

The background of the entire cover is a photograph of a vast field of golden wheat. The wheat stalks are in sharp focus in the foreground, creating a sense of depth. The field extends to a flat horizon line. Above the horizon, the sky is a vibrant blue, filled with soft, white cumulus clouds. The lighting suggests a bright, sunny day.

Juan Oliver

Ripe Fields

**The Promise
and Challenge
of Latino Ministry**

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction	1
1. Who is Latino?	5
<i>We Are Latinos</i>	
<i>Latino Episcopalians</i>	
<i>Which Latino?</i>	
2. Latinos in Church:	
Congregational Development	19
<i>Starting from Scratch</i>	
<i>The "Nested" Congregation</i>	
3. Forming Latino Christians	43
<i>Latinos Interpret the Bible</i>	
<i>Latinos Worship</i>	
<i>Latino Prayer and Spirituality</i>	
<i>Latino Service to the Poor</i>	

RIPE FIELDS

4. Forming Latinos in Anglican Polity.	67
<i>Latino Authority and Governance</i>	
<i>Latino Stewardship</i>	
<i>Latino Administration</i>	
5. Latinos in Holy Orders.	81
<i>The Latino Bishop</i>	
<i>The Latino Deacon</i>	
<i>The Latino Priest</i>	
6. Theological Education for Latino Ministry.	97
<i>Questionable Attitudes</i>	
<i>Preparatory Programs</i>	
<i>Theological Education in Latin America</i>	
<i>Burdening Assumptions</i>	
<i>Training Anglos to Assist Latinos in Their Ministry</i>	
7. A Vision of Promise and Challenge.	115
<i>Santa María: A Liturgical Story</i>	
Appendix A:	
The Bible Reflection Group	127
<i>Introductory Session</i>	
<i>Basic Format of the Bible Reflection Session</i>	
<i>The Rhythm of Christian Growth</i>	
Appendix B:	
An Outline for “Becoming Anglicans”	135
Resources for Latino Ministry	141
<i>Publications</i>	
<i>Online Resources for Ministry</i>	

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CHAPTER 1

Who is Latino?

A group of church leaders gathered around the coffee pot during a break at a national church conference. We all knew each other well, and soon we were bantering and joking. I said something about being Latino.

"Oh sure, Juan, but you're not really Latino," someone said. I pointed to my white skin and began my usual explanation about Latinos including the whole gamut of skin coloration.

"No, no," he stopped me. "I mean, you're not Latino," he said innocently. "Your parents went to college and you have a doctorate!"

Even after I reminded him, indignantly, that minorities have a right to name themselves and not be defined by members of the majority, he insisted. That's when I realized that we live in two different worlds, friends though we are.

RIPE FIELDS

I went home furious after this exchange. I had just been exiled from my people for not fitting an Anglo stereotype of who we are! My friend thought that I was less Latino because I have had the benefits of education. Apparently he is not aware of other educated Latinos in the United States and Latin America. Or perhaps by “Latino” he meant only the stereotypical immigrant of recent years—a poor, relatively uneducated person driven north by violence or chronic poverty. That would leave out hundreds of thousands of Latinos in the United States who are educated, many of whose forebears were here almost a century before Captain Smith fell in love with Pocahontas at Jamestown.

We need to know to whom we are speaking,
even in a general sense, before we know
how best to communicate.

—*Creating a Welcoming Presence*

What do we mean by “Hispanic” and “Latino”? What’s in a name? I bring this up at the start because names are extremely important. They are markers or signs that summarize our sense of self and others. We therefore begin our journey by examining whether we should call ourselves Latinos or Hispanics, as well as the stereotypical meanings that these terms may have for the dominant culture. We will then explore Hispanic demographics in the United States in order to get a sense of the pressing need to develop proactive missionary strategies to welcome Latinos into the Episcopal Church. Finally, we will examine what we mean in the church by “Latino ministry.”

WHO IS LATINO?



WE ARE LATINOS

The church often speaks of ministry among Hispanics, but in fact this is not what we call ourselves. “Hispanic” is a category invented by the U.S. Census Bureau to tag persons of Spanish or Latin American ancestry living in the United States. Of course the term covers us all, but that is not what we call ourselves. In Spanish, the term *Hispano/a* is an adjective describing a person or thing related to Roman Hispania, the Iberic peninsula in Europe. Most Latin American countries, however, declared their independence from Spain in the early 1800s, and in spite of the fact that we sometimes refer to it with a dash of irony as the “Motherland,” we have long stopped considering ourselves related to Spain, thanks to Morelos, Bolívar, and other independence leaders in Latin America almost two hundred years ago. We are not *Hispanos*. We are *Latinos*. That’s what we call ourselves.

