

Hispanic Realities Impacting Mississippi

PREFACE

The basis for this white paper is taken from various sources including Hispanic Realities Impacting America: Implications for Evangelism & Missions written by Dr. Daniel Sanchez (Church Starting Network. 2006, pps.320). In the book he addresses 10

realities among the United States Hispanic population and then describes the ministerial implications derived from these realities. Using the book as a reference for generic North American tendencies among Hispanics, this paper addresses the Mississippi specifics. Footnotes are included where other sources are cited.



PART ONE – THE REALITIES

One – Tremendous Population Growth

Hispanics have been a part of the Mississippi population for quite some time now. The oldest populations have been in Forest, MS and along the gulf coast concentrating in Biloxi where one of the first Hispanic Baptist works once existed. The population was rather small and scattered, however, until about 1995 when the numbers began to show a dramatic increase.

The Hispanic population has increased in formal census numbers from 10,000 to 60,000 from 1990 to 2000. It is estimated that in 2007, the census number of 70,000 is about 250% lower than reality for Mississippi. The population increase is due largely in Mississippi to immigration and secondly to biological growth. The Hispanic population accounts for roughly 6% of the Mississippi population.

The Hispanic population is primarily male. At a median age of 26 years, at least 60% of the population consists of men, many who have left wives and children in their home countries. “Both the high proportion of males and the relatively young age of the Hispanic population are consistent with immigration trends in which young single males predominate among newcomers seeking work.”¹

Implication – People seeking to reach their entire county and state population for Christ will be very wise to develop contextual strategies, allocating personnel and resources, to reach the rapidly growing Hispanic population in Mississippi. This can be done primarily by forming relationships with Hispanics who know a little English and can translate for you to the rest of the community, or, by learning Spanish. Although the former strategy is quicker than the latter, evangelism and discipleship are exponentially more effective when done in the heart language of the people.

¹ Logue, Barbara. Ph.D. The Hispanic Population in Mississippi. p. 32

Effective evangelism and discipleship strategies will prioritize outreach and ministry to men. The man is the key to the Hispanic family and population coming to Christ.

Two – Rapid Spread of Population Throughout Mississippi

The Hispanic population in Mississippi has spread from primarily rural origins to embrace the more populated areas of the state. Whereas smaller towns like Forest, Pontotoc, Laurel, and Batesville saw some of the earlier communities, the Hispanic populations of Tupelo, Jackson, the Mississippi suburbs of Memphis, Hattiesburg, and the gulf coast cities have grown to become the hubs of the population. Because many of the Hispanics work in the labor sectors of the state, agricultural areas, chicken and fish processing plants, tree planters, and construction jobs have been the attractants to the growth. The Hispanic population will continue to grow more heavily in the metropolitan areas, but also still be vastly scattered throughout the rural areas of the state. 18 counties in Mississippi possess a Hispanic proportion of 2% or more. The total population has risen 28.6% since Census 2000.²

Hispanic men outnumber the women. As previously mentioned, these men come to Mississippi often leaving their wives, children, and families behind in their countries of origin. On occasion members of these families join them eventually, but it could be several years later.

Implication - “The rapid and widespread growth of the Hispanic population coupled with the emerging new forms of growth and new areas of settlement present an unprecedented challenge for those who wish to lead Hispanics to a personal faith in Christ, enable them to establish churches, and encourage them to impact their communities with vibrant, compassionate ministries.”³ Ministries will need to concentrate on the men first and then to arriving families. Although the women and children respond quicker to the Gospel, the Hispanic family is not really reached unless the man of the house has given his life to Christ. Regional strategies for Hispanic evangelization should prioritize communities of those who have just settled within the past couple of years. Evangelization is better received during a period of change in the person’s life. Many windows of opportunity for facilitating the arriving Hispanic with cultural adjustments that will result in fostered relationships among the Hispanic population present themselves.

Three – The First Generation is the Largest Segment of the Hispanic Population in Mississippi

Most of the Hispanic population in Mississippi consists of those who were born outside the United States. First generation immigrants from any country usually do not

² Logue. 37.

³ Sanchez, Daniel. Hispanic Realities Impacting America (Church Starting Network, Texas: 2006), 17.

learn the English language with much proficiency. This is definitely true for the Hispanic immigrant that learns enough to understand work instructions and get through the check out line at the grocery store. This generation will generally not assimilate into “American” culture and will require specialized social services and strategies in order to relate to them.

