

# ***Lutheran Mission Matters***

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# Missouri's Mission with Hispanics in the United States—a Half-Century Critique: The Good, Bad, and Possible

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**Abstract:** Invited to share reflections on Hispanic ministry in the Missouri Synod over a fifty year ministry the author is in intent on showing that a great deal of progress has been made in Hispanic ministry as God has blessed dedicated individuals and families in raising up ministry to and with Hispanics in congregational leadership formation and literary productivity. At the same time, the Synod and its administrative units on district levels are judged sorely deficient in recognizing their own internal blindness to systemic cultural premises which have insisted on Anglo economic and administrative superiority and their consequent marginalization of ethnic and specifically Hispanic ecclesial needs. The article suggests that Hispanic and other ethnic minorities within the Synod present a possible “teaching moment” for the Church to recapture its identity as a “people in exile” under God’s eternal blessing instead of an institution in decline that must hold on to its power and control at all costs.



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Inviting a missionary, pastor, professor, and administrator to reflect on a particular area of ministry over fifty years is indeed a dangerous thing. I have been retired for eleven years, and with each year that I am away from active ministry I sometimes think that either I have nothing to offer or no one cares. The reader will then understand why, when invited to give my own reflections on Missouri's Hispanic ministries, I readily assented. Finally, I thought, they want to know, and finally I am going to "tell it like it is"! After a couple of weeks of reflection, recalling my years in Venezuela (1966–1978) and the varied accumulated memories of nine years of ministry with Puerto Rican sisters and brothers in Cleveland (1978–87) and later as director of the Hispanic Institute of Theology (now the Center For Hispanic Studies) from 1987–2006, which took me to dozens of cities all over the United States, I sensed that the memories were too broad and too diverse. It was not just "Tell it like it is!" because "it" is really "they, them, and those things" in the plural. I needed some simple organizing principles to deal with contradictions. As I recalled events and reviewed dozens of documents, I was surprised and sobered by the good and bad running side by side over the decades. Heroic individual ministry as exemplified by Pastors Cobian and Andrés Meléndez in Texas ninety years ago or Pastor Martinelli in California in the 1930s has run parallel with administrative bungling. Significant administrative progress can be demonstrated alongside blatant backsliding.

Consequently, for the sake of keeping things simple, I have chosen to address three general areas: The Good, The Bad, and The Possible.

## **The Good**

The first point that I want to make is that we do not need a new "Theology of Mission." This fact was brought home to me as I listened to and watched Dr. Robert Kolb's insightful banquet address to those gathered together in the Lutheran Society for Missiology (LSFM)'s annual meeting in the halls of Concordia Seminary in January 2017. In less than fifty minutes, he was able to remind attendees that a missionary understanding of the Gospel and the Lutheran Confessions was really there all along in the Lutheran "soul," manifested by words and actions of Lutheran princes, missionaries, and adventurers alike. This reality has been there for centuries and should not surprise us this year as we celebrate the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation. What surprised me, however, as I listened to his presentation of a Confessional Lutheran view of mission, was a nagging question: "Where have I heard this before?" I recalled a meeting of the International Lutheran Theological Conference on the same campus sometime in 1970 or 1971, when I represented the Conference of Lutheran Churches of Venezuela. Lutheran leaders from all over the world were gathered and tasked to ask and answer almost the same question: "Can we be confessional and missional? Does our Lutheran DNA (we didn't use that term then) help or hinder our ministries?" Yet, as I look back, I concluded that what I had lived over almost fifty years was a sound theology of missions with the "bookends" of the Lutheran Confessions, already debated but affirmed back then and still

consistently proclaimed at least in our theological discourse of this century, as so eloquently stated by Dr. Kolb.

A second “Good” that accompanies what we believe, teach, and confess and need not be debated, at least in terms of Hispanic presence in the United States or where Lutheran ministry might take place, is simply put: *We know very well what we should be doing and what is needed to do that work.* On an economic-sociological-political scale, we simply have better data on all facets of Hispanic presence in the United States than ever before. The Pew Hispanic Center continues to study the Hispanic realities of our country from almost every point of view, occasionally even posting reliable studies of religious and spiritual preferences. These are updated almost weekly. At the same time, we know a great deal about the Lutheran Hispanic presence. In 2006, the Synod mandated a Blue Ribbon Task Force to study Lutheran Hispanic history, presence, challenges, and needs for a report to the Synod in convention. The findings of the Blue Ribbon Task Force are still available in the Convention Workbook of 2007 and are still waiting to be implemented. Simply put: Another study is not needed.

