences of missionaries leaving Western countries. But now there is a new wave of missionaries coming to previously "sending countries." Little, if any, study has been done of pastoral couples and families who immigrate to be involved in missionary work in the United States. We still tend to see missions as being from the "powerful" to the "powerless." When it happens the other way around—from the "powerless" to the "powerful"—there are serious missiological implications. The American church is used to thinking of itself as a sending church. The issue raised by this study is that the American church also needs to learn to function on the receiving end of mission.

Some denominations and Christian agencies, desiring to reach Latinos in the United States, bring ordained pastors from Latin America to start or to pastor churches among people who may speak the same language.⁷ They do so without understanding the larger cultural picture. This new type of incoming immigrant pastor is being forced to fulfill the function of missionaries—to think and to act like missionaries. Neither they nor their sponsoring denominations or agencies fully realize this fact. They are missionaries without missionary preparation, orientation, or support systems.

The pastors who participated in this study believe their denominational and agency leaders in America do not grasp the missiological implications of their ministry contexts.

Each of those nationality groups requires a different method in terms of my approach to leadership in the church. Let me give you just a simple example. The way to gain respect, to pay your dues, to prove yourself with each of those nationalities requires a different tactic. With some nationalities, they respect you if you speak English well, others if you speak Spanish well, others if you taught at the university back home. But if you talk about teaching at the university in your home country with the "wrong" nationality, they think you are showing off, making it more difficult to prove yourself with them.

A major cause of the tension and pain experienced by the pastors who participated in this study is a different understanding of who is inviting them to come, who is their host. The pastors expected to be embraced by and enfolded in their mother churches. This understanding carried with itself a series of expectations that were not realized. The denominations functioned as agencies or brokers to place these pastors in a separate, specific, non-mainstream population. When the American church invited pastors to immigrate to the United States, it was not really receiving these leaders to itself—but receiving them to work with Latinos.

A clarification of the relationship would seem to be the simplest solution. A mission-focused solution, however, would be to change the way the American church sees itself in the relationship with the missionary pastors. If they were received as missionaries serving in the United States instead of as leaders in the Spanish-language church or community, there could be great benefit and blessing to the American church. Some suggestions of how to achieve this are found below.

Most of the pastors who participated in this study come from areas of the world where the church is experiencing explosive growth. The American church could

benefit greatly from understanding the principles behind that growth from leaders such as these, who were on the frontlines of the Latin American church as it experienced such historic growth. The church could also learn from them about theologies of poverty, a broader hermeneutics of the Old Testament, and different understandings of family models, among other themes.

The history of denominations in the United States is closely related to its history of immigration. The American church has regularly been infused by waves of immigrant Christians. The great infusion of Christians in America today comes from Latin America and Asia. Competent, Spirit-filled leaders are immigrating to the United States. Their contributions could help to transform the American church.

The growth of the Latino population in the United States “constitutes one of the most dramatic demographic shifts in American history. The number of Hispanics is increasing almost four times as fast as the rest of the population” (Robinson 1998:27). Since Latinos in the United States include Spanish speakers from every culture in the Spanish-speaking world, Latinos in the United States are not one culture but many. Because the Latino population in the United States is far more diverse than the Spanish population anywhere else in the world, ministry to this “ethnic group which is not an ethnic group at all” (Robinson 1998:27) is a demanding cross-cultural ministry, very costly to the new wave of missionary leaders.

Whether this new wave of missionaries comes under the auspices of a denomination or not, for the sake of the harvest, the church in the United States could prepare people and organizations to receive and to empower these new missionaries. There could be a continuum of support, backing, and collaboration: from being good brokers by helping Latino pastors better serve their own Latino communities to developing support systems similar to the ones for Western missionaries overseas. Some assistance would be simple personal, relational, intentional encounters. The other end of the continuum would require major organizational shifts and adjustments.

Some of the practical ways of doing this would be as follows:

- taking time to listen
- eating with immigrant pastors
- visiting them in their homes for meals with their families
- recognizing the sacrifice of these immigrating pastors for the sake of the gospel. In some denominations, traditional missionaries are celebrated as heroes. This new wave of missionaries should be as well.
- praying with them about issues of their concern
- helping to orient and to prepare the receiving and neighboring sister churches, as well as denominational and regional leaders as to the issues that will be faced
- mobilizing the American church to pray for them
- helping to orient and to prepare incoming pastors for the issues they will face in their new international, cross-cultural ministries
- planning cross-denominational events to bring together some of these new missionaries for spiritual feeding, encouragement, and re-tooling for the complexity of mainly urban, cross-cultural ministry, and
- encouraging and training this new wave of missionaries on how to find and to develop leaders from within the immigrant communities to reach the growing ethnic populations already here, as well as those likely to immigrate in the future.

