

# Hispanic Ministry Assessment

A conversation of what's been going on in our Hispanic Ministry efforts, and what we have learned over the past few weeks of assessment.

*Leviticus 19:33-34*  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Dallas

Rev. Todd B. Freeman  
May 16, 2010

Contrary to what is written in the worship bulletin, I am not Dr. Ruben Armendariz. This is the second time this year that Ruben has been in the preaching slot, and the second time he has been unable to be here. The first was in January when we initially planned our Hispanic Ministry Assessment weekend, but had to cancel it because of a snow storm here in Tulsa. So we rescheduled the Assessment to this weekend. On Friday of this week, however, there were horrible storm in San Antonio, so Ruben had to wait until yesterday to try and arrive. But we learned that he was not able to fly in. So it wasn't until around 4 p.m. yesterday that I returned from our Assessment meeting knowing that I had to preach this morning.

So I thought about pulling an oldie-but-goodie out of my sermon file cabinet. But I decided to do something different. Instead of a formal sermon, I'm going to have bit more of a conversation concerning what has been going on in the life of this congregation in regards to our Hispanic Ministry efforts, and what we have learned over the past couple of weeks, which has been a great deal. I want to change the scripture passage that Ruben was going to base his sermon on, to **Leviticus 19:33-34**.

*When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.*

For those of you who were here last Sunday, you know that I preached on the Book of Ruth. We learned a lot about Ruth, who was an immigrant herself from a despised neighboring country. Ruth followed her widowed mother-in-law, Naomi, back with her to the land of Israel. It was through Ruth's loving and faithful relationship with Naomi that Naomi found redemption.

I mentioned in that sermon a quote from the *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*. I'd like to read again this morning in the context of our Hispanic Ministry Assessment this weekend.

In modern times, ongoing debates over immigration laws indicate that many people feel burdened by the presence of foreigners in their midst – even if these outsiders profess undying allegiance to us and to our God, as Ruth did to Naomi. **The people in our congregations may find it hard to believe that refugees, immigrants, or people requesting political asylum might someday become the instruments of our redemption** [as Ruth was instrumental in Naomi's]. But there is no doubt that the biblical narrator

pictures Ruth as an immigrant, entering the “promised land” from the same direction and for many of the same reasons as Naomi’s [Hebrew] ancestors had done in previous generations.

And you just heard at the beginning of today’s service, that Rev. Hector Rodriguez from the PCUSA national office (Associate in Hispanic/Latino/Latina Congregational Support Office of the Racial Ethnic Division) state that a majority of people in the world do indeed see this land of ours as the “promised land.” He gave us several statistics that mentioned, for one thing, that people right now can earn up to ten times as much here in this country as they can in their own country. It posed a question for me: Who among us wouldn’t consider leaving our land to a promised land where we could make ten times what we’re making right now? That’s quite a promise, and quite a draw to this country.

We have been involved in Hispanic ministry here at College Hill for three years, and we are again trying to assess where we stand – what we’ve been doing well, what we might need to change, and especially how to structure it for the future. But in light of recent immigration issues, especially Arizona’s recent legislation, I think that pastors are often remiss in passing along to their congregations information that comes from our national leaders in the Presbyterian Church (USA) national office. And after hearing the following letter you may understand why, because this may be a little hard even for some in this congregation to hear. It is a letter written to the United States Congress and is signed by the three top elected officials in our national office: **Bruce Reyes-Chow**, Moderator, 218th General Assembly (2008); **Gradye Parsons**, Stated Clerk of the General Assembly; and **Linda Bryant Valentine**, Executive Director, General Assembly Mission Council.

