The Challenge of Leadership Development
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One of the greatest challenges facing the Latino church is the education and development of its leaders, particularly its pastoral leadership. In this regard the situation is tragic and even dangerous.

Traditionally, most mainline Protestant denominations as well as the Roman Catholic Church, have trained much of their leadership in seminaries and schools of theology. Therefore, although this is by no means the main channel through which Hispanic pastors are trained, let us begin by looking at some statistics provided by the accreditation agency for schools of theology, the Association of Theological Schools, or ATS. Since I am aware that it is difficult to remember and compare numbers, I have rounded up some of the figures. Still, the main point I wish to make should be quite obvious.

According to ATS, in 2001 there were a total of almost 74,000 people enrolled in all programs in all member schools. At that time, there were 2,750 Hispanics among that population. Thus, Hispanic enrollment was roughly 3.75% of the total seminary population. By 2005, four years later, total enrollment had increased by 7,500, for a total of over 81,000. Hispanic enrollment had also increased, but only by about 150, with the net result that the percentage of Hispanic presence in the student body had actually declined from 3.75% in 2001 to 3.56% in 2005. This at

a time when the Hispanic population in the country was exploding. Thus, at present, while the Latino population of the US is roughly 8% of the total population, only about three and a half per cent of the enrollment in seminaries and schools of theology is Hispanic. And this situation, rather than improving, is deteriorating.

If one were then to take these figures and join with the projections of the Bureau of the Census, it would seem that for a very long time the Latino population will be underrepresented in seminaries and schools of theology. Indeed, to overcome this gap it would be necessary for that student population to triple in the next ten years—and that is not about to happen.

If, instead of percentages we begin to consider absolute numbers, we may catch a glimpse of the enormity of the situation. You may remember that I said earlier today that in Los Angeles County alone, and also in most of our major cities, there are over a thousand Protestant Latino churches. My understanding is that here in Texas there are over 2,000 Baptist Latino churches. Similar conditions exist in the most populous states in the nation—California, New York, Illinois, and Florida. The fact is that we do not know—that it is impossible to know—exactly how many Protestant Latino churches there are in the country.

We do know, as I have already stated, that there are roughly 2,900 Latinos and Latinas enrolled in ATS-accredited seminaries and schools of theology. These statistics do not tell us how many of these students are Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox. Probably very few Latinos are

Eastern Orthodox, although there are some. Since the Roman Catholic Church is undergoing a crisis of vocations one may be rather conservative as to the number of Roman Catholic Latino seminarians, their number may be rather low. Still, this would bring the number of Latino Protestant seminarians to a figure somewhere below 2,000. Then, it is also not clear how many of these seminarians are preparing for pastoral ministry, and how many will follow other career paths in music, education, academics, denominational and regional administration, and so on. If one considers only those students pursuing the basic degree geared towards ordination (the MDiv), the total figure drops to exactly 1,006.

Furthermore, these figures include Puerto Rico, where there are at least 200 students enrolled in the MDiv.

So, the bottom line is that right now there are less than 800 Protestant Hispanics training for pastoral ministry through the seminary MDiv programs that are the traditional form of ministerial preparation in most mainline churches.

Again, it is impossible to ascertain, even approximately, the number of Latino Protestant churches in the United States. But whatever that number may be, it would seem that there are several hundred churches for each person preparing for ministry in a seminary or school of theology.

Clearly, on the basis of statistics alone, seminaries and schools of theology, important as they are, are only one piece in the total picture of leadership training for the Latino church.

Furthermore, the manner in which people are trained in many seminaries quite often does not respond to the circumstances of Latino churches. Some years ago, I was asked by a major foundation to conduct a study of Hispanic theological education, mostly at the seminary level. Part of the methodology of this study was to interview large numbers of ministers who were seminary graduates. As I conducted these interviews, a pastor in New York stated his experience in terms that were then confirmed by many others. He said: "I went to seminary with a great eagerness to learn and with many questions. During the first few months I was at a loss, because most people did not seem to understand my questions nor even to try to understand them. Then, slowly, I began to learn the right questions to ask and began receiving some very interesting answers which I was careful to learn. Then I came to the parish, back to the barrio where I came from. I have now been in ministry five years and I have begun to see that my original questions were right after all."

