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## Missions in Our Backyard: Evangelism Among Newly Arrived Hispanics to the United States

“Not all can go as missionaries to foreign lands, but all can be home missionaries in their families and neighborhoods” (White 1948:30). There is a possibility that one out of five of your neighbors in the U.S. will be Hispanic, as according to the U.S. Census Bureau, the Hispanic population in 2012 was over 53 million, representing about 17 percent of the total population (U.S. Census Bureau 2013). This article focuses on newly arrived Hispanics to the United States of America and on culturally relevant ways to evangelize them. The nature of this article does not allow an in-depth analysis of this segment of the population; however, statistical data will provide a glimpse of the challenges of this mission field right in our own backyard.

Between 1970 and 2013, the Hispanic population grew by 44 million, a six-fold increase (Brown 2014). Hispanics have already surpassed Caucasians in California (Dwyer 2014). Mexicans represent 64.6 percent of all Hispanic immigrants to the United States (Lopez, Gonzalez-Barrea, and Cuddington 2013). Hispanics have grown an average of 505% between 1980 and 2000 in areas considered “new destinations” in the southeast, such as Atlanta (995%), Greensboro (962%), Charlotte (932%), Orlando (859%), Nashville (630%), Fort Lauderdale (578%), Sarasota (538%), and Greenville (397%). Due to the fact that men arrive in the U.S. first, in these areas they outnumber Hispanic women by 17 percent (Singer and Suro 2014). These Hispanics require a specialized form of ministry since many established congregations in these and other areas do not have previous experience ministering to Hispanics.

Most Hispanics are Catholics, which is reflected among newly arrived immigrants. The 2010 census reported that Mexico had some 101,456,786 Catholics among the population aged five and above, which equates to around 91% of the total population (Roman Catholicism in Mexico 2015).

Although nearly three-quarters of Latin Americans consider themselves Catholic, only 40 percent said that they practice their faith (Frazer 2005). About 76 percent of Mexican immigrants to the United States come as Roman Catholics (Brodie et al. 2002:55). Many of those who recently came are nominal Christians, with a high chance that, if they came from a small town or from the countryside, they may have never touched a Bible.

It seems that in the United States the preferred term for the religion of the majority of newly arrived Hispanics is simply “Catholic,” but in their countries of origin they usually refer to themselves as being “Roman Catholics.” They do not understand much about “denominations,” and in their minds all who are not Catholics are “Protestants” or belong to a sect. Today much may be said about the “separated brethren,” but in the mind of many in Latin America, Protestants are still considered heretics. This underlines the importance of approaching newly arrived immigrants with a friendly attitude, showing an interest in their felt needs, with the goal of earning their confidence. Also by helping them in different forms of ministry will remove many obstacles for the presentation of the gospel.

### **Ministering to Newly Arrived Hispanics**

Hispanics show receptivity to the message of the gospel more than ever before in the history of this country (Sanchez 2006:35). Sociological studies and experience indicate that newly arrived immigrants are much more receptive to the gospel than established ones. Experts have realized that “the need for acceptance and recognition is uppermost in the mind of the Hispanic” (Shannon 1989:B1). The newly arrived immigrants suffer from strong feelings of alienation, isolation, and loneliness, which leads them in a quest for community (i.e., group acceptance, identification, and solidarity (Holland 1974:455). This openness indicates that both Anglo and Hispanic believers need training in sharing the gospel with people with a Roman Catholic background, however, this should be done before approaching them.

Almost one-third of the immigrants from Latin America come to the United States as evangelical Christians (Brodie et al. 2002:55). These new arrivals can very easily plant new congregations. In many cases, all they need is a little encouragement from an existing English congregation that will offer them an opportunity to use existing facilities and hold worship services in Spanish. They will be the most effective in attracting friends, neighbors, and relatives.

The Hispanic population is dominated by youth: Half are younger than 27 years old. In comparison, half of the Anglos are older than 40 years (Cohn 2005:A5). Hispanics of Mexican origin are the youngest out of the

14 largest origin groups, with a median age of 25, compared with Cubans' median age of 40 (Brown 2014). As expected, this trend is reflected in Spanish-speaking churches in the United States. Hispanic churches usually have an active group of young people in positions of leadership, which attract non-believers. On the negative side, Hispanics tend to drop out of school at an alarming rate (Fry 2003) so need a ministry of encouragement and, in many cases, ministries offering English as a second language.

