

In the New Frontiers: Beyond Being Strangers

A brief look at La Iglesia Presbiteriana Nuevas Fronteras and the Challenges of Immigration!

-The Rev. Victor Aloyo, Jr., pastor

When we talk about immigration to the United States, we tell a hopeful story about courage and sacrifice. But that story obscures the fact that, especially for the poor, immigration is often a traumatizing event, one that tears families apart. La Iglesia Presbiteriana Nuevas Fronteras, a community of faith located in Plainfield, NJ is composed of 16 countries and commonwealths¹ from North America, Central and South America and the Caribbean. These families have traveled through treacherous frontiers seeking economic well-being for their families although many in their families are left behind. There are huge benefits to migration, mothers or fathers who travel north to find employment in order to send money home so their children can eat and go to school. But there are consequences, too, as many of these children deeply resent their mothers or fathers for leaving. They feel abandoned, and disproportionately join gangs, fall prey to those who promise “love” and become pregnant due to our innate need to be comforted and loved.

It is heart wrenching to witness families trying their best to remain connected and fall prey to unjust legislation that demoralize their efforts in assuming their responsibilities. When I arrived in 2005 to serve this amazing congregation of Guatemalans, Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, Hondurans, Colombians, etc., the United States had experienced more migrants arriving in this land than at any time in the nation’s history, fueling a backlash. From 2005 to 2010, nearly a thousand laws were passed across the country addressing illegal immigration. In 2008, the federal government told all police departments to turn over any unlawful migrants they arrested to federal immigration authorities, a program called Secure Communities. As a result deportations nearly doubled between fiscal years 2006 and 2012 to more than 409,000 a year.

And so immigrant families were experiencing the trauma of being separated again, this time in reverse. Parents are now being deported to Mexico and Central America, away from United States-born children. Overall, 5,000 parentless children are now in foster care because their mother or father was detained or deported. It is in this context that we find a vibrant congregation being bold enough to declare that it is fashioned and blessed by God to be a blessing to the world. We are a dynamic multicultural and multilingual ministry that is located in the midst of a demographically changing community responding to the call of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ to be bold with our proclamation. We are renewed by the Spirit of God, committed to the ministry of Jesus Christ and our focus is to share the Good News of Salvation in the New Frontiers.

These immigrant families are steadfast in their faith and rely upon the presence of the Almighty to carrying them through their daily lives. Living in the fear of the unknown and in the midst of a culture that is not their own, this band of sisters and brothers in the faith celebrates their commonality of experience in the breadth and comfort of the Almighty. Even as studies suggest that the church is diminishing in its formal power within the U.S. landscape, we have an

¹ Dominican Republic, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Colombia, Peru, Mexico, Chile, Cuba, Costa Rica, Puerto Rico, Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, USA (second generation Latinos/as)

opportunity to claim the informal power that only grace gives us the freedom to assume. What better space for dreamers to meet, for asylum seekers to find respite, and for immigrants to find the sense of “family” in these new frontiers? La Iglesia Nuevas Fronteras is attending to the margins, looking to make those whom society would deem “invisible” visible, living out our gratitude to God for the grace bestowed upon us. We seek to fulfill our mission, for we were once strangers to God and have now been welcomed and claimed by God (Deut. 10:19; 1 Peter 2:10). Whether we are gringos or Chicanos, whether we were born in the United States or Colombia (or anywhere else for that matter), we are now God’s *gente*, God’s people. In the kingdom of God there are no undocumented persons, for our passport is the blood of the Lamb.

We have increased our membership and ministry participation from 35 in 2005 to 145 (including youth and children) in 2013, developed a formalized Sunday Studies program for all ages with the training of 10 volunteer teachers, developed a governing body of 12 members with five functioning ministry teams, established a Family Space small group ministry where we can have an intergenerational forum to discuss the intercultural challenges of this new paradigm. We partner with sister churches in the development of a Soup Kitchen as we share the love of Christ with the homeless and marginalized of this community. We partner with the Guatemalan Consulate by providing a 2-day immigration service to over 1,000 families and have developed a weekly arts and theatrical program for children of the community.

