

Hispanic Disciples in the US: Identity and Presence

Frontier Mission Strategy and Hispanic Disciples

When the movement known as *the Christians*, or *Disciples*, emerged on the American socio-political scene, the United States was going through a process of growth and expansion.¹ A wave of European immigrants strove to live in a land of freedom and to forge new opportunities. Frontier spirit was expanding the territory through new conquests and colonization. Some historians, like Frederick Jackson Turner,² hypothesized that the expansion of colonial borders determined the growth and progress of American society in the first half of the nineteenth century. Commercial and economic expansion made the transformation of North America a dynamic one, allowing the United States to become a political and economic force beyond its territorial borders, particularly by the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century.

Liberal capitalism and a market economy were developing fully in this new landscape. In addition to the pioneer spirit and the thirst for land, the spirit of adventure in North America was piqued by an eagerness for profit, especially as people searched for precious metals like gold and silver. The result was a demographic explosion, the extermination of native peoples, and the black trade that created a system of slavery leading ultimately to the Civil War (1861-1865) that

1 W. Clark Gilpin, "Faith on the Frontier: Historical Interpretations of the Disciples of Christ," in *A Case Study of Mainstream Protestantism: The Disciples Relation to American Culture 1880-1989*, ed. D. Newell Williams (Grand Rapids, MI-St. Louis, MO: W. B. Eerdmans and Chalice Press, 1991), 260-275.

2 D. B. Eller, "Frontier Religion," in *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, ed. Daniel G. Reid, Robert D. Linder, Bruce L. Shelley, and Harry Stout (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1990), 457. Eller's emphasis is that asserting religious determinism in frontier expansion is very simplistic, and he points out how different denominations were configuring their identities and mission in relationship to the frontier, assuming multiple challenges.

split the country and left its mark on United States history.³

The process the United States was experiencing reflected what was also happening in Europe. The Industrial Revolution was at its apex, and people anticipated an era of progress. Other factors influencing people of this era were new contributions by science, a common-sense philosophy, individualistic ideas of the Enlightenment, and fresh currents of empiricism and pragmatism. Some other important philosophical strains stimulating growth and dynamism were constitutionalism, the English Age of Reason, deism, positivism, liberalism, and a democratic spirit with its dream of freedom and individual volunteerism.

An inevitable result of all these new philosophical drives was the tendency to question all hierarchies and principles of authority. The social environment was infected by a *laissez-faire*, hands-off or “let them do it,” attitude. A common belief was that the meaning of freedom was emancipation from tradition and authority.⁴

The religious sector was not immune from these influences. Independent thought stimulated diversity in the life of the churches and allowed for the emergence of new religious movements and expressions. A new religious tolerance arose with the development of denominations.⁵

The expansion of the western borders had encouraged the proliferation of volunteer associations, which created new churches. Marked individualism, with optimism and confidence

3 Richard T. Hughes and C. Leonard Allen, *Illusions of Innocence: Protestant Primitivism in America, 1630-1875* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 221.

4 Mark G. Toulouse, *Joined in Discipleship*, 17.

5 Charles W. Forman, “The Americans,” in *Modern American Protestantism and its World*, ed. Martin Marty, 13. *Missions and Ecumenical Expressions* (New York: K. G. Saur, 1993), 38-47.

in new discoveries and advancements, created new ironies. On one hand a social awakening, with its high regard for stability, influenced the ethical-religious environment. Optimism awakened the idea that moral perfection and total sanctification were something that could be achieved. Thus, Puritanism and Holiness movements influenced the *civil religion*. On the other hand, mainline religious movements lacked agreement within because of the popular revival religions in which personal experience was essential.⁶

Beginning in 1845, the ideology of Manifest Destiny, which portrayed the United States as a nation chosen to fulfill a great mission in the world, spread through all levels of American society, including churches.⁷ It was broadly influential in the missionary movement and many times was confused the Gospel with American culture, something never seen before in the history of missions.⁸ Other social movements, such as those of students, women's societies, faith missions, independent missionary groups, and institutions for theological education were also catalysts for mission work. Liberal theology and its expression of social evangelism also influenced church life. By the grace of God and despite much cultural imperialism, many lives and countries were reached for the true accomplishment of mission.⁹

One of the most important results of Manifest Destiny was that evangelization became

6 Paul A. Varg, "Motives in Protestant Missions 1890-1917," in *Modern American Protestantism and its World*, ed. Martin Marty (New York: K. G. Saur, 1993), 3-19.

