

Becoming All Things to All *Latinos*: Case Studies in Contextualization from the Barrio

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This study explores the nature of two church-planting movements that successfully target U.S.-born Hispanics. Findings reveal that each movement came into being as a response to the linguistic and cultural distance between U.S.-born Hispanics and immigrants from Latin America. The data also reveal that a commitment to evangelize U.S.-born Hispanics obliged church leaders to reject the Spanish-speaking immigrant-church model in favor of more contextually appropriate approaches to ministry among English-dominant Hispanics who are reluctant to assimilate into dominant group churches.

During the past one hundred fifty years of mission and ministry among Hispanics¹ in the United States, most church leaders have assumed a “Spanish-speaking immigrant church model.” This model still dominates the landscape of Hispanic ministries among evangelicals in the United States. Unfortunately, this model is generally not successful when targeting U.S.-born² English-dominant Hispanics.

This study explores how linguistic, cultural, and social-economic factors have shaped the nature of two evangelical church-planting movements that successfully target English-dominant U.S.-born Hispanics in Southern California and throughout the United States. Findings based upon extensive interviews, observations, and official church documents reveal that a commitment to evangelize U.S.-born English-dominant Hispanics obliged church leaders to reject the Spanish-speaking immigrant-church model in favor of more contextually appropriate models for reaching U.S.-born Hispanics who are reluctant to assimilate into dominant group churches. Special attention is given to the contextually appropriate approaches to

¹ *Latino* and *Hispanic* will be used interchangeably throughout this paper to refer to all individuals of Latin American ancestry who reside either legally or illegally within the borders of the United States of America.

² *U.S.-born* and *native-born* Hispanic/Latino will be used synonymously in this paper to refer to Hispanics who were born in the United States of America including second and third-generation Latinos.

evangelism, preaching, and worship in each movement. The study also highlights and analyzes the indefinitely reproducible approaches to leadership development and church planting in these movements.

Research focusing on Latino evangelical ministries that target second and third-generation Hispanics is long overdue. Recent publications by Eldín Villafañe³ highlight social ethics from a Latino Pentecostal perspective while Arlene Sanchez Walsh explores the ethnic and religious identity of Latino evangelicals and Pentecostals.⁴ Each has contributed much to a growing understanding of the Latino evangelical and Pentecostal experience in the United States, but with the exception of select portions of works by Villafañe and Orlando Costas,⁵ very little attention has been given to evangelism and church growth from a distinctively Hispanic evangelical perspective.⁶ Only in *The Hispanic Challenge* by Manuel Ortiz has someone sought to identify the practical as well as the theological challenges facing Hispanic evangelical ministries at the turn of the 21st century.⁷ My own current research seeks to address this need, highlighting and analyzing the principles and practices of contemporary evangelical churches at the cutting-edge of Hispanic ministry among native-born English-dominant Latinos.

The social, economic, and political battles over the so-called “immigration dilemma,” especially as they are portrayed in the local and national media, lead many Americans to assume that the overwhelming majority of Hispanics in the U.S. are immigrants, for whom English is a second language and for whom American society and its core values are foreign. But according to the most recent U.S. Census figures, 61.0 percent of the 35 million Hispanics counted in the 2000 census were born in the U.S.⁸

Herein lies the issue this study will seek to address: The overwhelming majority of Hispanic ministries rely exclusively on Spanish and therefore by default pri-

³ Eldín Villafañe, *The Liberating Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994); also, *Seek the Peace of the City* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

⁴ Arlene Sanchez-Walsh, *Latino Pentecostal Identity: Evangelical Faith, Self and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

⁵ Orlando E. Costas, *Christ outside the Gate* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1982); also, *Liberating News* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

⁶ Justo L. Gonzalez has written three books that provide helpful insights toward understanding the nature of Hispanic biblical interpretation, worship, and preaching from a mainline Protestant perspective: *¡Alabadle! Hispanic Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996); also, *Santa Biblia: The Bible through Hispanic Eyes* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996); also, *Púlpito: An Introduction to Hispanic Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005).

⁷ Manuel Ortiz, *The Hispanic Challenge: Opportunities Confronting the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993).

