

## CUBANS IN THE UNITED STATES

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### **Abstract**

The term “Hispanic” is used in the United States for a large and diverse group of people. Cubans are among those that fall under this category, though they differ from other Hispanics. To understand some of the characteristic of Cubans, and to effectively reach them it is important to understand their history and culture. Mainly in Florida, Cubans are diffused throughout the United States, which requires flexibility and intentionality in reaching them. This article seeks to familiarize the reader with some of the historical, and cultural aspects of Cubans in order to reach them with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

### **INTRODUCTION**

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One of the challenges that I as a student of church growth have had to contemplate involves the Homogeneous Unit Principle (HUP). This idea, which was put forward by the great Donald McGavran, states that people will become Christians if they do not have to cross racial, linguistic, or class barriers.<sup>1</sup> In other words, this idea is that people who are of a similar background are more likely to respond to the Christian message if they are in a group that is similar to themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980), 223.

As a Christian, and considering the Great Commission passage in Matthew 28 in which Jesus said to go to *all nations*, the Homogeneous Unit Principle and the Great Commission seemed to be somewhat at odds with each other. Mark Demaz in his book, *Building a Healthy Multi-Ethnic Church*, made an interesting and valid observation that the Homogeneous Unit Principle as observed by McGavran may have worked in India because of the fact that India had a caste system. He goes on to state, “In fact, it is my opinion that the homogeneous unit principle should no longer inform church planting and development, as I believe it will become an increasing hindrance to both the advance of the Gospel and the growth of the Church in the twenty-first century—certainly in the United States, if not the throughout the rest of the world as well.”<sup>2</sup>

Does the fact that the Homogeneous Unit Principle, as observed by McGavran, worked in a society with a highly structured caste system invalidate it for us in the West? I would say no. However, I think we have to learn to utilize its insights and apply it appropriately. The Homogeneous Unit Principle is not an end unto itself but a strategy to begin a mission enterprise.

In many of our churches, and I speak from my own particular denomination, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, I have noticed that there is sometimes confusion about how and when to apply the Homogenous Unit Principle in many mission plans and projects. For example, the term “Hispanic” is used and is considered to be a reference to a homogenous unit, a group of people who are of a similar background. This happens as well in African and Asian ministry. This broad term is used to describe a group of very diverse people that appear on the surface to have some similarities (the Spanish language, for example). Yet for anyone actually working in the mission field, one quickly realizes that there are profound differences among people who have had this common label placed on them. In reality, it is a term used for convenience, but many times, it is not used accurately and often lends itself to a stereotype.

In my experience in the Lutheran church, when Hispanic ministry is mentioned, the assumption is that it is ministry to Mexican people. People equivocate the term Hispanic and Mexican. Case in point, I was recently asked by someone if we had celebrated Cinco de Mayo in the Hispanic ministry I serve, and I answered no. The members are mostly Central and South American, and they do not celebrate that day. Nevertheless, mission executives from denominational headquarters make decisions about ministry and want to see results without taking into consideration the broadness and diversity existing within the people being mentioned with that term. I believe that the assumption is made that because Spanish is the common language, the culture is the same. However, language and culture are different.

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Deymaz, *Building a Healthy Multi-Ethnic Church* (San Francisco, CA: John Wiley and Sons, 2007), 62–3.

The reality is that “Hispanics” are really not a homogenous unit. Hispanics are a very diverse group of people. Someone might be labeled Hispanic by country of origin, last name, language, or self-identification. However, these do not always correspond to reality. For example, I remember teaching citizenship at a school in the Los Angeles Unified School District and having students who were from Mexico but really did not speak Spanish. It turned out that they were Zapotec Indians and had their own language and culture. They were considered “Hispanic” because they were from Mexico, but in reality, they were Native, First Nations people from Mexico.

