Hispanics in Our Midst

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Shortly after the census of 1980, the Bureau of the Census issued a series of projections of Hispanic population growth. That series included a low, a middle, and a high projection. According to the high projection, Hispanics would be 8.7% of the total population in 1990 (22.05 million), and 27.9% in 2080 (14-0.74 million).

By 1990, it is clear that even that highest projection was too low, for the Census counted 22.35 million Hispanics, or 9% of the total population. At that rate, by the year 2080 more than a third of the total population of the United States will be Hispanic.

Hispanics' fertility and population growth is much higher than that of the well-known post-war "baby boom" among whites. The growth rate of the general population during the baby boom was l.8% a year. The present growth rate among Hispanics is almost 3% a year and is not expected to decrease to baby boom levels until 20 years from now. At present, the U.S. population is growing at a rate of 0.9% a year. This rate is declining, and it is expected that the U.S. general population will reach zero population growth in 2040. At that point, the Hispanic population will be growing at 0.9% a year, which is the present rate of growth for the population at large.

Even leaving aside such projections and dealing only with the present statistics, the Hispanic population in the United States poses a tremendous challenge to the churches.

According to the Census, there are now 22 and 1/3 million Hispanics in the US. To that figure should be added over 3 million living in Puerto Rico, and at least one million (perhaps as many as five million) whom the Census failed to count.

Even on the basis of the official Census figures, this represents an increase of 7.7 million since 1980.

This means that the United States is now the fifth largest Spanish-speaking country in the world–after Spain, Mexico, Argentina and Colombia.

This Hispanic population is concentrated in the four most populous states in the Union—California, Texas, New York, and Florida. One in four inhabitants in California and Texas, and one in eight in New York and Florida, are Hispanic.

At the other extreme, there are only five states with less than 10,000 Hispanics: Maine, Vermont, North Dakota, South Dakota, and West Virginia.

This means that, if we are to consider the challenge and the responsibility of the churches, there is hardly a region in the nation, or a judicatory in any of our major denominations, that can claim itself exempt from such challenge and responsibility.

It also means, let it be said in passing, that one of the reasons for the decline in numbers of the so-called mainline Protestant denominations is that they have not taken into account the changing demographics of the nation, or that, if they have taken them into account, they have not known how to respond to them. In my own denomination, at least, it is significant that many of those who are most vociferous in their calls for evangelism, and who are constantly bemoaning our declining membership, are also among the least willing to make the structural and programmatic adjustments necessary to reach a changing population. There is some connection between the declining membership of traditionally white, middle-class denominations and the Census figures that show us that, while in 1980 83% of the population was white, in just ten years that figure has declined to 80% of the population. But by the year 2080, and probably long before that, less than half of the population will be white.

However, such global figures about the US population and about Hispanics within that population are not enough. We must look at what they mean in terms of various sub-groups, as well as in terms of a number of cultural, economic, and educational data. Unfortunately, as I was preparing these remarks a detailed analysis of the 1990 Census was not available, and

therefore most of my data are gleaned from the1980 Census. That, however, should not negate the basic thrust of these remarks.

In terms of sub-groups, the largest by far is the Mexican American, which is larger than all the other groups put together (roughly 60% of the total Hispanic population). They are followed by Puerto Ricans, with 14%, and then by Cubans, with 5%. But the fastest growing group is what the Census calls "other Hispanics," mostly Central Americans, Dominicans and Colombians, who are now more than 20% of the Hispanic population.

While it is important to know of these sub-groups and the differences among them, the Census also shows that there is increasing connection between them. When Mexican Americans move out of the Southwest, they tend to go to other areas of Hispanic concentration—the Northeastern metropolitan belt, Chicago, or South Florida. When Puerto Ricans move out of the Northeast, they tend to move to the Southwest or South Florida. And when Cubans move out of Florida, they tend to go to the Southwest, the Northeastern metropolitan belt, or Chicago.

In the United States, more than anywhere in Latin America, there is constant and increasing contact among these various groups. And as a result, a new form of being Hispanic—a new Hispanic nation, if you will—is being born right now, here, in our midst.

Contrary to popular perception, 71% of all Hispanics whom the Census counted are native US citizens, and only 29% are immigrants. For a meeting such as this, this obviously means that we must consider educational programs aimed, not only at recent immigrants, but also at second and third generation Hispanics.

This does not mean, however, that the Spanish language is being forgotten or lost by most Hispanics. According to the Census of 1980, only one in four Hispanics (25%) declared that they either spoke only English or that they were bilingual with English preference, while 56% said that they were bilingual with Spanish preference, and 19% spoke only Spanish. Thus, it would seem that out of this population that is 71% US born, fully three quarters either prefer Spanish over English or do not speak English at all.