Immigrants are among the segment of the population most receptive to the gospel (Ramseyer 1973:68). One of the best ways to reach out to people in any community is to discover felt needs and minister to those needs. One of the most urgent needs is learning English. Among other problems, first-generation Hispanics are not able to communicate in English and, as a result, will most likely earn low salaries, face economic difficulties, and not be able to open a bank account. A free English class in a church facility (cafeteria, chapel, gym, church school), if properly advertised on Spanish-speaking radio and newspapers, will attract many newly arrived immigrants. Since they may not have transportation, a church van offering transportation to the venue of the class will be a plus for the project. Properly trained mission-minded teachers will be able to plant the seeds of the gospel in the hearts of many of these newly arrived immigrants. Invitations to social events related to the English class, including typical and regional foods, games, and picnics will also help to establish cultural and spiritual bridges.

Other forms of ministry should aim to satisfy the felt needs in the areas of social and health services. A church-run community center could offer compassion ministries, counseling services, dental care, medical services, health screening, sport activities for the youth, health education, and a food bank. All these efforts will require time, energy, personnel, and money. These activities should be done with the clear goal of leading the recipients beyond their felt needs to their real needs—salvation through Jesus. As people from the community come to the center, they should have a viable opportunity to read Christian tracts, watch Christian videos, and fill out prayer request cards, receive personal visits, and join Bible studies. In this way, a group of non-Spanish speaking believers can make a great contribution in spreading the gospel among the surrounding Hispanic community.

### **Personal Evangelism among Newly Arrived Hispanics**

Before talking with newly arrived Hispanics about religion, it is very important that the Adventist witness becomes aware of their beliefs, traditions, and practices. One may never refer to what one knows about them,

but this background knowledge may prevent a person from using the wrong approaches, from offending, and from not covering crucial topics that will help these new immigrants become mature and balanced Christians.

It is also important to be patient. Many Hispanics have a profound ignorance of the Bible and their initial inability to understand the principles of the gospel require patience on our part. Since they often are not even thinking of changing their religion, it is important to not rush them into Bible studies. Meet them where they are. The “milk of the Word” must be given before administering the “strong meat.” Many have not yet touched a Bible and do not know the difference between the Old and the New Testaments, or between a chapter and a verse, thus it is important to awaken their interest in Scripture.

State your confidence in the Bible. The goal of the first step in personal Bible studies is to direct their mind to the Bible. Many Hispanics have a Catholic background and have been taught the primacy of tradition. At the Council of Trent in 1545, the Church rejected the teachings of Martin Luther about *Sola Scriptura* and said that tradition was “to be accepted ‘with as much reverence’ (*pari pietatis affectu ac reverentia*) as Sacred Scripture” (Jedin 2003). Our challenge is, with the power of the Holy Spirit, to help people understand the primacy of the Bible as “the only rule of faith and practice.” Meanwhile, even when many from a Catholic background hear the readings from the “Word of God” on Sundays they do not always connect it with the Bible. Many believe that the Bible is a Protestant book. It is also helpful to use the Douay version of the Bible to help them understand salvation by grace through faith. During your evangelistic sermons or in personal Bible studies, repeat many times that the Bible is the Word of God. A line that helps Hispanic people accept new teachings is, “True religion is not to do what the pastor, the teacher, or the priest says, but to do what God says.”

You may want to determine their level of understanding and start from there. Some will appreciate learning what the Bible says about how to secure a happy home, how to raise children, how to be a good husband, etc. Others may even need to start with simple Bible stories such as the Creation, the Flood, Abraham, etc. They may also appreciate studying the ancient prophecies of the Old Testament fulfilled in the person of Christ. The point is to meet them where they are, then develop their confidence in the Bible as the Word of God.

Before you study controversial issues, begin with topics they can agree with. Topics at this stage could include the Trinity, prayer, and the Bible as the Word of God. Once they accept that the Bible is inspired by God, it will be easier for them to accept that there is only one Mediator, salvation by grace through faith, confession made directly to God, baptism by

immersion, etc. Before studying these “new teachings,” it is important for people to accept that the Bible transcends Tradition. The use of the Douay Bible in your Bible studies can also be helpful since this is a version of scripture that is widely used among Hispanics. Always handle the Bible with great reverence. After they have confessed Christ as Savior and Lord, they may want to study advanced topics such as “Peter and the Keys,” “The Sacrifice of Mass,” “Purgatory,” “The Rosary,” etc. (Walsh 1967; Sanchez 2003).

When working for Hispanics remember that most come from a Roman Catholic background so use their terminology in your Bible studies. For instance, when referring to the Bible say “the Holy Scriptures,” “the Holy Book,” or “Holy Bible” — “in the Holy Gospels we read that. . . .” When referring to Jesus, use the term “our blessed Lord,” “our Lord Jesus Christ,” etc. When referring to the apostles, talk of the “holy apostles.” In your studies, make as much reference as possible to what Saint Peter the Apostle said about salvation, about Jesus, etc. Most Hispanics do not use the term “Lord’s Supper” but, rather, “Holy Communion.”