A third “Good” to celebrate is that there have been and continue to be new Hispanic ministries opening in many districts each decade, largely carried out by Hispanics. This was already highlighted in the Blue Ribbon study, although not statistically documented since then. Leadership of Hispanic ministry in the LCMS is now completely or almost completely in the hands of Hispanic men and women. This fact must be celebrated because it was not always that way. When I returned to the United States in 1978, meetings were dominated by Anglo pastors, many of us as returned missionaries from different parts of Central and South America. Attending the Hispanic National Convention in Tampa in 2015 was a joyful celebration of a Lutheran Hispanic proclamation of the Gospel in study, culture, and song.

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To see Hispanic pastors and deaconesses leading national assemblies brings about another “Good.” Since the early 1970s, there has been a consistent, high quality program to form theologically well trained pastors, deaconesses and lay workers. Even prior to the creation of the Institute For Hispanic Studies under Dr. Herbert Simms on the campus of the then Concordia College in River Forest in the early 1970s, there were attempts in Monterey, Mexico, and Concordia College in Austin, Texas, to prepare men for ministry. Since 1987, the Hispanic Institute of Theology (now the Center for Hispanic Studies) has prepared dozens of men and women for ministry.

We can be thankful that a uniquely Hispanic approach to theological questions often previously voiced only through Roman Catholic and general Protestant voices

has been and are being voiced through and by Lutheran Hispanics and Anglo workers in Hispanic contexts so that the church at large at least has the opportunity for growth and instruction if it wants to listen and be taught. Generally, written studies do not single out friends or acquaintances for accolades or criticism. I would be remiss, however, in reflecting on our Lutheran Hispanic ministries if I did not mention the contributions of Hispanic Lutheran giants of our own Synod who have especially contributed to Hispanic theological thought and ministry. I think first of those now deceased: Andrés Meléndez stands out as pastor, radio preacher, missionary, and scholar, who translated countless hymns, prayers, tracts, and treatises, culminating in his editorship of the Book of Concord in Spanish. Bruno Martinelli and David Stirdivant must be remembered as first among many faithful workers in California. Bernard and Fred Pankow, though natives of the Dakotas, established work in New York City and California. Pastor Llerena did yeoman's work in New York City. Work in Florida is marked by the names of Robert Gonzalez, Eugene Gruel, Herman Gleinke, and Loraine Florindez. Fred Boden, Carlos Puig, and Leo Vigil are only a few of many faithful Texas missionaries now with their Lord. Pastors Gerhard Kempff and William Rumsch worked tirelessly in the Pacific Northwest. Angel Perez helped stabilize ministry in Cleveland and the Midwest. There is a continuing new, vibrant Hispanic ministry with new names: Leo Sanchez, Aurelio Magariño, Hector and Beatriz Hoppe, Ligia and Adolfo Borges, Melissa Solomon, Julio Loza, Benito and Jesse Perez, and Roberto and Irma Rojas are only a few who come to memory at this moment. There are many more.

Another "Good" is that we must recognize the blessings of ample theological, educational, and worship materials. When we arrived in Venezuela in October 1966, we had Bibles printed by the United Bible Society, ready access to the new Lutheran hymnal, *Culto Cristiano*, published jointly by the LCMS, the American Lutheran Church, and the Lutheran Church of America, and the Small Catechism, published by CPH in Spanish. An illustrated book of children's Bible stories was a common resource for Sunday School. Today, thanks to the multicultural department of Concordia Publishing House and the Lutheran Laymen's League, there are ample biblical materials for spreading the Good News in Spanish (and sometimes a bilingual format) at almost any level.

## **The Bad**

The reader might have noticed in the course of listing the "GOOD" side of this presentation that there is an almost "knockoff" phrase: "*If the Synod wants to . . .*" That statement is not a mistake, simply because, while I list outstanding individual contributors to the Lutheran Hispanic missionary movement, the reality is that the Missouri Synod—with the administrative responsibility and capacity to study, plan, administer, and support mission enterprises—has a most uneven history as it continues to fail as an institutional entity with any knowledge of or serious desire to prioritize ministry to Hispanics. This is often but not always reflected in its District extensions. In spite of the overwhelming demographic reality of the Hispanic presence and growing importance in all levels of our society, our administrative units

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have often dealt with this challenge as one on an equal par with important, but by comparison, much smaller identifiable ethnic or ministry need groups. The lack of Hispanic ministry as a priority is manifest by a blatant lack of Hispanic staffing on all levels of Synod or district levels. The result of the lack of Hispanic presence on administrative levels has resulted in failure to understand its own systemic weaknesses, failure to demythologize itself in the midst of the broader American culture, failure to attempt to learn the history of Hispanic presence, failure to listen to Hispanic theological voices, and, perhaps, most importantly, failure to do anything about any of the above, especially since Hispanic Lutherans have been addressing all of these concerns for years.