Implication – The need for Spanish speaking churches and ministries is extremely great. The rapid population growth demands that effective strategies for rapid church multiplication be employed. Lay people will need to be empowered to respond to Matthew 28 and Acts 1, being sent out to lead small groups and start churches in all types of environments in order to have a Biblical expression of church in every place in the state where a community of Hispanics resides. Due to the transitional nature of the 1st generation Hispanic and limited income, simple church models are much more advantageous than traditional institutional models of church.

First gen Hispanics that are arriving are a very oral people. Evangelization and teaching methods must take this under consideration before engaging in ineffective methodologies. The conversion process for the Mississippi first gen Hispanic is a long one. The Hispanic arrives with centuries of traditional religious baggage that must be dealt with before one can fully understand the relational nature of the Gospel that Baptists preach and the need for repentance and submission to Christ’s Lordship can be responded to. Current experiences are showing that cold call evangelism is not as effective as relational evangelism. A primary reason is the difficulty the lost person has in understanding that accepting Christ is not about religion and understanding their need for repentance before God and an authentic relationship with Christ. These concepts are better understood through ongoing dialogue and relationships with the lost person over a period of time.

Four – The Use of the Spanish Language Will Continue to Increase in Mississippi.

Communication involves many forms of expression which may vary from one people group to another. The language of a culture is the mechanism in which the values, traditions, and thought processes of a culture are shared. The way an individual thinks is shaped by the culture and likewise the language will be reflective of that culture. All cultures are affected by certain skills which each possess and to better understand intercultural communication. Spanish or Español is the Iberian romance language that was brought to the Western world by the Spanish explorers and is one of the top five languages spoken in the world today (Wikipedia, 2006). In the United States seventy-five percent of the over 41 million Hispanic people speak Spanish (Wikipedia, 2006). The use of pronouns varies according to the relationship and status of the speaker and recipient and all nouns occur in the masculine or feminine (Tharp, 2001).

Spanish usage is a major part of the identity of the Latino whether the speaker is foreign born Mexican, Cuban, Puerto Rican, or a Hispanic citizen of the United States. Spanish is a high-context language in which the speakers have an

internal understanding of what is being communicated, the speech is less formal with an understanding of insider-outsider boundaries with personal face-to-face long term relationships. Communication by Hispanics is less direct and often intent on pleasing the hearer rather than being upfront. Communication of bad news is difficult as they strive to preserve harmony. They are sensitive to criticism and detect nonverbals messages of disrespect or disgust.

Use of the Spanish language is generally a requirement for communicating with the Hispanic immigrant population, although, the second generation Hispanic in Mississippi is a predominant English speaker. DirecTV and Dish Network are the broadcasters of choice for this group because of the Spanish language packages that enable them to view channels from their countries and cultural programming. Stores are beginning to carry increasing amounts of imported Spanish products as well as bi-lingual informational materials in order to better relate to and attract this group.

Implication – Whereas some might learn English, it's a missiological fact that people respond more rapidly and completely to the Gospel in their heart language or mother tongue. The American church often makes the mistake, albeit sometime unconscious, of wanting to assimilate the ethnic groups into their congregation. Going way beyond just translating sermons and Bible studies, true discipleship of the Hispanic requires the Gospel be presented to them in a way that is culturally contextual and in their heart language.

ESL will continue to be a viable ministry toward Hispanics. However, ESL workers need to remain flexible and patient with inconsistency in student attendance. The ESL ministry need also not be an end in itself but a method of opening doors of relationship with the international students for the ultimate goal of sharing Christ with them. Evangelism is never an ulterior motive, but always the ultimate aim.

Five – The Second, Third, and Beyond Generations Will be Educationally More Advanced than Their First Generation Predecessors

Most of the first generation Hispanic population in Mississippi has at best a 6th grade education; many of them reaching only 3rd or 4th grade. Very few will possess high school or bachelor's degrees.⁴ American society, better educational opportunities, and parents that see the need for their kids to do better economically, place positive pressure on the second and following generations to obtain full educations.

Implication – Ministries among Hispanics will need to provide for people at all the stages of the immigration continuum – from recent immigrants to those generations now assimilating to the culture. The first generation will continue to be a predominantly oral culture even in their own heart language. First gens do not read as a habit. Several among them cannot read at all. Teaching, discipling, and preaching is more effective when delivered using the narrative method rather than Western expository methods. Evangelism methods need to keep in mind the oral nature of the lost before great time

⁴ Logue. 34.

and expense is spent in buying and passing out literature (tracts and Bibles) to a people that, even if they do read, will not understand the text.