The issue of Mary deserves a separate paragraph. Catholics have learned that Protestants do not respect the “the Most Blessed Virgin.” It is important not to offend them with a careless treatment of Mary. Surprise them! You can legitimately speak of “the blessed virgin,” or even the “holy virgin,” without diminishing any biblical teaching. They will immediately think, “This Protestant is different!” and will feel more inclined to continue to study the Bible with you. Many Hispanics are offended when a Protestant insists that Mary had other children (“brothers of Jesus,” see Mark 3:31–35; 6:3; John 2:12. They believe that these brothers may have been Jesus’s cousins or even Joseph’s children from a first marriage). Do not attempt to resolve this issue. Do not talk against Mary. Stay on the affirmative—speak of “one sufficient Mediator.”

When involved in personal Bible studies, pray with and for them. Hispanic people will greatly appreciate your fervent prayers offered on their behalf. They may have never heard an evangelical talking to God as a friend without using formulas or always repeating the same things. They will soon be ready to pray with you.

Personal Bible studies may be the best way to introduce the gospel to a newly arrived Hispanic because they can ask questions. They will also be relaxed in their own homes, without being afraid of being criticized. Once you have established rapport and developed a genuine friendship with them, they may be ready to attend church services, and you will be able to assist them in making a public commitment to Jesus.

## Public Evangelism among Newly Arrived Hispanics

When you consider public evangelism among newly arrived Hispanics, remember that for many of them Protestant churches are perceived to be threatening places. Many Hispanics feel very uncomfortable attending a Protestant church. Remember that newly arrived immigrants usually have serious mental barriers against Protestants, as they may consider them heretics. In some places they may even use the term “Lutheran” to refer to all non-Catholics. In the minds of many Catholics, Martin Luther was the worst heretic who ever existed (Monselice 2011). The best venue for evangelistic meetings that aim to attract newly arrived Hispanics is a neutral place, such as a school gymnasium, or the cafeteria of a church (Hiebert 1994:180). Of course, a hotel meeting room is a good (but expensive) option. An announcement of a “rented auditorium” may attract more Hispanics than an announcement of a meeting in a Protestant place of worship.

The best time of the year to invite Hispanics to an evangelical service is the last week of Lent, the week immediately preceding Resurrection Sunday (Lent is a period of 40 days that starts with Ash Wednesday and leads to Easter Sunday). While for Evangelicals the events of Easter are commonly reduced to a weekend, for many Hispanics the entire week is of crucial importance. They call it “*Semana Santa*,” or “Holy Week.” Another common expression is “Passion Week.” This period of intense devotion runs from Palm Sunday to Holy Saturday, a day of vigil in anticipation of the resurrection.

During this special time of the year it is best to focus on the passion and sufferings of Christ. You may announce “*meditaciones cuaresmales*” (“Lenten meditations”). An announcement in Spanish may read something like this: “Attend Lenten meditations during *Semana Santa*! See and hear about the passion, crucifixion, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.” In the handbills, feel free to show a bloody hand nailed to the cross. Use terms that are familiar and start the Saturday night before the “Palm Sunday” (one week before Easter). During the nightly services of Holy Week, show films about the life of Jesus (or show a portion of the film before each Lenten meditation).

Among Adventists in South America, Easter is the most important and effective evangelistic season of the year. Due to traditions that can be traced back several centuries, many Hispanics feel the built-in necessity of doing something religious and, in many cases, sacrificial during “*Semana Santa*.” For many throughout Latin America, this will be the only time they will go to church during the entire year. During this week it is common to see people walking on their knees for long distances to a special

shrine, avoiding consumption of meat, and participating in processions. It may sound strange, but some from a Hispanic background may even be willing to attend a “Protestant” event, if it is done in a proper manner. This is especially true if a commemoration of the Passion of Christ is offered in a home for the surrounding neighborhood.

Church services aiming to attract newly arrived Hispanics may start a “*Semana Santa*” series with introductory topics such as the origin of the Bible and the relevance of the Bible for our days, Old Testament prophecies about Jesus, and the importance of prayer. The most important days of the season are “Holy Thursday” (“Maundy Thursday” in England), “Good Friday,” “Holy Saturday,” and “Resurrection Sunday.” Take advantage of the season and present the plan of salvation on “Holy Thursday,” explaining why our Lord Jesus Christ died on the cross. Show how “Saint Peter the Apostle” said that only Christ can save (Acts 4:12). A good topic for “Good Friday” is “A Love Story Written with Blood” (illustrate it well with PowerPoint and video clips) and then make a call to accept Jesus as Savior. Keep in mind that in most Hispanic countries radio stations only play funeral music during “Holy Saturday”—so do not play “happy music” on that day! A good topic for Saturday night is “The Religion of the Empty Tomb.” Talk of Jesus’ resurrection, but also include initial references to death and “the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting,” the last sentences of the Apostles’ Creed. Insist that Christianity is the true religion (this is an important idea, because it undermines the concept that only the Roman Catholic Church is the true religion). Show that Saint Paul the Apostle said that “there is one mediator between God and men” (1 Tim 2:5).

