

Latino Ministry

by Pastor Helga Jansons Director for Evangelical Mission

Ministry among Latino people in our synod ranges from renting out space to a Latino congregation, Child Care/ After School Programs mostly attended by Latino children, Citizenship and English as a Second Language classes, to bilingual worship. This is our greatest opportunity and challenge for building cross- cultural relationships and expanding our style of ministry. The high population of Latino people in our geography, predominantly from Mexico, are the gift we have been given by God to help us grow (not necessarily numerical) as a denomination. As we encounter the colorful Mexican culture and passionate faith, our Lutheran intellectual way of communicating becomes apparent/evident. While our love for music, food and art are common ground, we are stretched to appreciate our differences and try to incorporate both cultures into our congregational lives.

So, how do we begin to do ministry among Latino people? The first thing is always about building relationships. In doing so, there is a longstanding history to counter, and this takes time. As a denomination, we are mostly Anglo and together with the varied immigration status of Latino people there is already a power imbalance. Socio-economically it is Anglo people that need to make the first move toward relationship and connection. Inviting Latino people for coffee and having a one to one conversation is the best way. Make sure to be able to linger in conversation since hearing about family and sharing about one's own, is often essential before mentioning anything to do with the church.

Speaking even a few words in Spanish shows that we care to make an effort to connect. For example, phrases like Como estas? (How are you?) and Muy Bien, gracias (Very well, thank you). Pastors and communion assistants could memorize the words: El cuerpo de Cristo dado por ti (The body of Christ given for you) and La sangre de Cristo derramada por ti (The blood of Christ shed for you). For adults it is harder to retain a new language but we can learn a few things by rote. Latinos are very forgiving when an Anglo tries to speak Spanish. They usually figure out what you are trying to say. Most Latinos know more English than they acknowledge. They just don't want to be embarrassed by saying the wrong thing. Anglos who can pronounce Spanish words could read the Bible to those who only speak Spanish. We don't need to understand each word when we are reading.

Once trust has been built, Latino people are open to learning what a Lutheran church is about: beliefs, history and how Latino people would be welcomed. The Latino people that I have met are incredibly warm and include and introduce everyone. Genuine hospitality is essential. To be welcoming signs inside and outside the church, mission statements, and pictures or plaques would be in both Spanish and English.

Most are Roman Catholic or Evangelical in background and those roots run deep. Across the ELCA churches that resemble either of these denominations – mostly Roman Catholic – are growing. However, if people are not educated in how a Lutheran church functions, where lay people are involved as volunteers and take leadership roles, then Latino people will only attend on Sundays. ELCA churches with the largest Latino populations are discovering this. Latino people are reticent to assert their views which means that it can be difficult to engage Latino people in leadership positions. However, over time, when recognizing and affirming the natural spiritual gifts of Latino people and with lots of encouragement, training and support, ministry among and by Latino people can thrive.

A way to grow Latino ministry is to offer programs for children. Tree of Life Lutheran Church in Yakima has proven this to be true. First Communion classes are well attended. Don't be surprised, however, when those who have participated in Lutheran ministry, still baptize their baby in a Roman Catholic church. We have a long way to go building bridges across denominational lines not just cultural ones.

P.S. All are welcome to be part of the synod wide Latino Ministry team that meets in Mattawa, WA.

