

Imagine With Me: Obra Hispana

April 30, 2021

Transcript



Terri Hord Owens: Hello, Disciples, and welcome to another episode of Imagine With Me. I'm so excited about the series in which we're bringing in Disciples leaders and just Disciples across the whole church to talk about how they are imagining who we are as a new church for this new world. And I hope that you're enjoying the series and will share it online with your friends and fellow church members.

Today I'm excited to share some space with the Reverend Lori Tapia, who is our National Pastor for Hispanic Ministries. Lori is the first woman to hold this role in the history of Obra Hispana of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and I couldn't be more delighted to have been there when she was elected. And also served in her ordination and continue to work with her as we both serve the whole church. So Lori, thank you so much for being with us. It's great to have you on. One of the things that I wanted you to do initially is to just share a little bit about the work of Obra Hispana. In fact, for those who may not know, what does Obra Hispana even mean? And how do we understand the work of our National Hispanic ministries across the church?

Lori Tapia: It is great to be with you, Disciples. Thank you, Pastor Terri, for the invitation. It is always awesome to be in dialogue with you. I'm so grateful for your leadership. And you know it is a beautiful time to be serving in the role that God has called me to serve the Obra Hispana. And I always give a quick lesson, a quick Spanish lesson with a hard end.

Obra Hispana is what many people say but Espana is a country. And so it's Obra Hispana. Obra Hispana really coins the term, comes from the work of the ministry - obra, that is the work. So it really comes from what many people when the missionaries were going to Mexico and Puerto Rico into other parts of Latin America and the Caribbean and they were talking about reaching out to the Hispanic population, to the Latin population, and so Obra Hispana really speaks of the work of the Hispanic people, Hispanic community. And so it is really the fellowship of Latino and Latinas all across the life of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada, divided geographically into what we call Hispanic conventions, which, I will say in this time, has been one of the greatest blessings living through the pandemic, because there is on-the-ground leadership established. There are trusted relationships established, which meant there was an ability to connect and provide pastoral care in ways beyond what would have been able to happen through just a general ministry office.

And so the Obra Hispana has nine geographic conventions at this time, and we are distributed all across the country, all across the country, and so we work to make sure that there is pastoral care and support, there is capacity building, there is accompaniment, there is resource development and so much more for the Latino community. But not only for the Latino community but for the whole church and so it is capacity building so that Hispanic ministries can continue to fulfill their call in the life of the whole church - of who we are as a Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the kingdom of God. Right?

THO: Amen, Amen. I just like that idea of the work, right? It's the work. It's not the club, or the organization. It's the work that we're doing, so thank you for that overview. As we all know, we've all been responding, pivoting, being creative and imagining how to be together, how to be church in these totally unprecedented times. I laugh and say that, you know, in February of 2020 in the State of the Church address, I said, you know, church, we got to have the courage to imagine who we must be, give ourselves permission to change, and walk in freedom from fear... and three weeks later we were in a pandemic in lockdown. And so the new world was handed to us.

So how did Obra Hispana, under your leadership - what kinds of new initiatives? How did you pivot? How did you respond? And in what ways has the pandemic shifted the kind, the way, in which you're doing your work and even the kind of work that you're doing?

LT: I think in the very beginning it was around trying to provide information. It was trying to make sure that we were providing faithful information, trying to find the right word for that faithful information, you know, to our leaders and to our congregations who are not all connected to regions who have regional ministers who can communicate with them in Spanish, who have other leadership who can communicate. Often resources, you know, are available in other languages and so it really was trying to become this space of dissemination of information where those structures were already in place. And so we began to use those first initially to do that. I think the first thing for me was to begin to create some videos to help make sure that there was a pastoral presence, and that that they were hearing the message "we're not alone in this; we're all going through this."

But I think one of the things that I feel like the Spirit spoke to my spirit initially was we needed to be proactive in what we were doing. We needed to not be creating things just for the pandemic. If we were going to be creating things, let's begin to think about this as that pivot for long-term visioning. And so it became evident in the very beginning when everybody realized, "oh wow, I could start to surf through all kinds of worship services on Sunday."