This is not intentional on the part of seminaries. On the contrary, most are trying to do as much as they can in order to offer an education that is relevant to ministry. The problem is that very few among seminary faculty have an experience of church that really helps them understand the church as their Latino students have experienced it. When I began teaching in the United States some forty years ago, I didn't know of a single other tenured Hispanic faculty member in

any Protestant seminary. Now the situation has improved. Out of 1,604 full professors in seminaries and schools of theology, 39 are Hispanic. This comes to 2.4%. There are others at various other ranks: another 39 Associate Professors, 33 Assistant Professors, and 2 at lower ranks. But even so, only 2.8% of all full-time faculty in seminaries and schools of theology are Hispanic. Thus, if a Latino or Latina enrolls in a seminary with a faculty of 50, chances are there will not be even one Hispanic professor. And, if there are in a seminary discussion as to curriculum, methods of education, goals for learning and so on, in most seminaries there is no one to speak for the Latino reality out of personal experience; in some there is one person and in less than a handful are there as many as three.

No wonder that pastor in New York felt he was told his questions were not the correct questions and eventually found that on this crucial point he had been right and his excellent school had been wrong!

In short, the traditional seminaries and schools of theology, while having an important role in the education, training, and development of leadership for the Latino churches, are neither sufficient nor are their programs fully adequate for the task.

However, before leaving the subject of seminaries, it is important to understand that the paucity of Hispanic students enrolled in them is not the sole fault of those institutions themselves. It also has to do with the economic and educational realities of the Latino

population statistics about High School dropouts among the Hispanic population are well known. Of those who actually graduate from High School, very few go on to college, and still fewer graduate. Many of those few who obtain an undergraduate theological degree are the first member of their family to do so. Given the cost of such studies—actual out-of-pocket expense and the loss of revenue to the family supporting a student—most of those who graduate manage to do so thanks to constant and serious sacrifice on the part of their families. As their graduation approaches, all in the family are looking forward to the young person's career, and the graduate himself or herself feels a deep commitment to repay the family for at least some of its sacrifice—to help one's parents move to a better home, to help one's younger sibling follow into college studies. At that point, it is very difficult for a young person to even consider going to seminary for three more years of study, and eventually to graduate from seminary, in order to have a salary that will probably be as much as he would be making had he not gone to college and to seminary.

Furthermore, there are many seminaries in this country where the average graduate leaves the institution with a debt of tens of thousands of dollars. In order to pay that debt, that recent seminary graduate has to seek a church that pays as much as possible. Since very few of these are Latino churches, even after people graduate from seminary the hemorrhage of Latino pastoral leadership continues, as pastors feel forced by their economic circumstances and their debts to leave the Latino church and move into a congregation of the dominant culture, or take up a position in a national or regional church board or agency.

Again, the bottom line is that seminaries, while enormously important for the total welfare of the church, hardly scratch the surface when it comes to the total need of pastoral leadership for the Latino church.

However, before moving to consider other programs it is important to acknowledge that many of them are conscious of this situation and are making an effort to correct it. They are doing this in various ways. Many are seeking Hispanic faculty. Obviously, the problem here is that there are not sufficient Hispanic graduate students to fill this need. Others are making sure that their field education experiences include Latino churches. Several are bringing in Latino pastors as adjunct professors, or to lecture on particular topics. A few are encouraging their non-Latino faculty to become more acquainted with the Latino reality, and particularly with the life of Latino churches. Many are offering their Latino and Latina students particular educational opportunities and experiences that help them relate their formal theological education to their vocation as ministers in Latino communities.