*Dear Members of Congress,*

*We write to express our conviction that you must enact comprehensive immigration reform this year. As people of faith and the leaders of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), we are keenly aware of the devastating effects our broken immigration system has on the lives of individuals, immigrant and non-immigrant families, and our communities.*

*The bigotry, trauma, and fear that will result from the recent new law enacted in Arizona, SB 1070, which criminalizes those who are found “with” undocumented persons and requires law enforcement officers to identify and detain such persons, serves to underscore the necessity of action at the federal level.*

*Churches are on the front lines of caring for families being ripped apart by our broken immigration system. Traumatized citizen children left behind when parents are deported are but one example of the ways the current system destroys the fabric of community life, the integrity of healthy families, and the safety of individual persons. Church workers are also at the forefront of offering relief and services to immigrants, regardless of documentation status. Arizona’s new law will put at risk those workers and others who are called simply to offer the most basic of humanitarian assistance. As Christians, we cannot stand by idly while our brothers and sisters die on our borders from exposure and thirst or languish in poorly equipped detention facilities, nor should we be required to do so by any law.*

*The new Arizona law also puts in jeopardy the public safety of immigrant communities, already wary of law enforcement for fear of deportation. Instead of new laws that induce fear and distrust, immigrants should be encouraged to participate with law enforcement, reporting crimes when they are victims and offering testimony when they are witnesses. Such trust and participation is impossible if local law enforcement is tasked with enforcement of federal immigration laws. SB 1070 will only foster more fear among immigrant communities, regardless of documentation status. Comprehensive immigration reform at the federal level is essential to override and counteract the damage done in Arizona by this new law.*

*In the Scriptures of Christians and Jews, we are commanded, "When an immigrant resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the immigrant. The immigrant who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the immigrant as yourself for you were immigrants in the land of Egypt" (Lev. 19:33-34). The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) therefore supports congressional action in 2010 on comprehensive immigration reform that creates a process for undocumented immigrants in the U.S. to earn their legal status; reduces waiting periods and upholds family unity; protects workers from exploitation; and provides efficient channels of entry for new migrant workers.*

*Sincerely,*

**Bruce Reyes-Chow**  
*Moderator, 218th General Assembly (2008)*

**Grady Parsons**  
*Stated Clerk of the General Assembly*

**Linda Bryant Valentine**  
*Executive Director, General Assembly  
Mission Council*

Whether you agree or disagree with any of this, I think it's important that you hear from our national leaders on this issue. For if nothing else, **something needs to be done concerning immigration reform**. So we need to address this issue, and soon.

Last week I sent out a couple of emails stating that we were going to have an assessment of where we stand here at College Hill with respect to our Hispanic ministry. In the first email I mentioned that no thorough discussion would be complete without talking about immigration. I received a few emails and phone calls saying, in effect, "Please don't open that can of worms." You know me well enough to know that that wouldn't actually bother me at all. But I do understand timing. So I thought, at this particular time we need to address what we're doing right now, regardless of documentation status. This fact remains: we still feel a calling to minister with our Hispanic community, and so we decided to assess that. Church member Peg Gotthold came in last Sunday morning and did a wonderful job of leading about 28 folks who showed up in the adult church school class with brainstorming and then discussing two main areas: the **BENEFITS** of engaging in Hispanic ministry, and the **HINDRANCES** to accomplishing our mission. I'm going to share with you the results in just a moment.

First, I want to mention who participated in yesterday's assessment. We had a Called Session Meeting, so our Elders that are currently serving on the Session were here. There was the Rev. Hector Rodriguez, from our national office; Marcus Barber, our Associate General Presbyter here in Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery (EOP); Sandy Bach, the current Vice-moderator of EOP and the former moderator of the Presbytery's Developing Congregations & Evangelism Committee. That's the committee that initially

gave this congregation a grant three years ago in order to start our Hispanic Ministry efforts. Also present was the Rev. Ken Woodhams, the current moderator of that committee. We sat around tables and talked and brainstormed and shared stories. I came away extremely encouraged – and not only because we're involved in this ministry, but *how* we have been involved and how we plan to continue.

Briefly, Hector shared with us several denominational resources, all of which I already had in my possession. The first was written by Hector himself, *Living the Vision: Hispanic Ministry*. There is also now a small *Book of Common Worship* in Spanish. We learned that there are 342 Hispanic/Latino/Latina ministries in our denomination throughout the country – one of which is our ministry here at College Hill. When I first started doing Hispanic ministry when I served Bethany Presbyterian Church in Dallas about 10 years ago, there were almost no resources. Another wonderful book is called the *Handbook for Hispanic/Latino New Church Development*. So we now have a lot better way of approaching all of this.

