The Richness of the Cultural and Ethnic Population in Florida: Implications for Theological Education

Dr. Justo L. González

Florida Council of Churches
Orlando, Florida
August 30, 1991

The Richness of the Cultural and Ethnic Population in Florida: Implications for Theological Education

It is my understanding that one of the main reasons for calling this consultation is the large number of seminaries that have begun or are considering the possibility of beginning work in Florida.

I am not surprised at that. Indeed, every year during the month of February I myself wish that the seminary where my wife teaches would move to Florida --preferably to Key West!

I do not know all the reasons why so many institutions are turning their gaze toward Florida. Certainly, my own February reason is the least valid of all. Still, it may be good for this consultation, and for the institutions represented in it, to consider the question: Why this rather sudden interest in Florida? Why this massive geographic conversion?

When I think about that question, I remember another time when churches and church institutions went through a similar change in geographic outlook. That was the late fifties and the sixties, with the move to the suburbs. Church planners told us that the "real growth" was in the suburbs. And in fact, that was where most of our churches grew. It was a time of frantic building of churches. National agencies entrusted with the task of planting new churches found that a dollar invested in the suburbs was soon returned with interest. Also, there was a sense of a great interdenominational race to capture the suburbs: "If we don't go in as soon as possible,

they will." And so, most of the denominations represented in this Council of Churches and at this consultation moved to the suburbs. Today, most of them are paying the price for having abandoned the inner cities.

In the last few years, I have eavesdropped on conversations in several seminaries regarding the need to move into Florida. Frankly, many such conversations give me a sense of *déjà-vu*. "The population in Florida is growing rapidly." "Orlando is rapidly becoming one of the great population and economic centers of the South." "Such and such a seminary already has plans to move into Florida." "If we don't move ahead, we'll be left behind." "This is the time to buy land and move in, before prices become prohibitive."

The problem with the move to the suburbs a few decades ago was not that the churches paid attention to the growing population of the suburbs. The problem was rather a false analysis of the shifts that were taking place, an analysis that was false because it was based on a truncated view of the church's mission. The analysis was false because it was not true that the real population growth was taking place in the suburbs. What was taking place was a population shift into the suburbs, but the real population growth was taking place among the minorities who could not afford to move to the suburbs–and who soon could not afford to be members of denominations dominated by the suburban, white, middle-class mentality. That was the false analysis. It was based on a truncated view of the church's mission, a view that

centered its attention on the institution and its economic well-being, and not on the people the church was called to serve, most of whom still remained outside of the suburbs.

I fear that much of the movement of seminaries these days towards Florida is based on a similar false analysis of the demographics and that such false analysis is based on a truncated view of a seminary's mission.

Let us look first of all at the demographic question. It is true that the population in Florida is growing rapidly, and therefore the argument is valid that Florida needs its own centers and institutions for theological education. What is not true is that such population growth is mostly among the same sort of people whom most seminaries up north are currently serving. According to the Bureau of the Census, in the greater Miami-Ft. Lauderdale area, Hispanics and African Americans comprise 46% of the total population. Right here in Orlando, 63% of the population is white, 25% is African American, 8% is Hispanic, and 4% is Asian, Native American, and other minority groups.

In order to understand a seminary's mission and challenge within such demographics, some data about the churches may be useful. Unfortunately, I do not have statistics for the entire state of Florida. What statistics I have–and these are approximate—are mostly about South Florida. It could be argued, however, that the population composition of South Florida is rapidly expanding to the rest of Florida. This is obvious when one compares the data of the

1980 and the 1990 Census, for the multiethnic composition that was typical of Dade County in 1980 has now extended to a line that is just reaching Tampa-St. Petersburg and Orlando.

According to a *Directory of the Hispanic Evangelical Churches of Miami Dade* published in 1984, in 1983 there were in Dade County alone 191 organized Hispanic Protestant Churches, plus another 23 in process of organization. By 1990, still in Dade County alone, there were over 250 organized Hispanic churches. One of the criteria employed in this count to consider a church "organized" is that it has its own pastor. Therefore, in seven years, in one county, albeit the one with the largest Hispanic population, there are at least 59 *new* Hispanic pastors—without counting possible retirements, churches with more than one pastor, etc. In South Florida, there are also over 1,000 African American churches, and 110 Haitian congregations.

Who is training these pastors? Among African Americans, most of those who attend an ATS-accredited institution go to the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta. Yet, this is a very small minority of all the pastors serving all the Black churches in the area. Among Hispanics, the vast majority of those pursuing an ATS-accredited MDiv degree are Roman Catholic, studying at the St. Vincent de Paul Regional Seminary in Boynton Beach. The number of Hispanic Protestants from Florida enrolled in MDiv programs outside the state is negligible. The same is true, but to even a greater degree, of Haitians.

So, the question remains, who is training these African American, Hispanic, and Haitian pastors? When I raise that question in circles such as this, I often get the response: “those people don't really want to study. They are content with preaching whatever comes to mind, or whatever the Spirit gives them." That may be true of some of them but not of all. In New York City alone, right now, there are over 7,000 Hispanic Protestants enrolled in Bible Institutes. Some of those institutes may not be very good. But their enrollment itself shows a thirst for study. In New England, a few years ago, I met a man with a third-grade education, serving as pastor of a rather large Pentecostal church. As we had opportunity to talk, he began asking questions about Greek grammar. When I asked him how come he knew Greek, he told me that for several years he had been studying it on his own, and then he added: "Brother, I plan to spend the rest of my life preaching this book. How can I do that if I can't read it?"

