

Spanish-speaking members will change the American church

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Latin Americans are now the largest minority in the United States and growing. And, whereas a decade ago most Spanish-speaking people were found primarily in large cities such as Miami, New York, Los Angeles and in communities along the Mexican border, today they are spreading throughout the country into little towns, with rapid growth in states such as Georgia, North Carolina and Kentucky.

Retailers are often the first to become aware of a Latin presence and adapt their product lines to serve their new customers. "Our sales are increasing wherever there is a density of Latins," said Alfonso Triviño, Director of Sales for Editorial CLIE, a Christian book-publishing company based in Spain. "Our major areas of concentration in the United States are from Miami to North Carolina and Texas to California."

Wherever Latin American immigrants settle, they take their culture, open up their own stores with products from back home, and in large numbers convert to evangelical Christianity and set up their own churches.

With numerous Spanish-language churches springing up in cities, small towns and rural areas throughout the countries, North American churches need to be aware of their presence and the impact that these new immigrants will have on establish U.S. congregations and denominations.

Each ethnic group that has come to the United States has brought certain characteristics and styles which have worked their way into the general Protestant milieu.

That kind of influence has already been noted in New York City where an explosion of African immigrant churches has helped to reshape religious worship in the city according to the New York Times.

Sociologist Tony Carnes has noted that "The African churches are bringing a new vitality and new ways of doing things to African-American and other churches. They are reaching beyond ethnic borders and trying to attract American members into their churches according to Charisma News Service.

Latins undoubtedly will do the same, especially as they more easily integrate into established U.S. churches.

New Latin Americans tend to form their own churches and keep to themselves primarily because of their inability to speak English Jimmy Garcia, Director of Hispanic Ministries for the Baptist General Convention of Texas told a recent workshop of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in Carrollton, Georgia. However, as they become fluent in English and adapt to U.S. culture, they tend to end up in English congregations and have little to do with their fellow countrymen who have not yet assimilated.

Second and third generation Latins tend to be assimilated and thus run into conflict with their elders, leading to what Puerto Rican missionary Al Ortiz calls a “high conflict in the Hispanic church.” Ortiz said that this is due to “parents living in the traditional mode they come with and wanting to preserve language and culture while the younger generation embraces Americanism and is assimilated rather quickly.”

Ortiz warns that incoming Latins have to be reached within a short time or they will “fall prey to the materialistic and consumerism tendencies we have in the US. They are escapees of survivalism and materialism is too great a temptation to defeat.”

Yet, as they assimilate, they will carry expectations and patterns with them into traditionally Anglo or African-American churches.

“Latins are intensely relational and respond to attention, to communication and to be taken into account,” reported Sam Olson, president of the Evangelical Council of Venezuela and the pastor of a large church in Caracas. “They will not return to a church if they sense that they are being belittled or do not receive care and love.”

Olson contrasts that characteristic with North Americans who, he said, want to remain private.

That relational tendency means that Latin Americans will be less interested in “project oriented program strategies” and will focus more on relational based strategies according to Marty Windle of the Latin America Mission who has served as a missionary in Latin America for 20 years.

Coming from a predominately Roman Catholic region means that Latins in the United States are likely to carry vestiges of Roman Catholicism. “It is ingrained in us from our birth,” explained Ortiz, who has served in the Dominican Republic and now works through World Team with Mission Miami. “The missionary movement into Latin America took the cultural gospel of the USA and not a gospel free of culture. So, the influx of Latins in U.S. churches tends to follow the same patterns of the past because culture is so pervasive.”

In spite of that Roman Catholic influence in family life and cultural understandings, Latins coming into the U.S. are expecting worship to be quite different; contemporary and not ritualistic. “If the service tends to ritualistic, the Latin will interpret that he is in a Roman Catholic mass, and would then prefer going to a Roman Catholic church,” Olson said. However, a well-educated or cultured Latin might prefer a more formal worship, Olson added.

“The line between church (denominational) traditions in worship is often blurred with Latin church worship,” Windle said. “I expect that we will see an anti-liturgical approach to worship, event oriented more than time oriented.”