7 Walter La Feber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion 1860-1898* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Press, 1963), 1-60.

8 Rubén Loes, "El destino manifiesto y la empresa misionera," in *Lectura teológica del tiempo latinoamericano*, ed. Carmelo Álvarez and Pablo Leggett (San Jose, Costa Rica: Latin American Biblical Seminary, 1979), 207-225. See also Gerald H. Anderson, "American Protestants in Pursuit of Mission: 1886-1986," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 12 3: 98-101, July 1988.

9 Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 272-

seen as a civilizing process.¹⁰ The progress mentality propitiated by liberalism defended the assumption that humanity was moving toward a higher stage of development--that of the European and American cultures. Ideally, this more highly developed civilization should extend throughout the world and among all cultures. The chosen people would become the chosen culture.

However, other cultures with autonomy and characteristic values do exist and should be respected even while sharing the Good News of the Gospel. The lessons we can learn from the history of missions are of incalculable value in this endeavor.¹¹

Disciples of Christ in Mexico

The Disciples of Christ mission in Mexico was initiated by the Christian Woman's Board of Mission (WBM) in 1895. Mr. M.L. Hoblit was assigned to explore and establish missionary work there. He went initially to Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua and later to Monterrey. Hoblit was able to open a school and a print shop, emphasizing education during his tenure as missionary. Mr. and Mrs. A.G. Alderman replaced Mr. Hoblit in Monterrey and founded the Christian Church in 1901. Unfortunately, Mr. Alderman passed away in 1903, and Mr. Tomás Westrup, who was very fluent in Spanish, took over that missionary post. Westrup continue to follow a strategy in which music, publication of educational materials and preaching were the main task. He was a talented musician, well-known to this day in Latin America and the Caribbean as "The Father of Mexican Hymnody". Many hymns were translated by Westrup to Spanish over the

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¹⁰ William R. Hutchison, *Errand to the World: American Protestant Thought and Foreign Missions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 102-104.

years. His son, Enrique T. Westrup followed in his father's footsteps. In 1905 Samuel G. Inman joined Westrup in Monterrey and became a leading voice and an influential mind because of his knowledge of Mexican and Latin American history and politics. He founded the People's Institute at Piedras Negras and the Mexican Christian Institute (Inman Christian Center) in San Antonio. This institution was very instrumental in assisting Mexican immigrants during the turbulent years of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1917).¹²

The comity among the mainline denominations divided the Mexican territory assigning the Disciples of Christ to Central Mexico (Aguas Calientes and San Luis Potosi). In Aguas Calientes the Disciples of Christ continue the social work started by the Methodists. A crucial decision had to be made; the Methodists established schools and Disciples of Christ continue their work. But the Mexican Revolution promoted new reforms, including a profound educational reform. The churches needed to comply with the new laws, and no religious instruction was allowed in public institutions, particularly the churches. The critical financial situation of those schools was another pressing issue which prompted the closing of many Protestant schools at the time. Maintaining schools that will compete with public education and complying with a curriculum that prohibited religious instruction was another serious challenge.¹³

Disciples missionaries continue developing new strategies and making adjustments to the new situation. They transformed the schools into social centers to serve the poor in the 1930's.

¹¹ Charles R. Taber, *The World Is Too Much with Us*, 65-68, 174-179.

¹² Sydney Rooy, "Inman, Samuel Guy (1877-1965)," in Gerald H. Anderson, ed. *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions*, 319.

¹³ Elma C. Ireland, *Fifty Years with Our Mexican Neighbors* (St. Louis: The Bethany Press, 1944), 83-88.

Juarez Social Center in San Luis Potosí opened in March, 1937.¹⁴

Another area of tension and challenge was the planting of new congregations. The two larger congregations in Aguas Calientes and San Luis Potosí achieved self-support, and for many decades were the strongest local congregations in the denomination. The congregations in the countryside were very poor and remained isolated, including the ones in Zacatecas and San Luis Potosí. Other congregations included those started in Texas under the supervision of Disciples of Christ missionaries in Mexico.¹⁵

Hispanic Disciples in Texas

The Disciples of Christ started new congregation among Hispanics in Texas, the last two decades of the 19th century. They were missionaries sent to Mexico, crossing the border and preaching to the Hispanic population, primarily Mexican with the help of bilingual *tejanos*. The first Mexican Christian Church was established in San Antonio, Texas in 1899 by pastor Y. Quintero by 1916 the State Mexican S.S. Convention was founded with seven congregations (two Mexican, two in San Antonio, one in Sabinas, one in Lockhart and one in Robstown. These congregations were very unstable due to the dependence on missionaries from Mexico, itinerant and bilingual preachers and pastors. One key issue was the lack of interest in preparing Hispanic leaders to become pastors in local congregations. This is today still a high priority, equipping pastors for ministry.¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid.116-117.

