

Thirty-fifth Anniversary of Fuller Theological Seminary's Centro Latino

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The logo for AETH (Association of Evangelical Theological Hermeneutics) features a stylized 'A' composed of several overlapping triangles in shades of yellow, orange, and pink. Below the 'A' is the acronym 'AETH' in a light grey, sans-serif font.

AETH

Fuller Theological Seminary
Centro Latino
Pasadena, California
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Thirty-fifth Anniversary of Fuller Theological Seminary's Centro Latino

We are gathered here to celebrate an anniversary. There have been many achievements to celebrate during the 35 years of ministry of Fuller's Centro Latino. As we gather here, we can point to the contribution of the Centro, far beyond what should have been the limits of its resources. We celebrate those difficult years back in the 70s, when the vision of a few—Latinos as well as non-Latinos—finally began to take shape. We celebrate the ministry of those who have taught in the Centro, of its staff, and of the many alumni and alumnae of the Centro, some of whom now have positions of responsibility, not only in California and the West Coast, but throughout the nation and the world, and in a wide variety of Christian denominations. We celebrate the special programs, symposia, and research projects that have found a home in the Centro Latino. We celebrate the contribution that the Centro has made to Fuller itself, and through Fuller to the church at large. All of this is worthy of remembrance and celebration.

But by its very nature a Christian gathering must never be satisfied with looking to the past. We are called here together, not just by Fuller Theological Seminary or by its president, not just by the Centro Latino or by its director, but by God. For ours is a God who is constantly calling us into the future. We are gathered here to remember and celebrate the past, yes, but also to remember the future that has been promised to us. And let us not forget that because it is God's future, we can be certain that it will come to pass—just as certain as we are about what is already behind us.

The God of our past is also the God of our future. For twenty centuries, the Christian church has gathered again and again to eat bread and drink wine in remembrance of the Lord who came to us in the past and whose Spirit is still with us. But it is He who also, while commanding us to remember, also promised that he would once again drink of the fruit of the vine with us in the Kingdom.

And so, as we gather here to celebrate the past, let us also celebrate the future. Because that is part of what is unique about our faith. Our faith is not just about what God has done. Our faith is also about what God has promised to do.

But we gather particularly to look at our present from the perspective both of the past God has given us and of the future God has promised us.

And so, this evening I invite you to look with me at our present. Let us look first with the eyes of the flesh. Let us look at what all can see, at what the newspapers and the Bureau of the Census says. But then let us look also with the eyes of faith, from the perspective of the future God has promised us. Let us look at the present with an eye on obedience to God's call.

As we look around us, as we read the newspapers, as we go grocery shopping, as we take our children to school, there is no doubt that California is changing, that the nation is changing, that the world is changing. When I first went to live in Atlanta, in 1969, there were three Gonzalezes

in the phone book. Now there are pages and pages. According to the Census—and Census figures are always conservative when it comes to counting minorities—some three years ago the United States became the second largest Spanish-speaking nation in the world—surpassed only by Mexico. In California, 48% of the population is Latino. And throughout the nation that population is growing at an annual rate of 3.3%. Compare this with the rate of population growth during the famous "baby boom," which was 2.8% per year, and you will see why the Census projects that by the year 2050 30% of the population in the U.S. will be Latinos and Latinas.

This sounds far away. I certainly do not expect to see the year 2050. But quite a few of the students who are now at Fuller Theological Seminary will still be in ministry in 2050. The children now being baptized or presented in our churches will then be at the prime of their lives.

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It also sounds scary. There are politicians and talk-show hosts who have made a career out of fanning the flames of fear of immigration. And we can all understand that, for it is a common human trait to be afraid of that which is different, of anything that challenges our received notions, that presents a different culture, or a different way of doing things. So, I do not blame—we should not blame those who look upon this future with fear.

But allow me to suggest that we try looking at the future the Census projects through the lens of the future our God promises. When I thus look at it, I find myself compelled to ask, could it be, could it just be, that what is happening right now across the nation and the world is an act of God's grace, allowing us to have even a distant glimpse of that glorious vision of John at Patmos, "After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands"?

Look at the present around us, look at our growing multicultural environment, not through the eyes of Lou Dobbs, but through the eyes of John of Patmos, and you will see, not a threat, not a problem, not even a challenge, but an opportunity, a promise, and a calling.

Through our present, God is calling us into the future. And so, it behooves us to look at the present in the light of the future and to seek ways in which we can make the present point to that future.

As I walk through some of our Latino barrios, I often see dilapidated houses, schools falling apart, children kept away from school by lack of interest and by violence, do-gooder programs with government funding that come for a few years and then disappear. And then I see two sorts of places that seem to remain over the years: I see bars, and I see churches. Frankly, I do not expect much good coming out of bars. So, in many ways the churches are almost the only

institutions that give cohesion and continuity to the barrio. They certainly are the only long-term institutions that give Latinas and Latinos an opportunity to determine their own future and to grow both in faith and in leadership. It is the churches that are forming our communities, that are forming our future leaders, that are giving our children the incentive to stay in school, that are creating a community of support in the midst of an often-hostile world.

