



# Latino/a Pastoral Reflections

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**Abstract** “Latino/a Pastoral Reflections” identifies a set of key issues and challenges HANA churches encounter today. The article also aims to offer readers a deeper understanding of the spiritual contexts in which Latino/a congregations serve and grow.

Kosacki, Silvina. 2015. Latino/a Pastoral Reflections. *Common Ground Journal*. [v12 n1 Spring]. ISSN: 15479129. [www.commongroundjournal.org](http://www.commongroundjournal.org). EDCOT. Form: eJournal. Pages: 53-59. Keywords: community, forces, hana, hispanic, influence.

## INTRODUCTION

“What else do we need to have? I am wondering: if we have a good and well-prepared worship team, a beautiful place to gather, a Bible-based sermon, and a wonderful organizational structure...what else are people looking for?” These words came from a preacher of a church that I visited not long ago. This question arose in the context of a sermon in which the speaker was wondering why people were not attending church as they used to do. This got my attention because the identity of the pastor was Dante Gebel. He is a Hispanic pastor (an immigrant from Argentina) ministering in the United States, who is pastoring one of the most iconic churches in California, the Crystal Cathedral, and in just three years grew a congregation from a small group to 3,000 people.

His words show that the challenge we face as ministers is not a matter of where we are ministering, or what country we come from. It has nothing to do with the size of our congregation, or the kind of building we have. The truth is that we are all in the same situation of facing the same challenges and learning how to handle the issues that we encounter while we do ministry in the Hispanic context in the United States.

In my experience of over twenty-seven years working with Hispanics residing in the United States—almost twenty of them as a pastor—I encounter the same situation over and over in the life stories that are shared with me: stories of loss, of uprooting, of broken dreams. When I reflect on these stories of life, I can tell that they are stories that hide both a deep desire to go back as well as painful memories of what was lost. I discern a dark cloud over the once-taken decision of crossing the border, now that they realize that a higher price was paid, way higher than the one they once imagined.

In order to minister correctly in the context we are talking about, it is necessary to take account of the forces or influences, both emotional and spiritual that exist and are present in our midst. They inevitably guide and shape the life experiences of people who are part of the Hispanic community living in the United States. Dr. Juan Martínez points out that “Yet, when we look into our communities we also need to identify and challenge the signs of death and self-centeredness. Part of our missional task will need to be prophetic. We need discernment to name the principalities and power that influence the places where God has called us to serve in His name (Martínez 2012).

When we talk about forces that shape our experiences in our communities of faith, we are talking about those influences that surround us, with which we struggle, and that somehow affect our lives, the decisions we make, and the ways in which we act.

Of course, I am not pretending to exhaust the list of all the forces that move in the midst of our realities, but I would like to focus on some of those that definitely will mold and define in a great way the decisions that the members of our communities will make in their lives.

## SPIRITUAL FORCES

As Christians, we are aware of the spiritual realm. We learn from the Bible about the fight we have against the army of darkness, the prince of this world, fallen angels, evil forces, or demons, or whatever you wish to call them. The importance resides not in the name, but in realizing that these are real, they exist, and they influence not only Christians, but every human being living on this earth.

There is a spirit, in most cases, that influence immigrants to leave their land, their roots, and their culture. It is not, as it was in the biblical case of Abram, “God’s calling.” That God later uses in His divine providence exile and diaspora to fulfill His missional purpose, does not mean that the spirit that pushes the great majority of Latin American immigrants in its massive movement toward the northern country is a response to a dream from God. It would be better identify this force as the “American dream.”

The spirit that prevails in the radical decision of what we can call “uprootment” comes from the *American Dream*, selling the idea of a better life, a better economy, and better opportunities. The spirit of the American Dream whispers continuously in the ears of those who want to hear: *In the northern land everything is better. What their country of origin does not offer, the northern country has in abundance. The closed doors, lack of opportunities, and negativities that people encounter in their daily lives in their home country are transformed into open doors, limitless opportunities, and positive responses in the United States.*

Now, when these people find themselves in the United States, they encounter other spiritual forces that impact their lives, since in the search to reach their American dream, the immigrants will be impacted by the spirit that gives impulse to other spiritual forces: avarice, materialism, selfishness, accumulation of riches, consumerism, and individualism. This is the spirit of the god *Mammon*, which is exposed in the Bible through the Sermon of the Mount, in the parable of the unjust steward (Luke 16:9–13, Mt. 6:19–21, 24).