⁸ U.S. Census Bureau, “The Hispanic Population in the United States,” (March 2000) 1, available online at <http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/hispanic/p20-535/p20-535.pdf>.

marily target first-generation Latinos (immigrants). That leaves the majority of Hispanics in the United States off the evangelistic radar screens of most Great-Commission churches. This study will argue that we must “become all things to *all* Latinos.” First, this will require challenging the hegemony of the historic paradigm for Hispanic ministry in the U.S. Second, it will require the proposal of new models, proven to be contextually relevant and effective in reaching native-born English-dominant Latinos in the U.S.

BACKGROUND: THE HISPANIC CONTEXT TODAY

The Hispanic population in the United States is growing. In 1980, the U.S. Census reported that 14.6 million Hispanics resided legally in the U.S.; by 1990, that figure had grown by 61 percent to 21 million. In 2000, U.S. Census data revealed that the Hispanic population had grown by an additional 53 percent to 35 million representing more than 12.0 percent of the total U.S. population,⁹ making Hispanics the largest minority in the U.S.¹⁰ By way of comparison, in California, the state with the country’s largest Hispanic population, Latinos represent 32 percent of the state’s total population.¹¹

At mid-decade in 2005, it is now estimated that there are more than 41 million Hispanics in the United States.¹²

In addition to being the fastest-growing ethnic group in the U.S., Hispanics are also the fastest-growing segment of the Protestant church. The number of Hispanic Protestant congregations in Southern California alone jumped from 320 in 1970 to 1,022 in 1986 to 1,450 in 1990.¹³ The surge is attributed to several factors including the influx of legal and illegal immigrants, the highest birth rate among ethnic groups, and massive defections from the Roman Catholic Church. While 73 percent of Hispanics are still Catholic,¹⁴ it is estimated that every year more than 60,000 Hispanic Catholics are leaving their ancestral church to join Protestant denominations.¹⁵ It is

⁹ By way of comparison, between 1980 and 1990, the total U.S. population grew at 11.5 percent. Between 1990 and 2000, the total U.S. population grew at 9.8 percent.

¹⁰ U.S. Census Bureau, “The Hispanic Population in the United States,” 1.

¹¹ The California Policy Research Center, “California Latino Demographic Databook” (July 7, 2002), available online at http://ucdata.berkeley.edu:7101/new_web/latino/.

¹² Pew Hispanic Center, “A Statistical Portrait of Hispanics at Mid-decade” (September 18, 2006), available online at <http://pewhispanic.org/reports/middecade/>.

¹³ Andrés Tapia, “Growing Pains: Evangelical Latinos Wrestle with the Role of Women, Generation Gaps, and Cultural Divides,” *Christianity Today* 39 (1995) 38-42.

¹⁴ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Hispanic Ministry at a Glance” (June 2002), available online at <http://www.usccb.org/hispanicaffairs/demo.shtml>.

¹⁵ Andrés Tapia, “¡Viva Los Evangélicos!” *Christianity Today* 35 (1991) 16-22.

now estimated that more than 15 percent of all adult Hispanics are Protestant¹⁶ or *evangélicos*.¹⁷

THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR THIS STUDY

The phenomena described above suggest that some Protestant denominations have seen an increase in the number of Hispanics joining their congregations because they have adapted their theologies of ministry to the “cultural context” of the growing number of Hispanics in their communities. Foundational to the thesis of this study is the conviction that the missionary’s ultimate goal is to communicate the supracultural message of the gospel in culturally relevant terms. The gospel is relevant to all ages, cultures, and peoples, but it must be contextualized in order for it to be experienced as the living message of God.¹⁸ This was seen in God’s communication with Israel¹⁹ and in the ministry of the Apostle Paul.²⁰ But contextualization is seen most clearly in God’s incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth, whom we are enjoined to imitate (John 20:21).

Toward this goal, this study will argue that the unique socio-historical and cultural context of native-born Latinos in the United States requires Great-Commission Christians to think beyond the traditional ministry models that have dominated Hispanic ministries in the 20th century. The two case studies that follow will demonstrate that the hegemony of the traditional monolingual immigrant-church model is in fact being challenged theologically and strategically by a growing number of churches that are successfully reaching unchurched native-born Hispanics with contextually appropriate approaches to ministry.

