

Surfacing

HISPANIC

Leaders

Visibility is a challenge, but not for long

BY RODOLPHO CARRASCO

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ELIACIN ROSARIO



When I was coming out of college in 1990, my desire was to live in East Los Angeles, join a church there, and serve Christ in the barrio with other Hispanic believers. The only problem was that I didn't know any Hispanic Christian leaders in East Los Angeles.

I was born in East L.A., the Ellis Island of the West, but I was never connected to the evangelical church there, since no one in my family was a believer and we moved away when I was seven. My family came to Christ through a Baptist, predominantly white church in Burbank. During college, first at Biola University, then as a Stanford University transfer student worshipping with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, I was in a small minority of Hispanics living out their faith. More challenging, my peers had few connections to Hispanic Christian leaders. That didn't deter me in my quest to find an ideal Hispanic congregation "back home." East L.A. had not been home for many years, but it had been my mental fixture, my destination, ever since I responded to an altar call at age 10.

So I searched—in vain. It was one thing to find Hispanic churches on the east side of Los Angeles, but quite another to find a church where I felt I fit in. The traditions and predominant use of Spanish (I'm not fluent) were foreign to me. In addition, I'd learned of God's desire to touch the whole life, not just save the soul. Finding a church that integrated action with faith was more difficult than I thought. I scoured national Christian magazines and Christian bookstores, coming across names like Jesse Miranda and Justo Gonzales and Manny Ortiz, but met no one like them on the streets of East L.A.

Upon graduation I went to work for urban ministry pioneer Dr. John Perkins, an African American. I reasoned that I would spend two years with Dr. Perkins, soaking up everything I could about the still-new philosophy of Christian community development, then return to East L.A. and start my own ministry. But two things happened to shift my plan. First, East L.A. came to me. Like every neighborhood in Southern California, ours in northwest Pasadena had a steadily growing Latino population. Everything I expected to find in East L.A. was right outside my front door. Second, and most importantly, during my time with Dr. Perkins I began to meet a wide range of Hispanic Christian leaders across the country.

They had been there, serving faithfully, for long periods of time, and I had missed them because I had grown up outside of Hispanic church traditions. But I also missed them because they were simply not visible to mainstream Christian audiences. In Spanish there have been many books and products, but there was a relative void of radio shows, publications, and conferences directed to English-speaking Hispanics.

It was a joy to meet what felt like lost siblings. One meeting was particularly memorable. In 1994 Dr. Perkins and I traveled to Chicago as representatives of the Christian Community Development Association (Perkins was the board chair at the time). The meeting was a cross-pollination between CCDA and the Hispanic Association of Bilingual Bicultural Ministries (HABBM). We met at La Villita Community Church, which was pastored by Noel Castellanos. Ray Rivera was there. So was Luis Madrigal. There were some young leaders from New York, Puerto Ricans, whom I looked at with a mixture of joy and bewilderment. The two groups agreed that second- and third-generation Hispanics must be targeted in order for the church in America to grow in the ministry of racial reconciliation.

I sat there smiling like a beauty contest winner, all eyes on me and the other Latino 20-somethings. It seemed so obvious. But it had been years getting to that point. HABBM had been the brainchild of Danny De Leon, pastor of

Templo Calvario in Santa Ana, Calif. It had just received a sizable grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts to expand its initiative to retain native-born Hispanics, who were seen as galloping out of Hispanic churches. They left because they were bilingual and bicultural in church settings that emphasized only Spanish and heavily favored the cultural traditions of the homeland. The churches they had grown up in remained the same, but they had changed and no longer fit.

Soon after that I took a position with HABBIM and began traveling the country, meeting Hispanic Christian leaders who shared the burden to reach emerging generations. That is to say, everyone I came across had that burden. As a writer, I took to recording my meetings and conversations, first in the HABBIM newsletter, later in Christian magazines (including *PRISM*). I felt like a neophyte, green as they come. But to those who read my articles, I was the messenger. "It's about time!" many said. "We need a Hispanic Christian magazine," others insisted. "You should do a book," rang the chorus. What was odd was that, in the early 1990s, there were a number of magazine articles about Hispanics, some Hispanic periodicals (albeit regionally or denominationally focused, not national), and a number of books. But many Hispanic Christians were not familiar with these offerings.

