

## Anglican-Lutheran Society Annual Meeting 2019

St George's Roman Catholic Cathedral, Southwark, London

### 'Living in Diversity'

#### What is a Bi-Lingual Parish? And Why?

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I am Spanish. I came to this country five or six years ago and I am very lucky because the Anglican Diocese of Southwark trusted us when we wanted to set up our project in Elephant and Castle. We are the first bi-lingual parish of the Church of England. I have to explain what I mean because many people say, 'I know a parish where there are services in other languages,' and I have to explain that legally our parish is bi-lingual. That means that English is not the main language and Spanish is the guest. Both are equal. So everything we produce, everything we do, has to be written and discussed in both languages.

We have a bi-lingual Parochial Church Council. There are members who are bi-lingual and members who are not. So we

have to translate everything in every single meeting that we have. We have one churchwarden who is English-speaking and one who is Spanish-speaking. This means that our parish is unique – and it is definitely a very challenging reality! As you can imagine, there are all kinds of issues around power because before we arrived in the parish there was an existing English-speaking congregation. They asked, 'Why are these Latinos coming here? Why are they trying to change things? We have been doing this for the last 30 years!' – and that kind of thing. This is something that we have to navigate all the time.

But culture is something more than just language. We have in our parish many different cultures. We have different understandings of space, roles, personal space, and boundaries – so it isn't that we have just Spanish and English, we have the challenge of the culture of the Spanish-speaking people and the English-speaking people. For example, personal space for a Latino person is completely different to personal space for an English-speaking person. Sometimes we have a little trouble with that because we Latinos love to touch and some British people love not to be touched. But life is mainly wonderful!

So let me share with you a little of the story of the parish and the mission. Around three years ago when I was in Catford [an area of south London] in the diocese, in the parish of St Lawrence, someone called me from another church and said, 'I know you're Spanish and I have two people who come to my services who are Columbians. They are here every Sunday but they don't speak English and I don't know how to address them. They always come to us. Will you come and ask them what they want? They must want something!'

At that stage my intention was not to minister to Spanish-speaking people and not to start anything like a Spanish Mission. But I went there with another colleague, an Englishman with a heart for mission and for Spanish-speaking people, and we talked with the couple. They thought it was wonderful to find a priest who speaks Spanish and they asked, 'Can you come from time to time and celebrate a Eucharist for us?' I told them that I really didn't have the time. I had my full-time post in Catford but, I told them, I would try to do my best.

The first time I celebrated the Eucharist there we were just three people. That was just the beginning. We agreed to celebrate Mass once every two months and to socialise afterwards. Four months later there were 25 people, and then we became 50. We had started to grow. And we realised that we were becoming part of the lives of the people who were coming, and most of them if not all of them were de-Churched people who for all sorts of reasons had left the faith years ago.

From the start we wanted to do something that underlined **belonging** rather than **believing**. Believing is a process, but we wanted to start with belonging and especially for us immigrants to belong to something and to feel that you are at home, and that you can reconnect with your roots and your memories and your background, means a lot. Some of the Columbians have been here in London for 30 or 40 years. They came to work, and they have been cleaning houses, and they never had the chance to learn English. So even though they have been here a long time to go to church is a challenge. If they could find a place where they feel at home, where they don't feel that people are judging them, if they could find a shelter where they can connect with their memories and their traditions, that would become something very important to them.

They wanted something that was more rooted in their daily lives than simply a Eucharist every other month. What they wanted was "popular religion" if you will allow me that term. I don't like the more usual "folk-religion". I much prefer to call it "popular religion" because "the popular" is about something that is very rooted in our being because even un-churched Latinos grew up in towns, villages and cities with certain festivals throughout the year, perhaps for Holy Mary or for a saint, where we all gathered together. I come from a communist background. I was not a believer, I was an atheist, and yet I always went to the festivals because that was part of something more than just religion, it was about family, about tradition, about friendship, about food – and there was religion, of course, but it was "popular religion", something beyond theological reflection but a very anthropological expression of religion.

And that is part of how we Latinos and Hispanics express our relationship with God. We have the formal gatherings, of course, and the liturgy but we have plenty of popular festivals where the un-churched meet with "churchy" people, where the priest has plenty of opportunities to meet with people who never come to church, and we meet in equal relationship, face to face, without any formality and yet with a deep sense of belonging and of community.

We discovered that what we wanted to do with those people was to create the opportunity to express religion here in London in such a way that it could be called "popular religion", Spanish popular religion. And that is how we started. We held the *Novena*, the nine days before Christmas when church and un-churched people gather round the nativity, we sing religious songs together and we build the nativity together, we pray and

we eat together, and we dance too, for nine days. Every single day from 16<sup>th</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup> December. And it doesn't matter if you don't believe in God, or if you do. It is just part of who you are as Spanish or Latino, and there are many other similar festivals throughout the year.

We started to discover that this "popular religion" really offered something to this explosion of people who came to us. So we wanted to start a chaplaincy, which is the normal mode the Church of England has for responding to this kind of thing. The main ministry is English or German or whatever, because that is **our** church, but we meet the needs of the others in parallel. But "popular religion" started to push us in a different direction because the whole thing about "popular religion" is to be present throughout the year. People can knock on the door and know that you are there and it doesn't matter if they come to church or not. So we began to think that chaplaincy was not the model we were looking for because chaplaincy is only something you do from time to time.

