

# **The Public Voice of Latino Protestantism**

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Hardly a week goes by when one doesn't read in the paper some new statistic confirming the large and growing presence of Latinos who are quickly becoming the "new majority" in Southern California. While many Californians, particularly those in the "old majority"—the Anglos—might prefer to ignore these reports, Latino leaders insist that we take seriously the changing demographics and begin to think differently about how we in the Southland are going to live together. Among these leaders are Protestant pastors who are working to build a unified voice that can have a more powerful impact in the public arena. Behind this public voice will be an infrastructure of organizations that can interface with public agencies and train a new generation of Christian leaders who have the skills to move effectively between sectors. This paper describes two organizations that are making strong headway toward this goal in Los Angeles: AMEN and the Hispanic Initiative.

While President Bush's faith-based initiative and its promise of grant money has been a major motivator for getting organized, the goals of organizations like AMEN and the Hispanic Initiative reach far beyond providing social services. They are working to establish a place at the table for Latino Christians at the local and national levels. They want their voice to have an impact on public institutions like the granting agencies, the media, and political bodies. Given the

tremendous diversity among Latino Protestants—cultural, economic, denominational, theological, political, and generational diversity—building a unified voice is no easy task. In this paper I will discuss the strategies used by AMEN and the Hispanic Initiative to create a coalition of Protestants and how they work to overcome the major fault lines that lie beneath these fragile alliances.

Roughly 71 percent of U.S. Latinos are Catholic and 23 percent are Protestant with the vast majority belonging to Pentecostal and Evangelical churches.<sup>1</sup> Latinos are the fastest growing sector in U.S. Protestantism and the failure of the Anglo Protestant world to take seriously their presence is one reason Latino Protestants are forming their own institutions and networks. Protestant churches and organizations have been slow to translate materials into Spanish, to welcome Latinos as members, and to take stands on political issues affecting Latinos, such as the anti-immigration legislation Proposition 187. Many Latinos feel discriminated against by other Christians who perceive their style of Christianity as too emotional, unsophisticated and uneducated.

Even though Anglo Protestants have made significant steps in the last ten years to include Latinos, such as creating Latino ministry offices, they are still marginalized rather than integrated into the mainstream decision making bodies of denominations. The history of racism and apathy toward Latinos is not quickly overcome. Historically, in the face of white prejudice, Latinos have had to turn to each other across denominational lines for support.<sup>2</sup> Today they continue to see an advantage in creating their own organizations—as the African American community has done—rather than rely on the Anglo majority to look after their needs.

Behind the push to build coalitions is the desire to have a more powerful role in the public sphere. Despite the growing numbers of Protestant Latinos there is still the common perception that all Latinos are Catholic. This misperception is perpetuated by the media, which typically turns to the Catholic church to speak on behalf of Latino Christians in Los Angeles. This is not surprising given the complicated array of independent and loosely affiliated Evangelical and Pentecostal churches. Because the Latino Protestant world has been very fragmented, at a very practical level there is a need to identify some leaders that have the credibility from the community to speak on its behalf. Related to this is the need for organizations and pastors that have the resources, skills, and authority to interface with government and non-profit agencies. At present agencies that want to work with Latino churches to provide social services, have no one to turn to besides Catholic Charities. Given their small size, Protestant Latino churches need to work together in applying for grant money in order to compete with the “big player.”

Over the past ten years there have been a number of meetings in Los Angeles to lay the foundation for establishing a Latino Protestant presence. Today I’m going to describe how AMEN and the Hispanic Initiative have been pursuing these goals, though they are certainly not the only