Second and following generations will be better able to function with the literate community although their culture is still very much audio/visually driven. However, many second generation Latino students drop out of school because of poor language skills. Tutoring ministries for the children and youth of First gens is a needed and practical assistance for parents who wish to help their children educationally but lack the language and educational skills to do so.

Six – Hispanics are fairly receptive to the message of the Gospel.

Statistics are showing that roughly one-third of the immigrants from Central America are evangelical. Because the Hispanic is culturally Catholic, those that are non-evangelicals are usually open to hearing of the Bible and being engaged in dialogue concerning their relationship with Christ.

Implication – Spanish speaking evangelicals need to learn to share their faith in a powerful but non-confrontational way with those of Catholic background who have not had a personal salvation experience in Christ.⁵ Also, contextualized evangelistic, church planting, and church growth strategies need to be developed that will accelerate outreach to the Hispanic community.

In Mississippi, Hispanic ministries are experiencing the need for long term discipleship relationships with prospects and new converts. Due to the limited education, the ingrained traditional religion, regional superstitions and traditions, American distractions, work requirements, and other native cultural distinctives, the span of time for a person to come to Christ and be firmly committed to Him as a discipler of others is proving to be lengthier than it would take should the same person be still in their community of origin. Evangelism and discipleship is more effective when done relationally than confrontationally; casual friend encounters are better than door to door witnessing, and one-on-one coaching is far better than classroom teaching.

Seven – Hispanics are generally fairly conservative regarding social values

Studies are showing that Hispanics are overwhelmingly committed to strong family ties, religious beliefs, education and hard work. Although Hispanic citizens tend to vote progressively, they tend to support conservative and traditional issues. Family unity and loyalty are incredibly important values among Hispanics.

⁵ Sanchez, 38.

Implication – The Hispanic church and ministries focusing on Hispanics should prioritize family and marital health. Whether or not a Hispanic comes to Christ often hinges on the acceptance of that person's family toward their decision. For evangelism strategies, the Hispanic male is the most important persona in the culture. Although the children and women are more apt to be drawn quickly to church events, until the male is reached for Christ, only minor spiritual advances will be accomplished among the rest of the family.

Eight – Second and Third generation Hispanics will typically be more financially stable than their First generation predecessors.

First generation Hispanics are finding work opportunities in labor intensive industries that pay minimum to medium wage salaries. This is partly due to being limited to places that will hire employees with limited English skills on a cash basis.

Because of their language ability, education, and immigration status, second generations and following gens will be eligible for and recommended for better jobs and employment opportunities.

Implication – The challenge of ministry focusing on first generation peoples will continue to be its transitional nature. First gens are always one better job offer away from moving to another location without prior notice. For churches seeking to be self-supporting according to traditional definitions, congregations comprised of primarily first gen members will require larger numbers to support its full time staff than other congregations. Also, churches will be forced to develop leadership development strategies that take into consideration the temporal nature of some of its leadership.

Stewardship training and financial management courses are vastly needed among the Hispanic peoples. Banks that will allow accounts for people without requiring a Social security number are needed. Ministry to first generation peoples must include a healthy social aspect that does not lead to welfare, but gives the peoples a lift from time to time and helps them to reach economic stability.

Nine – Hispanics tend to have more children than other families in the community.

At least half of the Hispanic population in Mississippi is under the age of 30. Most of the families that arrive do so with small children or infants. Because of the strong family values and traditional cultural necessities and religious teachings, having many children is the traditional norm. This translates into a Hispanic community that grows rapidly as more families settle in the state.

Implication – Churches that have children's ministers and youth ministers trained to minister to third culture peoples are in a much better position to meet the needs of Hispanic children and youth. Spanish speaking congregations will be forced to address

the issues surrounding second and third gens who do not speak Spanish, yet are not old enough to attend a separate English speaking church on their own. English speaking congregations who minister to second and third gen Hispanics will be forced to address the issue of ministering to second gens who are still Spanish speaking as well as Spanish speaking parents if they desire to have a holistic family ministry.

Already, there are some Mississippi communities where the second gen youth have grown to be unchurched and unreached because existing churches have ignored these issues. This is the framework for future gangs and a generation of lost and forgotten residents in our community.

Contextual strategies will need to be implemented. The erroneous tendency to fit everyone into our mold will only result in adding obstacles to a Gospel that is already difficult to embrace because of the cross of Christ.