It became evident that people were not in need of another worship service. They were not in need of another sermon and they were not in need of, you know, just that space, but they were in need of connection. They were in need of information. They were in

need of hearing inspiring stories. And so, what we created was two things simultaneously.

The first one was a program called Puentigo Contigo - means "with you." And so we really wanted people to feel like we were together in this, that we were walking through this together. And so Contigo is a live program every Friday, 1 pm EST. It's about an hour-long program. We have used this space - there's three pillars - inform, inspire, empower. We have used this to begin to have dialogue on things that don't get talked about in the the Hispanic church. We were talking about racism. We were talking about mental health issues. We were talking about pastor burnout. We were talking about domestic violence and all of the immigration issues. We've been using the space to bring pastors from geographical areas to talk about what they were doing and how they were living through this. This space has been a space to bring general ministries to talk about those. I've had you, Pastor Terri, in this space with me. And so it has been a connection.

Overall of the things that I could say, this space has been it has been one of the greatest connection points that we have seen. We go live and there are already people on when we have a pre-screen up, because they're expecting to receive some kind of nugget, whether it be me and dialogue with some pastors from, you know, Texas, or whether it may have an expert from mental health or some therapist on with me to talk about trauma and how we respond to trauma. People know that there is going to be something that is going to be beneficial for them.

And so, what we've seen is that has awakened the lay church in ways that we have not seen before. And it has created connection because we have exposed the church to leaders and to people who are doing amazing ministry that otherwise they would not get to connect with. Some additional things that we did initially had a great deal of concern for our pastors, thinking of the following year, how they were going to be able to fulfill their continuing education requirements. So initially we began doing continuing education through the Obra Hispana on that platform so that we could provide those continuing education credits and the regions could then accept that.

And what we realized is that there was a tremendous hunger for learning. Again, the lay church leaders all across the church, pastors, we have we have grown in who we are. We say we're the Disciples, right, in the United States and Canada, but the Hispania definitely has family in Panama, in Puerto Rico, and Mexico, and Ecuador, Guatemala and El Salvador. We have all of these people who are joining us, and so what we have experienced is coming together to learn outside of our geographic has expanded what we're learning it has created a more connected, a more reflective-of-who-we-are learning environment.

People who are doing ministry in Florida are very different from people who are doing ministry to learn together, and I love to hear each other. And we're bringing in people like Dr. Samuel. And Dr. Néstor Gómez has done courses for us. You know we're teaching on things like the technology and what's going on and how churches can be

equipped, but we're also talking leadership.

We're also teaching, you know, Jesus. You know, the last course that we taught was from the crucifixion of Jesus to the resurrection of Christ. And so we're really looking at building capacity in this time.

The one thing that I see, Pastor Terri, is, and I am speaking this into the life of the church all across the church; I believe that we're not just in a generational shift. We are being shifted into a new era. And as we're being shifted into new era, that means that there are things that are going to change for us all. This pandemic has created kind of a forceful leveling when we think about people and their technological skills.

You know, I get to visit the church much like you do, right? I know you were preaching in Texas this weekend. And I think our new world is, you know, I could preach in New York in the morning and I could mention Texas in the afternoon, and I could preach in California in the evening, all in one day, you know, because of what we're living through. Does that replace physical connection? No, no, of course it doesn't. But it does allow us to see new possibilities.

And what we're doing, and as I'm visiting churches and I'm seeing, you know, some of our 80-year-old members navigating Zoom with ease, and you know they're following on Facebook and they're doing all of these things, I think there was something that happened in this pandemic that forced us all onto kind of a level playing field or a level or playing field.

THO: Yeah, I can't agree with you more on that. I think one of the things that and you've just spoken to it in terms of the connections that are being made: People that normally would not be able to be in the same space, right, and develop relationships. Yesterday when I was preaching in Texas, the church itself was in Dallas. They had invited other church friends from Houston and even Maryland. So there were - and somebody people from Indianapolis - were on. So being in the same space as church has really shifted in terms of what that means.