Many Anglos do not realize that Latin America is comprised of *all* the countries on the American continents (North and South) which lie south of the Rio Grande, with the addition of Caribbean countries such as Cuba, Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico. All these nations were colonized by European nations whose languages developed from Latin, and thus in the nineteenth century the French developed the term *Amérique Latine* to refer to them. Thus people from countries as distant and dis-

RIPE FIELDS

tinctive as Brazil and Puerto Rico, Mexico, Colombia and Argentina all identify themselves as Latinos.

The Hispanic/Latino community is complex and multileveled. . . . With over forty years of on-the-ground experience, we recognize that there [are] many different and particular communities, each with its own historical, regional, and cultural identity. —*Creating a Welcoming Presence*

As Latinos, our cultural identity was shaped by our centuries-long experience of colonization and racial admixture. We are united by a common language and a shared history of colonial invasions, exploitation, genocide, and chronic poverty, all visited upon us at times in the name of God. We may have different countries of origin, and these will determine our culinary tastes and our slang, but there is something much more powerful that unites us as a people. In light of this common background, we can talk about a Latin American “identity,” carried over by Latinos in the United States well after we become bicultural and bilingual “over there.”

The only “Hispanics” in the United States who might not fit this description are the descendants of Spaniards who colonized the southwestern United States in the sixteenth century. Forgotten by Mexico and sold to the United States for a pittance, these *Hispanos* from Texas to California have managed to maintain, nourish, and develop a vibrant culture with roots in Spanish, Mexican, and, increasingly since the late nineteenth century, Anglo cultures.

WHO IS LATINO?

Thus, although the dominant culture in the United States insists on describing us as Hispanics, often meaning by that merely a collection of stereotypes, we do not see ourselves that way. Yet we are partly to blame for this stereotyping. In the wake of the civil rights movement, we have been tempted to define ourselves in terms of race rather than our unifying culture. It is much easier and convenient to tag as “Hispanic” some measurable, tangible attributes, such as skin tone or accent, but “Hispanic” and “Latino” do not actually refer to either the color of our skin or our accent, nor to our educational level, but to our shared *culture*. Our shared culture and all the sub-cultural elements that comprise it through a large and very varied region have, over the centuries, integrated these differences into a shared sense of unity.

Some Latinos certainly do experience discrimination on account of their race, be it black, Native American, mestizo, or mulatto. But this is not the whole story. “Latino” is a much broader category—a category related more to the ways in which we live, move, and have our being than to our race, education, or income. It is a category that includes a multiplicity of races, all living out of the same Latin American cultural matrix. A person who discriminates against a Latino may or may not be racist—it depends on that Latino’s race. Thus it is not racism *per se* that is at stake, but Anglo *ethnocentrism*, the natural tendency of humans who can only live, move, and have their being in *only one way*. “Our way” naturally is “the only way” and we assume that the whole world is this way, or should be.

As Latinos in the United States, we labor daily within and outside the pigeonholes set by the dominant culture’s

RIPE FIELDS

stereotypical classification. Sometimes we return the favor. The pigeonholes are legion; here are some examples.

ANGLO STEREOTYPES OF LATINOS	LATINO STEREOTYPES OF ANGLOS
"Latinos are all Roman Catholics."	"Anglos are all Protestants."
"Latinos are lazy."	"Anglos are workaholics."
"Latinos are overemotional."	"Anglos repress feelings."
"Latinos are aggressive."	"Anglos are passive aggressive."
"Latinos can't be good administrators."	"Anglos are efficient robots."

Recent studies show that the population of the United States is undergoing a shift away from an Anglo-dominant nation toward a truly multicultural one. Additionally, whereas earlier immigration patterns involved assimilating into Anglo-American culture in a kind of melting pot, more recent immigrants tend to retain their cultural and linguistic identity even as they acculturate to the dominant culture by learning Anglo ways. This trend will probably result in an increasingly large proportion of the population of the United States becoming bilingual and bicultural.