We can criticize those Bible Institutes, Bible Colleges, and such as much as we wish. Many of them leave much to be desired, especially in academic and intellectual standards. Yet the fact remains that they are the ones producing the vast majority of pastors for our minority churches (which are rapidly becoming the majority of churches).

The fact also remains that one of the reasons why so many ethnic minority pastors attend such institutions is the structural racism of our society, which results in lack of educational opportunities for ethnic minorities.

And there is a further fact we must acknowledge, even though we may not like it: People from those programs often find it much easier to work in the ghettos and the barrios than do our own graduates. They certainly find it easier to start and develop new churches among the poor.

By and large, most seminaries seem to believe that their mission as far as training pastors consists essentially in recruiting, admitting, and training people with at least a B.A. or its equivalent. Most of them do not consider themselves racist, quite the contrary. Yet, we have a saying in Spanish, *"Tanta culpa tiene el que mata la vaca, como el que le aguanta la pata"*. (The one who kills the cow is no more guilty than the one who holds it down). If an educational institution simply limits itself to recruiting people with B.A.s and does not actively and intentionally set out to counteract the consequences of racism in our society, it too becomes an accessory to that very racism that it verbally decries.

What can be done? Let me offer a number of suggestions:

1) We need programs that do not require a B.A. and yet are not academic dead-ends. One of the tragedies I constantly find among minority pastors is people who have spent years getting a certificate from an institution, who as a result of those studies wish to continue their education, and who then are told that they must begin again at square one. In response to that situation, a number of seminaries in various parts of the country are offering programs for non-college graduates with college credit. Many who attend those programs eventually enroll in

the MDiv program. Here in Florida, I know of two schools that offer such a possibility or are planning to do so.

At this point, someone may object that such programs have a tendency to become Mickey Mouse. I frankly don't understand why "Mickey Mouse" has become a synonym for easy. As I look at Disney World, and all the support system that is necessary to keep Mickey and his cohort going, it seems to me that Mickey Mouse is not easy at all. If anything, to me "Mickey Mouse" means fantasy-based. When you visit Mickey at Disney World, you see nothing of the thousands who are engaged in supporting him, oiling machinery, repairing equipment, cooking meals, and disposing of garbage. In that sense, if any program of theological education is "Mickey Mouse," it is not those that are community based but rather those that avoid contact with the harsh contexts of ministry and tend to confuse human reality with what can be learned in books!

2) We need programs that offer at least part of their courses in the native languages of minority students and of minority churches. This is not just a matter of being able to communicate with the students and having them understand classes and lectures. It is also a matter of helping those students communicate their learnings to their constituencies. Nor is it a matter of making it easier for students to avoid learning English. On the contrary, it is important that pastors in communities where another language is spoken also be as fluent as possible in

English, so that they may be advocates for their people and interpret to them what is taking place in the community at large.

Such multilingual education, difficult as it may sound to those who have not undertaken it, is not impossible. The Center for Urban Ministerial Education in Boston, under the auspices of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, offers courses in English, Spanish, French/Creole, and Portuguese. Here in Florida, St. Vincent de Paul Regional Seminary and the South Florida Center for Theological Studies seem to have taken the lead in this direction.

3) We need programs and opportunities specifically designed for immigrants who have received theological education overseas. These would include:

a. Means of sympathetic evaluation, accreditation, and recertification for studies abroad, so that such persons would be able to enroll in programs in this country.
b. Programs introducing these pastors to the particular characteristics of ministry among their ethnic community in this country—the complexities of urban life, the workings of racism, political structures, etc.

4) An active effort on the part of seminaries to establish contact and collaboration with, and to come to understand, those institutions and programs that are currently training the majority of ethnic minority pastors. I am convinced that there is much that seminaries can learn

from Bible Institutes and vice versa. Some concrete forms that this collaboration could take would be:

a) Seminaries could help train some of the faculty of these various institutions. This is already taking place in other parts of the country, with great success.

b) These various institutions could help seminaries place and supervise students for supervised ministry and internships in various urban settings, particularly minority settings. There is much to be learned there as to how to work in such communities, how to start new churches, etc.

c) Hopefully seminary professors, through their contacts with these institutions, teachers, and students, would gain new insight into how to teach seminary students for ministry in a pluralistic society.

5) Above all, we need an active collaboration and coordination among the multitude of seminaries engaged or about to engage in theological education in Florida. Clearly, there are institutions that, because of their confessional or theological stance, feel they must conduct their own separate programs. That is understandable. What I find difficult to understand is that there are also institutions whose theological stance provides no grounds for such separatism and yet pursue their own independent programs with a spirit more akin to capitalist competition than to Christian collaboration. In the process of such competition, already-scarce resources become scarcer. Seminaries tend to go where there are those who can and will

support their programs—which usually means relatively affluent whites. Once again, as is so often the case, minorities are the losers.

The opportunities for seminaries in Florida are enormous. It is precisely those opportunities that have given rise to what amounts to a mass geographic conversion. Yet, from an ethnic minority standpoint, I am convinced that Florida does not need more of the same, just a little bit closer. What Florida needs is something different, and perhaps just a little bit closer to the Gospel.