

# **STRATEGY FOR EVANGELIZING HISPANICS**

**IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND CANADA**

**12/1/04**

**PROFILE OF HISPANICS**

## ***General Background***

The term “Hispanic” is a generic term, used principally on the East Coast of the U.S.A. for persons derived from the Spanish-language colonies of Latin America. On the West Coast, the more common term is “Latino” and is somewhat more inclusive in that it could also include Brazilians and Haitians who speak, respectively, Portuguese and French, also Latino languages.

Therefore for this report, the term “Hispanic” will be used to designate persons derived from Mexico, the Central American countries of Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, Costa Rica and Panama, the South American countries of Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Venezuela, Chile, Argentina, Bolivia, Paraguay, Uruguay, and the Caribbean nations of Cuba, the Dominican Republic and the territory of Puerto Rico (technically, a trust of the United States but culturally, Hispanic). In total, 18 countries south of the border. Hispanic populations have “bled” also into Belize and other Caribbean countries.

There are other Spanish-speaking nations in the world, including Spain itself, with former colonies in Africa and in the Atlantic. Their immigration totals are insignificant for the purpose of this report.

The Spanish language is one of the most diffused in the world, spoken officially in 21 countries by 350 million people, including more than 20 million in the United States. Yet there is considerable variation in dialect between, for instance, what is spoken in Cuba and what is spoken in Argentina. The written language for the most part remains uniform.

Without going into the detailed history of all of these countries, suffice to say that Christopher Columbus preceded a whole range of Spanish conquistadors who established colonies in the New World throughout the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries well ahead of North American settlements. With the exception of the mountainous spine of the Andes through Central and South America where indigenous people lived in high valleys, most of the lowland Indians were decimated through disease, slavery, and warfare.

## ***Immigration Patterns***

A student of Hispanics needs to understand that there are many variations to the theme of immigration. Indeed, until the 1850’s most of the southwestern region of what is now the United States was part of Mexico with the majority of immigrants located there being Spanish, rather than Northern European. In essence, the “white man” was the latecomer, displacing the power, if not the population of the Mexicans.

Other notable immigration patterns more recently include the flight of ten of thousands of Cuban just prior to or after the Cuban Communist revolution of 1959, and more recently the flight of boat people from Cuba, including the “Mariolitas” from the jails of Cuba. The first wave of Cubans represented the power elite in the country. Subsequent waves represented more the intellectual dissidents and the impoverished. The Central American civil wars of the late 70’s first in Nicaragua between the Sandanistas (socialist revolutionary party) and the Somozistas (the oppressive dictatorship), then in El Salvador, sent thousands of refugees scurrying to the United States, with every change of government. Repressive regimes throughout Latin American, in Chile, Argentina, Guatemala, and ongoing civil chaos in Colombia, each in turn has pushed waves of citizens northward, seeking protection, freedom, economic opportunity, and educational benefits.

However, by far, the most substantial immigration has come from Mexico. Many Mexicans have long come for seasonal farm migrant work. Others have come more permanently, seeking economic security. Many have come illegally and have subsequently been made citizens.

## ***Hispanic Specifics***

It is dangerous to stereotype Hispanics. Racially, they vary across the board. Cubans, Hondurans, Panamanians, and Dominicans (from the Dominican Republic) may exhibit African physical features or a mix of EuroAfrican traits and are known as “mulattos.” Some South Americans have pure European bearing, such as in Argentina where the indigenous populations have been entirely annihilated. Many people from the Andean nations and Central American exhibited strong oriental racial traces, coming from the indigenous Mayan, Aztecan, Incan heritages. Those bearing the EuroAmerican traits are known as “mestizos.” There is even a direct oriental mix, from more recent migrations of Japanese, especially along the Pacific Coast nations such as Peru.

Social status is very much measured by the amount of European blood that one has, though racial prejudice is neither condoned nor recognized by officialdom as a problem.

It is now estimated that there are upwards of 40 million Hispanics currently living in the U.S. However, because of the sheer numbers and varieties of life situations, one must be careful not to generalize.

The term “Hispanic” has been used by the U.S. census in three ways:

1. Often, it has referred to someone whose surname is Spanish. However, this person may be a sixth generation American who has been completely acculturated, does not speak Spanish or identify primarily with Latin American culture. Or in reverse. Many Caribbean blacks have English surnames, like the Dominican baseball player, George Bell.
2. It may refer to someone who has migrated in their lifetime from a Latin American country. The problem here is that that person might not speak Spanish because they are indigenous, or come from a coastal community in the Caribbean where English was primarily used.
3. It may be a self-designation, and could be used by anybody who happens to have studied the Spanish language.
4. The new category of “mixed race” may apply to many Hispanics and so skews the data without adequate identifying it.

