



**Good News from the Hispanic Church:  
The community-serving activities of Hispanic Protestant churches**

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*Books and Culture*, 1 July 2004

We've heard it many times now: Hispanics are America's majority minority. Newspapers have reported the spectacular growth in the numbers of Hispanics living in the United States, especially in nontraditional locations. We've learned that from 1990 to 2000, the Hispanic population swelled 300 percent in Georgia, 278 percent in Tennessee, and 117 percent in Indiana. National Geographic recently noted that Alaska is now celebrating Cinco de Mayo and that Grand Island, Nebraska (Nebraska?) boasts a Spanish-language radio station. According to the business magazines, corporate America is increasingly underwriting Spanish-language advertising while firms puzzle out how to communicate effectively to the 17 different Hispanic subcultures now represented in the United States. Political pundits speculate about the impact of Hispanic voters and policymakers argue about immigration. We've been regaled with stories of Hispanic superstars like Ricky Martin and Jennifer Lopez (who seems to have appeared on more magazine covers than anyone since Jackie Kennedy). What we haven't heard very much about is the Hispanic church.

Two recent studies shed some light on this subject. Interim findings from the three-year investigation, "Hispanic Churches in American Public Life" (HCAPL), funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts, offer some counterintuitive insights about Hispanic Christians' political opinions and activities. And the Hudson Institute's Faith in Communities initiative, with support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, has conducted a year-long study revealing much about the community-serving activities of Hispanic Protestant churches. Neither of these studies provides exhaustive information, but they do offer some intriguing snapshots—welcome indeed when a subject of such importance has been so conspicuously under-reported.

**Religious Hispanics in the Public Square**

Gaston Espinoza, a Latino studies scholar at Northwestern University, oversaw the HCAPL project. Its study of over 2,000 Hispanics was the largest bilingual survey in U.S. history on Latino religion and politics.

Fully 93 percent surveyed identified themselves as Christians: 70 percent Catholic, 23 percent Protestant. Increasingly, they are religious conservatives. Evangelical Protestantism is growing among second- and third-generation immigrants, and more and more Hispanic Catholics are referring to themselves as "born again." This religious conservatism is associated with social conservatism on such issues as abortion and

homosexuality. Hispanics are strong supporters of prayer in schools, and over half believe that creationism should be taught alongside evolution in the public schools. <br /><br />

Some observers, says Espinoza, too quickly assume that such positions mean that "Latinos are lock-stock-and-barrel with the Republican party." Instead, the HCAPL findings revealed that Hispanics more often vote Democratic. A startling 73 percent of Hispanic evangelicals voted for Bill Clinton in the 1996 election. Democratic hopefuls shouldn't take Hispanics for granted, though—fully 37 percent of those interviewed labeled themselves "independents" when asked their party affiliation. And Hispanics are enthusiastic supporters of school vouchers and of George W. Bush's faith-based initiative. <br /><br />

In short, Latinos occupy an intriguing "in-between" space on the political spectrum. This space, Espinoza asserts, "may enable Latinos to help transform the liberal-conservative, black-white, and Republican-Democratic divide that has dominated American politics for the last half century by forcing both parties to change and adapt to the growing needs of our increasingly diverse and multicultural society." <br /><br />

<strong>Addressing Social Needs</strong><br /><br />

As the Latino population has grown, so have the number of studies pointing out the challenges facing Hispanics in America. Poverty is perhaps the greatest. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, the Hispanic poverty rate surpassed that of African-Americans in the mid-1990s. In addition, Hispanics are more likely than other ethnic groups to lack medical insurance. Roughly a third of all Hispanic students fail to complete high school—about four times the rate of whites and twice that of blacks. Hispanics complete college less often than do whites or blacks. <br /><br />

While these problems are well-documented, less well-known are the efforts of Hispanics of faith to meet these challenges. Far from being unaware of or unengaged in the life of their communities, many Hispanic congregations are reaching out to try to make a difference. The Hispanic church in America is a vibrant source of life, celebration, and service. <br /><br />

