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Hispanics in America

Who are today's Hispanics and how can your church reach them? Take an in-depth look at this exploding population and learn why churches nationwide are discovering that to be relevant in their community, they must intentionally break down cultural barriers and engage Latinos.

by Samuel Rodriguez

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When Reynaldo Gomez and his wife, Soledad, migrated from Mexico to the United States in the mid 1980s, they arrived with the desire shared by immigrants throughout the centuries.

"I came looking for a better life for my wife and children," Reynaldo says in broken English, explaining how the town where he lived enslaved people in a life of poverty, disease and drug dealing. "I did not come here just to succeed—I came so my family could survive."

Like the Gomezes, millions of Hispanics—the United States' largest minority group, according to the U.S. Census Bureau—have migrated to America with the same goal in mind: a chance to better their lives. The influx of Latinos like Reynaldo and Soledad offers an unprecedented opportunity for outreach and evangelism that many believe will transform the face of Christianity in America. Today, Latinos are participating in communities throughout the country—and not just in California, Texas, Florida, New York and the Southwest, U.S. areas historically known for large Hispanic populations. From North Dakota to Wyoming and Alabama to Maine, people of Hispanic origin are making a widespread impact.

And their influence has not gone unnoticed. Wall Street and Madison Ave., as well as Washington, D.C., understand the potential within the thriving Hispanic American community. While corporate America engages Hispanic consumers and political operatives recruit Hispanic voters, churches and ministries nationwide are discovering that to be relevant in their community today, they must have a strategy for reaching Latinos.

The Numbers

At the end of the day, demographic realities and sheer numbers mandate that the Church engage this community. Consider the statistics: As of July 1, 2005, the U.S. Hispanic population was an estimated 42.7 million (not including Puerto Rico's 3.9 million residents or the entire undocumented population estimated at 6.6 million), constituting 14% of the nation's total

population.

Moreover, Hispanic Americans are an ethnically and racially diverse population. For example, in 2005 the Latino ethnicities on the U.S. mainland were composed of Mexican Americans (64%), Puerto Ricans (10%), Cubans (3%), Salvadorans (3%), and Dominicans (3%). The remaining 17% are of other Central American, South American, or other Hispanic or Latino races.

And because 75% of all U.S. Hispanics are under age 40 and 34% are 18 years or younger, this community exemplifies future growth potential. When you consider the U.S. Census Bureau's projections that by the year 2009, one out of every six Americans will be of Hispanic descent and by the year 2020, the Latino population will total roughly 102.6 million people or 24% of the population, it's difficult to deny the need for thinking of Hispanics as a top-tier group that demands the Church's immediate attention.

La Familia

Yet while reaching Latinos is essential to 21st century ministry, it presents its own unique challenges. Possibly, more than any other ethnic community your church is trying to engage, you cannot successfully meet the spiritual needs of Hispanics without understanding the various dynamic realities embedded in *la familia*, or the family. The typical Hispanic household unites threads of culture, class, education and spirituality.

To get an accurate picture of the average Hispanic family, take a closer look at Reynaldo and Soledad Gomez's household. After coming to the United States and working in the fields of the Central California Valley, Reynaldo, the second-oldest family member, brought Soledad and her brother to America to join him. Like many first-generation Hispanic immigrants, Reynaldo works as a field laborer while Soledad works in the service industry. Though they speak both Spanish and English, they use Spanish predominately at home.

A few years later, Reynaldo's mother and family matriarch, Mama Rosa, and his sister joined them in California. Mama Rosa speaks no English, and she surrounds herself with Spanish media and entertainment. She stays connected to the old country via telephone and Spanish television. Because their children take care of them, the matriarch/patriarch in a Hispanic household usually has no need to learn English or become acculturated.

While today Reynaldo proudly exhibits his naturalization documentation, many members of his family—excluding his wife and children—live in constant fear of *la migra* or immigration customs enforcement agents. Reynaldo and Soledad's two children, David and Rosalinda, speak both English and Spanish fluently. American born, they see themselves as both Hispanic and American. As second-generation Hispanics, they're working toward establishing themselves and their children in American culture.

David, the eldest of Reynaldo and Soledad's children, is a successful entrepreneur. He owns a construction company employing more than 50

workers who are mostly Hispanic.

"I want to leave my children an economic foundation to pass along to their children," he says, adding that his generation exhibits a commitment to work, education and economic mobility vastly different from the media's stereotypical images of Hispanics. "We want to learn English, work hard, move up and succeed," he says.

David has two children of his own—both good examples of third-generation Hispanics. They're highly in tune with American pop culture, speak English better than Spanish and have more white-collar aspirations with higher-level educational opportunities than their parents.

"My children are 100% pure U.S. born who love Mama's enchiladas on Monday and hot dogs and fries on Tuesday," David explains.

The differences in language, education, economic and legal status between first, second and third generations in the Gomez family can be difficult to maneuver, Reynaldo says. He acknowledges that the family fights to stay together.

The Bigger Picture

Understanding the dynamics of a Hispanic household is essential to reaching Latinos. However, seeing the bigger picture of Hispanics in America today can help bust stereotypes, as well as reveal physical and emotional needs in the Hispanic community that churches of all sizes could help meet.