The point I am trying to make is that people put broad labels on groups of people that sometimes do not fit. The reality is that there is not one “Hispanic culture”; there are many “Hispanic cultures.” We need to recognize this. Hispanics from the Caribbean area, Hispanics from Central America, and Hispanics from South America all have some similarities, but they also have many profound differences. It is important when doing Hispanic ministry to be aware of these differences and not to paint everyone with a broad brush.

The Homogenous Unit Principle, I believe, is important as a way to initiate a church plant, mission, or people movement. Once established, the mission should break the barriers in that society and reach out with the Great Commission. The Homogeneous Unit Principle is not the ideal for the church, but it is a first step or foothold in a missionary enterprise to reach out to all the world.

Before his ascension, Jesus told the church, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8) Jesus is telling the assembled disciples, who were primarily culturally Hellenistic Jews, that they were to be witnesses among other nations and people. From its inception, the church is a community that is to cross barriers and labels, because it is a message to reach all human beings.

In the engagement of our ministry efforts, we must keep in mind the universal aspect of the Christian message and not limit or fence off people in order to create a comfortable community. Ironically, this approach can cause the malady of “ethnikitis” that can actually be a factor in church stagnation and decline.<sup>3</sup> Thus, this paper deals with a group that is categorized within the Hispanic label but exhibits very different characteristics from other groups labeled Hispanic. The group that is the subject of this paper is Cubans.

## **CUBANS—A VERY BRIEF HISTORICAL SURVEY**

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The first inhabitants of the island of Cuba were Ciboney, Taino, and Carib Indians. In 1492, Columbus, with his three ships, encountered Cuba and

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<sup>3</sup> Elmer Towns, C. Peter Wagner, and Thom S. Rainer, *The Everychurch Guide to Growth* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1998), 35.

claimed it for Spain. Spain remained in possession of Cuba until 1898. Colonization of the island by the Spaniards began in 1511 and became an important strategic and commercial center in the Caribbean area.<sup>4</sup> With its fertile soil, Cuba, the largest of the islands of the Caribbean, became an important colony in the Spanish empire. With the loss of the Spanish empire in Central America and South America, Cuba became the destination of many Spaniards displaced from the former Spanish colonies.

After 1898, Spain, having lost the Spanish-American War, turned over Cuba to the United States. The United States administered Cuba for several years, and by 1902, allowed Cuba to be an independent republic. Because of its history, Cuba is a racially diverse country. People of European (mainly Spanish) background, as well as people of African, Native American, Chinese, and Middle Eastern backgrounds live on the island. The language spoken by all Cubans is Spanish. Because of their noticeable accent and way of speaking, other Spanish speakers can immediately identify those from Cuba.

The twentieth century saw much political instability in the country, culminating in the takeover of Cuba by Fidel Castro in 1959. Shortly after the takeover, Castro declared openly to be a communist and proceeded to turn Cuba into the first communist nation in the western hemisphere. With this event, Cuba became the center of tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union. The United States imposed an embargo on Cuba, and this has essentially been the situation ever since.

## **CUBAN IMMIGRATION TRENDS**

Cubans have been coming to the United States since at least the 1820s. The close geographic proximity of Cuba to Florida and the Gulf of Mexico has facilitated Cuban contact with those states of the South and with other states as well. The reasons for early Cuban immigration to the United States are varied. In some cases, it was related to trade. In other cases, it was related to the tobacco industry, particularly around Tampa, Florida. Other reasons were political. For example, Jose Marti, one of the architects of the move for Cuban independence from Spain, was exiled in New York during the 1880s. Actually, a community of Cuban political deportees gathered to plan the campaign for independence from Spain while in exile in New York City.

These early instances of immigration were sporadic and not in great numbers. However, in the twentieth century, four periods of immigration occurred that can be described as large. These periods of immigration all stem from the period of the “Cuban Revolution,” which began on January 1,

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<sup>4</sup> Theodore E. Bachmann and Mercia Brenne Bachmann, *A Handbook of Lutheran Churches in the World* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1989), 481.