Worship is an integral part of church life for Latins, and their expression is much more lively than found in most North American congregations. ““Latins are very musical and bring to the worship a fresh energy and spirit,” reported Donnie Daniels, an Assemblies of God missionary in Temuco, Chile.

Nick Woodbury, director of Christ for Miami who served in Colombia for 15 years agreed. “Lively worship is central and a strong, aggressive evangelistic outreach is important. Some Latin churches are very driven by prayer with all night prayer meetings, prayer walks, 24 hour watches and so forth.”

Certainly, Latins expect much more than the traditional hour-long Sunday morning service that North Americans demand. “They are event oriented, not time oriented,” Daniels said. “A typical service in southern Chile would be at least one hour of singing followed by a one hour to hour and 15 minutes sermon followed by an altar ministry. So, you are looking at about a three hour service.”

Garcia sums up Latin worship as using more instrumentation for singing, not always following an order of worship, more evangelistic in worship, more emotive and contextualize worship.

Stylistically, Latins are more animated in their worship and their worship services tend to include a more charismatic expression, even in congregations related to traditionally non-charismatic denominations. The Evangelical and Reformed church of Honduras, established by missionaries from what today is the United Church of Christ in the United States is very charismatic in its worship style and theology. And, a charismatic tendency is sweeping through Southern Baptist-established churches in Argentina and Uruguay.

Amy Moline who served for several years in Mexico City with LAM’s Spearhead program said that she expects more bilingual worship songs sung in North American churches as more Latins assimilate into English speaking congregations.

The close family life of most Latins affects church programming and traditions. “You will see a more diverse generational population in worship services,” said Moline. “A Latin American’s view of family is to do everything together. They seem to prefer to have all ages in the sanctuary together, even if it may seem disruptive to the American.”

“The rites of passage that were so important in the Roman Catholic tradition, such as baptism and first communion are still important.”

Moline said that some families are taking the traditional quince (similar to the U.S. sweet sixteen celebration) and turning it into an event with Christian overtones. “

Latin evangelical Christians tend to be more biblically rooted than their North American counterparts and appear to be more conservative theologically. Anglican churches in countries such as Chile, Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay have taken a strong stand against the ordination of a gay bishop by the Episcopal church in the United States, and

many have joined their African brothers in splitting away from the world-wide Anglican fellowship.

Latins are very evangelistic and interested in hands-on ministries, Woodbury said. "Street evangelism and open-air meetings will probably increase in Latin areas and the will be involved in door-to-door evangelism," he said.

Youth are not exempt from this emphasis, bringing with them a passion for evangelism that they learned in their home country. For example, in Campinas, a city of one million people located an hour and a half west of Sao Paulo, the teenage youth group from a 3,000 member-strong charismatic Nazarene church spends every Saturday giving concerts, plays and puppet shows in city parks. Their goal is to lead at least 1,000 people to Christ every year.

Latins often exhibit a wholistic style of ministry in that they are not hesitant to combine evangelism and social ministries. "Evangelicals would have a different agenda here, because they do not come from -- or not nearly so much -- from the middle class," said Ralph Kurtenbach, a missionary in Ecuador with HCJB. "Evangelicals come from the poor primarily, so their (social) agenda would be left of center, not right of center."

Organizationally, Latins differ from their North American counterparts in several ways. "They have a tendency toward less proactive planning or accountability in financial management," Windle said. "They have a strong sense of authority and respect for pastors which has been largely lost in our familiar society."

Observing that Evangelical churches in Latin America tend to be more conservative than their North American brothers, Ortiz said, "The Pentecostal wing tends to be tithers but the non-pentecostals are not as faithful in this area.

North American churches can begin to reach out to Spanish-speaking neighbors by providing help in areas such as immigration procedures, English as a Second Language classes, citizenship issues and intercultural needs Garcia said. "Missionary efforts are probably best done by training persons that can relate to them culturally, not just linguistically. It is not enough to have someone who speaks Spanish, but someone who can relate to them culturally."

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