

BRIDGING CULTURES WHILE CREATING A CAREER NICHE, ... OR: DARE WE PLAY EN ESPAÑOL?

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Could the population data from Census 2000 have implications for our careers as organists and choral directors? It may or may not surprise you that the fourth largest Spanish-speaking population in the Americas—after Mexico, Argentina, and Colombia—can be found in the United States.¹ Moreover, the AGO's Region IX (Far West) is home to some of the largest concentrations of Latinos in the country. While Latinos or Hispanics comprise 12.5% of the total U.S. population, they constitute noticeably higher proportions in three of the five states in this region—25.3% in Arizona, 32.4% in California, and 19.7% in Nevada.² (Additional data are furnished in the table below.) While it is unlikely that Spanish will supplant English as our national language, it is difficult to ignore the increasing influence that Latinos, Latino culture, and the Spanish language have on all aspects of our lives. The objective of this brief paper is to initiate a discussion about the opportunities current demographic trends may offer to adventuresome church musicians who are willing to “go bicultural” through adding a Spanish-language music ministry to their career path.

One need not look far to see the influence of Latinos on the various Christian denominations. The Roman Catholic Church in the United States has a long history of service to many ethnic, cultural, and linguistic groups. It is fairly common to find Roman Catholic parishes that, though providing separate worship in English and in Spanish, nonetheless endeavor to relate to the two linguistic groups as one unified congregation.³ Latinos generally trace their origins to countries where historically Roman Catholicism is the predominant branch of Christianity, but those same countries have seen significant growth in the memberships of other Christian bodies during recent decades—especially among Pentecostal groups, but also among the so-called “main-line” Protestant denominations.⁴ Increased involvement of Latinos in Protestant Christianity is also obvious throughout the AGO's Far West region. In San Diego, for instance, anyone who drives more than three or four miles along El Cajon Boulevard will see myriad Protestant churches of both traditional and storefront types, many of which proclaim their readiness to serve all sorts of linguistic groups—including, of course, the city's Spanish-speaking population. The Episcopal Church—which characterizes itself as “both Catholic and Reformed”—currently supports Hispanic ministries in at least five parishes within San Diego County, and in yet three more parishes in the farther reaches of

TABLE

CENSUS 2000 DATA ON HISPANICS/LATINOS
RESIDENT IN
SELECTED COUNTIES OF AGO REGION IX

(Source of Information: <http://quickfacts.census.gov>)

State	County	Population	% Hispanics/Latinos
Arizona		5,130,632	25.3%
	Coconino County (Flagstaff)	116,320	10.9%
	Maricopa County (Phoenix)	3,072,149	24.8%
	Pima County (Tucson)	843,746	29.3%
	Yuma County	160,026	50.5%
California		33,871,648	32.4%
	Alameda County (Oakland)	1,443,741	19.0%
	Fresno County	799,407	44.0%
	Humboldt County (Eureka)	126,518	6.5%
	Contra Costa County (Richmond)	948,816	17.7%
	Imperial County (El Centro)	142,361	72.2%
	Kern County (Bakersfield)	661,645	38.4%
	Los Angeles County	9,519,338	44.6%
	Orange County	2,846,289	30.8%
	Riverside County	1,545,387	36.2%
	Sacramento County	1,223,499	16.0%
	San Diego County	2,813,833	26.7%
	San Bernardino County	1,709,434	39.2%
	San Mateo County	707,161	21.9%
	San Francisco County	776,733	14.1%
	Santa Clara County (San Jose)	1,682,585	24.0%
Santa Cruz County	255,602	26.8%	
Santa Barbara County	399,347	34.2%	
Stanislaus County (Modesto)	446,997	31.7%	
Ventura County	753,197	33.4%	
Hawaii		1,211,537	7.2%
	Honolulu County	876,156	6.7%
	Hawaii County	148,677	9.5%
	Maui County	128,094	7.8%
Nevada		1,998,257	19.7%
	Clark County (Las Vegas)	1,375,765	22.0%
	Carson City	52,457	14.2%
	Washoe County	339,486	16.6%
Utah		2,233,169	9.0%
	Cache County	91,391	6.3%
	Davis County	238,994	5.4%
	Salt Lake County	898,387	11.9%
	Utah County (Provo)	368,536	7.0%
	Weber County (Ogden)	196,533	12.6%

the Diocese of San Diego. A number of Lutheran parishes in the area have initiated Hispanic ministries, though so far with limited success. At least two San Diego-area congregations of the Presbyterian Church (USA) serve the Spanish-speaking—one of which does so within a larger English-speaking congregation, while the other serves an almost exclusively Spanish-speaking congregation. There are also local Hispanic ministries supported by groups such as the United Methodists, the Disciples of Christ, various Baptist denominations, various Pentecostal groups, and many others. Though this writer has not undertaken a thorough inquiry into the nature and number of Hispanic ministries in San Diego County—the county of his residence—it does seem to him that the growing presence of Hispanics and Hispanic ministries in the AGO's Far West region ought to prompt at least some church musicians to consider bridging cultures as a means of broadening their career niches.