organizations in L.A. to do so. I focus on these two because they were mentioned most frequently in my interviews with Los Angeles pastors, and they appear to have the most credibility among Latino Protestants at this point. The creation of AMEN marked the first major milestone in this process. AMEN stands for Alianza de Ministerios Evangélicos Nacionales or the National Alliance of Evangelical Ministries. It was founded in 1994 when 350 Latino leaders convened in Long Beach under the sponsorship of the Pew Charitable Trusts and voted to form a grassroots, ecumenical organization. The primary goal of AMEN is “to promote unity among leaders, churches and parachurch agencies in the Hispanic community and to provide a central voice of Hispanic evangelicals in North America to speak to the larger community of believers.” Today it has members from twenty-seven denominations and organizations in the U.S., Canada, Mexico and Puerto Rico. Led by Jesse Miranda, it has become one of the few Latino Christian organizations to have the ear of the Bush administration. While trying to impact public policy at the national level by providing “a prophetic voice on critical issues affecting the Hispanic community,” AMEN is equally committed to evangelization at the grassroots level and to developing effective, educated leaders with the skills to build strong churches and non-profits.

In Los Angeles AMEN has paired with the international organization World Vision to develop a program called the Hispanic Initiative. The goal of the Hispanic Initiative is to promote and build unity among Christians in Los Angeles and to impact the social environment by developing networks of cooperation among churches, denominations, ministerial alliances, and parachurch organizations. The Hispanic Initiative has put much energy into teaching pastors skills to build greater capacity for providing social services. Though most Latino churches provide some kind of social assistance to their members and those in the local neighborhood, few have the knowledge or infrastructure to provide the level of services that the faith-based initiative is designed to fund. The Hispanic Initiative teaches pastors how to do a community assessment, organize a non-profit, write grants and

fundraise. It too has established a national reputation and the director, Martín Garcia, has served as a consultant to the White House on how to bring Latino churches into the faith-based initiative plan. Garcia encourages churches to work together in applying for grants and to develop ties to the public sector by partnering with schools or hospitals.

Out of the Hispanic Initiative has come a new organization called La Alianza, which includes representatives from thirty-two denominations from Pentecostals to mainline Protestants. The group officially started last October with a press conference at USC's Center for Religion and Civic Culture. Its goals are to provide local pastors with information on where to refer members for immigration assistance, to network with elected officials and agencies, to develop a plan for emergency preparedness, and to organize the trainings offered for capacity building by making a master calendar and cutting down on duplication. Like AMEN, La Alianza has succeeded in bridging Latinos across the denominational spectrum and channeling their energy toward more public engagement. As one pastor put it, "Martín's work is helping us move beyond our small corner where we do ministry and try to put the whole picture together." Several mainline pastors I spoke with shared that they had focused their energy for many years on making a space for themselves within their denominations, and they now welcome the opportunity to turn outward to the public sphere and press for the Latino agenda on issues of poverty, justice and immigration. In my interviews with Latino leaders connected to both AMEN and the Hispanic Initiative, there was a palpable excitement at the possibilities. At the same time there is no denying the fragility of these ecumenical efforts and the tensions that arise when trying to establish organizations that will represent such an array of Christians. Tensions manifest along three major fault lines which underlie these alliances—denominational, theological and generational.

The dividing line between Protestant and Catholic Latinos is very sharply drawn in Los Angeles. The wounds of the past, as one pastor put it, make it hard, if not impossible, for these

groups to sit down together. Latino Protestants are deeply offended by what they perceive as the arrogance of the Catholic church that fails to acknowledge any other Christians as legitimate and the preferential treatment Catholic priests are given in some U.S. cities. This resentment coupled with continued religious struggles between Catholics and Protestants in Latin America, especially in Mexico where the church uses its public authority to squelch Protestant activity, directly impacts the possibility of dialogue in Los Angeles. It is very unusual for conservative Protestants and Catholics to work together, though at the national level AMEN has forged a partnership with the Mexican American Cultural Center for research purposes. At the grassroots level animosity remains strong and examples of partnership, such as in the Pico Union neighborhood, are rare. Garcia explained that if he were to invite Catholics to Hispanic Initiative meetings this could cause such an upset that the group would fold. Given the newness and fragility of the Protestant alliances, Garcia is not willing to try to tackle the Protestant-Catholic divide at this time. As he explained, “With time perhaps things are going to start to settle down and dialogue will start. But I think we need to start with us, because we are divided... There is still some fear between the Protestant churches.”