Along these lines, an indication of the concern on the part of seminaries is the support of many for the Hispanic Summer Program. This program began almost twenty years ago, initially with the support of a major foundation, but now and for the last ten or twelve years with the support of some forty seminaries and schools of theology. Every summer this program brings together approximately a hundred Hispanic students for a period of two weeks during which they take intensive courses under Hispanic professors, receiving credit which they then transfer

back to their own institutions. While there, they experience various forms of Latino worship, learn of the work of Latino pastors, professors, and others, explore bibliographical resources that are often unknown in their own schools, and in general experience a Latino seminary for a period of two weeks. They also experience the variety of the Latino church, for usually about a third of the students are Pentecostal, a third are Roman Catholic, and a third are mainline Protestants. Likewise, they experience that cultural variety of the Latino community, for there are always both within the faculty and the student body people of Mexican background, people of Central American background, people of Caribbean background, and so on.

At any rate, the fact that this program is currently supported by approximately forty seminaries and schools of theology—and the further fact that in most cases it was relatively easy to gain such support—attests to the willingness and even eagerness on the part of many institutions to find ways to respond to the Latino challenge.

Still, the sheer numbers I quoted a few minutes ago should suffice to show that ATS-accredited seminaries and schools of theology, important as they are, are not equal to the task at hand. Most people who are now serving as pastors of Latino churches have received no seminary education. Indeed, most of them have not even visited a seminary in their entire lives.

This leads us to the other main channel providing pastoral leadership for Latino churches. These are an entire series of programs ranging from undergraduate programs in accredited colleges

and universities, to people who simply believe they are called to ministry and move on to respond to that call with little or no training.

Several denominations have developed undergraduate programs where they are training many of their potential pastors and other leaders. Some of these programs are housed in colleges accredited by the regional or national accrediting agencies—my understanding is that the theological program here at the Baptist University of the Americas is one of these. Some are junior colleges whose graduates may then continue at their denominations' four-year programs and sometimes move from that to post-graduate seminary. Some are free-standing institutions that have negotiated with a college that accepts their credits if their students decide to go to those colleges. In some cases, ATS-accredited seminaries have undertaken to offer courses on religion and on pastoral ministry, and in doing so to act as agents for a partner college or university. Several denominations, such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the United Methodist Church, and the Episcopal Church have developed alternative programs leading to ordination, or at least to some form of pastoral ministry. In the United Methodist Church, for instance, there is the "Course of Studies," which consists of two levels. Students study on their own during the year, and during the summers take four weeks of classes. At the same time, the church encourages them to pursue their bachelor's degree from any college that is convenient to them. After nine years of summer courses, students have ecclesiastical credentials, authority, responsibilities and rights equal to those who did follow the more traditional seminary route. In brief, there are a variety of patterns.

However, by far the most common pattern is what Latinos call "*institutos biblicos*," or Bible institutes. These come in a variety of shapes. Most are programs run by a local congregation or a cluster of congregations, and they often combine lay and pastoral training. Although in Southern California there is an attempt to organize a number of these into a community validating each other, the general fact is that each of these *institutos* offers its own program and of its own design.

The number of these *institutos* is amazing. When I did that study of Hispanic theological education to which I have already referred, in New York City alone there were over 6,000 people enrolled in such *institutos*. Some years ago, the Association for Hispanic Theological Association (AETH, to which I shall refer later) did a rapid survey of some of the larger *institutos biblicos* in Texas, and the number was overwhelming, with several of them having fairly well developed curricula, modest libraries, and a significant number of students from more than one congregation—in other words, the survey did not include *institutos biblicos* run by a single congregations, nor those that offered classes sporadically, nor those that did not have at least a place where they met regularly and where they kept some books for their students' use. Of those, there are legion, and it is practically impossible even to begin to count them.

It is here that we find the answer to our previous question, where are all the pastors being trained for the thousands and thousands of churches that are sprouting all over the nation? The answer is that some come from regularly accredited seminaries, some from Bible colleges and

similar institutions, some through alternative programs that their denomination offers; but by far the majority are the product of *institutos biblicos*.

