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The Death of Machismo

By Sammy Rodríguez

How the megachurch phenomenon in the Latino community is being co-driven by women.



The current immigration debate succeeded in removing the grave clothes from one of America's best-kept secrets, the Hispanic evangelical church. According to one of the top Hispanic evangelical scholars, Gaston Espinosa, 37 percent of the U.S. Latino population (14.2 million) self-identifies as "born-again" or evangelical. This figure includes Catholic charismatics, who constitute 22 percent of U.S. Latino Catholics.

The Latino church is the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. church. If the current migratory and birth-rate trends stay constant, by the middle of this century, the majority of born-again Christians in America will be of Hispanic descent.

As a result, it is of the utmost importance for the entire church to understand the Hispanic evangelical ethos and analyze the trends within such a body. The emerging trends in the Hispanic church have the potential of transforming not only the Latino community but also the entire American born-again family. The three trends to consider are: the women-driven megachurch movement, the Hispanic missional movement and the Latino seeker, and the rise of a global Hispanic Christian social agenda. In this column, I'll discuss the first of these trends.

I believe the next Joel Osteens, Rick Warrens and T.D. Jakes of the church will have last names like Garcia, Gonzalez, Rivera, Maldonado and Velez. The Hispanic church already has megachurches throughout the nation. From Miami, Fla., Guillermo Maldonado pastors an 8,000-member thriving congregation. Gilbert Velez, Steve Perea, Danny DeLeon and others lead churches with thousands of adherents. Yet, what makes the Latino church unique in its megachurch phenomenon is that the culture universally known for its machismo is ironically producing pastors with names such as Lucy Saavedra, Yolanda Eden and Wanda Rolon.

In other words, the megachurch phenomenon in the Latino community is being co-driven by women. Undoubtedly, the question arises, How can a culture known to restrict the role of women in the cultural context reconcile with women as the senior leaders of thriving congregations?

"Hispanic Christians value one thing over the cultural dynamics and stereotypes of the people. We value the anointing. We value the presence and ministry of the Holy Spirit. More important than gender is the testimony of God. Our people will follow whoever is carrying the mantle regardless of gender," stated Sergio Navarrette, superintendent of the southern Pacific Latin district of the Assemblies of God.

In the state of Nevada, one of the largest Hispanic churches is lead by Lucy Saavedra. Pastor Lucy just finished the successful purchase of a multi million-dollar complex. In a recent meeting in Las Vegas, Lucy stated that one of her goals is to see Hispanic women pastor megachurches in every major urban center in America.

While many in the non-ethnic evangelical community still debate the role of women in ministry, the Latino church is leading the way in a progressive facilitation of female pastors. Hitherto, the evangelical debate continues to demonstrate a bias against the facilitation of female executive leadership, be it as senior pastors or supervisors in ecclesiastical oversight.

However, the Latino born-again Christian narrative is beginning to include the matriarchal elements embedded in the cultural context of the Diaspora. Hispanic women will not tolerate tokenism and limited roles within the great equalizer called the church. For instance, in Puerto Rico, Wanda Rolon leads a megachurch in the thousands while simultaneously providing oversight to pastors and churches in different parts of the Caribbean and the States.

"Hispanic denominations and fellowships are more open to female executive leadership than many of our non-ethnic brothers and sisters," stated Felix Posos, chairman of the Latin American Theological Seminary. "I predict we will see female leadership of our denominations before others do."

How will all this change the face of the church? At the end of the day, the evangelical church in America may well see women in all roles and positions in the church—including denominational leadership and the senior oracles of biblical orthodoxy and renewal, thanks in good part to the Hispanic church looking beyond machismo and embracing biblical equality. In the 21st-century church many spiritual sons and daughters will be grateful to Hispanic Christian women who removed the grave clothes of bias and limitation while exposing the glory of God.

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