Mainline Protestant Latinos occupy an ambiguous space between conservative Protestants and Catholics. Lutherans and Episcopalians are particularly suspect because they seem more Catholic than Protestant, even though they have historically defined themselves in opposition to the Catholic church just as conservatives have. Mainliners have taken steps toward reconciling with Catholicism in recent years beginning with a greater acceptance of cultural practices that have long been condemned as idolatrous. No longer do converts to these denominations find that they must repent of their Catholic past. Pastors try to teach their members the difference between honoring the saints, for example, and venerating them but admit it’s a tricky distinction that often disappears in practice. As a consequence of their acceptance of what were once considered sinful “Catholic” practices, mainline Protestants are able to work more easily with Catholics on social projects in Los

Angeles and even turn to the Catholic church for Spanish resources on liturgy and religious education. While conservative Protestants may be suspicious of the growing friendliness between mainliners and Catholics, in AMEN and the Hispanic Initiative they have been willing to accept the mainliners for the greater purpose of forming a strong Latino coalition. Perhaps it is just a matter of time before mainliners will be able to gather Catholics and conservative Protestants together at the table.

Closely akin to the denominational tensions are the theological divisions within the Latino Protestant world. Two issues are particularly contentious: social activism and homosexuality. Some conservative churches are opposed to social activism on the grounds that this type of secular activity is not the purview of the church—a position that has been reinforced by the oppression of political activists in Latin America and fear of deportation for those who are undocumented. Even though the stereotype of the insular, otherworldly Latino church is well known, it is misleading. In his survey of L.A. churches, Michael Mata, Director of Urban Ministry at the Claremont School of Theology, found that even the so-called in-house programs of churches are in practice open to a larger community.

While the majority of Latino churches are involved in some kind of social service ministry, there are significant differences in how this work is understood theologically. On one end of the spectrum are those who view social outreach as a means toward evangelization with the hopes that it will bring in more members. On the other end are those who believe services should be provided unconditionally. Theologically, there is no common ground between those at the extremes who see the other as having misunderstood the gospel imperative. On a practical level, such as in the meetings of the Hispanic Initiative, these theological differences are left unspoken. Though many of the pastors I interviewed expressed misgivings about those with opposing theological motivations, they agreed these new alliances could function effectively as long as theology was left at the door.

While theological debate is avoided, faith commitment is expected. Garcia explained that the conservative Protestants he deals with would not feel comfortable working with representatives of the more political organizations such as L.A. Metro, which works closely with many mainline denominations. L.A. Metro is the Industrial Areas Foundation in Los Angeles that brings sixty religious institutions and non-profit groups together to tackle problems like gang violence, poor schools and housing prices. While these goals are certainly shared by evangelicals, the work of L.A. Metro is framed in political goals rather than the spiritual goal of building the Kingdom of God. One pastor explained that conservative Protestants will only work with those who take seriously their religious beliefs rather than relegating them to private motivations, as L.A. Metro does. Mainline Latinos, for the most part, are adept at inhabiting both worlds, accepting the more spiritual orientation of conservatives and the more political orientation of community organizations.

Homosexuality is another a source of tension that works both against and for ecumenism among Latinos. It can be difficult for mainline pastors to work with conservative Protestants who are adamantly opposed to homosexuality. On the other hand, several mainline pastors told me they were more closely aligned with conservatives on this issue than the liberal Anglo clergy in their own denominations. Homosexuality is a very contentious issue dividing Latinos and Anglos in mainline denominations today. For example, within the Disciples of Christ denomination the Hispanic churches have a declaration against homosexuality that is completely opposite the tolerant position espoused by the denominational leadership. The same dynamic exists in the Episcopal church. Their shared rejection of homosexuality is a common platform for almost all Latino Protestants. Garcia explained that issues relating to family values are the most successful catalysts for bringing Latinos together.