Throughout late 2002 and early 2003, the Hudson Institute's Faith in Communities program conducted a survey of 468 Hispanic Protestant church pastors across the nation. The survey focused on the community-serving activities of their congregations. We found that an impressive 73 percent of Hispanic congregations offered social service programs for community residents. These included some 49 different types of services, ranging from short-term relief programs (e.g., food or clothing assistance) to longer-term, relational ministries (e.g., mentoring, tutoring, ESL, counseling, substance abuse recovery programs) to community development initiatives (e.g., affordable housing development, health care, church-sponsored schools). The most common social programs offered were counseling and food assistance (see Table below). <br /><br />

The percentage of Hispanic congregations reporting engagement in social services appears similar to that of African American churches involved in community outreach, if we compare the Hudson survey findings with those of leading black church researcher Andrew Billingsley. (We have to use some caution in making the comparison, since questions in the two studies were not worded exactly the same.) Billingsley, who surveyed hundreds of black churches through a series of regional sub-samples for his 1999 book, *Mighty Like a River: The Black Church and Social Reform*, found that between 66 percent and 75 percent of African-American churches operate at least one community serving program.<sup>1</sup>

The comparability in the level of outreach by Hispanic and black churches is intriguing because of the perception that exists that African American congregations are more active. Key gatekeepers in the Hispanic Protestant community say that this erroneous perception exists for two reasons.

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The first, according to Michael Mata of the Claremont School of Theology, is that researchers often look for "bricks and mortar" projects when they are trying to determine a congregation's level of community engagement. African American churches have been more involved in such visible community and economic development projects—building affordable housing, developing shopping centers—than have Hispanic churches. Mata reports that in his experience, when researchers don't see similar types of activities, "then they make the assumption that we're not doing anything of relevance or importance." Since Hispanic congregations are more involved in less visible "human services" rather than community development, their work can be neglected.

Luis Cortes, president of Nueva Esperanza and perhaps the best-known Latino Protestant leader involved in church-based community development nationwide, offers a second reason for the misperception. African American clergy, he notes, are often politically active in endorsing local candidates for mayor or Congress. "They'll make political pronouncements that are covered by the press," Cortes says. "We don't do that. As a result, our work goes unnoticed." Cortes goes on to argue that the media treats Latino clergy differently than they do faith leaders in the black, Jewish, and Muslim communities.

"When things happen in the black community, the press goes to the black clergyperson," Cortes says. "In the Jewish community, they [the media] will go to Jewish political leadership and Jewish religious leadership. In the Muslim community, they do the same. But in the Hispanic community, they always go to Hispanic politicians." The result, Cortes sums up, is general public ignorance about the contributions of the Hispanic faith community. "When you're not in the media," he laments, "you don't exist."

Good News about the Unengaged

Though most Hispanic churches are active in their neighborhoods, some are not, and the Hudson study tried to learn why. The most common reason given by church leaders for not being more involved in community ministry was lack of "know-how." These pastors

indicated that they wanted to do more, but were uncertain about the steps to take to launch an effective ministry. Other pastors reported that their churches were very small and lacked resources for running outreach programs. Only eight percent said that the reason their church was not involved in community service was because they believed it was more important to engage in evangelism than it was to conduct social services. <br /><br />

This last finding was encouraging to leaders like Cortes and Ray Rivera, the head of the Latino Pastoral Action Center in New York City. They recall when they were "theologically suspect" in the Latino community for their emphasis on social activism. "Now we no longer have to defend ourselves theologically," Cortes reports. Rivera says that the survey finding further solidifies the impression he has had in the last few years regarding the mainstreaming of holistic ministry among Hispanic evangelicals. He tells of a major crusade sponsored two years ago by the largest Hispanic congregation in the United States. The conference gathered the premier "Latino Billy Grahams," but organizers also brought Rivera and Cortes to speak on the final day about what Rivera calls "holistic evangelism"—meeting the needs of the body as well as the soul. "That concept that evangelism has to be holistic," says Rivera, "is still not on the top of the list [of priorities for the Church]. But it's making the list now." He predicts that "holistic ministry will be the dominant paradigm of the Latino church in the 21st century." <br /><br />