In 2004 the Census Bureau announced that the nation's Hispanic and Asian populations would triple over the next half-century. Non-Hispanic whites, who in 1960 made up 85 percent of the population and are now about two-thirds, will become a minority when their share drops

WHO IS LATINO?

to 47 percent by 2050. Hispanics, on the other hand, who are already the largest minority group, will more than double their share of the population to 29 percent by 2050.

Fundamental to the identity of the Episcopal Church is its welcoming and hospitable environment. There is room for persons of different theological and doctrinal positions within the Episcopal Church, just as there is room for persons of different class backgrounds. . . . Such hospitality needs to extend to persons who are different from most of the members of the Episcopal Church. This hospitality flies in the face of the xenophobia increasing in the U.S. This hospitality proclaims the gospel in a countercultural way, demonstrating to the rest of society that God cares for all persons, no matter their legal status, their sins, their color.

—*Creating a Welcoming Presence*

The growth of the Latino population of the United States thus continues apace. Latino immigration, “legal” or not, surged during the Reagan administration’s *Contra* wars of the 1980s and has grown to the point that demographers tell us that new immigrants and their children and grandchildren born in the United States will account for 82 percent of the population increase from 2005 to 2050. This is not the place to ask why; that is for historians and economists to ferret out. The undeniable

RIPE FIELDS

fact, however, is that the Latino population of the United States is growing by leaps and bounds. We are everywhere. Additionally, although current trends find the number of American-born Latinos to be growing faster than immigrating Latinos, immigration from Latin America, propelled by the great economic chasm that separates us from the rest of the Americas, will not likely decrease any time soon, at least not until Latin American economies begin to pull out of the stagnation to which they have been condemned by five hundred years of exploitation.

Thus the growing presence of Latinos in the United States is neither a temporary trend nor a small detail that we can afford to ignore. It presents possibly the greatest missionary challenge to the churches in the United States in their history. It also holds great promise.



LATINO EPISCOPALIANS

Based upon our experience, Latinos in the Episcopal Church also face a challenge: to develop our theology as a reflection upon our experience of God from within our own cultural context *and* within the wider context of an Anglican tradition. We have taken great strides in the last decade. One area of success is the location of our theology firmly in the Latino experience of poverty and privation, which are rightly for us a place of God's revelation. This insight connects Latino theologians in the United

WHO IS LATINO?

States with Latin American theological movements of the last thirty years.

In one way or another, either because of work, lifestyle, discrimination, or past experience, our potential members feel “out of touch” or “out of place” at church. They are looking for a place to make their own choices and build their own faithful and religious identity.

—*Creating a Welcoming Presence*

But Latinos in the United States, unlike our counterparts in Latin America, have another experience, which to my knowledge has not yet been named as a place of divine revelation: our experience of learning another culture—Anglo culture. Like poverty, our experience of learning a second culture is a theological gold mine. Once we are “over here” (sometimes even before we arrive), Latinos spend most of our time learning Anglo ways. For instance, we learn, slowly and patiently, the myriad ways in which the verb “to get” can be combined with prepositions to mean almost anything. We learn that life is possible without subjunctives. We learn to tell time in a different way from ours. We learn that people here are individuals, and that the family has usually just four people if you are lucky. We learn that religion is a matter of free choice and that “if you can think it, you can do it.” We learn that it is possible to be “a self-made man.” We learn that “net worth” is a dollar amount, not a feeling inside—what we would call *honor*. We learn that here being poor is an indication of God’s displeasure with you, as taught by the

RIPE FIELDS

Calvinist colonizers of this land who consider poverty a manifestation of God's judgment or of personal moral failure.

In short, since we spend all our time learning Anglo culture, most Latinos with a few years' experience in the United States—even Latinos with very little education—are experts in multicultural ministry. We minister constantly to people of a different culture from ours: clean their homes, care for their children, pick their vegetables—some of us even teach their seminarians and grade their term papers. So I suggest that we include the experience of learning to be bicultural as a rich place of revelation where God is present and manifest.

God is manifest in our bicultural experience by bursting the bubble of the dominant culture's claims to be final arbiter and universal standard of everything. Once the bubble has been burst, we discover that our experience of learning Anglo ways reveals to us something about God and life that we did not know before—something that forms us as immigrants and our descendants as a people, and that makes us who we are as immigrants to the United States: *Anglo culture is not God*.