¹⁶ Pew Research Center and Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “Changing Faiths: Latinos and the Transformation of American Religion” (March 25, 2007), available online at <http://pewhispanic.org/reports.php?ReportID=75>.

¹⁷ Among Latin Americans and foreign-born Spanish-dominant Hispanics in the U.S., the term *evangélico* is synonymous with Protestant.

¹⁸ Helpful introductions to the area of contextualization include Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994); Dean S. Gilliland, ed., *The Word among Us: Contextualizing Theology for Mission Today* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1989); David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989); Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985).

¹⁹ For classic examples of contextualization in the OT see Arthur F. Glasser, “Old Testament Contextualization: Revelation and Its Environment,” in *The Word among Us*, 32-51.

²⁰ For excellent examples of contextualization in the NT, especially in the ministry of the apostle Paul, see Dean S. Gilliland, “New Testament Contextualization: Continuity and Particularity in Paul’s Theology,” in *The Word among Us*, 53-73.

INTO THE “URBAN” BARRIO

Census data reveals that Hispanics are more likely than non-Hispanic whites to live inside central cities of major metropolitan areas such as Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, Dallas, and Houston. In fact, 46 percent of all Hispanics live in a central city within a metropolitan area compared with 21 percent of non-Hispanic white population who live in central cities. An additional 45 percent of the Hispanic population lives outside central cities but within a metropolitan area with a population of at least 100,000 inhabitants. This means that 91 percent of all Hispanics are urban compared with 77 percent of non-Hispanic whites.²¹ The implication for Hispanic ministry is obvious: People who want to reach Hispanics must move to the city, especially the inner-city. This is precisely what my own research of two Southern-California, evangelical, church-planting movements that have enjoyed phenomenal success in reaching second and third-generation Hispanics in at-risk, underserved urban and inner-city neighborhoods reveals.

Victory Outreach International (1967–2007)

Sonny Arguinizoni, the founder of Victory Outreach International, was a former heroin addict, gang member, and ex-convict. At the age of 21, Sonny miraculously was cured of his six-year addiction to heroine and converted to Christ when he came into contact with ex-gang member Nicky Cruz and Teen Challenge, the ministry of David Wilkerson, author of *The Cross and the Switchblade*.²² In 1962, Sonny left New York to attend the Latin American Bible Institute (LABI) of the Assemblies of God in La Puente, California. While in Bible college, Sonny began working with Teen Challenge in Los Angeles. After recognizing that most ex-drug addicts and gang members did not “fit in” or were not welcomed in the typical evangelical churches of the day, Sonny felt called by God to start a church for people rejected by many evangelical churches as well as society at large.²³

In 1967 Arguinizoni and his small band of rejected disciples purchased a small church in Boyle Heights, a drug- and gang-infested section of East Los Angeles and began what was then called “Victory Temple Addicts Church.” In addition to leading VOI for the past 40 years, Pastor Sonny Arguinizoni has written an autobiography,²⁴ an anecdotal history of the denomination,²⁵ and his philosophy and vision

²¹ U.S. Census Bureau, “The Hispanic Population in the United States,” 2.

²² David Wilkerson, *The Cross and the Switchblade* (New York: Jove, 1986).

²³ Sonny Arguinizoni, *Sonny* (San Dimas, CA: Vision Multimedia, 1987) 92-137.

²⁴ Arguinizoni, *Sonny* (1987). *Sonny* was originally printed under the titles *God’s Junkie* and *Once a Junkie*.

²⁵ Sonny and Julie Arguinizoni, *Treasures Out of Darkness* (San Dimas, CA: Vision Multimedia, 2000). The first edition appeared in 1991. Nicky Cruz, long-time friend of Pastor Sonny, has written a sympathetic anecdotal history of VOI entitled *Give Me Back My Dignity* (La Puente, CA: Cruz, 1993).

of ministry.²⁶ Since 1967 Victory Outreach has grown from a single inner-city church to a worldwide network of over 600 churches and ministries, with locations across America and in 24 countries from the Philippines to The Netherlands. The mother church in La Puente, California, now led by Sonny Arguinzoni Jr. has over 4,000 members.²⁷

Today Victory Outreach International is a comprehensive outreach and discipleship ministry that spans the globe, serving holistically in the name of Jesus. This is clearly evident in the movement's mission statement.