#### New Collaborations <br /><br />

Not only are more Hispanic faith leaders seeing holistic ministry as legitimate, they are conducting that work in innovative ways that involve interesting partnerships. The Hudson study showed that a substantial portion of Hispanic churches are working with police departments, public schools, secular nonprofits, and mayor's offices to better their communities. Youth Pastor Max Torres of El Tabernaculo Assembly of God in Houston, for example, has won entry to local public schools and worked there with teachers and guidance counselors to transform the lives of scores of Hispanic youth over the past twenty years. Torres also serves on the mayor's anti-gang task force. Its director, Adrian Garcia, gives much credit to Torres for the enormous drop in gang-related violence in the community that has been achieved in the last several years. <br /><br />

In Riverside, California, local judges give substance abusers the option of jail time or rehab at The Path of Life, a men's residential recovery home sponsored by a 150-member Hispanic congregation of the same name. Members of El Encino Covenant Church in Downey, California, have been invited by the local middle school to teach parenting classes for Spanish-speaking parents. And a few miles away, members from My Friend's House, a Hispanic congregation of 300 led by Rev. Jim Ortiz, partner with HUD in building affordable homes in Los Angeles. <br /><br />

Individual congregations are also achieving impressive results in combating some of the most pressing problems in the Hispanic community: lack of health insurance, poor

numbers of Hispanic college entrants, and high rates of school drop-out. Three stories from churches in Atlanta, Boston, and Phoenix are illustrative. <br /><br />

Helping the Uninsured in Atlanta Rev. Manuel Lozano vividly recalls the day his daughter, Diana, was complaining that her stomach hurt. At first, he and his wife hoped the problem would diminish with a little rest. It didn't. Her pain kept increasing. They realized she needed to see a doctor. Lacking health insurance, Rev. Lozano took Diana to one of Atlanta's "walk-in" clinics where he could pay with cash. But the physician there was concerned that the child might be having an appendicitis attack. He encouraged Lozano to take his daughter to the emergency room for a more thorough examination. After three hours of tests and consultations at the Gwinnett County hospital, Lozano and his wife were relieved to hear that Diana did not have to have her appendix removed. Doctors said her problem was a simple infection that could be cured with medicine. Indeed, she was already on the road to healing. The financial trial of the experience, however, was only just beginning. Lozano paid \$500 in cash to the hospital that day, then received a whopping \$3,500 bill in the mail some days later. He could hardly believe his eyes, and remembers groaning, "Oh God, have mercy." <br /><br />

Lozano's situation is the norm among Atlanta's Hispanic pastors, 70 percent of whom (according to Lozano's own survey) lack health insurance. According to the Pew Hispanic Center, nationwide, among all the major ethnic groups, Hispanics have the lowest rates of health insurance coverage. In 2000, 34 percent of Hispanics under 65 lacked any type of medical insurance. Lozano's own plight and his concern for fellow pastors spurred a vision: creating a health clinic specifically designed to serve uninsured Hispanics. <br /><br />

His dream was realized in November 2002 with the opening of the Emmanuel Health Clinic. Staffed by bilingual medical professionals, the clinic serves some 15 to 20 patients per day. To stay afloat financially while offering care at discounted rates, the clinic divides patients into three different groups. Members of Hispanic congregations throughout Atlanta can purchase affordable, significantly discounted health plans through the "Mi Promesa" program. Under it, \$120 annually covers a yearly physical exam, lab work, and an annual dental checkup (complete with X-rays and cleaning), along with discounted office visits throughout the year. Hispanic residents in the community who aren't churchgoers can purchase the "Premio Salud" plan, which costs more than the Mi Promesa plan but about 20 percent less than similar health plans offered by commercial health insurance companies. The income earned through customers purchasing these two plans makes possible the "Mi Pass" (Ministry for Pastoral Health Services) program, in which Hispanic pastors and their families receive free medical and dental care at the clinic. <br /><br />

The benefits of the clinic to Atlanta's Hispanic community are clear. The average visit at Emmanuel costs patients about 30 to 50 percent less than they would pay elsewhere. There are a few free medical clinics in Atlanta, but Hispanics can have difficulty accessing these services for at least two reasons. First, some are illegal aliens and thus ineligible for government-sponsored free care. Second, the free private clinics sometimes

require a patient to show his/her paycheck stubs as proof of income (so that the clinics can determine whether the patient is eligible to receive free care). This is a problem for many Hispanics who work in the informal, cash economy. <br /><br />