Further, there is no need to prove that the imperialistic force that drives the United States in its economical politic, converts the country in an empire. Obviously, all of those that decide to come to the United States to make their lives in this country, have decided to be part of an Empire. Every empire is an empire in base of the conquering and colonization that are driven by the spirit of enslavement and domination. The fact is that living in this country as an immigrant will be to be not a conqueror but a conquered one, not a dominant part but a dominated one. In that way, the immigrant will experience oppression and marginalization.

It is important to point out that the spirit that has moved to the United States to conquer is the spirit of *Manifest Destiny*. It sees itself as a nation destined to expand—to the detriment of the rights and freedom of other countries—with every right to achieve this end at whatever the cost, because ultimately the result will be positive for those other countries, as they will develop skills and will enjoy growth. The basis for this choice, according to those who support this doctrine, lies in the virtue of the institutions and the citizens of the United States, and this image must be reproduced in the world. It is easy to reach the conclusion that a spirit of a nation that makes to see itself as a superior one and a chosen one, will also make it to be intolerant to other people. This will produce, as an obvious result, racism and discrimination.

## EMOTIONAL FORCES

The forces that drive a person to make decisions are not only spiritual, but also emotional. We act according to our feelings. We make decisions based on our emotions. The circumstances that we face in our daily lives will impact the way we feel, and those emotions will shape our experiences and realities.

One emotion that I have seen in every single immigrant that I have ministered to, is the *sense of loss*. The immigrants that have decided to leave their country to live in the United States will experience several losses: loss of identity, loss of roots, loss of family and affective relations, and loss of culture.

Insecurities will come, as a product of numerous deficiencies in the person of the immigrant: lack of language skills to communicate, lack of a legal status allowing him or her to reside legally in the United States, lack of skills to navigate a different and unknown society. There are also insecurities that come from the presence of negative stereotypes connected with being an immigrant, from the lack of knowledge of the mechanisms of this new society in which the immigrant will live in, and from a lack of secure employment. These are only a few of numerous inabilities that an immigrant will suffer when encountering a new, unknown, and different culture.

Another emotional force that will affect the experiences of the immigrant is the *sense of disappointment*. How disappointed one must feel when they realize that the most valuable things cannot be bought with money! How impotent one must feel when their emptiness is not filled with the fulfillment of worldly desires and pleasures! How painful it must be to find oneself with a life which has been destroyed, a family that has been lost, and a marriage that is in tatters, and with only a useless credit card to restore them!

It is crucial to understand that the spiritual forces mentioned above make them vulnerable to suffering, because it changes them into individuals that are isolated and abandoned. Selfishness and individualism have separated them from the community, affective liaisons, and significant and meaningful social webs. Instead, they have put them up in the vulnerable position of a fictitious independence.

What hope is left when all else has failed? Unfulfilled promises, broken dreams, an endless race without a prize, an emptiness that is unable to be filled. Empty hands. The spirit that boosted them to come to this country will never deliver “the better” it promised, and not even give answers or hope.

## THE CHALLENGE FOR OUR COMMUNITIES OF FAITH

As Pastor Dante Gebel asked himself, each of us that form a part of these communities of faith, each of us who are called to minister to these people in exile, has to ask ourselves, “What else do they need? What else are they searching for? What else do we have to offer?”

I would like to suggest that what they are searching for is not a well-organized structure, or a nice building, or even a tidy and well prepared sermon. What they are looking for is what they still have not found: right guidance. They need to encounter a new, renovating, and positive Spirit. This Spirit will both guide them to detach from those spirits that molded their wrong decisions and that will guide their lives toward the real dream, the dream of God revealed in Jeremiah 29:11 which says, “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

In coming to this country, immigrants got a new identity, a new citizenship (although in most cases this is just virtual, not legal). This “citizenship” did not give to them what they expected. As communities of faith, we can offer to them a *new citizenship*: A citizenship in the Kingdom of the God that assures a Kingdom of justice, peace, and joy. This justice does not support racism, oppression, or marginalization. This

perfect *shalom*, which the Old Testament describes, translates into prosperity, integral health, physical and spiritual well-being, and harmony with God, with our neighbor, and with creation.