1959, with the coming of Fidel Castro and his Marxist Revolution. Cubans have left the island in several waves to seek asylum in the United States. Generally, the waves are categorized by years.

The first wave of Cuban immigration occurred from 1959 to 1962. In this initial wave, many of Cuba's professional and wealthy left. This first wave was the exodus of many of the elite of Cuban society. They were fleeing the decidedly leftist leanings and eventual communist regime that was in place headed by Castro. This initial wave had a tremendous effect in that the refugees were able to set up businesses and infrastructures for the Cuban community to establish a lasting presence in the state of Florida and other areas. Much of the subsequent success of the Cuban community in the United States stems from the fact that the entrepreneurial and professional classes headed the initial wave.

The second wave occurred from 1965 to 1974. This second wave primarily consisted of people from the middle and working class. Many were craftsmen or people with some technical trades. They left as the situation in Cuba grew increasingly radicalized with the implementation of Fidel Castro's Marxist Revolution. Many were sponsored by religious organizations and by the Cuban community of the first wave who had already begun to establish themselves in Florida.

The third wave took place in 1980, in what is known as the "Mariel boatlift." This wave of refugees consisted of about 125,000 people who left out of the port of Mariel in northern Cuba. With increasing pressure in Cuban society, Castro allowed people to leave in order to alleviate some of the discontent and desperation on the island. In this wave, Castro let people serving prison sentences and people with mental disorders exit. While these prisoners and mental patients consisted of only about 6% of the people that left through Mariel, somewhat of a negative stigma was attached to being a "Marielito" (someone who left Cuba through the Mariel boatlift).<sup>5</sup>

The fourth and final wave began in 1989 with the fall of Communism in the Soviet Union and the disappearance of the Soviet support of the Cuban economy. The fourth exodus of Cubans is currently still taking place. Cubans venturing out into the sea on homemade rafts and trying to make it to the shores of the United States, where they are granted immediate asylum as soon as they touch U.S. soil, characterize this period of immigration out of Cuba and into the United States. Sadly, literally thousands of Cubans have perished in the straits between Cuba and South Florida, due to storms and the lack of sea worthiness of the homemade rafts used for the journey. The political and economic policies and conditions in Cuba are such that refugees are still venturing out to try to arrive to the United States, despite some recent reforms on the island.

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<sup>5</sup> David T. Leonard and Carmen R. Lugo, *Latino History & Culture Vol. 1*, 152.

## DEFINITION, DEMOGRAPHICS, AND CHARACTERISTICS

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### OF CUBANS

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The term “Cuban” is used to describe people who have identified themselves as such. It is a subcategory within the “Hispanic” category. People who have identified themselves as Cuban were either born in Cuba or are of Cuban descent but born elsewhere. An estimated 1.5 million Cubans live in the United States. Cubans are the third largest Hispanic population group in the United States, the largest being Mexicans, followed by Puerto Ricans. Cubans are distributed throughout the United States, but the largest concentration of Cubans is in the state of Florida, with about 990,000. After Florida, Cubans are found in largest concentrations in New Jersey, New York, California, and Texas, in that order.<sup>6</sup>

One of the factors that is a bit different with Cubans when compared with other Hispanics is that Cubans tend to be older. The median age for Cubans, according to the PEW Hispanic Center Report from 2004, was 41 years old, which is much higher than the rate of other Hispanics. Among all other Hispanics, the median age was 27. The median age of Cubans is closer to that of non-Hispanic whites, which is 40 years old.<sup>7</sup>

In regards to education, Cubans place a high value on education. About 25% of Cubans over the age of 25 are college graduates, which is more than twice the rate of other Hispanics (12%).<sup>8</sup> Among those who are Cuban but born in the United States, the college graduation rate for those 25 and older is 39%, which is a higher percentage than among non-Hispanic whites at 30%.<sup>9</sup>