Language. According to U.S. Census data, the majority of Hispanics who speak Spanish are also proficient in English. Some 31 million U.S. residents age five and older speak Spanish at home. Among those who speak Spanish at home, more than half say they speak English "very well."

Occupations. The U.S. Hispanic population accounts for a wide variety of occupations. In 2005, there were 38,500 Hispanic physicians and surgeons; 50,400 Hispanic postsecondary teachers; 53,400 chief executives of businesses; 38,100 lawyers; and 5,000 news analysts, reporters and correspondents.

In 2006, fewer than one in five (18%) Hispanics worked in managerial, professional and related occupations. However, Hispanics disproportionately hold employment in service and support occupations. One in four (24%) work in service occupations; 22% in sales and office jobs; 15% in construction, extraction and maintenance jobs; and 19% in production, transportation, and material-moving occupations.

Education. In 2003, Hispanics made up 18% of the nation's elementary and high school students. In 2004, 58% of Hispanics age 25 and older had at least a high school education, and 12% had earned a bachelor's degree or higher.

Moreover, 714,000 Hispanics aged 25 years and older held advanced degrees (masters, professional and doctorate level) in 2004. Nonetheless, in various communities, the high school dropout rate is more than 50%. The difference between communities with high or low dropout rates is largely determined by how recently students' parents have immigrated to the United States.

"Recent Latino immigrants depend on harvest opportunities and constant migration for economic survival," explains Lydia Gonzalez, a national Hispanic educational consultant. "They cannot enroll their children for prolonged periods when they have to move a few weeks later."

Income. In 2005, the real median income of U.S. Hispanic households was \$35,967. That same year, the poverty rate among Latinos was 21.8% compared to 8.3% for whites.

Religion. Though 68% of foreign-born Hispanics consider themselves Roman Catholic, many convert to evangelical Christianity once they reach the United States. More than four-fifths of all Hispanic evangelicals (43%) are former Catholics, citing a desire for a direct, personal relationship with God as the main reason for their conversion. Currently, 15% of Latinos are born-again or evangelical Protestants.

Also worth noting is the explosive growth among Latinos of renewalist Christianity—a movement which places emphasis on the work and presence of the Holy Spirit in daily life and worship. More than half of Latino Catholics and Protestants identify themselves as charismatics, leading experts to believe that the emergence of Spirit-filled worship practices among Hispanic believers will certainly forge great change in America's religious landscape.

So the big picture of Hispanics in America offers the Church both opportunities and challenges in the years ahead. Taking into account recent political and legislative initiatives in immigration reform, the next decades may very well see a steep decline in new Hispanic immigrants. However, the birth rate in the Hispanic community will accommodate the projected growth, and research indicates that over the next 40 years Latinos will continue to thrive numerically.

As English becomes the dominant language among Hispanics (statistics show this will happen by the second generation), economic and academic success will follow shortly thereafter.

"As Hispanics master the English language, they exhibit a higher propensity to further education, start a business, purchase property and become civically engaged than other minority groups," says Rev. Felix Posos, chair of the Hispanic National Association of Evangelicals.

New immigration laws may hinder mass Hispanic migration to America; however, sociologists agree that the Latino population will continue to grow, acquiring the business acumen and the intellectual wherewithal to discover

and realize the American Dream.

Six Keys

Now that you know more about Hispanics in America, how can your church engage this community and create customized programs and strategies that bring relevance to your ministry? While developing a ministry that reaches first-, second- and third-generation Latinos isn't easy, it is integral to your church's community impact. Consider these six ministry keys: Embrace the cultural heritage; focus on relationships and families; assist in assimilation; facilitate acculturation; capture the entrepreneurial spirit; and connect generations.

Cultural heritage. For Rev. Saturnino Gonzalez, pastor of 4,000-member megachurch, Calvary Temple in Orlando, Fla., celebrating Hispanic heritage remains vital to reaching Hispanics. The Hispanic community, he says, still desires to maintain its cultural past, particularly between first, second and third generations.

"I do not leave my cultural heritage at the doorsteps of a church," Gonzalez says. "I want to be part of a church that embraces me, my culture and my heritage."

More churches in America today are celebrating Cinco de Mayo (a Mexican national holiday commemorating a legendary battle in Mexico's fight for independence). Others are celebrating the cultures and heritages of their congregation by hosting an international day, giving each person or group the opportunity to exhibit clothing, food, songs and artifacts that reflect their country of origin.

Familial focus. Moreover, outreach strategies that center on nourishing personal relationships, especially home visits that include opportunities to eat, laugh and share stories often result in greater success than impersonal casual invitations to a church service.

"If I can eat with you and sit in your living room, I can worship with you and sit in your pews," says Eva Rodriguez, senior pastor of multicultural congregation Christian Worship Center in Sacramento, Calif.

Dr. Gaston Espinosa, assistant professor of philosophy and religious studies at Claremont McKenna College in Claremont, Calif., and research director for the 2003 Hispanic Churches and Public Life Study, believes the recent success of Pentecostal/charismatic churches in drawing large numbers of Hispanics resonates with the DNA of a community that values relationships, experience and openness.

