
Light at the End of the Tunnel

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Abstract

The Adventist church in North America faces the challenge of reaching the first and second generation of Hispanics simultaneously. Unfortunately, the needs of each generation are different. This reality poses a threat to the future of the Hispanic church. The intention of this chapter is to create awareness of the differences and to suggest practical solutions for the Hispanic church in North America.

The Challenge

Driven by the American dream, millions of immigrants from Spanish-speaking countries immigrated to the United States during the last century. The immigrant community became the main growth vein for the Hispanic Adventist Church (Vazquez, 2000). Along with the well-documented generational gaps affecting the church across North America, an added dilemma threatens the future of the Hispanic Church.

This danger is caused by a cultural disconnect between the first generation (Immigrant Hispanics) and the second generation (American Hispanics). The disconnect manifests itself primarily in language. The majority of first generation Hispanics communicate predominantly in Spanish and they are highly connected to their homeland. On the other hand, “second and third generation Hispanics communicate predominantly in English” (Portes & Rumbaut, p. 277). Subsequently, the disconnect shows itself through differences in culture and traditions. The cultural practices of the immigrant community are closer to what they experienced in their countries of origin while second generation Hispanics more closely resemble the American culture.

Refuge, Respect, Resources

Everyone needs to experience God and all people need spiritual growth and nourishment. Can this happen

simultaneously with first and second generation Hispanics worshipping together? Sadly, the generational disconnect referred to previously gets showcased in the traditional Hispanic church setting. Typically the style of worship, sermon content and delivery, and social programs cater mainly to the first generation. Immigrant Hispanics attend church because they seem to find the fulfillment for three distinguishing and basic sociological needs: The safety of refuge, the assurance of respect, and the availability of resources. That is not necessarily the case for American Hispanics.

The Safety of Refuge. One of the reasons the Hispanic church succeeds in reaching immigrants is because the church fills the social and cultural void that comes from leaving one’s home country. Since friends and family were left behind there is a need to be part of a community that the church naturally fulfills. Whether or not it is intentional, the church easily becomes the hub for immigrant life—the location around which their lives revolve. Unfortunately, because American Hispanics have family and friends in the United States that may or may not be Hispanic, they belong to a community that extends outside the church. Their need for refuge at church doesn’t match the same need that galvanizes the immigrants.

The Assurance of Respect. The language barrier for immigrant Hispanics forces them to be employed primarily in blue-collar jobs. When they become active in the church and are placed in leadership roles, they regain

the respect they once had back “home” and lost when they came to America. By contrast, American Hispanics are not only English speakers, but also, more educated than their parents (Suro, 2007). Consequently, they occupy places of greater responsibility at work than their parents. Contrary to the first generation, second generation Hispanics do not perceive the church as the only place where they can experience respect and satisfaction.

The Availability of Resources. Most programs and ministries are geared to satisfy the needs of the immigrant church community. Hispanic tradition dictates that the first place to seek advice outside of the home is the church. Constrained by language, culture and social network, the church becomes the natural place to find help for the first generation. On the other hand, American Hispanics without a language barrier and with a wider social network have the opportunity to obtain resources from many other places. The situation creates a reason to be concerned. Once they go to college, the majority of second generation Hispanics do not return to the Hispanic Adventist church. Some do not come back to the Adventist church at all.

A New Reality

The dynamic of the Hispanic Church has changed over the last decade. Due to tougher immigration laws and a faulty economy, the number of immigrants has decreased. However, the Hispanic community is the minority group experiencing the largest number of births (Taylor, 2009). Therefore, Hispanic churches that do not understand this trend and make necessary changes will soon find themselves traveling on the road to extinction.

The new reality dictates the need for a new focus in order to prevent disaster and to ensure the future of the Hispanic Church in North America. Instead of entrenchment or fervently repeating the church forms from the Motherland, Hispanics must embrace a new opportunity for ministry in the United States. This new approach requires having the second and third generation of Hispanics at the center.

Reality Check

In order to create the new focus in the Hispanic church, things must change! American Hispanic youth perceive the church as “the place where my parents go to church.” How can the church become *their* church rather

than only their parents’ church? The process begins by understanding the needs of the second generation.

