
Worship Preferences and Practices to Reach Second and Third Generation Latinos

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Abstract

Second and third generation Latinos are the fastest growing population among the largest minority in the United States. Worship and music are a crucial part of their religious experience and spiritual growth. They favor energetic, public worship that is biblically based and passionately led. However, there is a gap between their preferences and perceptions and those of the first generation Latinos who typically lead Hispanic churches. This gap must be bridged for U.S-born Latinos to thrive and develop as disciples of Christ.

Introduction

This paper has a two-fold purpose. First, it will explore worship preferences among second and third generation Latin Americans. Second, it will identify the traits of corporate worship that is effective in reaching young, Hispanics who have grown up in American.

A brief literature review will be performed to ascertain who are second and third generation Latinos in the U.S. and to understand the nature of worship among Latinos in the Protestant tradition in America. The findings from the literature review will be compared against conceptual conclusions drawn from interviews and surveys performed among second and third generation Seventh-day Adventist Latinos from the state of Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, and Ohio.

U.S.-born Latinos

For the purpose of this study second and third generation Latinos will be referred to as the children “of immigrants who were either born in the United States or raised and educated in the United States” (Rah, 2009,

p.16). A survey of the literature shows that there is no single term that can encompass all Hispanics in America. Justo Gonzales (1996) simply uses the terms “Hispanic” and “Latino” or “Latina” interchangeably. This paper will follow that pattern. According to Maynard-Reid (2000), Hispanics in America are a mixture of European Spaniards, Amer-Indians and African Blacks. The largest Hispanic groups are 1) Mexican-American; 2) Puerto Rican; and 3) Other groups from Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Central and South America. Traditionally Hispanic population growth in North America has come from the immigration of first generation Latinos. However, a recent study sponsored by the Pew Hispanic Center demonstrated that “births in the United States are outpacing immigration as the key source of growth” (Suro & Passel, 2003, p. 6).

This means that in the near future the demographics of Latinos in American will change. We will witness coming into the workforce, public life, and educational systems, an influx of U.S. born Latinos. Unlike their first generation forefathers, second and third generation Latinos will have access to academic growth and financial success in North America. According to Suro and Passel (2003) the number of second generation Latinos could

outnumber the first generation Latinos by the year 2025. Native Hispanics will become a considerable group to be reached with the gospel by the Seventh-day Adventist church in North America.

But what does it mean to be a second and third generation Latino in America? Several illustrations have been offered to explain their complex identity and existence. Rodriguez (2011) explained that second and third generation Latinos are the modern day Hellenists who “are grumbling against foreign-born Spanish-dominant Latinos, the modern-day Hebrews” (p.2). Rodriguez also stated that the life of U.S. born Latinos can be explained as “living-on-the hyphen.” The hyphen is that cultural space “where multiple levels of racial and ethnic identification are possible” (Rodriquez, 2011, p. 53). The “hyphenated existence” is an experience in which second generation young people serve as bridges between the dominant world in which they live and the homeland of their first generation parents and grandparents. However, for the hyphenated individual the experience leaves him with feelings of not belonging to either world.

Soong-Chan Rah (2009) offers another analogy by proposing that second generation Hispanics share a triple consciousness. “They are insiders and outsiders to the dominant Anglo group, but also insiders and outsiders to first generation Hispanics as well. However, they are totally insiders only among other second and third generation Hispanics” (p. 181). Native U.S. Latino youth develop intercultural skills at a very early age and learn how to live in a neither/nor mentality due to their triple-consciousness existence. They enjoy cultural diversity but they also thrive by belonging to a larger group of other second and third generation Latinos. Considering that according to the Census Bureau report (2007) Latinos are the largest minority in the U.S., it can be asserted that they will become the bridge culture in the North American religious experience.

Latino Worship in the U.S.