I would like to suggest that the concept of *shalom* from the Old Testament is complimentary to the idea of *koinonia* from the New Testament. The *koinonia* of the Kingdom of God translates into communion, harmony, fruitful interpersonal relationships, and fraternal love and care. *Shalom*, as an attribute of the Kingdom of God, should be fundamental to *koinonia* and *koinonia* should not have any other end than to sustain, feed, and expand *shalom*.

As believers, we live in the Kingdom of God and have been given power to enjoy its benefits: *shalom* from the Old Testament, and joy, peace, and justice from the New (Rom. 14:17). But as we exercise the privilege of that enjoyment, we also have a responsibility: to administer gifts and mercies in a way that will reveal our identity as children of the Kingdom. We should play an active part of the *koinonia* that foment and sustains the *shalom*, not only inside the Kingdom, but outside its boundaries. We have, as children of God, not only the opportunity but the responsibility to experiment and defend the justice of the Kingdom in our own environment, promoting a style of life that will coincide with divine values.

These are what we have in our hands to offer to the Hispanic communities in the United States. A new Spirit, a new citizenship, new rules according to the Kingdom of God. *Shalom. Koinonia. Hope.*

Jesus painted a beautiful portrait of hope in the well-known story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10. In the picture painted by Jesus, where there were injuries, violence, and blood, there were also bandages, oil, and affection. Along with the characters that were hurried and indifferent, is a character that stops, cares, shortens the painful distances, and takes charge, making himself responsible for person's affliction. Along with the lament, hope is lifted up. The pain and brokenness are not only shared, but can be healed. It only takes someone who is willing to assume the challenge.

And even in the midst of the 21st century, this parable is brought to life on every corner of Los Angeles where Hispanics offer their *elotes* and *chicharrones*; in the fields of Arizona, where bent backs are only a part of the scenery; in the neighborhoods of Virginia, where the father of a working family is a delinquent for not having a card that validates him as a human being; in the colonies of New York, where the Puerto Ricans are guilty of every wrongdoing. In every city there are hundreds of people on the side of the road that have had their goods vandalized, been hurt in their identity, and covered by the mud of abandon and disinterest.

Villafane expresses this reality well when he says that the Hispanic church in the United States is the "church of the poor," a people living on the margins, for which God manifests His presence in the midst of those that society has rejected (Villafane, p. 95). In every city and neighborhood in the United States, a spirit of *koinonia* needs to be exercised as a lifestyle by the people of God, where *shalom* has to be present as a result of it. Christian communities that count on the Holy Spirit to empower them to be witnesses of the Good News. Even in the midst of their conflict and tensions provoked by the economic, social, and political systems it is possible to show a style of life that will keep alive the belief in the project of God.

## EMERGING TRENDS

The tendencies that are surging, and that cannot be ignored, are various and promising:

**Multicultural Churches.** Over the last few years, the Anglo church has observed the necessity to implement multicultural churches. They have realized that in the cultural mosaic that is the United States, there needs to be a place for those cultures to form part of their communities, in an attempt to reverse

the situation of declining membership.<sup>1</sup> In this, they have encountered a problem. They do not know how to do it.

The model that they have habituated is that of conquest, authoritarianism, and paternalism. And because it has “worked” in the past, they keep on attempting it in the present. But times have changed, and the realities they encountered in the past are not the same today. This model is not working anymore, and yet they have not found a solution.

In the Hispanic church, however, it is vice versa: we are living multiculturalism from the moment we step into this country. Congregations have been multicultural since their planting. Mexicans, Argentineans, Guatemalans, Hondurans, Salvadorians (I could keep naming other Latin American countries)—we have formed faith communities to the rhythm of salsa and mariachi, cumbia and tango, to the flavor of *pupusas* and *enchiladas*. It is not something that needs to be learned because we are already living that experience.