Second generation Hispanics have two main needs. The first one is discover from personal experience that the church is relevant to them and not only to their parents. The second is the assurance that the church is a place where they feel included, a place where they would want to invite their friends. When the church seems more like the church from the first generation’s culture, neither of these two needs are met.

Relevancy. Language reveals the relevance of the church. Will the primary language at church be Spanish or English? Will it be equally shared and translated? Since most second generation Hispanics learn Spanish from their parents, their Spanish understanding is only at the level of a home conversation. Their academic training is in English, so when sermons and meetings are communicated only in Spanish they feel excluded from a complete church experience. Spanish is their secondary language rather than their primary tongue.

Relevance is also challenged by the content of programs, sermons and ministries. The question is: Who is your target group? That will influence the needs you seek to meet. For second generation Hispanics, sermons and ministries that target the needs of new, Hispanic immigrants are like giving a 15 year-old a lecture about arthritis. Completely irrelevant!

Inclusion. As mentioned earlier, language can create an obstacle for including American Hispanics into the church. Leadership can also prevent them from feeling part of it. Two basic questions can reveal these potential exclusive forces: First, are there American Hispanics on the church board? Second, can English be used to communicate in church? If the answer to both questions is, “No,” second generation youth will not be included in that church.

From Surviving to Thriving

Some wring their hands and fret, “Change is impossible.” I disagree because I have seen change in this specific challenge in Hispanic congregations. Here are some suggestions that may improve the ministry of the Hispanic church to better serve in today’s world and prepare the path to the future.

There have been several church plants designed for second generation Hispanics. The results of those efforts are yet to be seen. Nevertheless, the following advice is intended to aid existing Hispanic churches. These recommendations come from years of ministering in the Southern California Conference in well-established Hispanic churches. And yes, it is possible for the church to change!

Pastoral Leadership. Change starts with a vision. As the leader goes, so do the people. In order to start the change, the pastor needs to have a clear vision of the target the church wants to reach (Sanchez, 2006). The pastor has the responsibility to initiate and share the vision with the church. Adults want youth in the church. They just don't know what to do or how to do it. This means the pastor must train and teach the members how to do this. After creating an awareness and projecting a vision, the pastor must instruct the church and its leaders how to take steps for that vision to become reality.

Change with Purpose. Churches get into trouble when change happens without a definite reason. Change is not impossible in the traditional Hispanic church! In general, church leaders want their church to improve. They just need to know the right way to do it and a justified reason to do so. The fear of ill-advised change moves them to say, "We've always done it this way." Give them a justifiable reason for change. Prior to implementing productive change, there must be a well-defined purpose for the change and instruction on why, how, and when it will take place. Cross-cultural change calls for a great deal of awareness as well as sharing lots and lots of information (Lingenfelter, 2008).

Become Inclusive. In order to successfully reach a target group, members of that community need to be part of the leadership. American Hispanics must be part of the leadership of the Hispanic Church if you want to reach American Hispanics. The inclusion of the second generation in the decision making process of the church will build bridges between both generations. Such an asset affects plans because it increases an understanding of a different world view. English can be included in sermons, multimedia slides and printed handouts without abandoning Spanish.

Engage Multiple Senses. The way people assimilate information has changed. The Word of God has not changed, but the ways to share it have. People today "hear" the radio while engaged in other primary activities

such as driving, working out or even doing homework. Information bombards us daily via screens on phones, cars, television and billboards (Hippis, 2009). Computers allow sound, sight and touch in every Internet experience. Therefore, this generation can't be expected to remain interested, much less learn, when someone is only speaking for forty minutes to an hour and in a language they can't totally understand.

The task is not easy and the work is just beginning. The Hispanic church faces a gloomy future if changes are not done. "Fear not" (Joshua 1:9), was the message the Lord gave Joshua when he was about to enter into a new and daunting task. Joshua understood that the experience he had during his youth would carry him through the challenging future. The work was not going to be easy. Neither was it going to be quick. Lots of changes and adjustments needed to be made. He understood the task required for everybody to comprehend their gifts and responsibilities. And victory would come one city at a time in the Promised Land. He was sure there was light at the end of the tunnel as well as lights along the way.

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