This population is also very young—21.9% is less than ten years old, as compared with 14.1% for the rest of the population. Another 21.1% is 10 - 19 years old (17.1% for the rest of the population), and 20.3% is 20 - 29 (17.9% for the general population). This means that 63.3% of the Hispanic population is less than 30 years old, while the figure for the rest of the population is 49.1%.

The converse is true at the other end of the spectrum. Only 14% of the Hispanic population is 50 years or older, while 26.8% of the rest of the population is in that age range. This will obviously have disturbing effects in the near future, as a larger proportion of the Hispanic

population is called on to provide Social Security and other retirement benefits for an elderly, non-Hispanic generation. It also should have clear implications for our planning in Christian education.

Beyond such demographic and cultural issues, however, we must look also at the economic conditions under which most Hispanics live.

Remember, these are official Census figures. The reality is probably significantly different.

According to the Bureau of the Census, between 1975 and 1985, the typical Hispanic family's income declined by more than $2,000.

By 1988, the median net worth of Hispanic households was $5,520, while the median net worth of white households was $43,280.

Although there have been slight fluctuations, during the entire decade of the 80s, the poverty rate among Hispanics remained between 29 and 30%. Furthermore, particularly in the case of Puerto Ricans, Mexicans and Central Americans, there is a factor of which the Census does not take account and that, if taken into account, would greatly increase the poverty level of Hispanics. Many Hispanic workers send a substantial portion of their income back to Puerto Rico, Mexico, or Central America, where they support elderly parents, children, spouses, or

other relatives. Thus, many Hispanics have dependents who (since they do not reside in the U.S.) are not counted by the Census—nor by the Internal Revenue Service—but who would clearly place them even further below the poverty level.

Bluntly stated, what this means is that the vast majority of Hispanics cannot afford to be United Methodists or Presbyterians—at least not the typical way in which people are Presbyterian or United Methodist. Nor could they afford many of the Christian education programs, materials, and structures designed by most major denominations, even if such materials were in Spanish. We must think not only in terms of translation of materials, or of production of materials in Spanish. We must also think in terms of programs and structures that take into account the harsh economic reality in which most Hispanics live. These statistics are paralleled by those indicating educational attainment. In 1983, while 88% of the total population above 25 years old were high school graduates, only 58% of Hispanics had attained that level of education. For college, the figures were 28% for the rest of the population and 17% for Hispanics.

Nor is there much hope that these figures will change soon. In the five years between 1978 and 1983, facing rising costs and cuts in government funding, private colleges and universities increased their support for the average white student by 15.6% (from $2,032 to $2,348). During the same period, average support for Hispanic students decreased by 4.5% (from $3,238 to $3,092). In 1970, when Hispanics were 4.5% of the population, 2.1% of all college students were

Hispanics. In 1981, when they were 6.5% of the total population, they still were 2.1% of the total student body.

(Figures in theological education, by the way, are similar. In 1987, 2.2% of seminarians in the Association of Theological Schools were Hispanic. And, at the PhD and STD level, the situation is really critical. In an average year, in all accredited schools in the United States and Canada that award teaching doctorates in any of the fields of religion, the total number of Hispanics—Protestant and Catholic—receiving such doctorates is 4.)

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All of these figures suffice to give us a sense of the nature and scope of the challenge. Yet, numbers are not enough. Indeed, when such numbers are adduced in order to call the church to action, there are at least two dangers.

First is the danger that these numbers are surreptitiously being employed to cause further division among minorities, and thus ultimately to continue disempowering them. We have to be wise as serpents to understand the ways these numbers are employed. Let me give you two examples:

Example one: Several years ago, *Time* magazine devoted the greater part of an issue to the growing Hispanic population in the US. Many Hispanics were glad to see that finally the press was paying attention to them. But what many did not see was the subtle between-the-lines message, addressed not at the population at large, but at Blacks: “Watch out, Blacks, here come the Hispanics. And they are going to take the meager part of the American pie that has been allotted to you.”

Example two: In most of the documents put out by the Census Bureau that discuss the number and the economic and educational status of Hispanics, Hispanics are not compared to white, but to "the rest of the population" or among themselves. The per capita income of Mexican Americans is compared with the per capita income of Puerto Ricans and of Cubans, thus causing division among the various Hispanic groups. But when it comes to comparing that income with non-Hispanics, the figures given are not for whites, but for "the rest of the population." By including Blacks, Native Americans, and others in such statistics, the contrast between the white majority and any of the other population groups is diminished.

We live in a society—and in a church—in which it is taken for granted that "minority concerns" should receive a certain proportion of resources, while the rest is reserved for the majority. It is that basic assumption that we must challenge, and not the manner in which the crumbs are to be distributed under the table.

