
A Strategic Vision for Reaching U.S. Native Latinos in Chicago

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Abstract

Latino evangelism and church planting has traditionally focused on reaching first generation immigrant families from Spanish speaking countries. North American Division statistics demonstrate that the vast majority of Latino baptisms and membership are first generation Latinos. Yet the majority of Latinos in the U.S. are second and third generation, born in the United States. Generational differences make it clear that U.S. born Latinos cannot be reached with the same methods that are typically used with first generation Latinos.

Through a partnership with the Seventh-day Adventist conferences in the Chicago area and the Lake Union we are proposing a strategy to plant a new church that ministers to second and third generation Latinos. This includes starting with a core group of bicultural and bilingual Latinos who have a passion to reach out to this people group. It also includes church planting instruction, coaching, and networking. The Lake Union leadership would like other Latino churches with English proficiency to implement a refined version of this approach to sharing the Gospel.

Introduction

U.S. born native Latinos (people born or raised from a young age in the United States) are a unique segment of the American population. Having been born and raised in New York City by Puerto Rican parents I always knew that, due to my being surrounded by the American culture and my almost exclusive command of English, I had different perspectives from that of my parents and their generation of friends and family. When I was sixteen years old I joined a Latino Seventh-day Adventist church in the Bronx. As I became involved in that local church I could clearly see that, despite the strong support the pastor and the older members gave to the youth, there were obvious differences in perspectives between first and second generations Latinos.

When I began working for the Lake Union Conference, I had opportunity to visit many Latino

churches. When I checked on how the youth were doing. I noticed that many of the pastors and lay leaders did not speak English very well. As a result, they were limited in understanding the needs of the U.S. native Latino youth in their congregations. I also noticed in several Latino congregations that adults outnumbered the youth who attended the weekly Adventist Youth programs, which were typically presented in Spanish.

In response to my growing concern I explored ways to reach U.S. native Latino youth. The Lake Union Conference organized and sponsored a June, 2010 a youth congress at Andrews University called Conectate (which in English means Connect). Unlike past youth congresses, this particular event targeted second and third generation Latino youth from churches. All the speakers and music and programming were done in both Spanish and English and seminars were designed around the unique needs of U.S. born Latinos. Over 800 young people attended the weekend event onsite and hundreds more watched via

live webcasts. The baptism of 20 Latino youth the last day was the highlight of the entire weekend.

In June of 2011 the Lake Union also sponsored a Youth Leadership training weekend. Once again, the target group was U.S. born Latino youth. Over 350 youth leaders attended and I could see from their reactions that there was a lot of active interest and participation in the event.

Both of these experiences were a clear revelation to me that U.S. born Latinos can be reached for Christ, provided a clear, strategic plan can be developed and implemented. In consultation with several Latino leaders in our union and the North American Division I decided it was time to explore the possibility to pilot a church plant in Chicago to reach this unique segment of the Latino population. The purpose of this paper is to present the rationale for the need of such a church plant and the general principles that need to be applied to make it happen. To help understand the urgent need to reach out to this population I will first present some important demographic information.

Generational Statistics of Latinos

In 2009 there were over 18 million foreign born Latinos and 30.2 million native born Latinos, revealing that native born Latinos made up a majority (62.9 percent) of the total Latino population (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009). Also in 2009 the average age of foreign born Latinos was 38, while the average age of native born was 17 and the average age of a Caucasian was 41 (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009).

Language Usage. According to the findings of the “2002 National Survey of Latinos,” 61% of native born Latinos were English dominant and another 35% were bilingual, while only four percent were Spanish dominant (Pew Hispanic Center, 2002). Five years later, the Pew Hispanic Center found that 88% of native born Hispanics were English dominant and 44% were bilingual (Pew Hispanic Center, 2007). With fertility births for Latino women in 2007 being much higher than non-Latino women (84 births per thousand compared to 63 births per thousand), one would expect the percentages of Latinos being English dominant will continue to increase (Pew Hispanic Center, 2008).

Attitudes and Relationships. First generation Latinos are more likely to express conservative views than second

generation Latinos (Pew Hispanic Center, 2004). In addition, foreign born Latinos tend to marry within their ethnic group while second and third generation Latinos have a higher probability of marrying outside of their ethnic group (Suro & Passel, 2003).

Identity. Few people know that the Spanish colonized America before the English. Europeans from Spain settled in St. Augustine, Florida 42 years before the English founded Jamestown, Virginia (Ochoa, 2001). Yet despite their early arrival to the United States, many Latinos do not feel at home with the majority culture. This is true for Latinos whose dominant language is English. The reality is that U.S. born Latinos are caught between two worlds, between the Hispanic culture of their heritage and the dominant English culture in which they were born. While there is a high degree of acculturation among U.S. natives, many desire to still retain their Latino heritage. By speaking “Spanglish” they are able to mix the language of their dominant culture and also include the language of their parents and ancestors (Morales, 2002).