Moreover, asserts Emmanuel Health Center's chief physician, Dr. Adolfo Molina, walk-in clinics that advertise "Se Habla Espanol," don't. Doctors and nurses have only limited Spanish language skills and the result is that many patients do not fully understand their diagnoses or how to take their prescribed medicines. By contrast, Emmanuel can serve patients with no English language ability and it refers them to two partnering pharmacies staffed by Spanish-speaking personnel. <br /><br />

Church members from Iglesia Cristiana Emmanuel, the predominantly Columbian 135-member congregation Lozano has led since 1998, play important roles in the health ministry. A few church members with professional experience in the marketing field, for example, designed the marketing strategy for selling the Premio Salud health care plans to the local Hispanic population. Church volunteers carry brochures advertising the health plans to shopping centers frequented by Hispanic families. Another professional from the church created the computer databases used at the health clinic to manage customer records and accounts. Jose Flores, an architect from the church, is currently helping Rev. Lozano with the design of the office space layout for a second clinic that Emmanuel Health Services hopes to open in the coming months. <br /><br />

Getting Into College <br /><br />

According to a recent survey by the Tomas Rivera Policy Institute, 96 percent of Hispanics surveyed expected their children to go to college. But 66 percent failed to answer four out of eight basic questions about what it takes to make college a reality. This, and the high Hispanic drop-out rate from high school, helps explain why fewer Hispanics than other ethnic groups enter college. (And even among those Hispanics who do, only 10 percent graduate from four-year colleges and universities.)

Leon de Judah, a nondenominational, charismatic Hispanic congregation in Boston that now boasts some 800 members, is doing something about this problem. The church's "Higher Education Resource Center" (HERC) offers classes to help prepare 10th, 11th, and 12th grade students to increase their scores on standardized high school tests and college entrance exams. The center also provides assistance to students and their families in completing college admissions applications and navigating financial aid processes. And Leon de Judah is mobilizing mentors for high school students. Most are Christians attending universities in the Boston area; these young adults can relate well to the teenagers, discipling them in Christian character while helping them prepare academically for their own college careers. <br /><br />

Twelve years ago, Leon de Judah left its affluent Cambridge address and moved into the tough Roxbury-Dorchester section of Boston. Church leaders were convinced, says HERC Director Samuel Acevedo, that it was time to engage in "social evangelism"—

meeting practical needs in the low-income community while continuing to call people into vibrant worship of Jesus Christ. <br /><br />

Now, Tuesday and Thursday nights find the church packed with young people completing homework, taking sat prep classes, or learning how to write an effective essay for a college enrollment application. In the beginning, the program offered just the classes. Acevedo and others soon saw the need for a mentoring component. Acevedo explains, "The theory behind the mentoring program is to awaken a vision in these young people that college . . . is both possible and desirable; that [it] is something that normal people go to—it's not just [for] astronauts and brain surgeons. That's important," he adds, "because we're working under the premise that most of these kids [are] the first to go to college. So there are no points of reference. The mentor becomes the point of reference." Acevedo also looks for ways to support and educate Hispanic parents about the whole college process. HERC sponsors college fairs, arranges campus visits, and helps parents complete complicated financial aid forms. <br /><br />

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Staying in School <br /><br />

Of course, kids who don't finish high school won't be going on to college. So, in Phoenix, The Church at the Neighborhood Center sponsors a comprehensive stay-in-school initiative that works with some of the highest-risk teens in the community. The "I Can Do It" program (ICDI) is achieving success with youth who have known more suffering in their short years than most adults experience in a lifetime. These are the children of prisoners, the siblings of gang bangers. They are victims of physical and sexual abuse; the daughters of prostitutes and the sons of crack addicts. But 98 percent of the kids involved in ICDI are maintaining at least C averages and meeting attendance requirements to keep their school journey on track. <br /><br />

According to ICDI director Debbi Speck, the program is premised on the belief that high-risk students can succeed in school, if they are just given a reason to. They must have hope. They need to believe that school matters. More importantly, they need to believe that they matter. ICDI gives kids reasons to stay in school and relationships through which they can begin to receive genuine love. <br /><br />