In a sea of Hispanic evangelicals (about 5 million in the mid '90s) the names of key leaders were unknown to many Hispanics themselves. If that was the case among Hispanics, then for the mainstream Christian population Hispanics were indeed the invisible minority.

Now we are the invisible giant. The general Hispanic population is above 40 million, and the Protestant Hispanic sector is estimated at 9 million. There are more Hispanics in America today than African Americans or Asian Americans (by 2020 U.S. Hispanics will number 55 million), but you wouldn't know it by looking at Hispanic outputs in our national media, whether television, print, or Christian niche.

I don't believe there is a conspiracy to keep Hispanics hidden, but I would like to apply a mild corrective. The whole church in America needs the partnership, insights, experience, and talents of its Hispanic brothers and sisters. Below are some names of people you will want to know in the future, if you don't already. This review of a new generation of national Hispanic Christian leaders is not meant to be exhaustive or to reflect any type of "ranking." It is a niche in its own way, emphasizing leaders who have or will have great impact in the American mainstream, and not necessarily in Spanish-language America or Latin America. That said, I hope you will find that these new national leaders may be of some assistance in your community, with your church, or within your denomination. Allow me to introduce a few.

EMERGING NATIONAL LEADERS

Luis Cortes

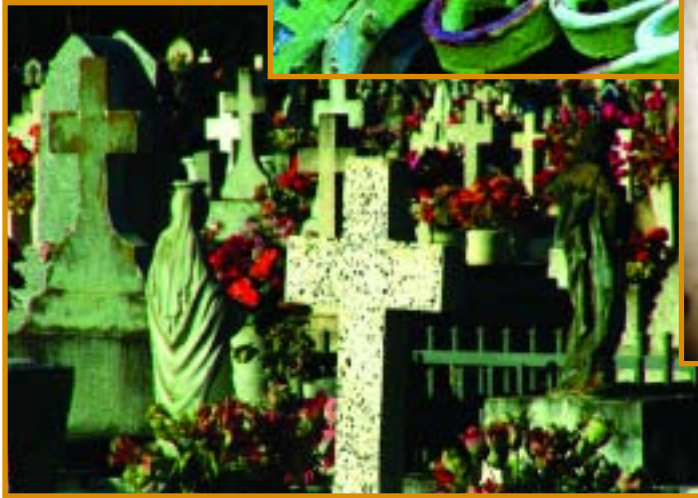
In one respect, Rev. Luis Cortes single-handedly put Hispanic churches on the national map. Since 2001 his organization, Esperanza USA (www.esperanza.us), has hosted the annual National Hispanic Prayer Breakfast featuring the president of the United States. For years there had been a National African-American Prayer Breakfast, and for some time there had been the National Day of Prayer, sponsored by predominantly white evangelicals, but no similar Hispanic visibility until Cortes and company pulled it off. At the 2005 prayer breakfast, in addition to President George W. Bush, speakers included House Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi. Over 700 Hispanic clergy from across the nation attended.

Current initiatives are impressive. Esperanza USA recently announced a partnership with the Government of Panama to build 100 public schools in the next five years in that Central American nation. Panamanian First Lady Vivian Fernandez de Torrijos was on hand at this year's prayer breakfast for the announcement. In May, Cortes met with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, discussing the use of stone from Israel in the building of sacred religious sites for Hispanic Christians in the United States. Esperanza USA national initiatives include the Hispanic Capacity Project, which targets 150 Hispanic faith- and community-based organizations around the country; the Pacto de Esperanza, an HIV/AIDS awareness campaign among Hispanic churches; and a community-based junior college, the Nueva Esperanza Center for Higher Education of Eastern University in Philadelphia.