The second problem with such use of numbers is that it easily leads to an ecclesiocentric understanding of mission. We then decide to respond to the Hispanic challenge, not because the Good News of the Gospel is also for Hispanics, but because if we do not do so our membership will continue declining.

Such an ecclesiocentric understanding of mission has very practical consequences. If the reason we are turning to Hispanics (or to other minorities) is that we need more people to support our denominational programs, we will turn primarily to those Hispanics (or other minorities) who are most likely to be able to support such programs and who are most like us. Mission and church development will be based, not on who needs the Good News of Jesus Christ, but on who can afford to pay a full-time pastor, maintain a church building, and make a financial contribution to the denomination. This is what a friend of mine calls the Kentucky Fried Chicken theology of mission. When Kentucky Fried Chicken decides to open a franchise, it does so, not on the basis of who needs chicken, but on the basis of who can afford chicken. That is quite appropriate, for Kentucky Fried Chicken is in the business of selling chicken and making a profit. But we are not in the business of selling the Good News.

We belong to churches coming out of a reformation that criticized the medieval church for the practice of simony, that is, for buying and selling ecclesiastical offices. Yet, when our planning and our programs are determined by who can afford our version of the Good News, as if such news were an item in the marketplace, we come dangerously close to simony!

We belong to churches that have rightly criticized the banking industry for redlining against minorities and against so-called transitional neighborhoods. Yet, when we close a church downtown because "it is not viable," or when we fail to plan programs and resources for the entire social scale around us, what we are doing deserves no other name than ecclesiastical redlining!

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As I look at this situation, I find strange and significant parallels with the book of Acts.

First of all, remember that the book of Acts begins with the miracle of Pentecost, that dramatic moment in which, through the power of the Spirit, all barriers seem to come down, and the Mede and the Parthian can understand as well as the Cappadocian and the Elamite, and the Spirit is poured upon young and old, male and female. At Pentecost, all these various people heard the Gospel. But they were not all made to understand the Aramaic that the apostles spoke. The text tells us that they each understood "in their own tongue."

At Pentecost, God pronounced a divine and final "NO" upon any incipient "Aramaiconly" movement that might have been brewing among the disciples. The church of the Spirit is a church in which all hear, "each in their own tongue." I could say much more about that, particularly in the light of some current events and movements. But we have a saying in

Spanish, "*al buen entendedor, pocas palabras bastan*"—a few words will suffice for those who will understand. Or, as the Good Book says, "those who have ears, let them hear."

Yet, even in the book of Acts, not all is rosy. In chapter 5, Ananias and Sapphira drop dead for having lied to the Spirit. And in chapter 6, we are told that "the Hellenists murmured against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution."

Let us look more clearly at the dynamics involved in these brief opening verses of Acts 6. The Aramaic-speaking Jewish Christians are the leadership. That is not surprising: They are the natives of the area. They are the inheritors of the original proclamation of the Gospel. The Greek-speakers are the newcomers. That much is clear. Within the earliest church, the Hellenists are at a disadvantage. In the world at large, they were more numerous.

So, the Greek-speaking portion of the congregation is somewhat marginal within the Jerusalem church—and also within the religious structure of the city as a whole. Their widows do not feel they are being fairly treated in receiving support from the whole congregation. And they are probably right.

There is murmuring. And the murmuring is against the leadership, against the twelve. Indeed, a few verses earlier Luke has told us that those who sold properties and brought the proceeds for

the relief of the needy "laid them at the apostles' feet." The apostles were responsible for the management of resources, and if there was criticism, it was ultimately directed at them.

So, what do they do? They call a meeting of the whole congregation. They did not downgrade the problem. Today some would say that the problem is that some widows do not know their place. We have already given them something. Something is better than nothing. Let them be quiet and take what is given to them or go away and leave us alone. Today we would speak of "the problem of the widows," or the "problem" of one ethnic minority or another. But the fact is that, if one reads the book of Acts as a whole, it is clear that the widows were not the problem. The problem was the Holy Spirit, who on that day of Pentecost was poured on all flesh, young and old, sons and daughters, and invited all to join, "Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphilia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cirene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians."

The problem is not caused by the widows, or by the Hellenists, or by any ethnic minority. The problem is caused by that subversive Spirit of God, who “bloweth from where the Spirit listeth” and who destroys all our neat patterns and classifications. And, because the problem was caused by the Spirit, the leadership took it seriously and decided something needed to be done.

The "something" would involve a new structure. The Twelve decide that they have the charge to proclaim the Gospel—evidently largely in Aramaic—and cannot in good conscience spend the time organizing the relief work for the widows. It is important that someone does that, however, and the present arrangement is unsatisfactory.