### Failure to Understand Systemic Weakness

Prior to addressing a specific failure to act over against Hispanic ministry, my observation over the years is that in general Missouri's mission efforts have floundered because of a constant turnover of administrations with conflicting theologies or methodologies of mission. Our Synod has never really figured out its identity. Are we pastors to the flock, educators with schools, doctors and nurses or evangelists? These functions of ministry have been played off against each other through programs. The *Ablaze* program, heralded with great pomp and expense only a decade ago, suddenly stopped with the next administration. Today the catch word is *mercy*. What will it be tomorrow? Hispanic pastors and deaconesses are left asking if their labors will be evaluated, affirmed, or terminated by new criteria as new administrations struggle to define their ministries. Hispanic pastors and workers, as well as their families, have been harmed and often embittered because of our capriciousness.

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### Failure to Demythologize our Cultural Comfort

Dr. Robert Newton's presentation to his own district on the LSFM's website about the delegation of the church's role in society to the margins of recognition of control and power, coupled with the theological necessity of the Church at any time to see itself in "exile," prompts me to invite the reader to explore the ever expanding bibliography of Hispanic-American theology treating that theme. The Anglo American church does not understand its use of power, that is, understand how readily it has accepted subtle and often unconscious myths of itself as intellectually and ethnically superior to the Hispanic objects of its well-intentioned mission efforts, and probably, most importantly, the presumption of its innocence, permanence of superiority and power over the Hispanic Christian movement. These presumptions militate against any recognition of God's people as a pilgrim people.

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Our Synod has not accepted its own level of accepting American myths of cultural structures. Good Lutherans decry the cultural aberrations of our society so centered on immorality, rampant individualism, and secularism. Yet, while we deplore individual aberrations of servanthood, as an institution we seemingly have accepted corporate models of administration far from the “margins” of an exiled people. A recent *Reporter* heralded the naming of a new CEO. The phenomenon of the CEO is certainly good for industry. Is it good for the Church? A few years ago on the basis of the required posting by the *Reporter*, with only a hand calculator I could see that the first million dollars of offerings of Missouri’s members each year go to six executives’ salaries and benefits. The point here is not that good men and women do not work hard and are worthy of their hire. The point is rather that we do not seriously question the myth that this is the way the Church must function in our society. How can a church mission executive on full salary with health and retirement benefits encourage Hispanic worker priests? We are slaves to our myths.

### Failure to Learn about the Hispanic Presence in the United States

These lines are being written during a September full of the tragedy of Charlottesville and the ongoing tensions between North Korea and the United States, all at the same time that we wait for daily updates on the Russian meddling investigation. The Charlottesville event highlights the deep cultural divide of racism and the scars of slavery of the African Americans that still haunt our national consciousness. The Korean crisis underscores our historic economic and political tensions with Asia, while Russia reminds us of ties to Europe. While we acknowledge a certain obsession with these three weighty challenges, the reality is that the daily life of most Americans, including members of LCMS congregations, is much more dependent upon our interaction with men, women, and children from the North-South axis, specifically with Mexicans, Mexican Americans, and Central Americans. Mexicans and Central Americans harvest our food, clean our hotels, mow our lawns, clean our office buildings, and increasingly govern our cities, while we see them as nameless and faceless. Lee and Grant at the Appomattox Court House represent one clash of culture. The Versailles Treaty represents another end to a war. We will probably get a rather blank stare, however, when we ask about the circumstances that brought about and the results of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1847—a treaty equally important and probably as relevant to life today in these United States. Offers of educational workshops by the Hispanic Institute and the Center for Hispanic Studies over a decade showed little response on the part of Synod’s leaders.