Cortes, a Union Theological Seminary graduate and ordained American Baptist minister, launched Hispanic Clergy of Philadelphia in the 1980s and also helped found a bank. Earlier this year, the Harlem-raised Puerto Rican was named by *Time* magazine as one of 25 influential evangelical leaders in America. These accomplishments and accolades are channeled into a vision to develop Hispanic church leaders and church capacity.

"The Hispanic church seems to be changing in two significant areas," he says. "There is an acceptance of a parish mentality, a realization that we can develop local leadership for the entire local community, not just for the parishioners or church members. Second, we are now focusing on establishing leadership in both national and international issues.

"This second area is of great significance for this country, since we as a people do not fit the traditional red (Republican) and blue (Democrat) distinctions and priorities. While we are conservative on family values issues, we are more liberal



taken over our mandate to love our neighbor?" Cummins asks. "How can we avoid becoming the country club for rising Latinos and instead remain the refuge of hope for all?"

Albert Reyes

Dr. Albert Reyes is the president of the Baptist University of the Americas (www.bua.edu), formerly the Hispanic Baptist

Theological School. He is also the first Hispanic to serve as president of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, and he also chaired the National Hispanic Task Force of the U.S. Department of Education's Office of English Language Acquisition.

I first met Dr. Albert Reyes in 1997 at a unique conference he hosted called Network 2000. This event gathered 100 Hispanic Baptist church leaders who were burdened about bringing second-, third-, and fourth-generation Hispanics back to church. Since that time his vision of reaching all generations of Hispanics has only grown. BUA's five-year strategic plan calls for graduating 100 cross-cultural Christian leaders per year from the main campus, which currently has 200 students, and five satellite Bible institutes with a combined enrollment of 500, for a total enrollment of 700.

"Christian organizations will demand cross-cultural leaders in the next five years," Reyes says. "Christian organizations will require Latino leaders for executive positions as well. We need to prepare those leaders now."

In June BUA received a \$3-million matching grant commitment from the Houston-based Baugh Foundation. The grant will help build a new campus on a 75-acre plot of land that was recently purchased, as well as provide for BUA's growth needs over the next three years.

Michael Mata

Michael Mata is the training director of World Vision U.S.'s Tools for Transformation program. His involvement with World Vision includes a stint on the WVUS board of directors and extends back to the 1992 Los Angeles riots, when he served as an on-the-ground relief liaison to churches through the riot area. An ordained Nazarene minister, Mata holds an M.Div. from Nazarene Theological Seminary and a master's in City Planning from U.C. Berkeley, and has done doctoral studies and research in Hispanic faith-based development at the University of Southern California. He teaches on the faculty at Claremont School of Theology and serves on the board of directors of Call to Renewal.

on immigration, civil rights, public education, and health care," he says.

Lisa Cummins

When President Bush established the White House Office for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (FBCI) at the start of his first term, one of the first calls that went out was for Lisa Cummins to come to D.C. as an FBCI staffer. As the only Latino in that office, she instantly became a hub for Hispanics putting their faith into action across America.

An Assemblies of God born and raised *tejana*, Cummins earned an MBA from the University of Texas in San Antonio and went to work for Bank of America as a regional vice president for community development, where she networked throughout the state of Texas with faith-based and community groups as well as with national networks like the Christian Community Development Association and Leadership Network.

After four years crossing the country helping to develop Hispanic communities through her organization, Urban Strategies (www.urbanstrategies.us), Cummins emphasizes the great need for Hispanic churches to engage in self-evaluation in order to grow. "Many of our churches' origins have been rooted in communities of need, whether serving new immigrants or the poor among us. There is much historical evidence that the Hispanic church was a stabilizing factor for families, providing a platform for many to improve their station in life," she says. "[But] too many of us have become insular and isolated. We are not as aware of the issues and struggles of the poor and underserved as in times past."