One issue that I expected to be a source of conflict, but was not mentioned in the interviews, is the ordination of women. While all the mainline Protestant denominations ordain women, many

Pentecostal and Evangelical churches do not accept female pastors. Even in mainline Latino churches, female pastors are extremely rare. For example, though 35 percent of Methodist clergy in the U.S. are women, among the Latino ministries in Los Angeles the number is roughly 20 percent. The few female Latino leaders I was able to interview shared that they feel marginalized within the ecumenical movement, which exhibits a machismo attitude toward women in ministry. At present their concerns are not even on the radar of the ecumenical discussion. Since the fragility of the alliances makes it difficult to broach controversial issues, the position of women is a subject best avoided, explains Garcia. However, even when not directly discussed it is indirectly broached in decisions about who to invite to meetings and training sessions and who to have speak at conferences. At the large La Cumbre conference last Fall sponsored by AMEN and the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, a few women were invited to lead sessions, but for now the Latino Protestant voice in L.A. is decidedly male.

The third fault line that appears is generational—"the generational minefield" as a twenty-something pastor put it. At issue is who best speaks for Latinos and who best understands their needs. Is it the fifty-something immigrant who has always pastored Spanish-speaking churches or the thirty-something second generation pastor who is bilingual and bicultural? Most of the Latino leadership in AMEN and the Hispanic Initiative is first generation, but there is growing sentiment that the time has come to pass the baton to the next generation. So far it has not been easy to bring the generations to the same table.

Latino churches have long struggled with how to accommodate the needs of the Spanish-speaking immigrants and their children who prefer English. While much energy has gone into dealing with the language division in churches, the real issue is the cultural gap between the immigrants and the American-born. Old-timers worry that the young are losing the language and traditions and becoming too "Americanized." The second generation are much more likely to look

upon their bicultural identity as a blessing rather than a limitation. They are also much more likely to value being part of a multicultural society and to be working in some kind of multiethnic ministry setting. While the old guard might see this as a betrayal of the Latino community, younger Latinos see no conflict in advocating both Latino needs and racial reconciliation. One generation X pastor explained, “For too long we have seen ourselves as caught between being American and Latino but instead we should see ourselves as a bridge, we are bicultural/bilingual and that is a gift.”

From this position, the next generation of Latino leaders brings not only a new sense of what it means to be a Latino in the U.S. but also a new understanding of how to best serve the needs of Latinos living in a multicultural society. As they take the baton from the immigrant generation the image and style of Latino engagement in the public sphere will shift dramatically, but some of the young leaders in Los Angeles are skeptical that the old guard is really ready to empower the next generation. In response to this concern, prominent leaders like Jesse Miranda made an important symbolic gesture on the last night of the La Cumbre conference with several thousand Latino youth in attendance: the old guard passed a torch to a young Latino pastor who just recently got his degree from Yale divinity school.

In their efforts to build a strong institutional base for Latino advocacy, Protestants have shown an extraordinary openness to work across denominational, theological and generational boundaries. This openness comes at the price of avoiding controversial topics and there is some concern that fear of rocking the boat will limit the prophetic power of the Latino Protestant voice. While these alliances are fragile, there is much excitement among Los Angeles religious leaders about the developing cooperation and the possible impact they can have together. Skillful leadership is required to hold these linkages together and avoid the divisive issues that can tear them apart. Leaders need to know how to communicate across sectors—government and private sectors, conservative and liberal sectors. The current push to build ecumenical alliances in order to impact

the public arena is a sign of the maturation of Latino Protestantism. While it is difficult to say how the public face of Latino Protestantism will change as power shifts to the American-born generation, no doubt its presence will have a tremendous impact not only on the lives of Latino Christians but on the future of our country.

**(Footnotes)**

<sup>1</sup> Results from the Hispanic Churches in American Public Life survey, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> See G. Espinosa, 1999, "El Azteca

': Francisco Olazabal and Latino Pentecostal Charisma, Power, and Faith Healing in the Borderlands,"

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, 63 (3): 597-616.