And being able to interact with people literally across the globe, that's so exciting. And it's so important, as you say, it's a new era. It's a new world. This is not about, "oh, we're doing this for a little bit" and what happens when it's over? We're forever changed. We're forever changed. There's no going back to normal and I think our challenge is to figure out, then, how we continue in this mode, right? Hybrid learning, new levels of interaction using new kinds of technology, empowering people in different ways. I'm excited about the lay engagement that you've talked about.

Let's talk a little bit about - and you've been part of the governance committee and part of the team that's worked on - the covenant education materials that will be coming out to invite congregations to talk about what it means to be in covenant.

We've already talked about some of the tools that you've been using. Can you say a little bit about how you see the work of Obra Hispana connecting to these four pillars of covenant, our narrative and story, the tools that we're using, and how we see spiritual practice?

LT: I think one of the things that has been critical since I came into this position in an interim role, initially thinking I was here for two years. There was a lot of really intentional work around identity - strengthening our identity - that has been one of the most fruitful things that we have experienced in this time because it is the work that we did strengthening identity and building connection that has allowed us to be more connected in this time. If anybody asked me about the Obra Hispana today, I say we are more connected than we have been in a long time in spite of the fact that we're not physically together. We are more together than we have been, right? It has been really critical to build on the work of our geographical groupings and conventions because it is those local leadership groups that have the responsibility to connect to the regions, to connect and make sure that we're accompanying our, you know, our persons who are going through ordination process, our new churches that are planting, and all of these different pieces. And so everything that we're doing, we're finding a way to make sure that we're teaching how important this is because of our covenantal relationship.

You know, it is no secret that the word autonomy in in our Hispanic churches is a word that has been used to shield from participation and to, you know, to stay distanced and use that as an excuse. And so we're really trying to help our congregations understand that the beauty of being a church in covenant means that, yes, you are free to be who you feel the Spirit is calling you to be as that body of the church, but you are not free from responsibility. You are not free from being connected to one another and that none of us are complete unless we're all at the table. And so being connected to the region, being connected to the general ministries and to the life across the church, is critical one of the things that we struggle with, even within the Obra Hispana is connectedness, right?

Even from one church to the next we've discovered in this time that most of the churches who deal with administrative crises and abusive pastoral authority, some of those things, they come from a lack of understanding structure and who we are as Disciples. And so we're working in this time to make sure that we're bringing our spiritual disciplines and understandings with resources and tools to help teach history and polity to the whole church, not just pastors who need it for ordination, but to the whole church that congregations understand our history and polity, that we're building up our boards, that we're teaching our boards what, you know, how a board functions and all of those different pieces. I think all of these things are critical to us being able to fully live in covenant. And reminding people that we are responsible for one another, we need one another, and that's what covenant allows us to do.

THO: Amen. Amen. I think you're - I've noticed some of those same concerns, you know, across the whole church, of, you know, pastors and whether you're ordained or

commissioned you're required to have some understanding of history and polity. We have a lot of new Disciples. Based on both - Me, I became a Disciple at 20 years old, and I had to learn what the history of the church was. And I think one of the important things that we have to remember is that the sooner that everyone understands how we're connected in this way, the easier it will be for us to do that work of building those bridges across the whole church.

And the excitement is, as I shared in the State of the Church, that about 75 of the new churches that were planted under Vision 2020 were planted in communities of color. Lots of Spanish-speaking congregations, as well as congregations who chose - existing congregations - who chose to become part of Disciples. And so, that work of understanding who we are and feeling free to now reinterpret what that means based on our particular context, is also so really, really important.

So Pastor Lori, I want to thank you so much for sharing what's happening with Obra Hispana and all the marvelous work that you are doing. You are a leader, not only in Obra Hispana, but truly a leader for our whole church. And we're all Disciples together. I always say where two or three are gathered the whole church is always there, so I want to thank you for spending just a little bit of time with me as we continue to see how the whole church is hearing that call to imagine who we must be to prepare ourselves for a new world so that we can bear witness to the limitless love of God together because we're all included in that love.

So thank you for your time. And, Disciples, we look forward to sharing with you again in another episode of Imagine With Me. And until then, remember that God loves you so much, and so do I.