These observations lead to pointed questions. "Is our service authentically reaching out, walking alongside and engaging with those in need? Or have our cultural traditions



Mata brings years of training experience to Hispanic and other church groups he consults, having served leadership programs such as the DeVos Urban Leadership Initiative (DVULI—www.dvuli.org). When asked how the church at large can promote Hispanic leadership development in America, Mata insists that churches and Christian organizations must seek qualified individuals and place them in positions of influence, and at the same time must support the training and equipping of gifted Hispanic leaders who will assume these positions.

Larry Acosta

Larry Acosta runs the largest urban youth worker training organization in America, the Urban Youth Workers Institute (www.uywi.org). Each May, UYWI draws more than 1,500 urban youth workers to Azusa Pacific University for three days of intense workshops, inspiring general sessions, new urban music artists, and refreshment for emerging and veteran leaders.

Acosta earned a D.Min. in leadership development from Fuller Theological Seminary, graduating in 2001, but he's been doing significant Hispanic and urban leadership development for over 10 years. Out of the Santa Ana-based Hispanic Ministry Center, Acosta launched *SHOUT* magazine, a Hispanic youth worker-focused, full-color magazine that was printed 10 times over a three-year period (the archive is still up at the UYWI website). There was nothing like it before it appeared and nothing similar since.

Beyond a conference and print publications, Acosta has done the necessary and oft-neglected work of personally nurturing urban leaders. Activities include monthly learning groups of 10–15 veteran and emerging leaders, mentoring and coaching, and hosting one-day training events for 150–300 ethnic leaders in 20 cities across the country. (In 2004–2005, these cities included Seattle, Phoenix, Los Angeles, Houston, San Diego, New York, D.C., San Francisco, Santa Ana, Chicago, Albuquerque, Portland, Memphis, and Minneapolis).

Acosta's long-term vision is to build transformational relationships among 20,000 urban leaders, who will in turn reach and disciple 1 million urban youth by 2010. It's an ambitious target, but judging by Acosta's track record, it is attainable.

Noel Castellanos

Noel Castellanos is the institute director for the Christian Community Development Association (www.cdda.org). This Whitworth College graduate has been all over the Windy City as a pastor of La Villita Community Church, as an agent of reconciliation with Latinos, blacks, and whites, and even as a past chaplain of the Chicago Cubs baseball team. Through the CCDA Institute, Castellanos travels the country training CCDA's 600-plus member organizations through courses including Asset-Based Community Development, Reconciliation for the New Millennium, the Theology and Practice of Incarnational Ministry, and Developmental Youth Ministry.

Castellanos' training background, including service as an instructor for the DVULI, is supplemented by his public speaking gifts. He's spoken at Promise Keepers conferences and served for years as the conference-long master of ceremonies at the CCDA annual conference. He's been a voice of reconciliation in the pages of *Christianity Today*, and has a passion to expand the reconciliation discussion beyond black and white. "The continued lack of awareness of Latinos in the reconciliation issue, despite our amazing demographic growth, needs to change," Castellanos says.

Elizabeth Rios

Miami-based Elizabeth Rios holds the unusual distinction of being the only Latina columnist for a national, English-language Christian periodical, writing in every issue of *PRISM*. Rios holds an M.A. in nonprofit management from Regent University, serves as adjunct faculty and academic advisor at Trinity International University's Miami campus, is pursuing a doctorate in organizational leadership, and planted a church, Wounded Healer Fellowship, alongside her husband, Hiram. For years Rios ran women's initiatives out of the Latino Pastoral Action Center (LPAC) in the Bronx, which is headed by Rev. Ray Rivera. While on staff at LPAC Rios brought together more than 650 minority women (and men) of color each year as part of the Center for Emerging Female Leadership (www.cefl.org).

Rios believes that over the next five years Hispanic churches must invest in second- and third-generation leaders. "Hispanic churches need to recognize the gifts, talents, and



viewpoints of the second- and third-generation leaders who have stayed in their midst just because of culture, not necessarily because they are being fed or think the ministry is great,” Rios says. “All that’s held them there is a commitment to ‘stay Latino,’ but that will only work for so long.”