Those of us who are more closely connected with academia can rapidly see many weaknesses in these programs and are therefore tempted to dismiss them as irrelevant. But before we do so, there are three points we must remember.

The first is what I have been trying to make clear during the last few minutes: sheer numbers do not allow us to dismiss these programs. They train the vast majority of Hispanic pastors. Therefore, much as we academicians may not like it, they are having and will have a greater impact on the Latin church than will regularly accredited seminaries. The shape of the church by the year 2050 will bear their stamp, and this is something any of us concerned for the church as a whole and for the society in which it is called to serve must not ignore.

The second point to note and to remember is that, even though most of us in more traditional and academically oriented theological education may not like it, there are some aspects of ministry in which these very humble and simple *institutos biblicos* have much to teach us. Remembering what that pastor in New York told me years ago about being taught to ask the supposedly right questions and eventually finding that they were actually the wrong questions, I cannot but feel that many of these *institutos biblicos* have much to teach us as to how to the be church in the very life of a community, about how to communicate the Gospel in ways the

common people are able to hear and believe it, about how to organize a church for witness and ministry, about the most disturbing issues that are really gripping many in the Latino community, and about a host of other things.

Actually, I dare say that if one evaluates effectiveness in ministry on the basis of church growth, church attendance, number of conversions, effectiveness in witness, impact on people in the community, and the like, it is quite likely that pastors who are the product of *institutos biblicos* and similar programs will attain higher scores than those of us who have followed the traditional academic route of college and seminary.

Still on this second point, *institutos biblicos* may help all of us in one more way. During the last few years many of us in theological education have been stressing what many call an "action/reflection model" of education. What is meant by this is that it is necessary to correct the old premise of much education, and certainly of much theological education, that first one learns and then one does; that theory precedes practice. Although this is not always the case with most Methodists and Baptists, in general the ideal process of ministerial education in the United States has long been one in which a person spends four years in college, then three in seminary, learning all about the Bible, theology, history, and the practice of ministry, and then is sent out into the world to do what they were taught in college and seminary. In Germany, this view of the priority of theory has been carried to such an extreme that traditionally theological students would spend several years at the university, learning languages, Bible, theology, and

other such disciplines, and then—once they know all about the Bible, theology, and so on—they would move to another institution, where they learned how to preach, how to counsel the bereaved, how to baptize, etc. Finally, after having learned also all the theory about these supposedly more practical things, they would be ordained and sent out into the field.

During the last few decades, this notion of the priority of theory over practice in the learning process has been seriously challenged, not only by educators, but also by theologians. The argument is that theory is not something that we impose on practice, like a cookie cutter is imposed on the dough, and whatever does not fit is left out. On the contrary, theory and practice stand in a dialectical relationship so that each informs the other. In other words, one does; one reflects on what one has done or is doing; the results of that reflection are then carried out into practice; practice once more tests those results; then follows more reflection; and so on. In brief, reflection and action stand in a reciprocal relationship, each informing and correcting the other.

This we in academia have known for a long time. This has often been our ideal. But we have not known how to implement it. In some cases, one could even say that, paradoxically enough, the "action/reflection model" has become one more theory that we are now trying to put into practice. And we thus fall right back into the trap of privileging theory over practice, even though our theory itself tells us it should not be so.