As for altar calls, follow the principles of progressive decisions—a gradual progression in form and intensity. You may invite them to come to the front for a special prayer request. When you make the first invitations to accept Jesus as Savior, you may ask them to fill out decision cards. Invite them to raise their hands during a PowerPoint presentation. When you make the first altar calls, make sure that the auditorium is poorly illuminated with a PowerPoint graphic. Many Hispanics are reluctant to confess their trust in Jesus in a Protestant meeting, and they do not want to be seen as they make their first decisions. If you rush them to confess Jesus at the first opportunity they visit a Protestant meeting, they may never return. Of course, you want them to eventually make a public confession of their faith in Jesus—just remember that they did not grow up in the Bible Belt and that you need to prayerfully design a strategy that will fit their cultural backgrounds. Meet them where they are, and then little by little, as they are able to bear it, unfold to them the great truths of the kingdom.

Plan for a careful follow-up after “*Semana Santa*” through regular Bible

study sessions to cultivate the interest generated during Easter. You may start during Holy Week to announce that on Wednesday, after “Resurrection Sunday,” you will give away Catholic Bibles, beautifully illustrated. A simple option is to continue with Christ-centered Bible studies in which the newly arrived Hispanics will grow in their understanding of biblical teachings. Make these meetings interesting by marking a Bible together, encouraging them to ask questions through open dialogue, and praying for their personal needs.

### **Small Group Evangelism**

Ministering to families is of crucial importance. The major theme dominating the Hispanic culture is the deep importance of the family to all its members (Clark 2014). They have a larger than average number of children per family, although their income is well below the national average. When a Hispanic thinks of his family, he thinks of an extended circle, often living under the same roof. The great importance of the family in Latin American culture can be stated by saying that the value of family well-being overrides the importance of the individual (Moore and Pachon 1985:96).

The individual in Latin America has a deep consciousness of his membership in a family. He thinks of his importance in terms of his family membership. . . . The world to a Latin consists of a pattern of intimate personal relationships of his family. His confidence, his sense of security, and identity are perceived in relationship to others who are his family. (Fitzpatrick 1971:78)

Since family is so important for the Hispanic community and plays an important role in God’s plans for human happiness, the concept of home and family is an appropriate and relevant bridge to reach out to the Hispanic community. There is the need of developing strategies for evangelizing whole families (McGavran 1999:325).

The use of cell groups has been demonstrated to be an effective strategy to reach whole families in urban Latin American churches, mostly because they stress the need of belonging (Greenway 1977:176). Experts from the Church Growth Movement state that “the phenomenal growth of the Pentecostal movement in Latin America reflects the effectiveness of using families to evangelize families” (Montoya 1987:41).

New forms of evangelism should be encouraged. Approaches based on family life will attract the interest of Hispanics, especially recently arrived immigrants with a high need of belonging. Strategies covering the family

will not only help to improve the quality of their lives, but will also serve as an entering edge to reach the whole family. Some evangelists have developed approaches in this direction, but no doubt other forms could be developed. I believe that the homogeneous unit strategy will serve to reach recently arrived Hispanic immigrants more effectively than a strategy based on a multicultural approach.

The following proposal is a strategy for small groups that I have used effectively in evangelistic ministries among recently arrived immigrants to the United States (Martin 2015:173–201). Christian families are trained on how to attract their relatives and friends to a Bible study about family issues. Rather than a lecture, the study is a guided discussion on selected issues based on the Bible. Non-believers are encouraged to express their opinions. The small group uses study guides. The presence of strangers may affect the quality of the dialogue, so this should be offered to the inner circle of people from their own social group. In about ten sessions, the discussion switches from family issues only to family issues related to salvation. Once the studies, including salvation, are covered, the group will be ready to cover other biblical doctrines. When family leaders are converted or a substantial number have made a commitment to Christ, the group is ready to join regular church services or an evangelistic series covering deeper doctrinal subjects. The new converts are then trained to repeat the process in different places and with different people. Again, this approach may easily work as a follow-up of evangelistic activities during Easter.

Many Hispanics come to the United States in search of a better life, but they need to find the way to true life, and “that they may have it more abundantly” (John 10:10). Their religious background may be a stepping stone to the evangelical message. They may respond favorably to the gospel if it is presented in a positive, sensitive way. Most church members need to be trained on how to share the good news with immigrants who come to our own backyard. They are “white unto harvest” (John 4:35).

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