**The Second and Third Generation.** United with the previous subject—to be accustomed to our multicultural identity—comes the subject of the second and third generation of Hispanic Americans, children of Hispanic immigrants that were born in the United States. The descendants of Hispanics born in this country will definitely have a different culture than their parents or ancestors. But because of their multicultural experience, their mentality has been already shaped, the cultural breach is shortened, and differences are accepted. It is seen as just another culture that needs to be ministered to. There is no tension or prejudice; for, like in the Mexican *peceras* or Argentinean *colectivos*, where whenever someone new climbs on the bus, everyone just presses in a little tighter and makes room for one more.

**Increasing Hispanic Communities.** According to statistical projections, the Hispanic population is destined to be in the not-so-distant future, the first “minority” in the majority in the United States. This places us in a place of privilege, not only as a missionary camp but also as agents of the *Missio Dei*.

**Spanish as a Common Language in Most Places.** We find today that Spanish is a language that is now being used naturally and commonly in many places in the United States. This is a problem for the Anglo that finds himself today with the challenge of a language barrier to complete God’s mission—for the Hispanic is a super powerful tool. Speaking the same language—Spanish—allows us not only communicate, but also to destroy the emotional barrier that produces insecurity due to the lack of a “common language,” that is becoming not English, but Spanish.

**Hispanics in Areas of Influence: Politics, the Workforce, and Media.** Hispanics in positions of hierarchy are more and more common today in the United States. In politics, in professional careers, in commerce and through communication, Hispanic names are multiplying at an accelerated pace. This brings power, influence, and a platform for the expansion of faith communities that really support and seek the *shalom* and the *koinonia* of the Kingdom of God for the society.

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<sup>1</sup> See the following articles on declining church membership:

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-shook-phd/churchgoers-now-a-minority\\_b\\_1537108.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-shook-phd/churchgoers-now-a-minority_b_1537108.html)

<http://www.churchleadership.org/apps/articles/default.asp?articleid=42346&columnid=4545>

<http://www.leaderu.com/ftissues/ft9303/articles/johnson.html>

<http://www.christianpost.com/news/pcusa-decline-in-churches-members-continued-in-2013-120725/>.

## FINAL REFLECTION

*“Hear this, you elders; listen, all who live in the land. Has anything like this ever happened in your days or in the days of your forefathers? Tell it to your children, and let your children tell it to their children, and their children to the next generation” – Joel 1:2–3*

Every moment cannot be repeated and is unique. God prepares for each generation events that will impact and will leave an imprint in the hearts of those that experience them. What happens today has been prepared for our generation, in the part of the history of humankind that we are living, so that what God wants to happen, happens, according to His plans. It is important to know the story. It is important to know our past. It is important to know where we have come from, our roots. But it cannot determine our lives, because God has new things for us every morning.

Looking back serves no purpose, if it is only to convince me that things will always remain that way. In the Bible, we see that the Pharisees were so tied by the past that it prevented them from recognizing their own Messiah and the new age that was already among them. Christ had something new and renovating. But many people lost the opportunity to enjoy it because they looked back and tried to put Christ into the frame of the Law, of tradition, and of what they had suffered for 400 years. They also kept looking at their past of captivity, and this kept them tied down. They were stuck in the past. God had given to one generation the Law, and now He was giving to this generation His only begotten son.

God uses every moment to do NEW THINGS. It is essential to discern the Lord’s timing, knowing how to understand the new things that come. Knowing beforehand that the path is long and not always easy. God asks: Has this happened in our days, or in the days of your father? No! What God does today is new, is different, and is unique. Let us learn from the past and what God has done but let us also rejoice in what he wants to do today! And let us look at the future with hope!

*Of this you will tell your children.*

*And your children to their children.*

*And their children to the next generation.*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Silvina Kosacki** was born in Argentina, but has resided in California for almost thirty years. Along with her husband Javier, Silvina helped established nine new Hispanic congregations and trained through the V.I.D.A. Bible Institute (which they founded in 2001) more than 100 Hispanic pastors, church planters, and leaders for the local churches. She is an ordained minister from the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, earned her M.Div. from Fuller Theological Seminary and at the present is enrolled at PRODOLA (Latino Doctoral Program) toward to her PhD in Ecclesiology. She is member of the Board of the FTL (Theological Latino Fraternity) and is author of two books (*Hermeneutics and Homiletics*, and *The Christian Worker and the Gifts of the Holy Spirit*) published by the ICFG Media. She has three children: Julian (21), Jonathan (17), and Nathalie (14).