Even for the most motivated, however, the mere thought of venturing outside of one's linguistic "comfort zone" can be threatening. Anyone who has ever attempted a telephone conversation in a less familiar language will recognize the tension and, yes, even terror that can dominate such an experience. Convincing people to risk operating outside of their primary linguistic turf can be a very hard sell. Latinos in the U.S., however, are likely to sympathize with the non-Spanish-speaker's painful efforts to speak to them in Spanish. As Latinos, either they or their family or friends have probably had to struggle at some point in their lives to come to terms with the English-speaking world. It is also comforting to know that, just as many English speakers know some Spanish—perhaps owing to high school or college language requirements—so also do many Spanish-speakers know at least a little English. But even when neither party in a conversation directly knows the other's language, the reality that Spanish and English share many recognizable cognates makes it likely that some minimal—though probably awkward—communication will take place. Although some bilingual church-music positions may require a comfortable fluency in Spanish, a lesser degree of proficiency may often suffice. Even minimal Spanish competency, however, can be much more than just a career "tool" when it opens up an enchanting and perhaps life-changing "parallel universe" that previously had gone unnoticed.

Clearly, there are opportunities for English-Spanish music ministry out there, but how does the interested musician find them? The usual places are always good places to start looking: the local AGO chapter, denominational offices for music and worship, denominational publications, THE AMERICAN ORGANIST, etc. However, don't expect such opportunities to be advertised in neon lights! You may sometimes have to dig deep to get information that is not explicitly provided in some job announcements—especially if a congregation's interest in Hispanic ministry goes unmentioned because of an assumption that AGO members would not be interested

in that sort of work. It may well be true that few of us are inclined in that direction, but some of us certainly might be willing to consider a career niche there. Sometimes, opportunities like these are closer to home than one might suspect. One might even negotiate a "trans-cultural job description" where one did not previously exist—perhaps in the church where you presently work.

Beyond some basic ability in Spanish, are there other skills that the classically trained musician should possess in order to engage in Spanish-language music ministry? To begin with, one does not need to be an expert on *mariachi* music or be able to perform in the style of the *Buena Vista Social Club*. As helpful as those skills might be, they won't be nearly as helpful as having a good collection of Spanish-language hymn materials at your disposal—most of which include keyboard arrangements and/or guitar chords for accompaniment. One of the better-known hymn collections is *Flor y Canto*,⁵ which has found a home in many Roman Catholic and Episcopal congregations, and has served as a useful resource for congregations of other denominations as well. Spanish-language hymnals have been produced by the Episcopal Church,⁶ the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America,⁷ the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod,⁸ the Presbyterian Church (USA),⁹ the United Methodist Church,¹⁰ and various other denominations and publishers. Typically, these hymnals include translated versions of familiar English-language hymns along with both traditional and newer Spanish-language songs. Because many "oldies-but-goodies" from the English-language hymn repertoire have found their way into Spanish-language hymnals, novices to Hispanic music ministry will immediately feel at home with at least some of the "new" music they encounter. And because accompaniment editions are usually available for these hymnals, there will be no pressure to improvise accompaniments in an "indigenous" style. In fact, accompanying the congregation with a solid and confident rhythm is far more important than mimicking a Latino music style. If you worry that someone might criticize your non-Latino manner of playing, it is only because you do not anticipate how impressed your adoring Spanish-speaking congregation will be at your ability to sight-read the accompaniments in the *himnario*. The skills that you already have will quickly and clearly establish you as the musical leader of the Spanish-speaking congregation. After you have been doing this for a while, you will probably develop a more natural sense of Latino styles anyway.

Various ideas about Spanish-language music ministry have been set forth in the course of this discussion. The pivotal consideration, however, is the significantly increased presence of Latinos/Hispanics in the United States—as documented in the Census 2000 data. It is the assumption of this writer, therefore, that the current demographic developments have clear implications for today's church musicians—especially those who are willing to work within their profession bilingually and biculturally. Some readers may disagree with this assessment of cur-

rent professional circumstances, but no one can deny the reality of the demographic trends indicated by the Census 2000 information. I hope this article will encourage further discussion and consideration of a career area that is sure to become more visible during the coming years.

NOTES

1. As asserted by Justo L. González, "The Religious World of Hispanic Americans," in *World Religions in America: An Introduction*, ed. Jacob Neusner, rev. and exp. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), p. 79.

2. Lower percentages are evident in the remaining two states of the Far West Region, with Latinos comprising 7.2% of the population in Hawaii and 9% in Utah.

3. Some examples of Roman Catholic parishes in the U.S. that provide outstanding ministry to the Spanish-speaking can be found in the recent book by Paul Wilkes, *Excellent Catholic Parishes: The Guide to Best Places and Practices* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001); see pp. 19–38 on St. Pius X Parish in El Paso, Tex., and also the "Index of Excellent Parishes," pp. 195–255. The same author has also published a parallel study, *Excellent Protestant Congregations: The Guide to Best Places and Practices* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), which lists in the "Index of Excellent Congregations," pp. 197–259, a handful of Protestant congregations that serve the Spanish-speaking.

4. Justo L. González, "The Religious World of Hispanic Americans," pp. 85–86, discusses some of the circumstances regarding the shift of many Hispanics toward certain Protestant groups.

5. *Flor y Canto* (Portland, Oreg.: OCP Publications, 1989).

6. *El Himnario* (New York: Church Publishing Inc.) is described by its publisher as the product of an ecumenical effort of the Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church (USA), and the United Church of Christ.

7. *Libro de Liturgia y Cántico* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress) is a combination hymnal/worship book for Spanish-speaking Lutherans.

8. Both *¡Cantad al Señor!* and *Culto Cristiano* (St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia Publishing House) are combination hymnal/worship books for Spanish-speaking Lutherans.

9. *El Himnario Presbiteriano* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998).

10. *Mil Voces para Celebrar* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1996).

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