The study yielded only “negative” examples. But the story of Rev. and Mrs. Palacios is a case that illustrates what could happen when some of these steps are taken. After an experience similar to those described in this study, Rev. Palacios was assigned to plant a church in a mid-sized Midwestern American city. A couple in denominational leadership who had met the family in their country of origin took a personal and ministerial interest in this gifted immigrant pastor and his family. They prepared the pastor for the cultural differences of the Midwest. They alerted neighboring sister churches and coached them in culturally appropriate ways to receive and to celebrate this family. Sister churches in the jurisdiction made and followed through with prayer commitments. They specifically prayed for the successful planting of a new church as well as for the cross-cultural and ministerial adjustments of Rev. Palacios and his family.

Traveling hundreds of miles, the denominational leaders visited Rev. Palacios several times each year. Each time they stayed in the Palacios home and brought small gifts for the young children. They prayed for the ministry and for the concerns of the family. At least monthly they called and listened to their concerns, even when no solutions could be offered. Personal and telephone conversations included acknowledgment of the sacrifices he and his family were making for the sake of the gospel. Hours were spent with him and others in similar situations, providing skills to exegete the culture in which they now ministered.

Three years after their relocation, the denominational financial commitment came to an end. Rev. and Mrs. Palacios were devastated. The supervising couple traveled to visit the family, mobilized prayer, and offered encouragement during the search for bivocational employment. Rev. Palacios was invited to preach at state-wide denominational events. As he spoke through a skilled translator, God used him—to proclaim the gospel and to break down barriers of prejudice and misunderstanding.

He has planted a healthy Spanish-language church that is experiencing very significant conversion growth. Recently they moved to their own building, which they have already outgrown. The church has sponsored a daughter Spanish-language congregation in a nearby city and is preparing to give birth to more daughter churches. Two families who came to Christ through the ministry of Rev. Palacios have chosen to return to Mexico, their country of origin. Giving up the possibility of maintaining the requirements for their prized green card, these families are planting a congregation in their hometown. Many of those involved in prayer for the original church plant are now praying for this overseas church plant—and so are the hundreds who have come to faith through the ministry of Rev. Palacios in the United States.

The growth of the Spanish-speaking population in the United States represents a dramatic demographic shift that is making history in this country. When “the number of Hispanics is increasing almost four times as fast as the rest of the population” (Robinson 1998:27), the church has a significant and unprecedented evangelistic opportunity. The manner in which the American church chooses to respond to the challenge has direct implications for global missions. The appropriate responses could result in a significant increase in great commission effectiveness.⁸

Notes

1 Rev Castillo and all the other names of pastors in this article are fictitious names for actual people. A major concern for all the pastors and spouses interviewed during the research for this study was who was going to have access to the information they gave me. All participants were assured that pseudonyms would be assigned and used in the writing of the study. I explained that each of the families studied belonged to a different denomination, that they lived in various parts of the United States, and that they originated from a number of countries, making it impossible for a reader of the final document, the only one to be made public, to identify my sources. Out of the concern most of the couples expressed regarding confidentiality, I have not revealed any names nor generally revealed countries of origin or denominations in the writing of this study. Two of the couples felt strongly enough about this to make it a condition for their participation. The quotes in *italics* throughout the study are direct quotes by the pastors. They were spoken in Spanish and later translated.

2 This is a qualitative study of how nine, first-generation, immigrant clergy families from Latin America experienced the impact of immigrating to the United States and of doing ministry in the United States as a foreign culture. An intentional choice was made to limit the number of participants. Since the qualitative research methodology was being used, the focus was not to gather information from a large sample, but to gain in-depth understanding of the topic at hand.

The participants were nine clergymen and their spouses who immigrated from Latin America. Only two couples came from the same country. They represented a variety of Christian denominations. None of them spoke English when they arrived in the United States. For all of them, Spanish is still their dominant language, five of the people interviewed are monolingual. Every couple lives in a different United States city and, with one exception, do not know each other.

Data was collected over a period of 24 months through in-depth, semi-structured and unstructured interviews of adult members of each family. I spent a total of 269 hours with the participants, doing 36 in-depth, open-ended interviews or participant observations of the immigrant clergy families in their homes, their offices, and their personal environments. All data were recorded through fieldnotes. The conceptual paradigm of symbolic interactionism was employed to analyze the data.

3 Many pastors from Latin America come as immigrants themselves. Having arrived on their own power, they plant a congregation or pastor an existing church. A discussion on that population is beyond the scope of this article.

4 Similar situations were observed by the author—but not studied in detail—in Bangkok, Thailand, with ethnic Chinese leaders, and in South America.

5 According to *The Spanish Language Worldwide*, distributed by the Embassy of Spain in Canada, the United States is now the fifth largest Spanish-speaking country in the world after Mexico, Spain, Colombia, and Argentina, in that order.

6 Following the principles of qualitative research, I did not approach this study with specific preconceived theories to confirm or to refute. Instead, I set out to explore and to discover the meaning of their immigration experience for these nine immigrant pastors and their spouses. The intent was to understand from their perspective the impact of having come to this country to do ministry.

7 The Spanish language is generally understood when spoken by Spanish speakers from different countries around the world. However, there can be major differences in vocabulary from one country to another.

8 The author would like to thank Miriam Adeney for her comments that assisted in making this a stronger article.

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