Victory Outreach is an international church-oriented Christian ministry called to the task of evangelizing and discipling the hurting people of the world with the message of hope and plan of Jesus Christ.

This call involves a commitment to plant and develop churches, rehabilitation homes and training centers in strategic cities of the world.

Victory Outreach inspires and instills within people the desire to fulfill their potential in life with a sense of dignity, belonging and destiny.

Victory Outreach works cooperatively with others of mutual purpose in accomplishing the task before us.²⁸

VOI is unique in that it specifically targets those in the inner city: drug addicts, alcoholics, gang members, prostitutes, ex-convicts, and other social outcasts.²⁹ As one might expect, VOI is a multiethnic and interracial movement. However, one of the first things an outside observer notices is that the overwhelming majority of its members are second- and third-generation Hispanics. While VOI resists referring to itself as a Hispanic, Latino, or Chicano church, the demographics (including the overwhelming number of Hispanic pastors throughout the movement) cannot be overlooked. Seven of the denomination's eight elders, including Pastor Sonny, are Latinos as are 75 percent of the 39 regional pastors. If the demographics of the graduates of the Urban Training Center are any indication, leadership at VOI will continue to be dominated by Latinos for years to come.³⁰

Praise Chapel Christian Fellowship (1976–2007)

Unlike Sonny Arguinzoni, Mike Neville, founder of Praise Chapel Christian Fellowship was the son of a traveling evangelist. At the age of 21, Mike and his

²⁶ Sonny Arguinzoni, *Internalizing the Vision* (San Dimas, CA: Vision Multimedia, 1995).

²⁷ While most VOI churches tend to be between 100 and 300 members, some are quite large. For instance, VO churches in San Bernardino and San Jose, California, have more than 1,000 members.

²⁸ Arguinzoni, *Internalizing the Vision*, 33-34.

²⁹ G. Espinoza, "Victory Outreach International" in *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* (eds. Stanley M. Burgess and Eduard M. Van Der Maas; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002) 331-332.

³⁰ For example, of the 86 graduates from the UTC in 2000, 80 percent were Latino. The commencement exercise was held at the VOI World Conference in Long Beach, CA (August 24, 2000).

brother Larry followed in their father's footsteps and began to travel around the country conducting revivals of their own. Two years later the evangelistic team broke up, when Mike married Donna McCamish, who was also raised in a preacher's home. For the next five years, Mike and Donna were on the road as traveling evangelists. Then, in May of 1976, the Nevilles packed up their family and belongings in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and moved to Maywood, a central city southeast of downtown Los Angeles, where Mike had been invited to become the pastor of a small struggling Pentecostal church.

In his book *The Harvest Generation: The Story of Praise Chapel*, Praise Chapel historian Ron Simpkins observes, that the Nevilles' first year in southern California was filled with critical and strategic challenges and decisions. The effective evangelistic techniques, discipleship programs, and church planting that would soon characterize the movement today known as Praise Chapel Christian Fellowship were still waiting to be discovered.³¹ The most obvious challenge the Nevilles faced was demographic. The church was in a poor, working-class, Hispanic neighborhood filled with drug dealers and terrorized by many dangerous inner-city gangs. Soon many of the church members were urging the new pastor to move the church to a safer suburb further east. But after receiving a revelation from God to the contrary, Pastor Mike stood before the congregation and made the following announcement: "Churches should reflect the communities they're in, and ours doesn't. We are going to have drug addicts, and prostitutes, as well as lawyers. . . . This church is going to be filled with Hispanics."³² Immediately 20 members walked out; many others would follow during the course of the Nevilles' first year in Maywood.

