

# **How the Hispanic Church in the USA/Canada is Different from the Church in the Rest of Latin America**

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Students of Latin American culture understand all too well that Hispanics are not a homogeneous group. Despite similarities in language, and historical heritage, there are significant differences between people from various Latin American countries. Mexicans are very different from Guatemalans, Argentines from Ecuadorians. Even within a single country, a variety of subcultures exist. Thus, Colombians from coastal Cartagena will often verbalize different values from the “Bogotanos” of the inland central valley. That diversity increases exponentially when people groups from Latin America adopt a new homeland in the USA or Canada. A Bogotano in Los Angeles and a Nicaraguan in Montreal would represent just two of possibly hundreds of cultural subgroups within the Hispanic-American/Hispanic- Canadian world. Also forming part of the Hispanic-American world are those Hispanics/Latinos who have not moved to the US from another country, but whose families have lived here even before their territory was claimed by the United States.

This ethnic and cultural diversity has many significant implications for the ministry of the church in the USA/Canada. Among them is the recognition that programs, resources and plans developed in Latin America, by Latin Americans, for Latin Americans are not always developed with the realities of the Hispanic church in the USA/Canada in mind. The church’s leadership would be well served to avoid the practice of depending exclusively on the southern constituency of the Latin American church to determine the direction for and resourcing of the USA/Canadian Hispanic church. The fact that something is written in Spanish by Costa Rican Christian theologians, for example, does not mean it addresses the specific and particular needs of Spanish-speaking evangelicals in Chicago, Illinois. Instead, a USA/ Canadian Hispanic church strategy should be developed by leaders in the USA/Canada, identifying areas where collaboration with other Latin American churches is appropriate but also noting where, when, and how new, original and contextualized resources are called for. The need for production and distribution of contextualized resources for the Hispanic church in the USA/Canada is a frequent observation by Hispanic-American evangelicals, and particularly by Wesleyan-Arminians.

Non-Hispanic pastors and congregations, with a vision for Hispanic ministry, are asking for help in understanding the diversity they are finding among Hispanics. “We thought they were all Mexicans, but now we know that’s not the case.” The following brief notes are a beginning point for the development of an understanding of the rich uniqueness and diversity of the Hispanic Church in the USA/Canada. The Hispanic Church USA/Canada is indeed different from the church in the rest of Latin America.

## **The Role of the Hispanic Church in US /Canadian Society is Different.**

- The church is a place of security and refuge for the new immigrant.
- The church is a place where the cultural values, norms and practices of the motherland

are reinforced on a regular basis.

- The church is a place for personal affirmation while the process of cultural adaptation takes place. Resources for adaptation, such as language learning and job skills training, often are offered at, or through the efforts of, the church.
- The church is often a place of connection with social services, such as health services, legal services, and education.
- The church becomes a place for transferring some Hispanic cultural heritage to a new generation that has not grown up in Latin America. Research has shown Hispanic/Latino women (mothers, grandmothers, aunts) to be the main transmitters of that heritage, with the church serving a secondary but very significant role.
- The church is a place of cooperation (even for those with differing theological and political stances) for the purpose of transforming society. Parishioners hope the church's leadership will proactively try to influence public officials on issues of morality, society and politics. This hope has been largely unfulfilled. The Ethical and Moral Issues the church in the US and Canada address are often different from those of the rest of Latin America (e.g. Same-sex marriage is not as great an issue for Hispanics as are racial profiling, equal access to education and pay equity). The Church worships and carries out ministry in a multicultural context.
- Communities and neighborhoods where people live and where they worship very often consist of many ethnic groups.
- Hispanic ports of entry are no longer limited to urban neighborhoods, but now have extended to suburban and rural areas where established family members, often better paying jobs, safer neighborhoods and better schools make for more attractive ports of entry into the US/Canadian society.
- Couples and Families who attend Hispanic churches are often of mixed racial and ethnic heritage.

**The Church often worships in a multi-congregational context. This is a growing trend.**

Many Hispanic congregations in USA/Canada get their start in buildings owned and/ or used by congregations of other ethnicities. The dynamics of ministry with that kind of temporary arrangement require coordination with the other congregations and with their ministries. The kind of programs and materials produced for these Hispanic congregations needs to take into account these dynamics and ministries that will be shared by the various congregations. Some material, such as signage, may need to be bilingual.

A growing number of Hispanic congregations in USA/Canada are permanently in multi-congregational situations. That is, they intend to continue to share facilities with other

congregations.

Many USA/Canada Hispanic congregations are not organized as separate churches, but exist under the organizational umbrella of one church with several congregations. Leadership is provided by a multi-congregational representative church board.

Many USA/Canada Hispanic pastors are considered either co-pastors, associate pastors, or senior pastors in multi-congregational situations. Their roles vary in terms of decision-making and influence.

**The USA/Canada Hispanic congregations have political and missional perspectives on the US and the rest of Latin America, that are significantly different from the perspectives of other Latin Americans, and of USA/Canada non-Hispanics.**

This affects how we present the missionary challenge This affects how we refer to USA/Canada and Latin America in our church literature. The generational differences in the Hispanic church USA/Canada include a significant cultural element. That is, the second-generation Hispanic in USA/Canada may more closely identify with the broader USA/Canada population and culture, and not as much with the culture of their parents' motherland.

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