All of the above in this case is simply to underscore the dearth of knowledge of Hispanic culture and history, as well as the systemic lack of interest in knowing whom we say we want to evangelize. There are two additional factors that currently play into any equation of our Synod’s successes or obstacles to successful ministry with Hispanics: (1) There seems to be an anti-immigrant tone within large sections of the American public and within the church to the degree that we mirror the general population. As I write these lines, the United States is embroiled in another debate

about Deferred Act for Childhood Arrival (DACA). Since these young people are in Missouri's congregations, our response to this debate will be a test of our resolve to be in ministry to Hispanics. (2) We have to be honest that our Synod's leadership has publicly identified the Synod with the tone of the new administration in Washington in our official publications and through public events featuring members of this administration, e.g., Dr. Ben Carson addressed the November 1916 LCEF Convocation. At least officially The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod does not project that it can be trusted as a welcoming community for Hispanics.

### Failure to Act

Once again I chant the refrain "*If the Synod wants to listen . . .*" The work of the Blue Ribbon Task Force for Hispanic Missions mandated by the Synod in convention in 2006 presented nine recommendations to the next convention. Of the nine, I must single out the first, third, and ninth for consideration:

- 1: A Counselor for Strategic Development of Hispanic Ministries
- 3: Hear the Hispanic voices in forming the church's future
- 9: Ongoing study to build a strategic plan

With the exception of the CTCR document, *Immigrants among Us*, none of these recommendations have ever been implemented. We actually know less about Hispanic ministry in the United States than we did ten years ago. Hispanics consistently put at the top of their "wish list" the position of the Counselor for Strategic Development of Hispanic Ministries. Yet the Anglo ecclesial administration could somehow justify budgetary considerations as a reason for not filling the position. There is less coordination and communication among Hispanic workers than there was ten years ago. There is no systematic plan for defining or identifying Hispanic ministries or monitoring success or failure. There is no one person or office charged with coordination of planning for looking outward or strengthening the interior Hispanic community. Hispanics can only conclude that ministry to, by, and with them is not a priority.

### The Possible: A Bright History, A Bright Future

We can rejoice that there is a bright history for a Lutheran proclamation of the Gospel through Hispanic ministry for many reasons. First of all, we must always go back to our central affirmation that Jesus the Savior is Lord of the Church. Ultimately, nothing can and will prevail against it. Secondly, He continues to prepare and send men and women into the world to proclaim Good News with or without a denominational support system.

When one looks backward at Hispanic ministry carried on by Hispanic men and women over these ninety years, one can conclude that ministry has taken place by men and women with sanctified dedication, in many cases in spite of the Missouri Synod. One might go so far as to say that—since in so many cases their ministries have been carried out on the margins with little, no, or erratic denominational

support—they have learned how to minister from the viewpoint of vulnerability. They have identified with the powerless on the margins because in many cases the church has put them there. Their wives or husbands often work full time to support the family while they labor in ministry. They work as carpenters, contractors, maintenance supervisors for 40 and 50 hours a week and then prepare their sermons and minister to their flocks. They know of exploitation, as they have labored on brainstorming tours to raise money for Hispanic missions or posed for pictures in official publications, knowing the Synod’s or district’s intent to use them to raise money, but then have been denied a voice in saying how it was used.

There is another reality often difficult for the dominant culture to understand or appreciate, namely, that it might be that Hispanic and other ethnic cultural groupings within the United States could help the Synod do more than survive. After long years of being on the margins, these groups can help the church at large learn how to “downsize,” that is, how to be vulnerable instead of powerful and controlling. We look around our aging demographic and we wonder where all the people are and how we can sustain ministries. The reality probably is that we can’t, nor should try to sustain the congregational understanding of church as power, influence, and control agent. Theological themes such as pulpit and altar fellowship, liturgical wars, steps toward church discipline—themes important to the “in group” that that have seemingly dominated and divided our Synod for the last fifty—are not on Hispanic “needs” mission radar. Hispanic Lutherans from Missouri’s tradition know that in many cases they must rely on other Hispanic Christians. In many cases, they relate more to Roman Catholic, Evangelical, and even other Lutheran Hispanics over questions of education for their children, economic exploitation, health care, and immigration. The aging Anglo Missouri must “let go” and let Hispanics and other cultural groups help show it how to leave its perception of being able to “do it alone” and join Christians of other stripes in ministry as Lutherans.

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Hispanic Ministry in the Missouri Synod might be the “canary in the cage” to determine the life and death of the Synod. The Synod might make it if it can once again be vulnerable “in exile” and learn from Hispanics and other marginalized cultures how to live without power and serve as a people in exile—or continue to insist on control and power as it descends into the cave of death.