But according to the home church's official website, "Many young gang members gave their lives to Christ and a sovereign wave of revival swept through the community." Pastor Mike immediately began to "disciple" the young and predominantly Latino converts and soon began to see the congregation stretching out beyond the four walls of the church. In 1980, the first "pioneer church" was planted in Ontario, California. Since that time, over 200 churches have been planted across the United States and hundreds more in 13 nations.³³

In 1996, after leading PCCF for more than 20 years, Mike Neville died after a brief battle with brain cancer. His wife Donna assumed the role of Senior Pastor of the mother church that had since moved from Maywood to neighboring Huntington Park. Mike Neville's brother, Larry became the President of Praise Chapel Christian Fellowship International, now headquartered in Rancho Cucamonga, California.

³¹ Ron Simpkins, *The Harvest Generation: The Story of Praise Chapel* (Huntington Park, CA: Mission Global Harvest, 1994).

³² Quoted in Simpkins, *The Harvest Generation*, 16.

³³ See the Praise Chapel Huntington Park official website: <http://www.praisechapelhp.com/aboutus.html>.

The official 2006 policy manual describes PCCF as “a church multiplication movement” whose stated vision is: “Win, Build, and Send.” Their purpose is articulated in the following three statements: “Preach and teach the gospel of Jesus worldwide,” “Plant churches domestically and internationally,” and “Fellowship together with other churches, ministries and fellowships with like minded vision.” Their vision is articulated in the following statement: “To reproduce and multiply churches and fellowships of churches, providing ongoing discipleship training, and spiritual leadership for continued development and fruitfulness.”³⁴

Like VOI, PCCF resists referring to itself as a Hispanic ministry or Hispanic denomination, but fellowship leaders including President Larry Neville and cofounder and Senior Pastor Donna Neville agree that well over 80 percent of the movement’s North-American members are Latino, while more than 90 percent of its pastors are Latino.³⁵ This includes many of its pastors serving overseas.³⁶

In a matter of three to four decades, VOI and PCCF have successfully planted hundreds of healthy and evangelistic churches across America in at-risk, underserved, Hispanic neighborhoods targeting second and third-generation Latinos. Virtually all of their programs and ministries are conducted in English.³⁷

Contextualized Leadership Development in the Barrio

Within a very short time, men and women who had been rescued from destructive urban lifestyles began to catch the vision of pioneers like Sonny and Julie Arguinzoni and Mike and Donna Neville. Evangelistic revivals were taking place in some of the most dangerous neighborhoods in Los Angeles, and among the least likely people. These revivals were soon to spread throughout Southern California, the state, and the nation. Key to the rapid spread of revivals associated with VO and PCCF was an emphasis on evangelism, discipleship programs, and leadership development in the context of the local church, short-circuiting the traditional role of preaching schools, Bible colleges, and seminaries in most Protestant and evangelical denominations. Not only would the vast majority of the new converts in these two movements not qualify academically for admission to most preaching schools and Bible colleges, more importantly, the evangelistic fervor in their hearts could not be held back for two to four years while they obtained the

³⁴ Praise Chapel Christian Fellowship, *Policy Manual* (Rancho Cucamonga, CA: Planters and Pioneers, 2006) 3.

³⁵ From personal interviews with Pastor Donna Neville at Praise Chapel Huntington Park (3/22/07 and 11/7/07) and with Pastor Larry Neville at Praise Chapel Rancho Cucamonga (4/5/07).

³⁶ See a list of PCCF pastors at: <http://www.praisechapel.com/international/pccfonline.php>.

³⁷ Recently, VOI and PCCF have also begun to successfully plant churches targeting Spanish-speaking immigrants. But each movement has learned to appreciate the cultural as well as linguistic differences that separate the immigrant generation from the native-born Latino generation.

training and minimum credentials required of pastors in most denominations. In his study of PCCF, Ron Simpkins observed that for the sake of the kingdom, this pattern had to be broken.