So, the leadership suggests that the congregation is to choose seven from among its members to carry out such tasks. And here comes the first great surprise. Today we have a solution for this kind of "problem." If we are slightly enlightened, we appoint a token member to the committee dealing with the distribution of resources. If we are a little more enlightened, we set up a quota for such tokens. If we are still more enlightened, we allow those minority representatives to administer that part of *our* resources that *we* have set aside for them. But that is not what this congregation does. Those who are chosen all have Greek names. Some might be natives, but chances are most are not. At least one is listed as a proselyte from Antioch—a Gentile who had become a Jew. So, this congregation, where presumably the majority are still Aramaic-speaking, chooses leadership that empowers those who had been more marginal.

But there is more. Given the political situation, empowering the Greek-speaking segment of the congregation may well have been a courageous thing to do. It implied a sharing of leadership with a new part of the community. It gave leadership to those who might raise even more questions about the church in the wider city. It would lead to strife and conflict that might

possibly be avoided if the Apostles had refused to expand the leadership beyond their own small group.

You see, the Hellenists were not "respectable folk" in good Jewish society. One may well imagine the arguments that could have been adduced against appointing them. If the financial resources of the church are put in the hands of these outsiders, giving will surely go down! When you come to church to be fed, both spiritually and materially, do you want one of those people to be in charge of the table? If it were today, we could find a dozen reasons for not taking the radical steps that the early church took. And we would convince ourselves that we were doing it out of love for the church!

The twelve had an alternative. They could have refused to empower the Hellenists. They could have kept the purse strings. But, had they done so, the miracle glimpsed in Pentecost would have been undone.

But that is not all. Then comes the second great surprise. The Twelve had decided that they would give the management of resources to the Seven, and that they would keep for themselves the ministry of the Word and Prayer. But then, what does the very next verse, v. 8, say?

"And Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people." And the result is that Stephen ends up preaching. The Twelve may have decided that the Seven would not preach. But the Spirit had other plans, so that the rest of chapter 6, and all of chapter 7, are taken up with the story of Stephen's preaching. (Actually, his sermon is the longest in the entire book of Acts.)

Then chapter 8 turns to Philip, another of the Seven who was not supposed to preach. And by chapter 9 our attention shifts again, focusing now, not on one of the Twelve, nor even on one of the Seven, but on one who was standing by during the martyrdom of Stephen.

You see, the Twelve are structural conservatives. They apparently believe that their task is to preserve the structure that existed in the beginning, perhaps with some minor adjustment. And so, in chapter one, even before they receive the Spirit, they attempt to elect another to fill the gap left by Judas. Jesus appointed twelve, and twelve we must be, says Peter. But apparently the Spirit had other plans, for of that Matthias whom they elected we hear not one word more.

And now, although they are willing to give up the ministry of serving at tables, they are not ready to share the ministry of preaching the Word. But the Spirit is ready, "And Stephen, full of grace and power," began preaching.

The significance of this is enormous, for there is a tendency in every church and in every denomination to think that there is a God-given structure, and that this structure must remain forever, perhaps with some minor adjustments. But no. The Twelve wanted to keep the ministry of the Word for themselves, and the Spirit had other plans.

Likewise, the Twelve asked that seven *men* be named, and the congregation did name seven *men*. Hopefully, if today we were dealing with an issue having to do with widows in the church, we would know better than naming seven men to deal with it! And that, too, is not simply the result of the modern world; it is also the work of the same Spirit who turned Stephen and Philip into the preachers they were not supposed to be.

Then there is the third great surprise, the surprise of the entire book of Acts. Because the early church took the risk of responding to injustice by opening up its leadership, the mission progressed far beyond their own expectations. From the Hebrews to the Hellenists, from the Hellenists to the Gentiles. And who are we, but the spiritual descendants of those first Gentile Christians, outsiders brought in, not because the others really wanted them, but because the Spirit would not be thwarted?

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The issues posed in this passage continue to this day. They continue at the level of the local congregation, and they continue at every level of the world-wide church. The issue is simple: Are we willing to see leadership in the church going to groups that have formerly been excluded from such leadership, especially to groups whom the rest of society does not consider apt for leadership?

That is the fundamental issue with which this Consultation must deal. We need more materials in Spanish. But it is not simply a question of producing more materials in Spanish. We need materials for second and third generation Hispanics. But it is not simply a question of producing such materials. What we need is a vision of the church, and of the educational task within it, that is open to the promptings of the Spirit, so that our young people may have visions, and our old people may have dreams, and we may all hear the Good News of what God is doing, "each in our own tongue."