We created a group of leaders from among the Latino people and started to think together about what we actually wanted. The conclusion was that we wanted to be a **parish** to be there for people 24 hours of the day, seven days a week. So we began a pastoral and theological reflection and presented it to the Bishop. It was very strange for the Church of England because it is the Established Church and has its own self-identity and understanding. But it is also a very generous Church. Sometimes it can be a little cliquey, white, and middle class. This is not always the case, but what we were asking was hard for many of them. We want to be a parish but we do not want to be a ghetto. We want to be a bi-lingual parish.

When we are inviting and welcoming Latinos into the Church of England are we saying that they have to be English, or to become like the English, if you want to be Anglican and if you want to share in the decision-making of the Church? For me, the whole thing about the Reformation in England is how we understand authority and participation in the Church. Are we saying to the Latinos that they have to become English and, if not, what **are** we asking them? What we wanted was for Latinos to have a word to say within the Church of England, but in order to achieve that we have to be a parish, with its Parochial Church Council, its Electoral Roll, with elected representatives on the Area and Diocesan Synods. Only then can you make yourself heard.

We wanted Latinos to be part of the whole faith set-up, we wanted a bi-lingual parish, but to begin with there were voices saying, 'Why do we need a bi-lingual parish? The Church of England is English! We have churches where other languages are used, but not bi-lingual parishes.' So it took a while to do the journey with the diocese and with the Bishop as well.

The Diocese decided to make the bi-lingual parish in Elephant and Castle [another area of south London] here in Southwark because it is the heart of the Latino community where the second language is Spanish. This cathedral in which we are meeting is in my parish. If you walk to the main square you will find many businesses which are only Spanish. There are shops and restaurants, and we have our own Spanish newspapers, and one road is named after the first Columbian who came to live here, and the Columbian Embassy is here. The Columbians came 30-40 years ago, and then came people from Ecuador, Peru, Dominica and from Spain, so it seemed quite 'normal' that the parish church in this area should open its doors to the Spanish-speaking neighbourhood.

We are now trying to find a way of navigating through the challenges as both the English and the Latinos try to walk together. We like to say, following St Paul, that we are one body with two lungs and we try to breathe through our two lungs – one is English-speaking and the other is Spanish-speaking and we don't want to say that one is more important than the other but we want to promote both. So we are one body, because we have one church council, the two churchwardens and we have the leaders and everything is mixed at that level. But then we have two lungs because we have two congregations. We don't worship together apart from once a term because, as I said at the beginning, it is not just a question of language it is also about culture. When we tried to worship together regularly we faced so many misunderstandings, especially, for example, in the way we share The Peace. The Latinos are so effusive and some of the English find that too much! Also, the way we Latinos venerate the cross on Good Friday is very different from what the English are used to. It's not so much the language as the culture. So we found that if we want to reach the souls of the people coming to the services we needed to keep the services separate.

So how can we build bridges? Once a month we have a shared lunch for both congregations after the Masses. We make pilgrimages together; we hold many social events together. But we try to keep the uniqueness of both congregations. We have to tackle issues around power. We Latinos have only been there for about five months but there are 160 of us and we are growing. There are 20 adults preparing for confirmation and there are 20 children getting ready for first communion, and there are three groups of de-churched people who call themselves "spiritual seekers". Some we hope may become part of the community, others won't, but we are journeying with them. We also run Alpha Groups.

The English congregation has always been there but for various reasons they have dwindled from more than 100 to just about 30. They, too, are beginning to grow because we have ten more doing Alpha, but as you can imagine, issues around power loom large in our parish. So we are running workshops about communication.

We say that to believe in God is also to fight for social justice so we have a huge social project in which people trained in communication skills and leadership come to the congregations to run workshops on conflict resolution without violence! Every three months we run a workshop for the Church Council to remind us of our vocation to communicate the Word of God by peaceful means and to better understand each other.

Every month 10 people from one congregation are invited to the Mass of the other congregation so that after a year most people will have experienced how the others worship.

We do all these things to build bridges and to overcome the issues that arise from our experiment.

I have founded the Hispanic Mission three years ago and now that we have the parish the Hispanic Mission has expanded and become the centre for pastoral resources and theology. So every parish in London that has Latinos and Spanish (and doesn't know what to do with them) can send them to us, and we train them as leaders, because our identity is mainly a missionary identity and we really want to reach the un-churched people. We provide them with resources that we produce in Spanish to cover everything from first communion preparation to worship services. So the Mission has become a centre for pastoral and theological resources.

The Diocese has now designated us as a resource parish where pioneer ministers can come and train for ministry in south London today with its multi-cultural setting. And we are a resource parish because the Diocese wants to replicate this model of the bi-lingual parish. Another parish is about to be opened which will be part of the Spanish mission. Another bi-lingual priest is coming to help me, and we have three ordinands and three pioneer ministers in training.

So we have come a long way in three years, when we started with just three people at a Mass. So I shall finish by asking, what are the challenges? I think there are three questions that have not yet been answered. What is it to be Anglican in the Church of England in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? What are the questions that the Church of England is asking of you who are coming from abroad and being received into the Church? What are the questions that we who have come from abroad and are being received into the Church are asking of the Church of England?

These are questions that we are trying to answer in the Hispanic Mission, to help the mission of the Church here in south London.