Precisely because we have survived and thrived through the process of learning a second culture, we have discovered that culture and its components—language, manners, rituals, body language—is *multiplex*. We have discovered that the world created by a given culture for those in it is only *one* world among *other* worlds. Our experience thus reveals that there are many ways of being in the world, not only our way, and that each way builds up its own world with its traditions, assumptions, values, virtues, and sins. The bicultural person knows—from ac-

tual experience, not merely in theory—that “the way things are” is many ways, and that there are other ways of doing whatever must be done “just this way.”

Thus, the immigrants’ place of revelation is also a place of dangerous knowledge, for in the eyes of monocultural people, our “other” ways of doing things undermine the stability of their world. This insight may throw light on the recent nasty dialogue about immigration. It is no wonder that we, who have found out that the world has room for many ways of being, are considered best as being ministered *to*, even *managed*, for monocultural members of the dominant culture are sensitive enough to feel that if we “others” are permitted to act out our world, we may well construct and express a different world from theirs with a different order of power and meaning. Naturally, this is profoundly threatening to them.

As Latino “others,” we might paint the church in loud colors. Or insist that there cannot be worship without offering something (candles, flowers, ex-votos) to God. We might need to be accompanied in worship by the saints, the church triumphant. We might develop a long entrance rite to allow everyone to arrive before the first reading. We might express our respect of the dignity of the poor and give them pride of place in our assemblies. We might insist that the two-track system of preparation for ordination (Commission on Ministry followed by seminary) be integrated into a single track so that the seminary’s daily experience of the ordinand can be part of his or her discernment process. We might consider practical work in field education parishes every bit as creditable as academic work in the classroom, finding new ways of integrating one into the other and keeping the two experi-

RIPE FIELDS

ences in dialogue. We might decide that since there are so few Latinos with undergraduate degrees, our seminary education must seek ways of assisting promising candidates to complete their bachelor's degree while starting their graduate education in theology. These are just a few creative examples. Clearly, Latinos who are *doing* rather than *receiving* ministry are a dangerous lot.

As members of a very wide and rich cultural matrix, Latinos in the United States daily juggle the task of valuing and retaining our culture while learning the dominant Anglo culture. We do this in the midst of stereotypical misunderstandings of who we are and where we come from. This book attempts to clarify and correct some of these misunderstandings, in order to remedy the series of false starts to which Latino ministry in the United States seems condemned, even while our numbers continue to grow.



WHICH LATINO?

Years ago, while I was discerning my vocation to the priesthood, I called a bishop in a heavily Latino diocese. An affable man, he showed some interest in developing Latino congregations near the Mexican border. "Where are you from?" he eventually asked.

"I'm Puerto Rican," I explained, "and moved to the States when I was seventeen."

WHO IS LATINO?

Silence. Then, as kindly as he could, he said, "I wish you well, but I'm not looking for Puerto Ricans; I need Mexican clergy."

The ignorance of Latino cultures evidenced by this statement is impressive. The bishop assumed that different nationalities make different Latin Americans unable to minister to each other. But we must ask, can an Anglo-American priest serve in an Australian congregation? Can a French-Canadian work with people in France? Can a Venezuelan relate to Peruvians? The historical answer to all these questions is a clear *yes*. The idea that differences in Latin American countries of origin and their subcultures make Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Bolivians, Venezuelans, Argentineans, and so on incompatible with each other is extremely naïve. Each of these countries of course has its own slang, cuisine, and idiosyncratic ways of expressing and viewing the world, but they are all part of a broader Latin American culture, so that as a result, Latinos have much more in common *with each other* than with Anglos in North America. Sometimes recent immigrants from Latin America, thrown together in church for the first time with members from other countries, will be shocked by the differences among Latinos. This is entirely natural. In a short time, however, they will discover our commonalities and shared culture, and will soon be joking about differences in slang and cuisine.

RIPE FIELDS



The rate at which our presence in the United States is growing is nothing short of impressive. Latinos already constitute the largest minority in the United States and in forty more years will likely reach a third of the population. This presents a tremendous missionary challenge and promise to the mainstream churches, *one that can be met only by getting to know Latinos as we actually are.*

This depth and honesty of relationship with us, however, cannot take place as long as we continue to gloss over the differences between Anglo and Latino languages and cultures, pretending that we are all the same, in some well-intentioned but naively mistaken quest for peaceful inclusion. The unity of different peoples in the church cannot be bought by sacrificing our diversity; rather, that unity will be realized only when we recognize *and welcome* our differences as reflections of the life of our Creator, who is one, while consisting of three distinct persons. With this caveat in mind, we turn first to the development of Latino congregations.