¹⁵ Ibid.120-121.

¹⁶ Pablo A. Jiménez, *Somos Uno. Historia, teología y gobierno de la Iglesia Cristiana (Discípulos de Cristo)* St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2005), 22-23.

Daisy Machado traces the contradictions posed by the missionary work and planting of Hispanic congregations in Texas. She stresses that the Disciples in Texas did not provide the necessary financial resources to support the planting of new congregations, depended on Mexican pastors, supervised by Disciples of Christ missionaries in Mexico, and failed to offer theological education to empower Mexican-Texan Disciples leaders. They remain marginalized and excluded, foreigners in their own land.¹⁷

Hispanic Disciples in New York City

Puerto Rico is the home of a distinctive Stone-Campbell community. At the end of the nineteenth century Puerto Rico was experiencing a significant transition. Having become a U. S. colony as a result of the Spanish-American War, it received many Protestant missions from the United States beginning in 1898. The Disciples of Christ came to the island on April 23, 1899. J.A. Erwin and his family were assigned to the northern part of Puerto Rico, in the city of Bayamón, as part of the comity agreement among Protestant denominations that established missions. The first Disciples congregation was founded in 1901 in Bayamón. From Bayamón the Disciples moved to the countryside, starting the first Protestant rural congregation in Puerto Rico. Dajaos became, and still is, the Mecca of Puerto Rican Disciples.

The first missionaries experienced the misery and desperate needs of the Puerto Rican population and decided to respond by establishing two orphanages in Bayamón to educate and protect orphan children of the vicinity. By 1914 the missionaries had decided to change their strategy for mission in Puerto Rico. They closed the orphanages and concentrated on planting new congregations and on evangelism. Many children were transferred to the Polytechnic

¹⁷ Daisy L. Machado, *Of Borders and Margins. Hispanic Disciples in Texas, 1888-1945* (New York-

Institute of the Presbyterian Church in San Germán. The process of establishing new congregations resulted in Disciples expanding their influence, particularly in the northwestern part of Puerto Rico.¹⁸

The first major crisis among Disciples of Christ in Puerto Rico erupted when, in 1933, a group of laypersons started prayer circles at noon in Calle Comerío Christian Church. A charismatic movement spread like fire in all of the churches, creating what is known in Puerto Rico as *El Avivamiento del 33*.¹⁹ The revival included glossolalia, dancing in the Spirit, fasting, aggressive evangelism, and a contagious enthusiasm that affected even other denominations. But the missionaries decided that the revival was not according to the “Disciples way” and tried to suppress and even stop the movement. A serious confrontation that lasted ten years provided the opportunity for Puerto Rican Disciples congregations to declare self-support and to rely on the tithing and offerings of the poor members of local congregations. Disciples of Christ in Puerto Rico developed a unique model of mission. It is a strongly charismatic denomination, but it expresses a creative diversity in worship. Puerto Rican Disciples have a deep appreciation for solid intellectual and theological education of their pastors.

Pablo Cotto, a Puerto Rican Disciples Pastor, is the story and pilgrimage of a pioneer of the Hispanic Disciples Diaspora in the US. It is a wonderful model of what the missionary effort

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 88-101.

¹⁸ Joaquín Vargas, *Los Discípulos de Cristo en Puerto Rico. Albores, crecimiento y madurez de un peregrinar de fe, constancia y esperanza 1899-1987* (Bayamón: Iglesia Cristiana (Discípulos de Cristo) en Puerto Rico, 1988), 1-50.

¹⁹ Joaquín Vargas, *Los Discípulos de Cristo en Puerto Rico*, 69-102. See also, Daisy Machado, “El gran avivamiento del ’33,” *The Protestant Missionary Enterprise, Revival, Identity, and Tradition*, in Orlando O. Espín, Gary Macy, eds. *Futuring Our Past. Exploration in the Theology of Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 249-275.

is all about, combined with a solid theology of mission with an ecumenical commitment, and embodied in the life of this faithful man. He was baptized in 1920 by Vere C. Carpenter, a Disciples missionary from Kentucky who was the founder of the Dajaos Christian Church, first rural congregation in Puerto Rico of any Protestant denomination in the Island. Pablo felt, at that young age that something special was awaiting him. In a persistent and continuous search, Pablo discerned God's calling for pastoral ministry. It was during the Awakening of 1933 among the Puerto Rican Disciples that Pablo was convinced: Pastoral ministry was his life! The *Avivamiento* as they called this unique blessing of the Spirit in Puerto Rico molded him and gave the initial impulse to become a lay preacher.

