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Who's Your Neighbor?

By Sammy Rodríguez

How an ancient parable challenges a MySpace vision of ministry.



Who is my neighbor? This query asked in the parable of the good Samaritan exemplifies the debate in the heart of the ethnic church and the primary challenge to the evangelical body at large. After 100 years of exponential growth in the Latino church, Hispanic pastors and leaders find ourselves struggling to define a new missiological baseline. In other words, do we exist to preserve an ethnocentric ideology or do we focus on intentional building of the kingdom of God?

Hence, the Latino church is strategically and prophetically situated to provide leadership to the collective evangelical church in America by both incorporating the tenants of the good Samaritan parable and nullifying the "MySpace" version of Christianity that it—as well as the African-American, Anglo and other segments of the church have adopted.

Nick Garza, an Assemblies of God pastor in Sacramento, California, sees the functional structure of this popular Web site as the antithesis of successful biblical outreach.

"MySpace.com enables the subscriber to determine who has access to his or her profile, pictures, stories and information," he notes. "In other words, unless you have been given access, you can't come in. Only my friends, who share my interests are granted access.

Accordingly, the church has operated under a MySpace model. As long as Christ is our default friend, we are somehow allowed to build our own space with limited access to include only those who we know or permit.

"Although I believe a need exists for ethnic churches to serve the various constituencies in our communities, we must never see the preservation of the ethnicity, language or culture as the primary purpose of the local congregation," Garza adds. "We must be readily accessible to all our neighbors."

Garza recalls hearing a Hispanic denominational leader warn pastors and leaders to be careful in starting English-speaking services because it may result in the loss of our heritage and culture. He notes that "this sort of statement exemplifies the limited thinking that fosters an atmosphere of segregation and competitiveness."

According to Albert Reyes, national Hispanic baptist leader, the Latino church personifies the 21st-century good Samaritan.

"Samaritans were a mixed breed. Just as Latinos are mixes of European, Indian and Afro-American cultures. Samaritans were rejected because of their makeup. We see our diversity as strength. We can reach out to Anglo, Asian, black, and other ethnicities because racially and culturally, our fabric reflects the various threads," he explains. "Latino evangelicals have a prophetic calling to build bridges between the various communities and facilitate a fruitful ministry of reconciliation."

The good Samaritan parable not only challenges leaders to ask, "Who is my neighbor?" but also, "How much am I willing to invest?" The good Samaritan provided his oil, wine, donkey, silver and even a commitment for future expenses to be reimbursed.

"As a Latina pastor, I got tired of limiting my ministry to one class, group or segment of our community," explains Reina Olmeda, senior pastor of 3rd Day Worship Center in Allentown, Pennsylvania. "We want to reach out to all."

Olmeda adds that the church has a biblical mandate to walk the path of transformational ministry and identify the needs regardless of the size.

"The Samaritans were rejected because of their ethnic makeup," she notes. "What made the Samaritan good was not what he had or who he was, but how he responded to the needs of others."

Historically, in response to the original question, "Who is my neighbor?" the Latino church responded by identifying those in the Latino community. That erroneous response limited the outreach and created walls of segregation between the Hispanic church and others. Today we must ask this question by bringing clarity to its original intent. In reality, this question asks, "Who do I want to heal, restore, love and embrace?"

Who is my neighbor? My neighbor is the poor and the rich, the black and the white, the urban and suburban, the city and the rural. My neighbors are the children of Darfur and those suffering with AIDS in Africa. My neighbors are the victims of Katrina and the Sunnis and Shiites of the Middle East. Our response as Christian leaders to this query speaks more about who we are than who we will reach out to. "Who is my neighbor?" is actually questioning not who are those around me, but rather who am I in the midst of a lost and dying world.

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