Ten – Although many commonalities exist among the Hispanic community, there are significant diversities as well.

“On the one hand, new immigrants function almost exclusively within their native culture and language while on the other hand their children immediately upon arrival embark on a rapid assimilation process promoted by public education, the media, and peer group pressure.”⁶ First generation Hispanics will have few social contacts outside of their own group. Second and Third generations will progressively move toward more extensive interaction with other social groups. For this reason, assimilation and immigration are often taking place in the community at the same time side-by-side, often even within the same family.

Also, whereas the Hispanic community shares the basic foundation of a common language, it is widely diverse in nationality, ideology, education, and cultural distinctives. Most Hispanic churches will be multi-national/multi-cultural in nature. Some nations get along better than others. While the basic tenets of the Spanish language are common across nationalities, regional idioms and vocabulary vary in their definitions.

The people group is Hispanic, but within exist a multitude of vastly varying cultures. Foods vary from culture to culture even within nations. Mexicans are the only ones who eat tortillas and predominantly use chilies in their cooking. Clothing varies, gender expectations, traditions, predominant religious beliefs, worldviews – Southern Americans are more cosmopolitan because of a heavier European influence in the society, and many other facets of community life varies from place to place among the Spanish nations.

Implication – The need for the leader of the Spanish ministry to be, not only a native Spanish speaker but, Hispanic cannot be over-emphasized. The leader needs to be of a nationality that will get along with the majority of the community and be able to minister cross-culturally, understanding the indigenous cultural varieties that will exist in a Hispanic community.

⁶ Sanchez.. 57.

A variety of strategies and congregational models will need to be employed to effectively reach the largest possible number of Hispanics in any given community to a personal experience of salvation in Jesus Christ. Non-Spanish speaking congregations desiring to begin or lead in Hispanic ministries would be well served to strongly network with regional Hispanic leadership and/or partner with a local Baptist Hispanic congregation.

The Hispanic Challenge

1. Hispanic congregations are traditionally very dependent on pastoral leadership. Unless the pastor has done a superb job in creating congregational ownership of the vision and mission of the church, the Hispanic church without a pastor will diminish in effective ministry and become disassociated from Baptist life. Also, the pastor needs to be married and his wife be able to relate culturally and linguistically to the women of the church in order for the pastor to have full ministerial effectiveness. The Hispanic male is typically very jealous of his wife. A minister who is single is a threat to the unsaved husband and will have great difficulty in having a successful ministry among Hispanics in Mississippi.

2. The ability of leadership to effectively train others is largely based on their own discipleship experience and the model by which they were discipled. Many of the traditional methods and resources employed by anglo churches for discipleship are ineffective in Hispanic contexts. Churches and leaders must carefully examine the models that are being employed for discipleship to insure that they are reproducible by those that are being discipled. To fail in this is to fail in our mission to truly develop disciples who can go on to disciple others.

3. Many of the evangelical immigrants that are coming to our churches, as well as some of our leaders know very little about Southern Baptist polity and teachings. Most of them are not interested in the bureaucratic functions of Southern Baptist denominational life which is not altogether bad. However, because of language difficulties and lack of knowledge concerning Baptist life, many are disenfranchised and disassociated with local associations and pastoral gatherings. Sponsoring churches and local Baptist Associations must proactively mentor Spanish congregations in these things. Initiating friendships with Hispanic leadership is welcomed by the Hispanic. Hispanic churches are willing to cooperate and get involved, and are passionate about learning. Many just simply do not know how. Also, local associations and state convention departments must begin to think in other languages and provide programs and services in Spanish.

4. Hispanic leadership, both ordained and lay, need doctrinal training, Bible teaching, leadership training, and pastoral development in Spanish. They are actively searching for these things, but lack the resources to adequately provide for it. They

need to be coached how to be an Acts 1.8 church without having to fit into Anglo molds of ministry.

5. Churches seeking to employ Hispanic leadership must make sure that the prospective leader:

1) is fluent in English. Much of his ministry among the Hispanic congregation will be interceding for them with city and state Anglo officials who do not speak Spanish. Mississippi is still very unprepared to handle a Spanish speaking community and the people rely on ministers to translate and help them in daily functions that require communication with the English speaking community.

The Hispanic leader must also be able to relate well with his area counterparts who do not speak Spanish. If he is unable to carry himself well in English, he will alienate himself and his family from much needed friendship and fellowship, prayer support, and often financial and human resource support for himself and the Hispanic ministry.