What this means is that “Hispanics” ought not been seen as a bulk population but need to be known by their own preferences, their national origin, their socio-economic backgrounds and the circumstances of their entrance into the U.S.

By far, the major migration of Hispanics has come from Mexico, both legally and illegally, perhaps 25 million of the total. Undocumented (the term “illegal” doesn’t exist in Spanish, so the problem is defined in their minds more as an absence of documents than a judicial failure) aliens may number as high as seven million. There is the sense among many Mexicans that they are returning to land originally theirs, or that out of the desperateness and proximity of America, that there is an economic alternative for the difficult life-style issues presented to them in Mexico. Furthermore, corporate and agricultural employment needs in the United States are especially tailored to the lower but more favorable incomes of the North American market.

The result has been a rather ambivalent attitude from Americans (less so, Canadians who do not have the massive immigration problems derived from illegal entrances) who, while needing the services performed, resent the additional social costs that many of the undocumented represent. So the rhetoric is hot and heavy especially during political campaign and in the border states most affected. This problem is mirrored in the Church where the question of legalities and documents affects both local church leadership and evangelistic

potential. Ironically, it is a problem not confined to the responses of the majority or competing cultures, but often between generations of Hispanics themselves.

The Hispanic influence on American, less so in Canada, is profound in all aspects of life, and growing. The Southwestern states such as Arizona and California, and Texas and Florida are now becoming “Latinized,” though the influences are quite varied. Puerto Ricans (who enjoy U.S. citizenship) are a huge presence in New York City and New Jersey. Cubans dominated the ethnic political landscape in Florida. Mexicans are prominent in Texas, California and between, though there is considerable difference between old established Mexican families several generations immigrated in Texas and the current wave of Mexican immigrants. Refugees and their families from El Salvador and Nicaragua have congregated in many northern cities. And migrant workers are dispersed throughout small town U.S.A. especially in the Midwest and western agricultural states (Dodge City, Kansas now has 63% of its school enrollment identified as Hispanic). Of course, the figures for migrant workers varies seasonally.

## ***Nazarene Ties***

This influence is paralleled in the Church of the Nazarene where over three hundred and seventy-five churches have been formed and are active in the United States and another ten in Canada. The Hispanic ministries are the most active of all “ethnic” ministries. Yet each congregation has its appeal often to a particular national group such as Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Cubans, etc. based on local demographics. Others however are not excluded from participation.

Part of the growth of the Hispanic Church of the Nazarene in North America may be attributed to the following reasons:

1. The very early and extensive ministry of the denomination into Latin America, beginning with Cuba, Mexico, Guatemala and Peru. These national churches have grown considerably and so, it is to be expected, that their expatriates would come to the U.S. and Canada, bringing with them their denominational affiliation and loyalties.
2. The overall “Protestantizing” of the traditionally deeply Roman Catholic Hispanic base. In many Latin American countries, the “Evangelical” alternative is seeing both revival and outstanding church growth.
3. The openness of the Hispanic community, especially since Vatican II, in the early 1960’s.
4. The sheer numbers of immigrants seeking new lives and open to new religious options.
5. The passion of the Latino personality that intensely desires mystical union with God, stability and loyalty in family, and a cultural repository where their immigrant origins are respected and maintained.
6. The fact that a “critical mass” of Hispanic leaders and people can sustain the necessary institutional structures to service better their community, i.e. camp meetings, mini Assemblies, ministry training programs, literature availability.
7. The proximity of the Hispanic culture to the North American one, where language, lifestyles, and histories are sufficiently intertwined that acculturation is possible for second and third generations. However, this same phenomenon creates intergenerational barriers among Hispanics.

The result is that the Hispanic church in North America is well stabilized, growing, and under quality indigenous leadership that is well represented at the highest levels of denominational decision-making.

# **The Missional Task of Evangelizing Hispanics**

## General Suggestions:

Distinguish between Hispanics and Spanish-speaking people. Though the Church desires to evangelize Hispanics (many who do not speak Spanish or identify primarily with Latin American culture), the focus ought to be on reaching Spanish-speaking peoples. Many Hispanics, already integrated into North America society, may not want to be distinguished from the rest of the culture. However, they can be seen as “bridge-builders” to the Hispanic culture, if they so choose.

Recognize the great diversity there is among Hispanics and that there is tremendous difference historically, racially, economically, politically, and situationally between various groupings and individually. One must be sensitive not to lump all Hispanics together in anticipating their needs and responsiveness to the Gospel.

Explore the demographics of changing communities to see the new presence of Hispanic immigrants.

Understand that certain ministries among Hispanics may be tempered by seasonal, socio-economic and legal factors. For instance, ministry among migrants will often be seasonal. Other congregations have formed and dissolved as economic realities push the migration out of one community into another. In some instances, entire congregations have evaporated because of public policy that harasses or arrest undocumented immigrants.

