

Wanted: Trained Hispanic pastors_112403

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Wanted: Trained Hispanic pastors

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Trained Hispanic pastors are a precious commodity, both because of their value and their scarcity.

While the Hispanic population grows by leaps and bounds and the Baptist General Convention of Texas Church Multiplication Center intentionally launches an increased number of congregations to serve the population, qualified Hispanic ministers remain in short supply.

The severe lack of trained pastors has left many of the 1,250 Hispanic congregations across the state without educated leadership and slowed the development of strong institutions, said Gus Reyes, ethnic consultant in the BGCT Center for Strategic Evangelism. More striking, there are only a handful of people serving as full-time ministers of education or youth in these churches.

Roland Lopez, pastor of Northwest Hispanic Baptist Church in San Antonio, places the blame for this problem squarely on the local church.

Congregations generally do not understand leadership development as part of reaching and discipling individuals, he said. "The local church has failed

to train and disciple leadership. Leadership is not born. It is made."

When a church leads a person to faith in Christ, the congregation has started a journey that lasts as long as the person is part of the church, Lopez argued. Members must continually invest in each other and help them "bear the fruit" of the faith.

Reyes agrees with Lopez's assessment, but he believes the situation is even more complex. Congregations should encourage their members to get educated, he added.

An overwhelming number of Hispanic pastors do not have a college degree, he pointed out. Statistically, the highest level of education achieved by Hispanics nationwide is:

Associate degree, 8 percent.

- ◆ Bachelor's degree, 5.6 percent.
- ◆ Master's degree, 3.8 percent.
- ◆ Doctoral degree, 4.5 percent.

Among Baptists, many Hispanics who hold postgraduate degrees serve on the denominational level rather than in local congregations.

The problem is not that Hispanics are not graduating from programs; rather, they are not enrolling. One in five Hispanics ages 18 to 24 were enrolled in college in 2000, compared to almost two in five Anglos, according to a study published by the Public Agenda for the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education.

Excluding the Baptist University of the Americas, where 90 percent of the students are Hispanic, the ethnic group is not looking to Texas Baptist seminaries to attain degrees.

At Baylor University's Truett Theological Seminary, 5.4 percent of this year's student body is Hispanic. At Hardin-Simmons University's Logsdon School of Theology, slightly more than 3 percent of the current student body is Hispanic.

At Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, there are 69 Hispanic students, accounting for 2.4 percent of the current student body.

As well as pushing education, Reyes and his pastor, Rolando Rodriguez at Hampton Place Baptist Church in Dallas, are training students in the ministry themselves. College students are invited to serve as interns in certain aspects of the work, such as youth ministry.

The students then develop a conference plan in that ministry area and give seminars around the state about what they have learned. The program is designed to help spread information throughout Hispanic churches and help members lead conferences in other Hispanic congregations, Reyes said.

The church hopes to expand the program to include surrounding Hispanic congregations that would facilitate an internship for selected Dallas Baptist University students.

"It's based on the local church," Reyes said. "If you can't do it on the local church level, you have no business doing it on the state level."

The program stems from Reyes' belief that getting a degree is not enough for Hispanics. They must be trained in the work with an emphasis on leadership development. A ministry internship is key to their college experience.

He also hopes the training will help unite students with Hispanic churches that are competing with all other churches for their gifts.

"We increase the odds when we connect them with a Hispanic church during their college years and they have an internship experience," he said.

When the education level of Hispanics increases, so will the earning power of individuals, Reyes argued. This will help congregations afford full-time qualified staff.

Mario Ramos, interim dean of student services at the Baptist University of the Americas, hopes Reyes is correct. The school prides itself on having curriculum that leads Hispanics who may not speak English or have high school diplomas to get a bachelor's degree and be prepared for church staff work or a master's degree program.

Ramos is pleased that 100 percent of BUA's graduates either move on to a master's-degree program or find church staff positions. However, many Hispanics trained in Texas leave the state for jobs after graduation.

Churches in other states offer better salaries and benefits, Ramos explained. In Texas, Hispanic graduates enter a cycle where churches cannot afford a full-time employee, but a church does not grow without that full-time help.

"It's a lack of money among Hispanics," Ramos bemoaned. "We just don't make enough money to support" full-time ministers.

So the demand for Hispanic leaders in Texas continues. Reyes receives at least a call a month from Anglo pastors looking to hire Hispanics. Bilingual and bicultural ministers are snatched up as quickly as they put out resumes.

One focus for the Center for Strategic Evangelism's activities for 2004 includes encouraging Hispanic youth to get educated and respond to a call to the ministry, Reyes said.

He hopes this will help churches put pieces of leadership development into a systematic effort.

"Leadership is more than a seminar," Reyes noted. "The strategic leadership development plan must be holistic. This means we work on all the pieces. It becomes an entry-to-exit and on-to-deployment approach. It's investing in someone whether you get credit or not."

A lack of leadership hurts churches and their members, the Texas Baptists reminded. Leaders give direction and help members develop to guide the church in the future. If Texas Baptists are to reach the population demographers project Texas to be in the near future, it will be through the coming Hispanic leaders.

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