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Layman says full-time position in Hispanic ministry a dream come true

by Chelsea Weikart by Catholic News Service

Washington, D.C. — Being hired as the first full-time director of Hispanic ministry in the Diocese of Colorado Springs, Colo., is a dream come true for Javier Cervantes.

A three-year grant from Chicago-based Catholic Extension covers two-thirds of the cost of the position, which he has had since July.

Catholic Extension has made a commitment to help fund lay Hispanic leadership positions in dioceses around the country to meet the ministry needs of the increasing number of Hispanics in the Catholic church.

"This type of program, I'm sure since it happened to me, will inspire more people to be involved in different ministries with Hispanic communities and inspire people to get more education and look for paid full-time jobs throughout the U.S. in our church," Cervantes told Catholic News Service in a telephone interview.

According to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University, 6 percent of all parish leaders are Hispanic, while 39 percent of all Catholics are Hispanic and more than 50 percent of Hispanic Catholics are under the age of 25.

Colorado Springs is just one of the U.S. dioceses seeing steady growth in the Hispanic community.

Cervantes was teaching in catechetical programs and lay ministry formation in El Paso, Texas, when he saw an ad for the full-time ministry position put out by the Colorado diocese. He applied and was hired.

"Even though there was a need, the diocese didn't have the resources to cover this position," he said. "Catholic Extension's Hispanic leadership initiative was the thing that made a dream a complete reality."

The \$15-million Hispanic Lay Leadership Initiative is a three-year program to fund 100 new positions in the nation's mission dioceses, numbering about 90.

They are defined as "mission" because they have limited resources for funding both basic and essential pastoral works and ministries, and cover a vast territory served by small number of priests, religious sisters and other pastoral workers.

Over its 107-year history, Catholic Extension has distributed more than \$500 million in donations for church construction, religious education and seminary formation, campus and outreach ministries, evangelization and salaries for missionaries in these dioceses.

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With grants from the Hispanic Lay Leadership Initiative, dioceses will seek candidates for ministerial positions, and then chose the applicant that fits their needs. Some dioceses already have candidates in mind whom they cannot afford to pay full-time. Others have priests doing the job.

One of the requirements Catholic Extension has for the leaders is that they enroll in continuing education courses for a few weeks out of the year at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, the Boston College School of Theology, the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, Calif., or the Mexican American Catholic College in San Antonio. That cost also will be covered.

Joe Boland, senior director of Extension's grants management, said this is part of the organization's vision to give laypeople the tools they need for their ministry.

"We wanted to make sure they could get education and connect with other leaders from around the country," he said.

Extension also will pay a "significant portion" of that person's salary if the diocese hires the person full time after the three-year grant period.

Arturo Chavez, president of the Mexican American Catholic College, said this program gives him renewed hope, despite the closure of some Catholic schools and parishes around the country when so many Hispanic immigrants are in need.

"If we cut in areas where the church needs investment most, in the formation of leaders for the future, we will pay for that in the generations to come, especially in the next 10 years," he told CNS.

The first class of lay Hispanics who have chosen to attend the Mexican American Catholic College as their education requirement will start in November.

He urged the church to act quickly to meet the needs of Hispanics in the church.

"The bishops have said the Hispanic presence is a gift for the church, because their fervent love of God and the Virgin Mary, values of family hospitality and hard work are assets the church needs," said Chavez. "If we don't act quickly with systemic approaches to empowering leadership in the church of

Hispanics, we are going to lose a great gift."

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