What I want to do now is review the **benefits that we discerned to doing Hispanic ministry in this church**. And I will do it as kind of a Top Ten list. We brainstormed, putting up about 30 benefits on newsprint. Then, each of us were given three votes of what we thought were **the most important benefits**.

#### **10. Build new friendships with good people**

#### **9. Example to larger Tulsa community and to the Presbytery**

Believe me, I can tell you firsthand that there are a lot of people in this Presbytery looking to us for a lot of reasons, and one of them is because we have had the courage to engage in Hispanic ministry – and in a new way, a more congregational-based ministry than setting up a completely separate ministry that has been tried and has failed in this presbytery in the past.

#### **8. More children reached**

I think that reaching more children is very obvious every time we gather for our weekly Time With the Children during worship – not so much in our pre-school age children, but in that elementary age with Ms. Karen's class, which is predominately made up of our Hispanic children.

#### **7. Protestant/Presbyterian place for Hispanics**

As you know, a good number of folks from Mexico are Roman Catholic. Hector said something interesting yesterday, however. He said that being Roman Catholic may not be as big a deterrent to joining a Presbyterian group as we may think – because a good number of folks from Mexico are Roman Catholic by birth, but not by practice. So that isn't the barrier it once was to becoming Protestant. So he said that evangelism works quite well with Hispanic folks, especially those from Mexico, that are in this country.

#### **6. Living the College Hill traditions**

You know the history of this church better than I, especially how going back as far as World War II, of how this congregation has reached out to people in very inclusive ways.

## 5. Understanding more about God and God's other children

I love this one. We are reminded that children of God include more than middle-class Anglos.

## 4. Service to the local neighborhood community

I'm not sure how many times in the past this congregation has discussed moving from this location, because so many other churches have left the neighborhood in which they were founded because the neighborhoods have changed so much. But I know that this congregation has said, "No, we feel called to continue to minister in *this* neighborhood." And now that we find ourselves in a predominately Hispanic neighborhood, that is just naturally part of our ministry.

## 3. Awareness of political issues at large and their implications

Immigration is a hot-button issue right now across the country, and certainly here in Oklahoma. Our Hispanic ministry efforts, therefore, have led us to pay greater attention to the many political issues at hand, as well as their implications.

And by far, the two that received the most votes for benefits involved with engaging in Hispanic ministry:

### 2. Living the gospel

I was thrilled that that was not only a response but also a top vote-getter. That indicates that we sense our ministry efforts are a calling from God, not just something we're not doing just out of a sense of guilt, or a "that's what we need to be doing" attitude.

### 1. Living out diversity

This is actually quite remarkable. Statistics show that about 82% of Presbyterians are Anglo. So to be a congregation that sees living out diversity as one of the most important reasons of doing this ministry says a lot about this congregation.

Briefly, now, I want to talk about some of the **hindrances of accomplishing our Hispanic Ministry mission**. This was certainly one of my major concerns going into this assessment weekend. With Hector here, I was quite interested in what we might learn about what we are currently doing, or how we might proceed.

Let me read the top 5, this time starting out with the number one response, because this was by far the biggest vote-getter:

### 1. Language barrier

Hector very much understands this. He himself is bi-lingual, but many of the Presbyterian Hispanic ministries in this country are not bi-lingual, but Spanish-speaking. Here at College Hill, we are doing ministry primarily with first-generation immigrants. However, most of their children know English, so in years from now we may be doing a much more English-based ministry. Hector recognizes, as we do, that it is so hard when we can't communicate the way we would like to.

### 2. Legal Issues

I think we always need to be aware of what those are. It is my understanding that we are in not legal jeopardy by engaging in ministry to those who are undocumented. We are aware, of course, that there are great number of legal issues that are involved with our Hispanic folks that are in this country without proper documentation.

### 3. Funding

We received an \$8,000 grant from our Presbytery and Synod to start this ministry three years ago. Our Hispanic folks contribute weekly. At this point, we are still keeping all those funds separate from our general fund. It is currently at \$13,000. So actually, we could run for a very long time on the way we're doing things right now, but the real rub that comes with funding is tied to the number 5 voted hindrance, and that is staffing. **(Number 4 is theological/religious/ideological differences.)**

### 5. Staffing

This is personally by biggest issue. I don't think we can have a fully-functioning Hispanic ministry without what I will call an "ordainable, bi-lingual pastor." And that can take a couple of forms. Hector reminded our Hispanic folks that no congregation our size is able afford two pastors. And even if we had a half-time pastor, we would still have to pay the full amount of pensions and benefits – so we're talking somewhere around \$40,000+ a year if we wanted an ordained **half-time pastor** to lead our Hispanic ministry. Many of you have shared a concern about that, and rightly so, because we are not currently in a position where we can do that.