Too many churches put a cap on those men who feel a call to ministry. A church's traditions, habits, and patterns put obstacles in the way of real ministry. The best they can offer is to go off to Bible school and then maybe preach in the distant future. Only the most determined young men and women find their way into the pulpit. The most exciting thing that happened in those early days was when men started to rise up and say, "*I want to preach, I want to be like you.*"³⁸

Even today, decades after these two movements were born in the barrio, men and women who express similar sentiments are encouraged to start and lead home-Bible study groups, targeting their own unchurched neighborhoods, friends and family members. Since most of the group leaders were first introduced to Christ through one of these informal Bible study and prayer groups, they know firsthand that one of the most important credentials needed for effective ministry is unswerving faith in the power of God to break the cycle of sin, suffering, and death. They have also learned through personal experience in these small groups that the key to unleashing this transforming power is fervent prayer in Jesus' name and in the power of the Holy Spirit. Finally, they have learned that a sincere personal testimony is indispensable for validating their message in the barrio, where hopelessness reigns generation after generation in broken and dysfunctional homes. Small groups also provide would-be church-planters and pastors with opportunities to develop their preaching and pastoral skills under the direction and supervision of the local pastor.

As Bible study leaders develop their skills at preaching, intercessory prayer, and leading worship in the context of home Bible study groups, those who demonstrate unique giftedness, faithfulness, and commitment to the vision of the pastor are given opportunities to lead at the congregational level, where their lives serve as powerful examples to motivate others to follow the indefinitely reproducible pattern of leadership development in the context of the local church.

In addition to on-the-job training, under the careful scrutiny of the local pastor, the would-be leader meets regularly for one-on-one times for prayer and accountability with the local pastor, where he is challenged to bring every area of his life, including his marriage, family, and finances under the lordship of Christ. Married couples also meet regularly for mentoring by the local pastor and his wife.

Women, especially those married to men who feel called by God to pioneer a new church plant, are also afforded opportunities to develop skills that will be needed to copastor a church. A fellowship-wide network exists to disciple and support women within each fellowship. At PCCF, women are encouraged to participate in local and regional gatherings called "The Ruth Factor." VOI encourages its women

³⁸ Simpkins, *The Harvest Generation*, 26.

to participate in “United Women in Ministry” which embraces the task of evangelizing and discipling the hurting people of the world with the message of hope and the plan of Jesus Christ. “This call involves a commitment to train, develop, inspire, and instill within women the desire to fulfill their potential in life with a sense of dignity, belonging and destiny.”³⁹

The third component in the leadership-development paradigms of these two movements is the more formal training offered by the local pastor to those men who express a commitment to serve and lead and who express a sense of calling to pioneer a new church. These classes usually meet one night a week for 2-3 hours and focus on the “core values” and the “foundational beliefs” of their respective movements.⁴⁰ At PCCF, Pastor Mike Neville established a cherished tradition of reserving one night a week for what is known throughout the movement as “Men’s Discipleship.”⁴¹ At VOI, Sonny Arguinzoni set a similar precedent with weekly gatherings of the “Mighty Men of Valor.”⁴²

At local church and regional functions men gather together for a time of prayer, worship, and a special time in the word of God from their pastors and leaders. It is a time when unity in Christ, camaraderie, and a sense of purpose is established and reinforced among the men of Victory Outreach.⁴³

Like the church in Antioch described in the Book of Acts, Victory Outreach and Praise Chapel reaches those overlooked by the traditional church (Acts 11:19-21). Like the church in Antioch, future missionaries are trained and must demonstrate their evangelistic and leadership skills locally before they are ever sent to plant a new church (Acts 11:25-26; 13:1-3). Every evangelist, pioneer church-planter, and pastor is taught to be a committed disciple, then trained and mentored locally by caring and dedicated pastors who are modeling daily the life and vocation they too feel called to embrace. The pastors I have interviewed thus far say that on average it takes between 5 and 7 years from the time a man is saved to the point where he is “launched out” to pioneer a new church.

³⁹ See the VOI official website: <http://www.victoryoutreach.org/ministries/victory-outreach-women.asp>.

⁴⁰ In the case of PCCF these values include: hearing and responding to the call of God, tapping into the power of the Holy Spirit, radical evangelism, radical discipleship, the importance and role of the local church, the importance of fellowship and accountability, and local and world mission.

⁴¹ PCCF also started a Bible Training Center at the mother church in Huntington Park. It offers a three-year associate degree. Four classes are offered each Thursday night from 7:00 until 9:40 p.m.

⁴² In response to the need for more formal training for pastors and evangelists, “Victory Outreach International Bible Institute” (formerly “Victory Outreach School of Ministry”) was started in 1984 to provide more in-depth biblical, spiritual, and theological training. VOI Bible Institute has joined hands with Latin American Bible Institute and Azusa Pacific University to provide expanded training for those wishing to go into full-time ministry.