In this regard, *institutos biblicos* have much to teach us. Were we to ask those who teach in them what they think about the "action/reflection model," they would be perplexed and would have little idea what we are talking about. Yet in a way this is precisely what many of them are doing. People come to the Bible institute after a full day's or a full week's work. At work, they have been trying to witness to their faith. Last Sunday, they taught an adult class in Sunday School. This morning someone asked them about the meaning of the doctrine of creation. Each of these events has given them great satisfaction but has also left them with a clear feeling that they have much to learn. So, they come to class, not to learn a theory that at some point they will try to apply, but rather as people whose practice urgently requires a theoretical grounding. There is little distinction between their theological questions and their pastoral questions. They wish to take courses in Bible, not to find out what were the sources employed in the writing of Matthew or of Acts, but rather to discover what it says to us today, how to communicate it to the people of God, and how to live it out. Thus, often without knowing the pedagogical theory behind the action/reflection model, these programs are forced to follow that model, not by a theory, but by their own practical situation. In this, they have an advantage over the more traditional, more academically oriented programs that many of us know best and many of us represent.

In other words, the first two reasons why we must take these programs into consideration are, first, that they are providing by far the majority of our pastors. The second is that they have much to teach us. The third is that, for the health of the entire church, the *institutes biblicos*

also need the seminaries and institutions of higher education. Having visited many *institutos biblicos* and spoken with hundreds of people studying in them, I shudder to think that some of the things being taught in some of those institutions are shaping the life of the Latino church and in consequence are also shaping the future of this nation. There are people in the Latino church—pastors trained in some *institutes biblicos*—who claim to know exactly in which of the trumpets of the Apocalypse we now are, and who therefore decide how to vote on the basis of knowing who the apocalyptic beast is and what will happen next. There are people who are convinced that they have found the key to Scripture in a particular verse, or in a combination of numbers, as if God had given us a puzzle to solve rather than a Word to hear and to obey. There are people who believe that Jesus is a phantasmagoric, purely spiritual figure, ignoring all the Bible says about the true incarnation of our Lord. There are people who justify abuse against women and children on the basis of Scripture. There are people who are convinced that everybody who does not believe this particular point of doctrine is going directly to hell. There are people who think that theology is about knowing how many ranks of celestial beings there are and how archangels relate to the seraphim or the cherubim.

Such people do not bear the full responsibility for this. That responsibility must be shared by the larger church and academic establishment when it acts as if simple theology had to be bad theology. That responsibility is to be shared by professors who are interested in writing only for their peers or for the "enlightened," and who are not interested in showing the relevance of their work for the common life of common folk.

While this is true of the church at large, it is also true—perhaps even more so—in the Latino community. Consider those very few Latinos and Latinas who teach in schools accredited by the Association of Theological Schools. (Remember that, as I said earlier, the total number of such professors, Protestant and Catholic, in the United States, Canada and Puerto Rico, is 112.) One of them has just been invited to join a faculty—let us say, a young Mexican-American woman in the field of New Testament studies. She probably decided to devote herself to Biblical studies out of a profound love for the church and for the particular Latino Christian community in which she grew up. That very decision has now forced her to spend well over ten years submerged in academic environments and exercises. The last such exercise was a doctoral dissertation—a piece to which she devoted two years, and which she wrote, not to communicate with her own community of origin, nor to communicate to the church at large, nor even to communicate with her own peers, but to impress a committee of three professors with her ability to make subtle distinctions and to discover what, to this point, no one knew. Now that she is launching her teaching career, she knows that her contract will be revisited periodically and that in six years she must either be granted tenure or be fired. In that process, an important part of her evaluation will have to do with her scholarly publications. She has learned much in her studies that would help her original faith community back in the barrio, understand the Bible better and see its relevance for life today. But she cannot devote much time to that. The pressure is on her to produce materials that her academic peers will respect. Whatever she does for her own community of origin—for that Latino church which she loves and to which she owes much of her own identity—must be done in her own time. At best, it will be counted as service to the

community. But it will not be considered serious academic work.

What is the likely result of all this? Perhaps she knows quite a bit about the book of Revelation that would help her community understand that book and follow its directives. But no, she has no time for that. And so, people in her community read "The Late Great Planet Earth" and "Left Behind." And then, ironically, they are looked askance by the academic community because they don't know any better!