"Latinos are attracted to Pentecostalism because it offers salvation, healing and the promise of hope for a better tomorrow," he explains, adding that successful Hispanic outreach offers a home, a family and a strong sense of community where everyone counts—extremely important for Hispanic

immigrants who instinctively view the church as a home and a refuge.

And because marriage and family are central to the Hispanic ethos, and Latinos frown on cohabitation, providing programs and minifor marital enrichment, childcare and family outreach can be key to meeting needs.

Assimilation and acculturation assistance. Resources that offer life skills and help Hispanics to assimilate into American society and culture are integral to reaching the first generation and recent immigrant segment of the community.

Consider providing much-needed services like English as a Second Language classes, civic courses, and citizenship and naturalization assistance. Moreover, networking Hispanic businesspersons and offering basic financial management courses enable a church to address poverty in the Hispanic community while simultaneously embracing its entrepreneurial spirit.

"Hispanics seek spiritual enrichment and socio/economic enhancement from their churches," says Everardo Zavala, director of the National Hispanic Business and Professional Christian Task Force. "Churches must reach out to Latinos with the grace to get them to heaven and the tools for success here on earth."

Espinosa adds that any outreach to this community must include an opportunity for advancement.

"Latinos do not desire to be members of a congregation," he says. "They desire to be shareholders of a vision with opportunity for personal and spiritual growth."

Generational connection. To minister to the multiple generations with varying levels of acculturation, some churches are offering their worship services and printed programs in both Spanish and English. Successful outreach ministry that resonates with multiple Hispanic generations requires that churches engage leadership who speak the language and can connect to each generation.

Leading Latino scholars Espinosa and Dr. Jesse Miranda agree that identifying and factoring in variances of income, language and education assist in helping churches create a viable outreach ministry.

"Latinos are about reflection while Anglos are about action," says Dr. Jesse Miranda, professor at Vanguard University and founder of AMEN, the National Alliance of Evangelical Ministries. "To engage Latinos, one must understand that first-generation Latinos are insulated while second and third generations are about acculturation."

He adds that viable Latino outreach strategy must include two approaches—one for the recent immigrant and another for second- and third-generation Latinos.

"The first generation thinks 'barrio' while the second generation thinks 'global,' " Miranda explains.

However, your church approaches Hispanic outreach, successful, viable and sustainable outreach models to Latinos may no longer be a matter of choice. Migratory trends and demographic realities require churches across the country to engage this community, not as an option but as a prerequisite for survival and relevancy. In the end, a mosaic that enriches a local church with purpose, passion and promise significantly blesses churches and ministries that reach out to this rapidly growing community. Lord of the harvest, send us laborers for the harvest is Hispanic and the harvest is great.

Considered an expert on the Hispanic community, Samuel Rodriguez is the president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference (NHCLC), an organization he started six years ago to be a voice for Hispanic evangelicals.

More Than Just Latino

Walk down any grocery store's Hispanic foods aisle, and the variety of spices alone is a sight to behold. This same diversity also applies to the Latino community, asserts Liz Correa, programs director for the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference (NHCLC; nhclc.org).

"Latinos are not all the same," says Correa. "From income to language to cultural heritage, this community cannot be considered a monolithic block." To grasp a proper understanding of the Hispanic community then, regional and cultural differences must be considered, Correa says.

While similar cultural underpinnings connect the Latino community as a whole, it's important to know and pay attention to ethnic differences. Samuel Rodriguez, president of the NHCLC, identifies three unifying commonalities of Hispanics: language, spirituality and an unrelenting commitment to family.

"These three values bring the Latino community together. But besides these three, we have subcultural differences that need to be understood by churches seeking to reach Latinos in their neighborhoods," Rodriguez says.

These subcultural differences emerge via geographic origin, level of acculturation into American society, and generational identification.

Geographically, Latinos can be separated by three main regional breakdowns: Central American and Mexican, South American and Caribbean. Between these three regions, differences in musical style, culinary tastes and social practices abound.

"Music that would attract a Caribbean Latino would be more rhythmic salsa," Rodriguez explains. "But Central American music is more lyrical. So these differences force us to look at the nuances of each regional culture."

Moreover, within the Latino immigrant community, varying levels of acculturation and generational identification yield differences in interests and concerns. To effectively minister to local Hispanic communities, therefore, Rodriguez suggests that churches proactively reach out and dialogue with their neighborhood Latinos.

"As a pastor, you must do your due diligence and spend a couple of hours getting to know the regional cultures represented in your area. Once informed, it's crucial that you embrace the cultures," Rodriguez says. For example, customizing outreach specifically to the Cuban-Americans or Peruvians in a community can lead to an unprecedented outreach opportunity for American churches to allow the growing Hispanic community to enliven their congregations for the future.

Says Rodriguez: "Churches really have an opportunity here by telling Latinos, 'We want to embrace your culture. We're going to enrich our American culture with your Latin flavor, so come as you are.' "

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