During its 40-plus year history of being officially recognized by the Presbytery of Elizabeth, La Iglesia Nuevas Fronteras has touched thousands of lives for the glory of God. Nuevas Fronteras has produced a total of twelve students who completed their Master of Divinity studies at several Presbyterian seminaries and are now serving the Church universal in numerous vocational opportunities. Through these past eight years, the congregation has served the larger Church by being a field education site for nineteen seminarians who have entered the doors of this congregation and have received the teachings of a transformative church that has been adhering to God’s purpose and mission.

Nuevas Fronteras is a church filled with rich culture, love and leadership. Many have come through the doors of our ministries and have evolved into leaders of God in many contexts. The praise band, “Agrupacion Nuevas Fronteras” is composed of 9 people of different backgrounds and cultures. They come together to lead the congregation in a worship with a mix of different types of music. Throughout Central and South America and the Caribbean, the music tends to be infused with Spanish, African, Asian, and European influences. At Nuevas Fronteras we combine all the different flavors, lead the whole people of God in this tapestry of lyrics and song, and we praise the Lord with rhythms from various genres such as Salsa, Cumbia, and Merengue.

Our children’s ministries vary from bible studies to music and theater classes and are developed by our young adult leaders. This year’s Vacation Bible School was coordinated by two of our own young adults who grew within this congregation and evolved into the leaders God has intended them to be. We are blessed to have an amazing group of different young people who are willing to come and work hand in hand for the enrichment of our beloved church. The congregation is formed by members of all ages, from the youngest to the oldest we are like a family, always united. Our uniqueness is not only that we have various cultures in our church; it

is that we are a family based church open to everyone and anyone who seeks the love of Christ.

The Impact of Our Ministry

As a community of faith, hope, love and witness of the Good News of God's transforming grace in Christ Jesus its Lord, Iglesia Nuevas Fronteras is responding to God's call to enter into one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church in Christ with the Presbyterian Church, USA (PCUSA). For over forty years, Iglesia Nuevas Fronteras has responded to the call of God, "To Love the Lord our God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our minds." And the second call has been to "Love our neighbor as ourselves." As part of the body of Christ, the Word of God touched the heart and soul of pastors mentioned above who responded to God's call to establish and lead a church in the community of Plainfield. Each pastor had its purpose in responding to the need within the community of Plainfield. It has been a journey of Exodus but one that has significantly defined the purpose of the church to be **"Bendecidos por Dios para Bendecir al Mundo"/"Blessed by God to bless the World."**

Our response to the call of God is not determined by a survey, on the basis of the power of special interest groups, in response to the burning social issue of the moment, or according to the desires of the current leadership. As we examine the realities of the growing church in the New Testament, the ministry of the church was determined by what it took to cultivate---to build up---the new people of God, to contribute to the concrete and practical formation of the apostolic community of the Spirit. The description of the ongoing life of the baptized and forgiven community in Acts suggests the essential elements of the church's ministry in any time and place: "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (2:42). The various programs and services offered by Nuevas Fronteras for its next phase in history is intended to provide content, motivation, direction, and support for the mission of the church. Since the mission of the church is dependent upon the ongoing inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit---the living God who is creatively and redemptively active in the world---it must be open and responsive to the challenges and opportunities of changing circumstances.

We, the members of Iglesia Nuevas Fronteras are present in the body of Christ and in the community of Plainfield. And we continue to demonstrate our involvement through love and commitment to our Lord Jesus Christ by building relationships with God first, each member and our surrounding community. We are an existing congregation that is vibrant and growing in faith and understanding of God with a burning desire serve. We have experienced the hardships and the joys and know that they will always exist but God has shown us that with God all things are possible. We are currently the only Spanish speaking free-standing congregation in the Presbytery of Elizabeth that is serving the children of God in unity with the surrounding Presbyterian Churches and believe in faith that the time has come for us to be at the table with our Presbyterian brothers and sisters and continue to proclaim the Good News in unity and in all its diversity.