But back to the *institutos biblicos* and similar programs. Again, the third reason why we should all be concerned about our relationship with them is that seminaries, universities, and schools of theology do have much to offer them. Again, simple theology does not have to be bad theology. Simple books do not have to be simplistic. Could that woman I have just described not write a book about Revelation at such a level that the people in the community or in an instituto biblico can understand, and yet one taking into account all that she has learned in her advanced studies and in her research? Could an academically trained theologian not write a book in which theology is more than indoctrination, and which is, however, accessible to the common reader?

This is perhaps the greatest challenge before the Latino church. The next thirty or fifty years will determine what direction this church will take. Will it be an active part of the community, reading the Word of God responsibly, seeking to obey that Word both in its own inner life and in

its projection into the rest of society, knowing how to place all things and to judge all things from a perspective of faith? Will it manage to develop—is it developing—the leadership required for that future? Is it training—will train—such leadership in sufficient numbers? Will it be able to produce the necessary coalitions and bridges between and among various models and levels of theological education, so that all will move together towards that goal?

Since much of what I have said up to now may sound rather pessimistic, let me conclude by pointing out that there are signs that such coalitions and bridges are being developed. For many years the Hispanic Summer Program, which I have already mentioned and explained, has included among its students people who are teaching in institutes biblicos and similar programs, thus making participants of the wider dialogue that is taking place within the Latino community. While it is true that Hispanic scholars and graduate students are often pressed to leave aside their communities of origin, there is an agency, the Hispanic Theological Initiative, whose purpose is precisely to provide such scholars and graduate students with the support necessary to remain connected to the Latino faith community, and to seek ways to make a contribution to it.

This institution where we are now has a series of extension programs or Bible Institutes where presumably the same quality of reflection is offered as takes place here, although adapted to the varying conditions of those studying in those centers. These must not be seen as secondary aspects of the work of a theological school. Again, particularly in the Latino context, it is in

centers such as these that most of our pastors are trained.

And, finally, there is an organization I should mention, both because of its own value and contribution and because this institution, the Baptist University of the Americas, or rather its forerunner the Hispanic Baptist Theological Seminary, had a hand in its birth. This is the Association for Hispanic Theological Education–the Asociación para la Educación Teológica Hispana, or AETH. When AETH was first organized, now over fifteen years ago, the President of the Hispanic Baptist Theological Seminary, Dr. Josue Grijalva, and another member of its faculty, Dr. Abdias Mora, were among the first small group that gathered to give shape to this new organization.

Fifteen years later, this organization which your institution helped start, has over 850 individual members, as well as almost a hundred institutional members. There is wide variety among the membership of AETH. Among the individual members, there are many who are pastors of local congregations who teach regularly in *institutos biblicos*, many who teach in some of the most prestigious universities of the nation, many who teach in Bible colleges, and so on. Among the institutional members, there are *institutos biblicos*, colleges, seminaries, and universities, as well as a number of denominations. This is so because one of the main purposes of AETH has always been to foster communication and collaboration among these various entities and models of theological education. Over the years, AETH has found financial resources to improve the libraries of many *institutos* biblicos, conducted seminars on a number of fields of interest for

faculty and administration of theological institutions, fostered collaboration between seminaries and *institutos biblicos*, served as a resource for institutions seeking to improve their Hispanic programs, and in general sought to respond to the situation and the challenges I have been describing. One of these responses is its publication program.

All of this leads me to revisit what I said at the beginning. You may recall that I said that, as regards the education and development of Latino church leaders, the situation is tragic and even dangerous. I do not wish to detract from that statement one bit. But at the same time, I now wish to add another statement that may seem to contradict the former but actually complements it: the training and development of leadership for the Latino church, insufficient and faulty as it may be, is also a sign of hope for the future of the church. It may well be that, as we seek to respond to the challenge of the need for trained leadership in the Latino church, we may be opening the way for new models of theological education that may point the way for the future, not only of the Latino church, but of the church at large. I am pleased that the Baptist Seminary of the Americas is part of this endeavor.