Regarding religion, the largest church affiliation among Cubans is the Roman Catholic Church. If asked, most Cubans would answer that they are Roman Catholic. However, they exhibit a greater degree than other Hispanics of being nominal in their religious observance. Cuban culture, even before the Cuban Revolution, was very secularized. Historically, the Catholic church had not been a church close to the people; rather, it was allied closely with the Spanish colonial government. Cubans were more likely to be actively involved in political associations, and even Masonry, than in the church.<sup>10</sup> In the United States, the trend towards being more secularized continues. Cubans are less likely to say that religion is important in their lives, as compared with other Hispanics. An example of this can be seen in

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<sup>6</sup> “Cubans in the United States,” [www.pewhispanic.org](http://www.pewhispanic.org), 3.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> “Cubans” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Latinos and Latinas in the United States*, Vol. 1, ed. Suzanne Oboler and Deena J. Gonzalez (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 446.

a 2002 study, in which only 28% of Cubans said they participate in religious services once a week or more. This rate is lower than most other Hispanics in the United States.<sup>11</sup> Also, on moral issues related to faith, they are more likely to take a liberal approach than other Hispanics do. For example, they are less likely than other Hispanics to oppose abortion. This is clearly not in keeping with the moral teachings of the Roman Catholic Church or with conservative Protestant churches. In regards to divorce, Cubans also have a higher rate of divorce than other Hispanics. In fact, Cuban divorce rates are closer to the divorce rate of Anglo-Americans.<sup>12</sup> These findings show that generally, there is a tendency to have a more secular attitude among Cubans when compared to other Hispanics.

In addition to Catholicism, the presence of other belief systems within the Cuban population exists in the United States. An increasing number of Protestant Christians from most of the major denominations is present among Cubans. As time passes and Cubans assimilate and marry outside of the Cuban community, there is a greater degree of affiliation with Protestant and Evangelical churches. Surprisingly, there is a Cuban Jewish community as well.

Perhaps the most controversial religious practice among Cubans involves Santeria. This is an animistic religion that was brought to Cuba with the West African slaves. The religion uses the Yoruba language in many of its rituals and has many rites and rituals that date back to West African animism. Interestingly, there seems also to have been some Islamic influence in the Yoruba culture of the Africans brought to Cuba, as seen from the Arabic greeting “Salam Aleikum” used by practitioners of Santeria.<sup>13</sup> One of the reasons why the presence of Santeria is controversial is that it is syncretistic. Many consider themselves Catholic, yet also practitioners of Santeria. Many of the Catholic saints have been given names in Yoruba and have been incorporated into the pantheon of Santeria. In the United States, one of the common features of neighborhoods with a considerable Cuban population is the presence of a “Botanica,” which is a shop that typically sells religious articles used in the practice of Santeria. While only a small percentage of Cubans practice this religion, it seems to exert a considerable presence in the Cuban community.

Perhaps the most iconic religious symbol in Cuban culture is “La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre.” This is a representation of a virgin appearing over three shipwrecked sailors on a small boat. The story, as it has been told to me, is that during a storm at sea, a ship was destroyed. Only three of the ship’s sailors survived on a small boat. With the continued bad weather,

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<sup>11</sup> Pew Hispanic Center: Cubans in the United States (2006), 7.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Handbook of Hispanic Cultures in the United States: Anthropology*, ed. Thomas Weaver, (Houston, TX: Arte Publico Press, 1994), 70.



exposure to the elements, sharks, and lack of food and water, the demise of these sailors was certain. Suddenly in the sky, the virgin appeared, and as a result, they were saved. This scene of the virgin over the three survivors on a small boat is seen in most Cuban businesses and homes. A shrine to this figure in south Florida attracts many pilgrims yearly. It seems that the scene of the three sailors lost at sea with the virgin protecting them is one to which Cuban refugees, many of whom left Cuba on small boats, can relate. As Christians, the challenge we face as we reach out to Cubans is to show them that Christ guides and protects us.

