

Ascension Lutheran Church
Landover Hills, Maryland
Fred Hedt, Pastor

Why Have an “Hispanic Outreach” Ministry?

On April 27, 2008, as the result of a generous grant from the Southeastern District of the LCMS, we were able to place Mara Jeffries into service as our Pastoral Assistant for Hispanic Outreach. This has prompted several people to ask me “why do we have an Hispanic outreach ministry?”

This ministry is grounded in the fact that the Church is *Apostolic* – we are “sent” (“apostoloi”), we are to be in mission (from the Latin “to send”). Mission is not an “add on” for the local congregation – it is part of the very reason God calls us together. He gathers us to gift us and then sends us out in mission. The mission field begins at the Sanctuary doors.

“Go!” Jesus said (Matthew 28.19 & 20), “And make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all the things I have commanded you.” The word translated “nation” is in Greek “ethne”, from which we get our word “ethnic”. Jesus is actually saying “Go and make disciples in all ethnic groups”.

For us, there is no option. We are Apostolic – we are sent, we are in mission to all the ethnicities around us. We *have* to be, or we are not the Church.

Ascension has historically done a pretty good job making disciples among white folks and African Americans. A decade or so ago as African immigrants moved into our area they found a welcoming home at Ascension Church and School. And we were able to birth a daughter congregation, Lamb of God Lutheran Church, whose primary focus is African immigrants. The “jazz community” has found a church home at Ascension. And now the population around us is increasingly Spanish speaking. For us, there is no option. We are Apostolic – we are sent, we are in mission to all the ethnicities around us, including Hispanics.

What is the goal of our Hispanic outreach? It is to offer our Spanish speaking neighbors the opportunity to know Christ as their Savior and grow as His disciples. A year or so ago we tried to begin outreach to the Spanish speaking community by offering Sunday evening Spanish language worship services. We did this for a period of six months. Sunday evening was, apparently, not the best time to do this, and while non-Spanish speaking Ascension members enthusiastically supported this service, we never had more than two Spanish speaking families from the community attend this service.

It was obvious that we would have to do other kinds of activities to build bridges to the Spanish speaking community in order to open the doors of Ascension. When Mara came on board we decided to begin with English as Second Language classes. We decided to begin with one ESL class and ordered twelve text books. We had more than 80 people show up and had to split into four classes. Every session begins with all the students gathering in one room, and there is a Bible reading and prayer. I envision that from this beginning a worshipping community will emerge sometime in the fall.

And that *is* the goal. Not just helping with language skills or legal problems, but establishing a disciple-making, worshipping community which feels like “home” to Hispanic immigrants. Like some of our African immigrants, this community may be fully integrated into the life of Ascension. Or like other of our African immigrants, they may wish to establish their own congregation. Ascension, I believe, stands ready to help with either or both options.

There are other Biblically based reasons for us to be in this ministry. Jesus tells us to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt.22.39). Jesus tells us in Matthew 25 that what we do for the “least of our brothers and sisters” we do for Him, and that our failure to make a compassionate response to the least fortunate in our midst is a failure to love Him.

Compassion for the stranger is a theme that runs deep in Scripture. At Mt. Sinai God said to the Israelites “Do not oppress an alien; you yourselves know how it feels to be aliens, because you were aliens in Egypt” (Ex. 23.9) The prophet Jeremiah said (22.3) “This is what the Lord says: Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of his oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless, or the widow.” Hebrews 13.2 urges us to “not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.” This verse is interesting because it says in Greek that we should practice “*xenophilia*”, that is “the *love* of foreigners” – the word is the exact opposite of “*xenophobia*”, the “*fear* of foreigners”!

But, some people ask, isn’t it possible that some of the people we are helping are “illegals”. Quite probably. But what does that mean? Nations have borders, and nations have the right to protect and defend those borders. Who is and isn’t “legal” are civic questions. Christians of good will can have different opinions on those issues and, as citizens, should help shape the answers to those questions. But the Church must rise above nationalism – we represent the Kingdom of God on earth and not any one nation. We are sent to be in mission to all “ethne”, all the people we encounter. God has declared that His house is to be a house of prayer for *all* people, and God’s Kingdom rises above any earthly kingdom. Let Caesar decide who is “in” and who is “out”, who is “legal” and who is “illegal”. That’s Caesar’s job. The Church will preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ to everyone it encounters. That’s the Church’s job.

Yes, immigrants come here with different customs and take jobs and use services and confront us with change. I know all that. I’m the grandson of immigrants, and my family’s ways probably seemed funny to a lot of the people around them. But they came here because America held out the promise of a better life.

It is easy to be xenophobic. But Scripture calls us to be “*xenophilic*” – to love *all* people, even the stranger with strange, new ways. And while change can be unsettling, the strength of this nation has been the contributions of people who have immigrated from all over the world.

Ascension is Apostolic: we recognize that Jesus calls us to go to every ethnic group around us and make disciples of all people. Our Hispanic outreach ministry is one response to that call.