Orlando Crespo

Orlando Crespo has labored for over a decade within InterVarsity Christian Fellowship to increase Latino student participation. Today InterVarsity’s La Fe initiative brings together Latino students for fellowship and spiritual development in an environment where they are strongly affirmed. After years of counseling Latino students, Crespo encapsulated his listenings and learnings in his landmark book, *Being Latino in Christ* (InterVarsity Press, 2003), a primer for healing and wholeness of the minority student in America if ever there was one. The La Fe model of student ministry and leadership development is a blueprint for any denomination or national parachurch organization seeking to be effective among emerging Latino generations.

RESEARCHERS

Two researchers to keep close tabs on are **Dr. Edwin Hernandez** and **Dr. Gaston Espinosa**.

Hernandez, director of the Center for the Study of Latino Religion at the University of Notre Dame, is principal investigator for the Hispanic Church Research Initiative, which studies the impact that Latino congregations have in their community. Previously, Hernandez served as a program officer at Philadelphia-based Pew Charitable Trusts.

He recently coauthored *Rethinking Latino Religions and Identity* (just out from Pilgrim Press) with Miguel de la Torre, and is co-authoring two more books in progress: *AVANCE: Envisioning a Future for a New Mañana*, a sociological study of Latino Seventh-Day Adventists (Loma Linda University Press); and *Reconstructing the Sacred Tower: Challenge and Promise of Latina/o Theological Education* (Scranton University Press).

For sheer output, few in any field of research or practice can match Espinosa. He served as the director of research for the pivotal 2003 study, “Hispanic Churches in American Public Life,” while a faculty member at Westmont College. After a sojourn at Northwestern University, Espinosa is now an assistant professor in philosophy and religious studies at Claremont McKenna College. Books in his pipeline include *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the United States* and *Latino Religions and Politics in American Public Life*, both with Virgilio Elizondo and

Jesse Miranda and published by Oxford University Press.

I asked Espinosa for thoughts on what Hispanic churches need to do in the next five years. His reply could likely fill another book. His five-prong approach for effectively reaching *barrios* and *colonias* includes the following: finding ways to reach young people with a message of hope and transformation; building and maintaining strong and healthy churches; organizing faith-based political, civic, educational, and social service organizations; emphasizing spiritual formation and one-on-one discipleship and mentoring; and encouraging Hispanics to write their own histories, theologies, and books on faith and life.

BLOGGERS

One of the quickest ways to encounter leaders and emerging ideas is by reading blogs (short for weblogs), which are private online web journals gone public. Most blogs are authored by individuals who wax eloquent on whatever catches their interest. Blogs are critical to emerging Hispanic leadership because they make it easier for new voices to be discovered and amplified—all it takes is a Google search, in many cases.

In the future, Hispanic Christian bloggers may have an inordinate influence upon attitudes and thinking about Hispanics. According to a private study by BlogAds.com founder Henry Copeland, “Seventy percent of blog readers are influentials, those articulate, networked 10 percent of Americans who set the agenda for the other 90 percent.”

Here are a few voices that have caught—and keep—my interest. Bloggers who have already been mentioned above are **Elizabeth Rios** (latinaliz.typepad.com) and **Noel Castellanos** (noelcastellanos.blogspot.com).

Jeremy Del Rio (genxcel.blogspot.com) is a go-to youth worker coordinator in the greater New York City area, having assisted the Ground Zero Clergy Task Force, Mission America, and the recent Billy Graham Crusade in youth organizing. An NYU Law School grad, Del Rio worked as an attorney for a few years before reimmersing himself as a full-time youth pastor at Abounding Grace Ministries in Manhattan’s Lower East Side. **Abner Ramos** (elacceso.blogspot.com) is the first-ever full-time Latino staffer for InterVarsity Christian Fellowship in the Los Angeles area and a leader in IV’s national La Fe movement. Nicaraguan-American **David Trigueros** (springofmysoul.blogspot.com) is a worship pastor at Bethany Church in Long Beach, Calif., and an M.Div. student at Talbot Seminary.

