

Voices: The challenge of crossing cultures to understand each other

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Recently, I attended the Waco Regional Baptist Association's monthly Ministers' Roundtable titled "Understanding our Hispanic Neighbors." Pastor Jesse Rincones, executive director of the Hispanic Baptist Convention of Texas, gave a tremendously educational lecture.



Jack Bodenhamer

I was blessed to be at a table of experts—Pastor Mario Sandoval and his wife, Miriam, of Maranatha Church and Pastor Tom Gutierrez of Viento Fuerte Church. Our table was rounded out by our associational director of missions, Tim Randolph, who has an extensive history planting churches in South America and who routinely preaches in Spanish-speaking and bilingual churches.

Needless to say, I was treated to quite a learning experience.

The roundtable format allows for a seven-minute jam-packed presentation, followed by 15 to 20 minutes of discussion around the table, usually centered on questions offered by the presenter. After the presentation, I sat

in earnest silence, soaking up the words of my tablemates as we continued the conversation about ministry to our Latino neighbors. Tom, Mario and Miriam shared their wisdom, successes and struggles within their congregations.

When time came to answer the assigned questions, we addressed only one. Tom looked to me and asked, “What don’t you understand about your Latino neighbors?”

Understanding

Texas Baptist Voices

It was a question I initially had a hard time answering. I grew up in an agricultural area where around 50 percent of my school was Hispanic. Spanish was the only foreign language offered and continues to be an invaluable part of a Texas education. Quinceañeras and cumbia dances were a part of life. Some of the best breakfasts of my life occurred on team buses when Hispanic teammates’ moms sent enough breakfast burritos for all of us. In fact, we did every part of life together *except for church*. Our table had quite a laugh as I told them I had performed my first Baptist quinceañera for a church member this past summer with a couple more planned in the years to come.

What don’t I understand? It was a question I couldn’t rightly answer in the moment, but it is one I have wrestled with the last few weeks. And now, finally, I think I have an answer.

I don’t understand

- *I don’t understand fear.*

I’ve never had to wonder in fear if the person knocking on my door is going to take me away, or take away my parents, or my siblings, or my children. I’ve spoken to teacher friends, and I have seen their social media posts

from places like Austin, San Antonio and Waco, and I know the fear their students feel is real. It is a fear I have never known, nor ever will know.

- *I don't understand having to hide.*

Pastor Mario shared with me the story of a few folks he knows who minimize their time in the public eye to avoid unwanted attention. They do not spend much time doing even the simplest of things, such as running errands, because they do not want to run the risk of being noticed. Their lives are affected by the tumultuous times in which we live in ways I could not even begin to appreciate.

- *I don't understand discrimination.*

There was a time when I had long hair, pierced ears and hung out with guys with a lot of tattoos. Occasionally, looking like we did made uncomfortable workers follow us around a convenience store. But I never have had someone judge me lesser because of my skin color or nationality. It burdens my heart that Pastor Tom might be discriminated against, despite being a third-generation Texan, just because he rolls his R's when he introduces himself. Sadly, while I do not understand discrimination, I have certainly been witness to it.

These are just a fraction of the things I don't understand in my Hispanic brothers' and sisters' experiences.

But I want to try.

Trying

I suppose if there is another thing I do not understand, in all honesty, it is immigration.

I am not naive, foolish or bullish enough to pretend there is a silver-bullet answer out there for such a complex issue. But what I do know are the

commands of my Lord. Yes, the commands and not mere suggestions: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:30-31).

If I could use a little pastoral license, I might even say, “Love your *Latino* neighbor as yourself.”

Almost without fail when Pastor Tom sees me, he says, “When I grow up, I want to be just like you” despite being three decades my senior. And my general reply is always, “Someday I want to have hair just like yours” because, despite being three decades my senior, his full head of hair makes my receding hairline envious.

Tom is my friend; he and his wife, Elizabeth, minister to my soul, and they help me in my understanding. My Hispanic church members who have invested in our little church have helped create a place that looks a little more heavenly. They are patient with me as I learn about a different culture, and they even get to laugh at me when I tell the congregation, “We are having *pozole* alongside our biscuits and gravy for Easter breakfast,” because I say it “like such a white boy.”

They help me in my understanding, and perhaps the first step to loving my neighbor better is understanding them.

Jack Bodenhamer is pastor of First Baptist Church in Elm Mott, Texas.