Latino Adventist Statistics. Ricardo Norton, Director of the Hispanic Ministries department for the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, has shown that the majority of Hispanics in the Adventist Church in North America are first generation Adventists. With 71 percent of the membership being first generation, and 77 percent of baptisms coming from the first generation, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has much to celebrate when it comes to the first generation (Norton, 2011). On the other hand, this exposes a vast gap of neglect in reaching or retaining U.S. born Hispanics. These startling statistics indicate that a course correction must be done to reach this much people group that has been taken for granted or simply ignored by church leaders.

Proposed Strategy for Planting an English Proficient Latino Church

All 36 Hispanic Seventh-day Adventist churches in the Chicago area target Spanish dominant Latinos. Church growth among Latinos in the Lake Union began in Chicago over 65 years ago and has been consistently successful in leading thousands to join the Seventh-day Adventist church (Vasquez, 2000). Because of that success, it has been easy to unconsciously ignore a major segment of the Latino population. That must change.

Conference leadership dialogues and decisions. The Lake Union began a dialogue with the Hispanic coordinators

from both the Lake Region and Illinois conferences over this issue. These leaders established a consensus to give special effort to reach U.S. born Hispanics in each of the conferences. The Lake Union shared with the Illinois conference president the concept of planting an English proficient Latino church. After considerable discussion, local conference leaders approved the project.

Core group. A key ingredient to any church plant is the establishment of a core group (Evans, 2011). In our context a core group of bilingual, bicultural Latinos from the Chicago area must be formed who have a passion for reaching their own generation. Ideally this core group will consist of deeply spiritual people, some of whom would have the characteristics of people described in the book *The Tipping Point* as connectors, mavens and salesmen (Gladwell, 2002). The Lake Union will train this core group by connecting them with NADEI and with Seventh-day Adventist pastors from different parts of the country who are experienced in planting English proficient Latino churches.

This core group will also meet on a weekly basis to pray, study the Bible and focus on the five step process Christ utilized in reaching people with the Gospel, as described in the writings of Ellen White the principles of what true ministry is all about as described in the book *Ministry of Healing* (White, 1970, p. 143):

“Christ’s method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Savior mingled with men as on who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. The he bade them, ‘Follow Me.’”

Additional training for church planting and retention can be gleaned from current literature and resources. For example, seven steps for church planting (Malphurs, 2004) specifies discovering the church’s core values, developing a mission statement, conducting an environmental scan, developing a vision, developing a strategy, implementing that strategy and performing evaluation. Once the church plant is established they will be encouraged to join the *Churches of Refuge* (COR) network and to apply the nine COR values as part of their mission strategy (Whitehead & Boyd, 2009).

Church to Serve as a Bridge for Non-Latinos to Join. According to a report by the *Congressional Research Service* (2011) the population of the United States is becoming

more racially and ethnically diverse, to the extent that by midcentury minorities will be the majority of the population. That will create a challenge regarding how to best share the gospel in such a changing landscape. According to Daniel Rodriguez (2011) U.S. born Latinos are bicultural, which puts them in the unique position to bridge the linguistic, cultural and religious divide between the Hispanic and non-Hispanic communities in the United States. Orlando Crespo (2003) believes that because of their biculturalism, U.S. born Hispanics can serve as interpreters of different worlds to those who cannot fully understand or appreciate them and thus be valuable agents for reconciliation. This explains why English proficient Latino churches that currently exist in different parts of the country tend to attract non-Latino people from a variety of cultural backgrounds. The Lake Union strongly urges the new church plant to fully appreciate its biculturalism so that the church can be an inviting place which warmly embraces people from any cultural background.

Conclusion

In the book of Revelation we see a beautiful description of the people who are part of the restored kingdom of God:

(Revelation 7:9-10 MKJV) After these things I looked, and lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, out of all nations and kindreds and people and tongues, stood before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palms in their hands. And they cried with a loud voice, saying, Salvation to our God sitting on the throne, and to the Lamb.

There is no doubt that the presence of this great multitude is the direct result of the command given by our Lord to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19) and the call of the first angel of Revelation 14 to take the everlasting gospel to every nation, kindred, tongue and people (Revelation 14:6).

The research shows that Seventh-day Adventist members of the majority culture are getting older and their churches are growing at a slower pace than the Latino churches. I agree with Rodriguez when he says that born again, U.S. native Latinos are the answer to the church’s prayers for laborers to work in the harvest (Rodriguez, 2011). It is time that the church fully embrace the demographic transition that is taking place

in our church and our nation and make every effort to bring to reality the words of God's servant:

“Therefore God wants the different nationalities to mingle together, to be one in judgment, one in purpose. Then the union that there is in Christ will be exemplified (White, 1948, pp. 180-181).”

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