⁴³ See VOI official website: <http://www.victoryoutreach.org/ministries/victory-outreach-men.asp>.

When asked how these movements are able to plant churches that in turn plant churches in a relatively short period of time, two Latino pastors with PCCF agreed that key factors are the experiences gained at the local church and the intimate relationship developed with their local pastor. Pastor Omar Lopez and Pastor Woody Calvary each spoke of the opportunities to serve and lead that were afforded them by “Pastor Mike.” They also spoke of his sincere love for his church, especially for those men and their wives called to pastor new and existing churches. They gratefully recalled that Pastor Mike looked for every opportunity to help them develop their skills to pray publicly, preach powerfully, and lead dynamic worship. Omar Lopez added, “[Pastor Mike] loved you and treated you like a friend. . . . Every one of the men our pastor trained and launched would say that Pastor Mike was his best friend.”⁴⁴

VO and PC pastors consistently, reverently and affectionately refer to the pastor of the local church where they were saved and trained as “my pastor.” Each of my informants added that the care and mentoring they receive from their pastors doesn’t stop when they are “launched out” to pioneer a new church. Again, like the apostle Paul in his relationship with the church in Antioch (Acts 14:26-28), pioneer church planters are regularly invited back to the church from which they were launched out to report on the progress being made, to motivate up-and-coming leaders and to seek advice and receive additional instruction from their pastors. This dynamic relationship between mother and daughter churches and pastor and church-planter is clearly indispensable to the success of each movement. It is what Pastor Larry Neville, President of PCCF International refers to as “connectivity.”⁴⁵

Contextualized Preaching in the Barrio

Not surprisingly, Hispanic Catholics are also trying to understand the success of church-planting movements like VOI and PCCF. Bishop Robert González of Boston examined the nature of the message preached by charismatic and Pentecostal groups like PCCF and VOI in order to better understand their attraction to large numbers of Latinos. His research question was quite simple: What are they saying? González summarizes what he understands as a message rooted in the gospel, a message that presents Christ in all his power as the foundation of new life, of conversion, of forgiveness of sins. In his words, “Their preaching seems to be based solely upon the person and power of Christ. They preach the sovereignty of Christ. They preach it enthusiastically, whereas we seem to be tired followers of Christ.”⁴⁶

⁴⁴ From personal interviews with Pastor Omar Lopez at Praise Chapel Paramount (3/30/07) and with Pastor Woody Calvary at Praise Chapel Azusa (4/5/07).

⁴⁵ Larry Neville, *Connectivity: The Power to Touch the World* (Rancho Cucamonga, CA: Planters and Pioneers, 2006).

⁴⁶ Robert O. Gonzalez, O.F.M., Auxiliary Bishop of Boston, MA, “The New Evangelization and Hispanics in the United States,” *America* (October 19:1991) 268-269.

At PCCF and VOI the gospel is not just preached enthusiastically, it is preached boldly. Pastor Sonny Arguinzoni yearns for more men and women with initiative and vision, who will preach the gospel with boldness and enthusiasm. “Spreading the Gospel requires boldness. Because of our boldness, we’re able to move into the worst neighborhoods of some of the world’s roughest cities with aggressiveness, dedication and effectiveness.”⁴⁷

Rick Alanis, pastor of an 800-member VOI church in San Bernardino, California, has launched 16 churches in 16 years. His young pastors are “launched out” to preach boldly and enthusiastically that Jesus Christ has the power to deliver people from life-controlling habits and broken lives. According to Pastor Rick, boldness and enthusiasm flow from the integrity of the messenger. He asks, “How can you preach the message of deliverance if you yourself have not been delivered?”⁴⁸

At VOI and PCCF, Christ’s liberating power and sovereignty is preached by men and women transformed by that power who now live abundant lives under his rule. The preaching one hears validates Bishop Gonzalez’ conclusion that evangelical churches that attract Hispanics, preach the gospel enthusiastically and boldly.⁴⁹

FOREIGNERS IN THEIR NATIVE LAND

In virtually every neighborhood in Southern California where one finds a thriving Victory Outreach or Praise Chapel congregation, one will also find one or more traditional monolingual Spanish-speaking churches. By default, but sometimes intentionally, these churches target immigrants rather than native-born English-dominant Hispanics. And while the largest percentage of U.S.-born Hispanics still live in predominantly Hispanic urban neighborhoods in relative proximity to more recent immigrants from Latin America, U.S.-born Hispanics seldom share the same emotional attachment to their ancestral homeland or culture as their grandparents or parents.