David Ramos is the director of church relations at the American Bible Society and blogs about ministry and emerging church at the Latino Leadership Circle blog (latinoleadershipcircle.typepad.com). **Julio Hernandez** (juliuseltrucho.blogspot.com) is a Salvadoran-American M.Div. student at

Regent College in Vancouver, while **Aaron Flores** (thevoiz.typepad.com) is a master's student at Vanguard University and a pastor at CircleChurch in Orange County, Calif. Flores is also a leader in the ranks of videobloggers, bloggers who use video as well as the digital word to post their commentaries. **Eliacin Rosario** (momentoamomento.com) began blogging as a Christian camp director on the beaches of Puerto Rico, then moved to Washington state. His blog is contained within a website that includes his personal photography.

ONGOING LEADERS

This brief, non-exhaustive roundup of some emerging national Hispanic leaders is not to infer that established Hispanic Christian leaders are in any way on the verge of retirement. I write only to introduce names that may not have as much national visibility, or visibility outside of a few significant but nevertheless niche circles. A cursory view of the activities of established names reveals a buzz of action and productivity.

Dr. Jesse Miranda directs Vanguard University's Center for Urban Studies and Hispanic Leadership, where he is committed to spending critical, one-on-one and small-group time with a new generation of Hispanic church leaders. **Dr. Manuel Ortiz**, author of the seminal *The Hispanic Challenge* (InterVarsity Press, 1994), is pastor of Spirit and Truth Fellowship in Philadelphia and professor emeritus of practical theology at Westminster Theological Seminary. **Dr. Isaac Canales** is pastor of Mission Ebenezer Family Church in Carson, Calif., and president of the Latin American Bible

Institute. **Rev. Dr. Ray Rivera** shepherds the Latino Pastoral Action Center in the Bronx. **Rev. Jim Ortiz** pastors My Friend's House in Whittier, Calif., and is chairman of the Latino Coalition for Christian Community and Faith-Based Initiatives.

Rev. Danny Cortes, after years as a program officer for the Pew Charitable Trusts, is senior vice president for Esperanza USA. **Dr. Alvaro Nieves** is professor of sociology and anthropology at Wheaton College and a lead contributor to the Latino Heritage Bible (God's World Publishing). **Dr. Elizabeth Conde-Frazier** is associate professor of religious education at Claremont School of Theology. **Dr. Eldin Villafañe** advises the Public Ministry of the Hispanic American Church D.Min. track at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, where he is professor of Christian Social Ethics. **Dr. Marc Rivera**, pastor of Primitive Christian Church in Manhattan, recently completed a doctoral thesis on "Leadership Transitions in the Urban Latino Church."

A PLENTITUDE

The church in America seeks Hispanic leaders to address new realities brought on by the rapid increase in our Hispanic population. All of the people mentioned above may be of some assistance in meeting personal, organizational, or denominational needs. Yet they represent only a fraction of emerging and existing Hispanic Christian leaders who are out there. Large crops of ministers full of potential exist within denominational pipelines, but the challenge with these leaders is that they are often equipped to minister only within their own denominational tradition.

Perhaps the greatest source of new Hispanic leadership in the future will be found outside of directly Hispanic contexts. On this note I am biased. I was "found" by the good people at HABBM while serving in a predominantly African-American context under a well-known black leader. Today I lead a historically black ministry—now black and Latino—that carries a Swahili name: Harambee. As I travel the country I run into many like me, who may not fit ethnically correct stereotypes. Like me, they desire to serve, to contribute, and to have a hand in reaching Hispanics for Christ.

If I'm right, then the apparent lack of Hispanic Christian bridge leaders, men and women equipped to minister effectively in both Hispanic and non-Hispanic contexts, could swell overnight, suddenly, dramatically. ■

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