In regards to assimilating to American society, Cubans have done well. They are very appreciative of the United States due to the government's anti-communist policy and the fact that asylum was granted to those fleeing from the communist nation. They generally tend to be politically conservative. Assimilation to American society can be seen in the fact that Cubans are in important positions, businesses, education, the arts, sciences, and politics. The list would be too long to list for the parameters of this paper.

Cubans are more likely than other Hispanics to consider the United States to be their home country. The reasons for this are many. For one, they certainly cannot return to Cuba, given the political, social, and economic conditions in that country. They have erased returning to Cuba as an option, leaving them with the decision of making the United States their home. In addition, the United States government has been welcoming of Cubans coming to the United States, given the strained relations and ideological differences that have existed between Cuba and the United States. Cubans have been granted special refugee status and can rather easily attain residency and citizenship. Cubans politically are more on the conservative side of the political spectrum than are other Hispanics.

#### **POSSIBLE STRATEGIES FOR REACHING CUBANS WITH THE GOSPEL**

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To have a ministry specifically aimed at Cubans can pose a bit of a challenge in most places in the United States. The most likely place to have a Cuban-specific ministry is in south Florida and perhaps in parts of eastern New Jersey. Cubans are concentrated in greatest numbers in Florida, so it would be most feasible there. In the rest of the country, Cubans are diffused in lesser numbers and have integrated into other communities. It is thought that only the state of Arkansas has no known Cuban resident, so it is not recommended that Cuban ministry be started there!

My recommendation for reaching Cubans in places outside of Florida is to have a broadly Hispanic ministry and find those enclaves or networks where Cubans gather. Be familiar with the idiosyncrasies of Cubans, while being aware of other cultures in your midst as well. Based on some of the characteristics of Cubans, a brief description of evangelistic strategies will be discussed.



## Ministry of Presence

It goes without saying that one of the ways to begin ministry to Cubans is to be present where they gather. This will take some time to research but may be productive. Here in Los Angeles and in other cities around the country, Cuban restaurants, markets, and cultural clubs may provide opportunities for initial contact. It is important to be aware of Cuban holidays and festivities so as to be able to be present and know the reason for the celebration. As stated, familiarity and appreciation of another's culture goes a long way when trying to establish a presence among a target group of people.

The first step in the process is to find out where Cubans are present, and then go there. At this point in the intentional outreach of the target group, it is important to remember that evangelism is about going out to where the people are and that evangelism is a process. It will be over a period of time and repeated contact that people will be open to hear the Gospel.<sup>14</sup>

## Conversation

One of the ways to initiate meaningful contact with people as we engage in ministry is to enter into dialogue with them. Being able to listen and answer questions in an unthreatening manner is rather important in developing friendships. Honest dialogue builds trust and opportunities to share the Gospel. George Hunter III states, "The most proven approach for engaging secular people at the point of their doubts is dialogue."<sup>15</sup> In dealing with Cubans, as with other people, it is important to engage in dialogue. Be an active listener and appreciate the points of view being expressed.

Specifically, when dealing with Cubans, it is important to avoid controversial political topics. Remember that Cubans were given a warm welcome by the United States, so they are quite appreciative and patriotic when it comes to this country. Cubans generally are conservative politically, so use caution when talking politics. The best tactic, pastorally, is to be interested in issues and questions that deal with their well-being. Cubans tend to have close family networks, and family issues are of great importance. It is also worth remembering that Cubans have a higher median age than other Hispanics and whites, so issues related to the elderly will probably be of concern.

When engaging in conversation, it is best to keep the focus on discovering ways in which one can offer pastoral care. One of the tools that is of great utility for pastors and missionaries in dealing with people in general is Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. George Hunter III writes about the use-

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<sup>14</sup> George G. Hunter III, *Church for the Unchurched* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 154.