He established in 1933 with a group of enthusiastic Puerto Rican Disciples Hato Tejas Christian Church, in Bayamón. But the precarious economic situation in Puerto Rico pushed Pablo to emigrate to New York. It was a critical time of frustration and desperation. But Pablo knew he needed to support his large family. The New York City experience was difficult for displaced Puerto Ricans. That experience led him to a second conversion.

Joining a group of Puerto Ricans in an independent store-front congregation of Manhattan, Pablo began organizing his second congregation as a pastor. They named the congregation La Hermosa in 1939, becoming a Christian Church in 1943, the first Hispanic Disciples congregation in New York City. He also helped establish a second congregation in The Bronx, Second Christian Church. Later on Pablo founded the Association of Hispanic Pastors of New York City. Before long, Pablo felt called to move to Texas.²⁰

Hispanic Disciples Diaspora in the United States

David Vargas has written an insightful and interesting article on the historical background of the National Hispanic and Bilingual Fellowship, founded in 1981. He stress that Fellowship was inspired by two key principles: Growth and unity. It is rooted in the pioneering effort of the first Mexican Christian Church in San Antonio 1899. “The search for unity has always been an essential factor in that historical process.”²¹ The main emphasis in which Vargas expands on these hermeneutical principles is the “Hispanic identity” *Identidad Hispana*. *Obra Hispana* is a process and effort to reclaim the distinctive Hispanic/Latino culture and ethnicity in the larger context of the US.

The process of becoming a national entity called the National Hispanic and Bilingual Fellowship started early in the 20th. century. The process begins with the *Convenciones* (Conventions) in the different regions from the State Mexican S.S. Convention in 1916, the Northeast Convention in 1958, and Midwest Convention in 1978.²² Later on *Convenciones* were established in Arizona, Southeast, Southwest and Pacific.

For Vargas the *Presencia Hispana* (Hispanic Presence) was aiming at having “la unidad Hispana” (the Hispanic Unity) in the larger context of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). To be recognized and accepted as active participants in the denomination, within the manifestations of the Church at the local, regional and central levels, was the main goal.²³

This *Presencia Hispana* needed a concrete national organization that will provide a space

²⁰ Pablo Cotto, *Hilachas en el acontecer* (Unpublished manuscript).

²¹ David Vargas, “Trasfondo Histórico de la Confraternidad Nacional Hispana y Bilingüe,” 1 (my OWN translation).

²² Ibid. 2-3.

for retreats, conferences, planning meetings, support to the *Convenciones*, advocacy and accompaniment to Hispanic congregations in the regions, in other to respond to the specific pastoral and spiritual needs of the Hispanic Disciples.²⁴ The culmination of this process was the founding of the National Hispanic and Bilingual Fellowship and the *Caucus Hispano* (Hispanic Caucus), as the Executive Committee, in 1981. the Fellowship and the Caucus Hispano were the instruments to continue in the struggle and towards the fulfillment of the *sueno de los Discipulos hispanos* (the dream of Hispanic Disciples): A body that represents, advocates, communicates and shares, the collective interests and aspirations of *Obra Hispana*, in the context of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the US and Canada.²⁵

After many years of having a Director for Hispanic and bilingual congregations under the Department of Evangelism of the Division of Homeland Ministries, the decision was made to establish a new office to serve more efficiently and directly to *Obra Hispana*, under the leadership of Hispanic pastors and lay persons. The new office called the Central Pastoral Office for Hispanic Ministries Office, under the direction of a National Pastor for Hispanic Ministries, was established in 1991. David Vargas was the first part-time National Pastor until 1993. Lucas Torres became the first full-time National Pastor until he retired in 1999. Pablo Jiménez became the second full-time national Pastoral and more recently Huberto Pimentel.²⁶

Hispanic Disciples is a vibrant and growing community within our larger fellowship,

²³ Ibid. 3-4

²⁴ Ibid. 4-6.

²⁵ Ibid. 6-9.

²⁶ Pablo Jiménez, "Hispanics in the Movement." in *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, Paul M.

integrating and advancing in the different regions, with a sense of commitment and enthusiasm, facing the multiple challenges of being part of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) towards the 21st. century.

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