Well-respected local pastors at three large Hispanic churches have observed that the cultural barrier between immigrant and native-born Hispanics is then widened further when second- and third-generation Latinos experience rejection at the hands of immigrants who criticize them for not speaking Spanish or for speaking it poorly. Consequently, unchurched native-born Latinos do not usually respond favorably to the evangelistic efforts of Spanish-speaking immigrant churches.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Arguinzoni, *Internalizing the Vision*, 76-77.

⁴⁸ From a video-recorded message delivered during the VOI World Conference at the Long Beach Convention Center (August 26, 2000).

⁴⁹ Gonzalez, “The New Evangelization,” 268.

⁵⁰ From personal interviews with Senior Pastor Aureliano Flores of *La Iglesia del Redentor* in Baldwin Park, CA (2/7/07), with Senior Pastor Isaac Canales of Mission Ebenezer Family Church in Carson, CA (3/15/07), and with Senior Pastor Daniel de Leon of *Templo Calvario* in Santa Ana, CA (3/22/07).

Equally surprising to many outside observers is the fact that traditionally white, English-dominant churches have also failed to attract the growing number of unchurched U.S.-born Hispanics. This observation raises an important question: Why are U.S.-born English-dominant Hispanics not attracted in significant numbers to dominant-group churches? Ethnographic research focusing on the importance of ethnicity among Latinos provides some important clues. Carlos H. Arce conducted two comprehensive ethnographic and empirical studies of Latino ethnicity. He observed that factors that reinforce Mexican-American ethnicity include continued immigration, proximity to Mexico, familial ties, and discriminatory treatment in the U.S. The latter factor—discrimination—generates more intensive intra-group reliance and interaction and inhibits socio-cultural contact with non-Latino-descent populations, and thereby has the inadvertent effect of reinforcing Mexican-American ethnic identity.⁵¹

Though they usually prefer to speak English and have an affinity for things “American,” many second and later-generation Hispanics nonetheless “perceive” that they are treated as second-class citizens in the country of their birth and often treated as “outsiders” in the churches of the dominant group. Father Virgilio Elizondo, one of the most influential Hispanic theologians of the past 25 years has summarized our shared legacy: “We have always been treated as foreigners in our own countryside—exiles who never left home.”⁵²

Unfortunately, many church leaders fail to recognize that even though the linguistic and cultural distance between U.S.-born Hispanics and the dominant group has been minimized due to a preference for English and higher levels of acculturation, the legacy of 150 years of cultural conflict, marginalization, and discrimination has alienated many U.S.-born Hispanics from many institutions of the dominant group, including the church.

Nevertheless, as we have seen in this study, there is good news coming out of the barrio. In the past 40 years, a new generation of churches has emerged from within the barrio. These new Great-Commission churches are reaching growing numbers of unchurched U.S.-born Hispanics in some of the most dangerous and underserved neighborhoods of America. They are doing so with a contextually relevant message, preached in English! They are also training pastors locally with contextually appropriate strategies and methods, sending them back into the barrio to pioneer new churches following a biblical and indefinitely reproducible pattern. This paper has sought to introduce the reader to their exciting story, the story of cutting-edge Hispanic ministry at the dawn of the 21st century, the story of a mission to and beyond the barrio. **Scj**

⁵¹ Carlos H. Arce, “A Reconsideration of Chicano Culture and Identity,” *Daedalus* 110 (1981) 171-191.

⁵² Virgilio P. Elizondo, “Mestizaje as a Locus of Theological Reflection,” in *Mestizo Christianity: Theology from a Latino Perspective* (ed. Arturo J. Bañuelas; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995) 9.