<sup>15</sup> George G. Hunter III, *How to Reach Secular People* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1992), 57–8.

fulness of knowing this in order to be able to understand and respond to people's needs. The hierarchy of needs is listed below.

1. Physiological needs
2. Safety needs
3. Love and belongingness needs
4. Esteem needs
  - A. Self esteem
  - B. Esteem from others
5. Need for self actualization
6. Desire to know and understand
7. Aesthetic needs<sup>16</sup>

It is important for those who engage in ministry to any group of people to be able to listen and understand what the needs are. The use of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs can be an effective tool to gauge and evaluate how to respond to the needs of others.

Engaging in dialogue as a way of establishing friendship and evangelism is a good tactic for reaching Cuban people. Those who engage in conversation need to remember that the objective is to make friends and to share the Gospel. It is not about winning political arguments and practicing debate tactics. When engaged in conversation, it is best to express one's appreciation and care for the person. Being helpful, courteous, and respectful should be the standard way of dealing with those we befriend. It is also important to remember what is stated in I Peter 3:15, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have, but do this with gentleness and respect."

### **Special Events**

The growth of friendships creates many opportunities for organizing events and special services that may appeal to Cubans specifically and to others generally. Remember that other than Florida, Cubans are dispersed throughout the United States, so specifically doing Cuban ministry can be a challenge. It is best to hold events that appeal to a broad group, but include features in the events, recognizing and appreciating those differences that exist. For example, on the day of Pentecost, we are planning a service and inviting all of the members to bring a flag representing their country. Since the day of Pentecost and the Great Commission mentions that the mission of the church is for all nations, we are planning the service with this in mind. It would be appropriate at a service like this to invite a Cuban family to church and offer a special prayer for the people of Cuba. Following the service could be a fellowship time with food from the respective countries represented.

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<sup>16</sup> George G. Hunter III, *The Contagious Congregation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1983), 41.

This service could be an example of being broad enough to appeal to a large number of Hispanic people, yet specific enough to acknowledge and appreciate the individual countries and cultures. The same could be done throughout the year at Easter, Christmas, and other holidays. Elements that represent different cultures can be included, along with the Biblical message at our Sunday services and at special services throughout the year. Numerous front door and side door ministry opportunities can reach out broadly to Hispanic people and specifically to Cubans. Programs such as Vacation Bible School, Christmas pageants, E.S.L. classes, and other activities can serve as a way to bring greater contact with the people.

### **Assimilation into the Church**

As friendships and association with the ministry of the church continue to grow, the hope is that the Christian faith would be demonstrated both in words and in service. “Christianity is more caught than taught,” the saying goes. This is the hope, that as a greater appreciation of the person and work of Jesus Christ is grasped by the people to whom we minister, the attendance at church on a “regular” Sunday may become a reality.

The skills and methods used to assimilate and catechize people into the church can vary from one denomination to another, but the process can begin on a more formal basis. Robert Webber in his book, *Ancient Future Evangelism*, describes a model for bringing people to faith and discipleship. He describes a four-fold process of discipleship inspired from the process of the ancient Christian church. He lists,

1. Evangelize into the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
2. Disciple into the church, its worship, its Scripture, its discipline.
3. Spiritually form into the ethic and lifestyle of faith.
4. Assimilate into the church through a discovery of gifts, the Christian vocation of work, and caring for the poor and needy.<sup>17</sup>

The process listed above can be a way to bring someone to faith and discipleship where he discovers his gifts and then has opportunities to serve. Each of those steps can be made memorable if marked by the church with a rite that both celebrates and recognizes the passage.

In some denominations, such as the Lutheran Church, is a rite of Confirmation, for example, that could mark a process of growth and reaffirmation of faith. Other ways of recognizing the important milestone could include a prayer for someone assuming an office in church. All of these are important in a mission, church plant, or renewal because it reminds all of those present of the reality of growth and discipleship within the people of faith assembled there. It is a celebration of God’s work among his people.