How do Protestant Latinos worship in the United States? What are the recurring themes in religious worship experiences in Latino Churches in North America? A recent article from Wazchholz (as cited in Wainwright & Westerfield, 2006), asserted that Latin American churches draw their worship practices from liturgical (Lutheran, Anglican, Presbyterian) and non-liturgical (Baptists, Congregationalists) backgrounds. Liturgical churches are characterized by the use of “fixed cultic formulas, rites

and procedures” (Wainright & Westerfield, 2006, p. 657). Hispanic churches from a Mexican-American background will tend to be heavily influenced by Roman-Catholic preferences and practices and will be deeply rooted in first generation Mexican culture (Gonzales, 1996). For these congregations, which prefer to worship in Spanish, the value of reverence in the sanctuary is equated with a quiet and contemplative posture of worship. Therefore, an attitude that proactively adopts emotional, physical and high energy demonstrations of worship would be interpreted as irreverent. Because reverence has been entrenched as a worship value in these contexts, the worship value of joy typically gets overlooked or trumped by reverence.

Gonzales (1996) identifies two themes prevalent in Latino worship in North America. The first theme is that of the *Exile* in which Latinos feel that they have been forced out of their countries of origin because of financial, social, or political reasons. Being in a foreign land, Hispanics often feel like exiles and pilgrims. “Esta no es mi casa” (“this is not my home”), will be the underlying, existential assumption. Worship services with the *Exile* theme will often be characterized by a fond memory of the past and a strong emphasis in the future, “when things will get better.” This enables the worshipers to cope with a difficult present situation. Hope is mixed with sorrow in the different worship elements of the service and nostalgia for the past and a restoration for the future frequently receive emphasis. Aspects like social justice, solving the problems of today in the immediate community are important but not necessarily essential. First generation Hispanic worshipers bring their longings, desires, and dreams to the Lord’s Table. Adventist themes like the Second Coming and the Judgment are strongly welcomed under the *Exile* theme.

The second theme is *Fiesta* which is extensively studied by Justo Gonzales (1996) and Manyard-Reid (2000). The *Fiesta* theme focuses greatly on community and the simplicity of celebrating togetherness. *Fiesta* worship places a high emphasis on the performance of a liturgical prescribed service as well as the attitudes and participation of the worshipers. *Fiesta* worship gives room for the celebration of who God is and His deeds and doctrines. This emphasize the present in addition to the past and the future. The *Fiesta* theme says, “We need to celebrate aqui y ahora!” (Here and now!) *Fiesta* is about encountering God in a way that is real and experiential. Expressions of worship will be characterized by energy and passion. This theme welcomes the Christian emphasis

of social justice and the eminence of God. An Adventist theme such as Christ in his Heavenly Sanctuary reminds the worshiper of the ever present intercession of Christ.

Second and third generation Latinos develop their religious experience in an environment primarily led by first generation Hispanics. Worship preferences among first generation immigrants are considerably different from that of U.S. born Hispanics. In first generation churches the dominant language is Spanish even though young people prefer bilingual worship or even “Spanglish.” Espinoza (2008) believes that for second and third generation Latinos Spanglish is a medium to express their spirituality. Because Latinos in America have a triple consciousness that includes being insiders in the first generation culture, they consider worship with a Hispanic flavor to be important for their spiritual growth. It is impossible to separate Hispanic Americans from their Latino roots, so their worship needs Hispanic elements and influences. Crespo (2003) believes that attempts to separate faith and ethnicity do not favor spiritual growth. Second and third generation Latinos do not have to stop being Hispanic in order to experience maturity in their walk with Christ. Latinos love a variety of musical styles and the section below will show that they are not fixed with a single worship style. Instead, they measure worship styles and public service based on authenticity, spirituality, and biblical values to determine whether or not these help their spiritual growth. De La Torre (2009) believes that worship that is informed by the Latino culture provides U.S. born Hispanics with their ethnic identity. Still, the Church needs to strategize to assure that second and third generation Latinos are given enough space to worship God without feeling that first generation styles and practices are the only way to be spiritual.

Findings from the Worship Preferences Survey

A series of surveys and group interviews were performed in the Lake Union Conference to identify worship preferences among Adventist second and third generation Latinos and traits that are effective in reaching U.S. born Hispanics. Young second and third generation Latinos expressed their perspectives in the following areas: (1) Spiritual practices and language preferences; (2) Worship and musical styles inclinations; (3) Preferences for public worship practices; (4) Perceptions on worship as evangelism.

