

## **Jesse Gonzalez and HMMN**

A simple review of demographics informs us of this: In the geography of the presbyteries of the Synod of Sun, there continues to be a significant rise in Hispanic populations. However, a simple review of our ministries says that frequently, Presbyterians aren't keeping up with that rise.

In a conversation with TE Jesse Gonzalez, pastor of Gethsemane Presbyterian Church in Fort Worth, TX, the Hispanic Ministry Mission Network (HMMN) will help presbyteries and the Synod of the Sun develop sorely needed Hispanic ministries.

The HMMN is the successor of the Hispanic American Council that functioned from the mid-twentieth century until the turn of the twenty-first century. As Synods shrank in scope and size, so did the funding and resources for Hispanic ministries. The HMMN represents a way to bring back Hispanic ministries in the Synod of the Sun in an organized way.

"We are currently without formal leadership," says Pastor Gonzalez, "there are four people who are recognized as a leadership team. One of our purposes at the HMMN gathering in Austin is to select an Executive Committee to formalize the organization." This validated Hispanic ministry of the Synod of the Sun, as an organized effort, will bring representation to the table and help the Synod with direction on Hispanic ministries.

In the Synod of the Sun, validated Hispanic ministries exist state in Texas, concentrated in Mission, Grace, and New Covenant presbyteries (Central & South Texas, DFW and Houston metro areas). According to Gonzalez, the rest of our presbyteries have little or no Hispanic ministries, with the exception of a ministry in Rogers, AR. That ministry is in conversation with the Arkansas presbytery on how the Presbytery can provide support. As a result, people from the Rogers congregation are attending the HMMN meetings.

### **Getting organized**

Gonzalez cites two critical reasons for the HMMN to get organized in the Synod of the Sun. "Hispanic ministry could be the biggest mission ministry of the Synod of the Sun. There is a disconnect with the reality of a growing Hispanic population. If the HMMN can organize, be known, and have a political position within the Synod, we can help others in reaching out to this underserved population."

The second reason is to be recognized at the GA level. Gonzalez is the on the Executive Board of the Hispanic Presbyterian Hispanic Latino Caucus, yet he is coming from a Synod that has not reorganized. "There are entire Synods without an organized Hispanic ministry or with no Hispanic ministry at all," says Gonzalez. "Hispanic ministry is not properly represented in the denomination."

"If we, as the HMMN, can approach underserved presbyteries in an organized and coordinated way, if we can have greater representation, we can say 'we can help you'." says Gonzalez. "Even though we are 'surrounded' by Hispanic people, we have few Hispanic ministers and leadership for Hispanic outreach. In an evangelistic approach, if there are no Hispanic people for leadership, they can not respond to the growing Hispanic population."

### **Challenges**

There are several challenges to creating Hispanic ministries. Foremost is the lack of recruiting for Hispanic people to attend seminary - but recruiting is a “chicken or the egg” problem. For Hispanic ministries to thrive, there needs to be more Hispanic ministries encouraging the recruitment of clergy and educators. However, in order to have more Hispanic ministries, we need to have more Hispanic ministers.

Additionally, even if more Hispanic people could be recruited, the number of churches that can afford a full-time pastor are in decline. Gonzalez suggests that a more feasible and realistic approach might be Commissioned Ruling Elders that can serve Hispanic congregations, without recruiting for seminary.

Another problem perhaps is at the core of Presbyterian identity. “Just get out in DFW and you can see lots of Anglicans, Pentecostal, and Lutheran ministries are popping up” says Gonzalez, “but not Presbyterian ones. We need to think ‘outside the box’, because Hispanic people love our liturgy and Sunday School programs, but our polity and inflexible definition of “membership” are barriers.

Nesting a Hispanic congregation is also a laudable strategy, but “If we apply the ‘anglo’ approach to Hispanic ministry, realistically, it’s very difficult.” says Gonzalez. Often times, nested Hispanic ministries are on a limited time frame to see results, much like church planting. If there isn’t a definable goal met within that time line, funding and resources are often re-directed.

“Instead, open your building for Hispanic people to come and learn the Bible and be brought to Christ, without the pressure or burden of becoming a “well organized” ministry on a time line. If you, as a congregation, want to have a Hispanic outreach, if you are in the midst of a Hispanic community, make your space welcome and patiently see what will develop” says Gonzalez.

The Hispanic Ministry Mission Network is holding their gathering at Austin Theological Seminary in April. Go here for more information: [AustinSeminary.edu/HMMN](http://AustinSeminary.edu/HMMN)