Church members serve as tutors and mentors, visiting participating teens on campus or at home at least weekly. Some mentors have even had teens live with them for weeks or months when the students' home situations became unbearable. Each student is also placed in a small peer group, typically led by an adult church volunteer. The groups range in size from four to eight youth and are same gender. The groups gather every three weeks, usually for some fun, "horizon-stretching" activity. Program staff have found that these groups make possible the kinds of peer-to-peer support needed to make school attendance normal and college enrollment plausible. ICDI also rewards participants for their school attendance and academic performance through a combination of financial incentives and special trips. <br /><br />

The program works. Rosalba Espinoza, whose son and daughter are enrolled in it, is just one of the satisfied parents. "Before Ramon [her older son] was in this program," she reports, "I used to get calls all the time—his teacher was always telling me that Ramon was talking back to him and getting into fights. Now that he's in the program, I'm happy because they keep track of him, and he doesn't want to get in trouble." She smiles. "He's like, 'If I do, if I have bad grades or something, I won't go on the field trip.'" <br /><br />

Dr. Ruth Ann Marston, a prominent public educator in Phoenix, commends the program's approach. "Children have very little ability to judge whether what they are learning now is important or not," she explains. "They need a system of short-term rewards." ICDI delivers that. Even more important, Marston adds, it offers the one thing these kids need most: a loving adult in their life who makes them feel special. <br /><br />

Teens in the program refer to their mentors in family terms. Katrina\*, a high-performance senior who is headed toward a career as an Ob-Gyn doctor, says her mentor hasn't just been a mentor: "She's been my mother. She's been my best friend. Really, she's been everything, like a sister." Other students agree. One young woman, who was sexually abused by her father almost nightly for years until he was finally put behind bars, shared her life story with her mentor. <br /><br />

"When I needed time," this 17-year-old recalls, "she always made time for me. I always told her everything." This student credits the love of her mentor for the fact that she remained in school, graduated, and did not "end up on drugs." <br /><br />

#### Strengthening Hispanic Outreach <br /><br />

Jim Towey, the director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, recently visited The Church at the Neighborhood Center in Phoenix, commending its deep investment in the community. Church leaders admit they don't get too many calls from the White House, but plenty of inquirers from within the faith community ask for advice from them about launching their own outreach programs. Luis Cortes at Nueva Esperanza is also inundated with requests from Hispanic pastors and church workers for information, training, and resources for new ministries. Cortes says that the media attention generated by the President's faith-based initiative has stirred up increased interest by Hispanic faith leaders in community engagement. <br /><br />

But, Cortes warns, unlike in the black community, the Hispanic church lacks strong institutions for building the capacity of local churches to do effective community development. Although more seminaries and Bible Institutes attended by future Hispanic pastors are talking about community outreach, robust training programs with classroom and hands-on curricula are rare. <br /><br />

"I almost feel like we may have lit a fuse to a powder keg and we were not ready to deal with the explosion," Cortes says. Ray Rivera, too, has noticed a hunger among young Hispanic church workers for more training in community ministry. "They study to be a pastor," Rivera notes, "but after they graduate, they still feel a need to get something else."



I see them wanting to engage in training that equips them and empowers them for a holistic ministry." If the training institutions shaping future Hispanic pastors—both Protestant and Catholic—can rise to this challenge, the faith sector may well become the principal vehicle through which America's growing Hispanic community achieves a greater share in the American dream. <br /><br />

#### Twelve Most Common Types of Social Service Programs Offered

Service Type	Number of Churches	% of Churches
1. Pastoral counseling	260	55.6%
2. Food assistance	247	52.8%
3. Family Counseling	210	44.9%
4. Clothes assistance	192	41%
5. Referrals to other helping agencies	162	34.6%
6. Emergency financial assistance	128	27.4%
7. Aid to immigrants	92	19.9%
8. ESL classes	87	18.6%
9. Aid to prisoners & their families	77	16.5%
10. Tutoring programs	72	15.4%
11. Substance abuse rehab/counseling	56	12%
12. Parental training	50	10.7%

n = 468<br /><br />

1. Andrew Billingsley, <em>Mighty Like a River: The Black Church and Social Reform</em> (Oxford Univ. Press, 1999).