Realize that the Hispanics have represented and will continue to represent the major immigrant source to North America, carrying with them great cultural institutions, networking and family connections which are significant to the future growth of the Church of the Nazarene.

## **THE MISSIONAL TASK FOR THE DISTRICT IS TO:**

- Get acquainted with the Nazarene connections in sending countries. Have “host” congregations send Work and Witness teams to places that have direct relationships to target Hispanics in North America.
- Identify the considerable resource in personnel, literature, relationships that can serve in advisory roles for the development of new Hispanic ministries.
- Draw from the large pool of North Americans who have Hispanic connections, cultural interest and linguistic expertise. Because the Spanish language is the most frequently taught in North America, and most easily learned, there is a growing body of people competent to assist in Hispanic ministries, including former missionaries, business people, social workers, language teachers, etc. that can be used as assets for the development of new Hispanic ministries.
- Have every church in a Hispanic outreach community maintain a library of evangelical Spanish language materials, including the book, “Surge La Iglesia del Nazareno” by Me. E. Redford and Gene Van Note and the Heraldo de Santidad the Spanish-language version of Holiness Today.

- Develop a district strategy for Spanish-language ministry at the District level. Many districts have a Hispanic coordinator to so strategize. Beyond that, there is a North American director, Rev. Roberto Hodgson, who is designated to advance such ministries. Under his administration, are various resource and task force committees that can help in the planning of new initiatives and/or the stabilizing of insecure situations.
- Encourage the participation of Hispanics in all areas of District life, featuring and supporting their ministries in both public and private settings. However, allow the Hispanics to develop their own culturally-sensitive alternative programs, i.e. parallel assemblies, interdenominational gatherings, youth camps, etc.

**THE MISSIONAL TASK FOR THE LOCAL CHURCH IS TO:**

- Partner with the existing Hispanic Nazarene community to provide necessary resources, facilities, and expertise where it is desired and useful.
- Acknowledge the presence of Hispanics whatever their legality as being a receptive population for the Gospel. For the church, the issues of evangelism supercede the issues of documentation. However, for pastoral leadership, issues of documentation and legality often become paramount in selection and credentialing.
- Recognize that, though most Hispanics have a cultural heritage of Catholicism, there is an unusual openness to the evangelical Gospel. Hispanics are not afraid to discuss religion, or their disillusionment with Catholicism. Often, the brand of Catholicism they represent is nominal or mixed with indigenous religions as seen in the “Botecas” or the “medicine shops” in Hispanic communities. However, because of the lack of priests in their homelands, a deeper understanding of Christianity often is lacking, reducing the religious into “fiestas”, “patron saints” and annual celebrations. Evangelical Christianity, on the other side, stresses discipleship, ethics, and personal relationship to Jesus Christ.
- Understand that many Hispanics still are tied to the homeland, often sending funds and visiting back and forth. Those commitments are very important and can be used for developing Christian connections in both settings.
- Respond to specific needs of Hispanics, i.e. food, clothing, immigration information. In many instances, local organizations may abound designated to address these needs. However, the presence of a non-Hispanic colleague to accompany the immigrant, can be very useful in translation or in protection from the hazards of bureaucracy. Often, Hispanics will come to the church because it is seen as an advocate addressing human needs, rather than to the government agencies which are seen as adversarial.
- Learn Spanish. Even elementary words and fractured sentences communicate a

spirit of hospitality.

- Welcome international students. Host them on special civic celebration days. Participate with them on their national or cultural events.
- Host ESL classes for adults or tutoring for Hispanic children/
- Provide space for Hispanics to meet, first as a Bible study, then eventually as their own worshipping congregation.
- Develop a multicongregational ministry
- Offer translation in English-speaking services where Hispanics might attend. Invest in translation equipment if this is the preferable option.
- Realize that many Hispanics will wish to worship in their own worship settings because their style of worship is more “event-oriented” than “time-oriented.” Prayer meetings and prayer times are usually more intense than with other cultural groups, including all nights of prayers or special seasons of prayer. Song services are jubilant and lengthy, and involve lots of kinetic energy and participation.
- However, recognize that one of the functions of their congregations is to serve as a repository of Hispanic culture, to hold together family and cultural values that are seen as being undermined by the host culture. Ironically, second generation children often reject this “hold” and wish to transition to the majority culture, creating considerable family conflict. Part of the advantage of a multicongregational church is that the options are available and the transitions less painful if there is sensitivity to this issue.
- Incorporate Hispanic youth into the ministry by giving recognition to their cultural background without locking them into it. Each young people will respond differently to the cultural transition. Be sensitive to each variety.
- Develop or host Spanish-language training programs for Hispanic church leadership.
- Organize joint services with Hispanics where possible giving appropriate preparation and orientation on both sides.