So the other option we talked about is hiring a **Commissioned Lay Pastor** (CLP). Both Iris Carrera, who started this ministry here, but left just over a year ago, and Ricardo Chavez, have both taken CLP courses. This, then, may be the best route for us to pursue since it's a lot less expensive. Unfortunately, neither of those two were/are fully bi-lingual.

But here's the other thing, and this is the hard part. How can we get into a funding situation where all the money isn't dependent on us, or the funding isn't dependent on getting grants. Just briefly, the church that I served in Dallas, Bethany Presbyterian Church, started a Hispanic Ministry program about ten years ago, but we got way **over-funded** by the PCUSA General Assembly. That was real exciting at the time, however. We received \$125,000 over a 5-year period to do our Hispanic ministry. We pursued by hiring an ordained, half-time Presbyterian minister. But we never grew enough to sustain that, so when the five years was up we were faced with a couple of extremely difficult options. One was to terminate the call with the associate pastor – but that would have meant losing around fifty of the Spanish-speaking Hispanic members of our congregation. We could not see how we could rightfully do that. So in a bizarre twist, the pastor (me) became the expendable position. While I am not afraid of that happening here, I want you to know that we're not going to get into an over-funded situation in that when the grant money runs out we have to make horribly drastic decisions that affect people lives.

You need to know that General Assembly realizes that they have made mistakes with that funding model, primarily because a good number of those Hispanic ministries projects did not last for five years. Therefore, currently they will only give \$25,000 for the first 18 months. Then only with a proven track record can you receive another \$25,000

over the next 30 months. That's only \$50,000 over a 4-year period, which might be something we could investigate since that wouldn't get us into quite as dangerous a financial over-funded situation.

But the other option is this – **working with Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery to form a Hispanic Immigrant Fellowship.** What this would do is set our Hispanic ministry not under the direct umbrella of this congregation, but under the Presbytery. Therefore, it could be a ministry effort that is overseen by, and somewhat funded by, the Presbytery and not this local congregation. The benefit is that we may be able to reach out to other local Presbyterian congregations and ask for financial support for the Hispanic ministry efforts of this Presbytery, which happens to be housed at College Hill.

Reality is, and we've heard this from folks on the Presbytery staff, that there is a potential that some other churches might have the funds and the desire to support this effort, but probably wouldn't because we're College Hill – because we're a More Light Presbyterian congregation, and it's still that divisive. But if, because a lot of people think this Presbytery should be doing Hispanic ministry, even though it would be housed here at College Hill they could give their financial support to the Presbytery, then this might be something workable. We don't know if this will happen, but we will explore this option.

All this is to say that we have been working really hard at all levels to try to figure out how to make this work the best. And I was very encouraged to know that the very church that Hector attends functions almost identically to ours in that they have a multicultural congregation (Anglo, Hispanic, and Arab) that worships three Sundays each month with separate services in each of those different languages. Then they all gather together once a month to have Communion, even though not everyone can understand all that is going on. That's the model that I found worked best at the church I served in Dallas, and I think we've hit a good balance here at College Hill by doing it that way as well.

And another encouraging part is that Hector, who does a lot of this kind of ministry throughout the country has said to us that we are totally on-track. And more importantly than anything, he told us at our gathering yesterday, **“Not only do you receive Hispanic people into your membership, you also receive them into your fellowship.”** That observation had a profound impact on me, that as a congregation, being open means more than just sharing our space – but that we share our lives with one another as well.

**So I think we are indeed on the right track.** We still have a lot to figure out. For as I've said for over a decade in Hispanic ministry, “We're making this up as we go along.” But it's very nice to hear the encouragement from our national leaders that as this small congregation in Tulsa, Oklahoma, we're making a big difference!

So may God be praised.

Amen.