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<sup>17</sup> Robert E. Webber, *Ancient Future Evangelism: Making Your Church a Faith-Forming Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 48.

People are more willing to join and commit themselves to a church if done within a familial group. It is a good idea to plan outreach events and church services with the entire family in mind. Particularly with Cubans, intergenerational ministry is beneficial. Strong family ties within Cuban communities provide a wonderful opportunity to have the entire family participate in the worship and life of the church. “Oikos” evangelism will work well with this people group. These are a few possibilities for ministering to Cuban people.

## **CONCLUSION**

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The challenge, which many of us engaged in ministry face, is that reality sometimes is very different from the labels and generalizations that are made. This is the case, I believe, with the term Hispanic. It is a term used too frequently and applied too broadly, with very little understanding of the deep differences among people to whom that term is applied. It is perhaps more accurate to speak of “Hispanic cultures” than a single “Hispanic culture.” Many confuse language with culture. The Spanish language may be one of the common factors, but deep cultural differences need to be appreciated and understood.

Related to this is the challenge of applying the Homogeneous Unit Principle. When viewed broadly, Hispanics are not a homogenous unit culturally. There are some very profound differences despite the application of the same term. The need to accurately apply the term needs to be discussed in order to appropriately reach people.

Another issue is that the homogeneous unit should not be thought of as the goal of the church; the Great Commission is. It should be thought of as a way to begin a ministry and move on with the Christian message beyond the confines of one particular group. This is particularly true in the multi-cultural world in which we live today. The Christian message should not be confined and applied only to one group of people. Rather, the universal appeal of the Gospel, along with the Great Commission, should transform a homogeneous unit to breach those barriers and reach others. The apostles did not confine their efforts only to Hellenized Jewish people, but they went to the furthest corners of the world they could reach. The Christian church from its very inception was not to be confined to only one group of people; it was for the whole world.

Having said all of this, this article is focused on Cubans, who are a group within the broad Hispanic cultural category. Cubans exhibit very different characteristics from other Hispanic people. This paper tried to view some of those differences with the goal of learning how to appropriately reach them with the Gospel. It was also mentioned that a certain degree of pragmatism needs to be applied in doing ministry to Cubans. They are dispersed over the United States with greatest concentration in Florida. Having a

ministry specifically focused on Cubans may be difficult outside of the state of Florida, so it is best to develop a ministry strategy that is more flexible and inclusive of other Hispanics/Spanish speaking people. Therefore, the pastor and missionary needs to be a student of the different cultures in the area in which he does ministry. Ultimately, ministry is about reaching people individually and incorporating them into the church, which in itself is a new culture.

To sum it up, the Gospel is for all people. We need to learn how to reach people in a way that they can understand the Christian message and be assimilated into the church. This is done by understanding other cultures and listening to their needs in deliberate pastoral friendship. As people come to faith, they will incorporate into the church, grow in the faith, develop, discover their gifts, and reach out to others. In reaching out to others, they will probably encounter ethnic, cultural, and linguistic barriers that will have to be understood in order to present the message of Christ to that culture. This is the pastoral task before us as we seek to grow and renew our ministries in keeping the Great Commission of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

### **About the Author**

Dr. Antonio J. Lopez was born in New York City, to Spanish and Cuban immigrant parents. He grew up speaking both Spanish and English at home and school. While growing up in the borough of Manhattan, and in Los Angeles CA, He attended Catholic parochial schools. After high school, he attended California State University, where he earned a Bachelor and Master degrees in History. He also holds degrees from Concordia University, Irvine CA, Liberty University, and earned a Doctor of Ministry degree from Biola University, Talbot School of Theology. Dr. Lopez is a pastor in the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod and has served congregations in Brooklyn, New York and in Los Angeles, California. He is married (wife Rebecca) and has three children. He enjoys hiking and reading.