Join that to the Census data that I have just given you, and you will see that it is the Latino churches that will be shaping the future of much of the nation. And it is mostly the pastors and other leaders who are shaping the church.

It is here that all I have been saying impinges on theological education in general, and on Fuller Theological Seminary and the Latino Center in particular. Right now, while roughly 15% of the population in the United States is Latino, 2% of the student body and of the faculty of all the seminaries in the nation is Latino. In other words, we would have to multiply the Latino presence in our seminaries sevenfold just to approximate the Latino presence in our society today. This would mean that in a school with an enrollment of about 2,000 students, our goal should be approximately 300 Latino and Latina students *today*. Although Fuller is commendably exceptional in the presence of Hispanics in its student body, there is still a long way to go to reach that goal of 15%.

There are many reasons why Latino and Latina student enrolment in seminaries remains low. One is that many of the denominations that are growing most rapidly in the Latino community do not require seminary studies in order to serve as a pastor. However, having said that, I must immediately break our stereotypes by adding that it is precisely those denominations that have the highest number of Latinas and Latinos in seminary, and even in advanced degree programs. Out of their own experience seeking to lead their communities of faith, pastors and other leaders in those churches know how necessary it is to study. (Some years ago, I met a Latino pastor with a third-grade education who was studying Greek. When I expressed my surprise, he simply said: "Brother, I cannot spend my life preaching about a book I cannot even read!" Not surprisingly, he was doing better in Greek than those whose Presbytery required it.)

A much more important reason for the relative absence of Latinas and Latinos in seminary programs is the lack of basic educational and financial resources in the Latino community. In the context of the church, many became pastors simply because they had a calling. When they felt the need to study, they enrolled in the first Bible institute that crossed their path—some of them good, some of them so-so, and some of them frankly bad. Nobody advised them. Most probably, they had not even heard of proper seminary education.

It is on this score that the Centro Latino plays an important role, long before a student shows up at Fuller. The Centro keeps before the eyes of our pastoral leaders the vision and the possibility of seminary studies.

But even after they have heard, such studies remain an unattainable goal for people with meager financial resources. Many already have significant educational debt from their earlier studies. If they now finance their seminary studies through additional borrowing, by the time they graduate their financial obligations will be such that they will not be able to fulfill their calling to work among the poor in our communities, for the salaries that most Latino churches can pay would never allow them to repay what they owe. So, there are many who see seminary studies themselves as valuable for their ministry and yet decide not to pursue such studies because eventually, not the studies, but their financial obligations connected with such studies, will impede their ministry. And there are others who do come to seminary, graduate, begin their work in a Latino church, and soon find it necessary to move to another form of ministry just in order to pay for the debt that they incurred in order to study for a ministry that they now cannot fulfill.

So, what do we need? What can we do? What must we do? We need and we must do many things.

First of all, we need for all seminaries to realize that this is not just a Latino problem. If a seminary in California today grants a degree to a person, no matter of what cultural background, who has no idea how to practice ministry among the Latino population, that graduate is already disqualified for ministry among practically one out of every two people in the state. So, part of the ministry of the Centro Latino is not just with Hispanics but also with

the entire seminary community, with its faculty and its student body. To the degree to which Fuller Theological Seminary sees matters in this light, it is to be commended, and this celebration then is not just a celebration of what has happened in the Centro Latino over these 35 years past but also of what has happened in Fuller Theological Seminary, and in the church, over the course of those 35 years. The Centro Latino is here, not only to call Latinos and Latinas to study, but also to remind Fuller Theological Seminary of the world in which it has been called to serve.

Second, we need programs that serve as a bridge for the large number of Latino and Latina pastors who have attended academic programs that, although of good quality, are not part of the normal curriculum vitae of most students in seminary and do not include a college bachelor's degree. This, too, the Centro Latino has done and is doing, and this, too, we must celebrate on this 35th anniversary.

Thirdly, we need to find ways to make it academically possible for qualified Latina and Latino students to attend an institution such as Fuller Theological Seminary. This the Centro Latino is facilitating by offering courses in Spanish, educational guidance, and various forms of support.

And finally, but also of the utmost importance, most of this cannot be done without proper financial support. We need the financial resources so that the offerings of Fuller and of its

Centro Latino may be made available to a wider student body. In other words, we need to raise scholarship support for the students at the Centro. Without such support, many would not be able to come. Without such support, many who could come will graduate with a level of debt such that they will not be able to afford their calling to ministry among the poor in our communities and will be forced to seek greater remuneration.

But with such support, with the common ministry of Fuller Theological Seminary, of the Centro Latino, of pastors and other leaders in local churches, and of those who are able to provide financial undergirding for the entire enterprise, we will prove to be, faithful and loyal heirs not only to the tradition of 35 years that we celebrate today but also to a vision that has kept the church alive for two thousand years, a vision that still speaks to us today, and a vision that describes the future from which we must live and to which the church must point: "After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands." And with them we join tonight in this celebration, singing "Alleluia, Amen, so be it!"