

Oral History Project

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Closing Celebration
UMC
March 22, 2012

Oral History Project

As this project comes to a conclusion, it is first of all time to celebrate. It is time to celebrate the work done by Bishop Joel Martínez and his collaborators. It is time to celebrate the material that has been gathered, and what it will mean for the future writing of the history of Latino Methodism. It is time to celebrate the many who in various ways have contributed to this project—with their work, with their participation. With their stories. with their advice, with their support, and with their prayers.

But above all it is time to celebrate the history itself that this project seeks to preserve. It is not a long history. But it is a distinguished history. It is a history of vision and sacrifice, of hope and endurance. It is a history worth preserving and retrieving, both for ourselves and for generations to come. As Jose Ortega y Gasset used to say, each generation is like an acrobat atop a pyramid, standing on the shoulders of those who went before. If we are to understand who we are, we must know the shoulders on which we stand. So, in celebrating our history we celebrate not only those who went before us, but also ourselves and our identity.

On the other hand, it is not only time to celebrate. It is also time to challenge. While projects such as the one we celebrate tonight come to an end, history does not—at least, not yet. A historian's work may be done; but history is not done. History is still marching inexorably towards the future.

So, while it is time to celebrate, it is also time to challenge ourselves, to challenge the entire church, and to challenge generations to come both to continue and to expand the work begun by this Oral History Project.

That the work needs to be continued should be obvious. The generations that are now at their high point will also come to their waning days, and before they pass it is important that their experiences be recorded, that their memories too be kept for future generations. This is one reason why tonight we celebrate, not only the conclusion of this particular Oral History Project, but also the fact that it is now becoming imbedded into the General Commission on Archives and History, and thus becomes part of the task and mission of the entire church. Thanks to the joint work of the Oral History Project and of the General Commission, resources should be available both for the compilation of historical records—interviews, documents, photographs—and for their cataloguing and preservation—a task requiring vastly more abundant resources than the compilation itself.

Yet I say that the project must not only be continued but also expanded. It must be expanded in at least two directions.

First, it must be expanded in its ecumenical dimensions. The history of Latino United Methodism has not followed a path entirely independent of the history of Latino Christianity in other traditions and denominations. Indeed, there have been times when the Latino

contingents or the parent churches of our own denominations were able to flourish and perhaps even to survive thanks to their connections with Latino constituents in other denominations. This is a matter that deserves wider exploration—an exploration that cannot be undertaken by United Methodists alone, but which will require collaboration with parallel projects and interests in other denominations.

But secondly, and most importantly, our project must be expanded in its scope within Latino United Methodism as well. I have often said that when I first studied history, what we studied was mostly the orography of history—that is, we concentrated on the mountaintops, the great figures, the most visible institutions. But now we realize that mountains stand on valleys and plains, and that even under both mountains and valleys there is an unseen stratum that supports the mountains as well as the valleys and even the plains.

Let me give you an example in a totally unrelated field of historical inquiry. In the nineteenth century, the study of ancient Egypt became a craze among British and French aristocracy. Hundreds of expeditions traveled to Egypt in order to study its temples, its palaces, and the tombs of its pharaohs. They dug up the land, uncovering magnificent monuments to ancient ingenuity and to the wealth of an empire. Today, Egyptologists are much more interested, no longer in the lives of the pharaohs and their courts, of the high priesthood and their temples, of those interred in the great pyramids, but also in the lives of the common folk whose labor supported the pharaohs and their courts, who worshiped in the great temples, whose toils and

sweat built the great pyramids. So, present-day Egyptologists often find themselves searching for the remains of villages under the debris that earlier Egyptologists dug from around the palaces and dumped on the villages.

Likewise, the history of Latino United Methodism is not only the history of its leaders and formative figures—important as they are. It is also the history of the common folk who were attracted by the preaching of Benigno Cárdenas and Alejo Hernández, and of their successors. How did they interpret that preaching? What attracted them to the Methodist tradition? How did they live out their faith?

Thus, our Oral History Project must be expanded, not only so as to include Latino Methodist interaction with other Latino religious constituencies, but also to include the witness and records of ordinary Latino United Methodists, of the people who attend our churches. How did they first learn of United Methodism? What attracted them to it? What was their experience? How did they relate to the church at large? All of these are questions that future historians will find extremely helpful. And it is a part of the story that is passing us by, never to return, like water under a bridge.

History moves on. Because history moves on, every celebration is also a challenge; every finishing post also marks a new beginning; every historian becomes part of history.

Therefore tonight, when it is time to wrap up, to celebrate, to congratulate, let us also remember that it is a time to challenge, to prod, to move on...

And on we must move as long as it pleases the Lord of History for history to continue unfolding; until that final day when all history will come to its consummation; until the day when all that is past will be eternally present.