2) is married. As mentioned above, it is expected of the minister that his wife be the pastor figure for the females of the Hispanic community. Single minister's also have little impact among the Hispanic families because they are considered to be immature and mistrusted by the husbands of the community families.

3) knows Southern Baptist life. The language barrier alone is enough to cause enough rift between mother and daughter churches. But if the Hispanic leader is not from a Baptist background or does not understand Southern Baptist life, the congregation is more apt to eventually fall to charismatic tendencies, or at the very least become very independent once the financial help ceases to exist.

4) is at least a Resident Alien. It is too expensive, cost prohibitive, and limiting for the Hispanic leader to have to rely on a Religious Visa status to work in the United States. Few Mississippi Baptist churches are capable of carrying the enormous financial load that is required to support a Hispanic minister and his family with enough to provide the basic living costs, medical needs, and retirement income for the three to four years required to finish the change of status process.

Conclusion

God is working among the Hispanic people to launch a rapid church multiplication movement. In order for Mississippi to reach all of the Hispanic neighborhoods and peoples, the church must efficiently train and call out its lay leadership to lead cell groups, house churches, and varied models of healthy churches. Therefore, all training needs to be focused on the helping leadership reproduce themselves and not about the programs.

The Mississippi Baptist church and association must develop an ethnic strategy with purpose. Have in mind the ultimate goal for the strategy – ministry only, Sunday School class, or new church. The church and association must commit itself for a long term involvement in the ethnic work; budgets reshaped, workers continuously enlisted

and trained, sponsoring churches called out. Future Hispanic ministry will require strong partnerships between English and Spanish speaking congregations in order to effectively bridge the generational challenges of ministry. Greater Kingdom perspectives need to be embraced where the church is more concerned of reaching a community than increasing its own membership. Assimilation of the ethnic groups into the mainstream church congregation will be limited and should not be pursued.⁷ This will necessarily lead to ministry models that are uncomfortable yet Biblically sound, exciting, edgy, and totally dependent on Holy Spirit vision and ability and not on human capacity or American resourcefulness.

Church Planting Considerations

The most effective way to reach Hispanics for Christ in a way that produces disciplemaking disciples is through an intentional church plant among the community. However, in the process of engaging the community, there are many models that might emerge. Depending on the population strength, whether the community is tight or spread out, mobility issues, and leadership availability, some models are more suited than others.

Ministry Models

Many churches and peoples start social ministries to meet the needs of language people groups around them. Some communities are not demographically ready for a church plant strategy, but very prime for ministry models. ESL, food pantries, and clothes closets are generally among the more popular. A key question for the church is “How does this ministry need to be organized so it will lead to fulfilling the Great Commission among the population groups and segments that it reaches”? It is at this point that the ministry changes gears and becomes an effective evangelistic tool. Not all ministry should be done with this agenda, but unless a disciplemaking element is added to the ministry, it will not have a significant lasting eternal impact on the Hispanic people. Taking moments to incorporate Chronological Bible Storying (CBS) strategies into key ministries is a great strategy to use. More information about CBS can be found through the Church Planting or wMu offices of the MS Baptist Convention Board.

Church Planting Models

When the ministry changes gears to gathering for Bible study or worship, then a different model needs to be employed. From cell groups to house churches, from lay leadership to full time vocational, and from translated to native speaker, all are elements of models that need to be considered and weighed against the existing and expectant demographic needs. Church planting among any language work will not always result in a traditional self-sustaining self-supporting model of a church that has its own building and full time pastor and staff. Self-supporting / self-sustaining may

⁷ Fairbanks, Jess. *New Solutions: ¿Qué está ocurriendo?* (Lifeway. Nashville, TN. Spring 2007) 6-9.

mean house church with no paid staff to an autonomous church that shares a building and has a bi-vocational staff. The key is to see God's vision and let God and the community dictate strategy and not one's pre-conceived notion.

Hispanic work in Mississippi will require a myriad of different models, creativity, and ministries if we are to reach the population group all across the state. God is preparing a people to be a new and mighty part of His army. Hispanics are being accepted into parts of the world that Anglos traditionally have been denied access to. Southern Baptists in Mississippi have an incredible opportunity and responsibility from God to be a vital part in being used of Him to help reach and disciple this people group, preparing them for His service. Currently, Mississippi is employing various different models of "church", evangelization and discipleship in order to succeed in this missional endeavor. Prayerfully, Mississippi Baptists will continue to do it well, correctly, contextually and with excellence.

 2007 *David A Alexander*

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