News



Marcos Gonzalez Villalba, center, meets with young adult leaders in the Diocese of Shreveport, Louisiana. In 2016, he was the first Hispanic youth and young adult coordinator for the diocese. (CNS/Courtesy Catholic Extension)



by Peter Feuerherd

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At the St. Patrick's Parish picnic in Lawrence, Massachusetts, the Anglos grill the hamburgers. The Latinos handle the tacos. The Vietnamese bring the spring rolls. Yes, it's stereotypical, but it's one way diverse cultural groups work together at parish picnic time. St. Patrick's is a tricultural parish.

Some 36 percent of all American parishes are now designated as bicultural, according to a 2016 study from the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), conducted for the U.S. bishops. That usually means Anglos and Latinos, but sometimes can include a mixture of Africans, Filipinos and Vietnamese, among others.

Brett Hoover and Hosffman Ospino, two experts on multicultural ministry from both coasts, agree: The church needs to get this right as it moves into a future with a declining base of white Catholics.

"This is the biggest story in the church today," said Hoover, a theology professor at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles and author of *The Shared Parish*.

Catholic bicultural parishes have been developing for decades in a break from past practice. The growth of the church in the 19th and 20th centuries was largely spurred by the development of national parishes devoted to particular European ethnic groups, or by parishes devoted to the ministry of one particular ethnic group.

Hoover said that church leaders for years would quietly say that multiethnic ministry was confined to both coasts: California with its large numbers of Mexicans and Vietnamese, or New York with its postwar influx of Puerto Ricans and Dominicans. Hoover grew up in southern California, but his parents are from Logansport, Indiana, where he said that Latino growth has energized the local Catholic parish and the wider community, typical for many Catholic parishes throughout the South and Midwest.

For Hoover and Ospino, there are elements to watch out for as parishes attempt to incorporate different ethnic groups.

Let leadership emerge.

Ospino, a native of Colombia and professor of religious studies at Boston College, conceded that not every pastor or parish leader can be bilingual. But anyone with cultural sensitivity can allow leadership to percolate from ethnic groups.

"They will show you the way," he said about parish leaders emerging from different cultural groups. Ospino is active in the tricultural — Anglo, Latino and Vietnamese — St. Patrick's parish in Lawrence, Massachusetts.

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Being hospitable doesn't need translation.

Hoover once met a parish usher, "a person of great heart," who knew no Spanish, but was able to communicate a warm welcome to everyone who entered the church via gestures and smiles.

Share faith stories.

Ospino, author of a forthcoming book from Fordham University Press titled *Cultural Diversity and Paradigm Shifts in Latino Congregations*, suggests that people from all groups in a parish occasionally come together to share faith experiences. Different views, for example, on how Catholics of all nationalities approach the Blessed Mother is a good faith icebreaker.

"Ask people to tell their stories," said Ospino. "In religious education, some people go straight to doctrine." Better, he said, to explore together questions such as "What does our Lady of Guadalupe mean to you?"

Be prepared for culture clash.

"For most of us, our parish is the Catholic world," said Hoover. Newcomers from different cultures will, by definition, see Catholic culture and practice in a different light. "It's the culture clashes that irritate people," he said.

In his extensive studies of Catholic bicultural parishes, Hoover frequently finds himself in a bridge role. Simple items, such as the use of collection envelopes, carry cultural baggage. Mexicans are used to giving to the church, but not so much in weekly Sunday Mass settings. Tradition there focuses on particular celebrations.

In another example, a call for volunteers, a common approach for Anglo parishes seeking assistance, needs to be done differently with other ethnic groups. For Vietnamese and Koreans, seeking volunteer help is best done by communicating with elders in the community, he said.

Demographic trends are creating grief in the wider culture.

Immigrants are unsettled by their experience. Those who have been in the U.S. for a while can resent the loss of how things "used to be." Multicultural parishes can be "crucibles of grief" for all kinds of cultural anxieties, said Hoover, an anxiety that is being played out in American politics and social life.

Parish leaders need to be aware that many white Catholics, perhaps the majority, voted for President Donald Trump. For Latinos, the president's immigration policies are often viewed as a personal threat.

"The biggest reality is the power dynamics," said Hoover. "People who are just arriving don't have power."

In parish life, that power dynamic can manifest itself in professionals running youth ministry or music programs focused on the Anglo community. Those functions in immigrant groups are often taken up by volunteers.

Latino immigrants are, by and large, younger than more established Americans. Two thirds of young Catholics who attend church regularly are Latino, according to the Catholic Extension Society. Hoover calls this a "May-December" dynamic. It is also affecting traditional African American Catholic parishes, who are now often sharing parishes with a younger Latino population.

"Migration is not an old person's game," said Hoover.



Fr. Lawrence Jozwiak of the Co-Cathedral of the Sacred Heart in Houston, Texas, hands out traditional red envelopes with passages from sacred Scripture during a Vietnamese Lunar New Year celebration in January 2017. (CNS/Texas Catholic Herald/James Ramos)

Keep in mind, parishes are about evangelization, not assimilation.

"Parishes need to be concerned that their first task is not to Americanize or assimilate people. The parish is to evangelize," said Ospino. Providing space for groups to pray and come together is the best way to promote the Gospel. Teaching English or other assimilation techniques needs to be seen as secondary.

Identify the most in need.

Ospino said that his parish identified hunger as a basic local need. Some feared that opening a food center would result in the parish being overwhelmed by minorities. The end result: about half the people coming for aid are white. Meeting common

needs creates a common bond, he said.

Worship together, just not too much.

For Hoover, bilingual Mass works fine, but it can't be done too often. He suggested feast days, such as Pentecost, that don't carry heavy cultural baggage as opportunities for all groups to come together. But do it too often, he said, and it can become a distraction.

Have fun together.

Different ethnic communities will develop along parallel tracks. Parish socials, particularly those focused on food, provide an opportunity for groups to come together.

Ospino said to let the Anglos come up with the hamburgers and, in his parish's case, provide opportunities for the Latinos and Vietnamese to showcase their ethnic dishes. Food can serve as a unifier.

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