Latinos that responded to the worship preferences survey stated that language is a factor that does not make a significant difference in their spiritual practices. However, the findings seem to agree with Rah (2009) in that they embrace a triple consciousness in regards to worship. Second and third generation Latinos embrace their bilingual skills to develop a stronger relationship with God. For example, they sing in Spanish, English and even Spanglish.

When it came to worship and musical styles inclinations, participants seem to be less concerned about the style of music or worship and more concerned with elements of authenticity and community. Second and third generation Latinos welcome hymns and contemporary praise and worship songs.

Preferences for public worship practices showed that young Latinos are more in tune with the *Fiesta* theme than the *Exile* theme. In response to the question, “What is the most important thing that you seek when you come to a public worship service?” young Latinos consistently pointed to the need to hear the voice of God in response to practical crisis of life. For them *Fiesta* is the celebratory experience where God can heal our brokenness. The lyrics and the message contained in the songs are important because this is how God speak to young Hispanics. Margarita, a young Latino from Ohio who was drifting away from God, experienced transformation when she attended a worship concert at her local church. According to Margarita, “The words of that song touched my heart; it felt like God was talking to me. Since then I have grown, and I thanked the people that sang that night and the song choices they made. It changed me.”

Energy and passion are very important themes for Latinos. When Latinos perceive that praise leaders lead songs with conviction, passion, and energy, they develop a connection with God. Lizbeth, a young adult from Indiana, said, “God is enthusiastic and energetic; he knows how to get my attention.” Daniel Rodriguez (2011) asserted that the Hispanic church is the place where Latinos “naturally and safely express our deepest and most powerful emotions to God and to one another without concerning ourselves with *que diran?*” (“What will they say?”) (p. 158). A clear example of this is Orlando’s testimony. He attended a worship experience in Chicago led by the praise team *Calls of Worship*. Orlando said:

“I decided to raise my hand as I sang and closed my eyes, the lead singer invited me to go up and

sing with them and I did. I felt full of God and his Spirit and I was able to publicly show that I wanted to worship Him fearlessly. I let go of my comfort zone, and decided not to mind what others thought of me.”

Second and third generation Latinos are not very fond of a critical spirit and controversies that surround the issues of worship and music. They are more interested in bringing an offering of praise and love to God in the context of community. They want to be blessed by inspiring music and a Bible-based sermon.

Second and third generation Latinos perceive the corporate Sabbath service as an opportunity for evangelism and witnessing. There is, however, a sense of duty to preserve the local identity of the church. Jason, from Indiana, thought that he would feel more comfortable inviting his friends to a conference-wide youth rally as an introduction to Christianity before inviting them to a worship service at his church. When Crane (2003) conducted ethnographic research among Seventh-day Adventist Churches in Michigan, he observed that the worship style of traditional, first generation churches “was similar to how Anglo Adventist would have worshipped 10 or 20 years ago. Outside of language, there is no attempt to make it more compatible to Mexican tastes. But there are no complains” (p. 119).

First generation Latino leaders in local churches are still learning how to bridge the cultural gap to reach second and third generation Latinos. There is a general disposition to make the church an accepting worship community for all, including second and third generation visitors, but there is little strategizing and comprehensive efforts to make U.S. born Latinos feel that they belong in the first generation community, apart from accepting everything the first generation offers. Nevertheless, participants in this study identified the following traits for worship that reaches them: Worship must be biblically planned, passionately led and authentically experienced. These characteristics help U.S.-born Latinos to experience spiritual growth and become active disciples of Christ.

Recommendations

Even if second and third generation Latinos can serve as “hyphens” between the dominant culture and first generation Hispanics, I submit that local churches need comprehensive training to bridge the gap between U.S. born Latinos and first generation leadership in matters

of worship and music. This paper recommends that a follow up study be performed to determine the specific training needs of Hispanic churches and second and third generation Latinos. It is recommended that such study be hosted by local conferences in the field of the Lake Union Conference. Other union conferences in North America might face a similar challenge and need. There is great potential in investing time, efforts and resources in the fastest growing population among the largest minority in America.

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