

Investigating the Nature of Thriving Hispanic Congregations within a U.S. Evangelical Denomination

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Abstract

Church growth strategies have long been employed throughout the United States. However, are general approaches for church growth and vitality applicable for all churches no matter their ethnic and cultural makeup, or should churches utilize unique strategies tailored to the ethnicities and cultures represented within their churches? This research investigated the distinctive factors that contribute to the thriving nature of Hispanic churches within the Christian and Missionary Alliance, an evangelical denomination within the U.S. Six key factors emerged that provide valuable information for current and future church growth strategies concerning the unique cultural factors present within these Hispanic churches. This research challenges the notion that church growth and vitality strategies can be one size fits all in their methodology. Instead, a more targeted approach may be more appropriate, one which gives serious consideration to the ethnic and cultural makeup and identity of the local church.

Keywords: Church Health, Church Growth, Hispanic Studies, Denominationalism, Distributive Leadership, Church Planting

The authors acknowledge the receipt of financial support for the research, authorship, and publication of this article from the Lilly Endowment Inc. Thriving Congregations Initiative.

Research Gap and Interest

Church attendance in America is in decline (Barna 2020; Burdick 2018; Jones 2021). This trend is troubling for many, including American denominations who desire to see spiritual and numerical growth among their constituency. Over the past decade, The Christian and

Missionary Alliance (C&MA), an evangelical denomination, has wrestled with organizational stagnation as it worked to see renewed growth through church revitalization and church planting efforts. According to internal research conducted in 2019, approximately 80% of all C&MA churches were stagnant or declining in church attendance. As the C&MA has begun to develop strategic interventions to help churches turn around and experience renewed growth, there were surprising observations about the emerging data.

Despite the well-documented differences between Hispanic and Anglo congregations, current and emerging interventions targeting church growth and revitalization tend to focus solely on majority culture churches. If the C&MA desires to develop focused and effective interventions, these differences must be understood better, especially considering the growing influence of Hispanics within U.S. Protestantism (Ramos, Martí, and Mulder, 2018; Taylor et al., 2019).

Are general church growth and vitality strategies effective for all churches, no matter their ethnic and cultural makeup? Or do Hispanic churches within the C&MA specifically, and in the United States more generally, need unique strategies tailored to the ethnicities and cultures represented within their churches? Such questions take seriously the need to avoid ethnic reductionism, or what Ramos, Martí, and Mulder refer to as ethnoracial essentialization, while simultaneously holding out hope for a systematized process that can help Hispanic churches and churches of various ethnic backgrounds thrive (2018).

To better understand the nature of Thriving Hispanic Congregations (THC), we observed these churches. We listened to the stories of the pastors, congregants, and denominational leaders to gain the most accurate picture of their operationalized mission at multiple levels. The goal of this research project was to unearth and better understand the unique components and aspects present within Thriving Hispanic Congregations to provide data for the C&MA to use to help other Hispanic congregations restore organizational vitality and growth.

Definitions

In this paper, we use the term Hispanic for two reasons. First, the research conducted was within churches accredited by C&MA. Historically, the denomination has identified as Hispanic those primarily Spanish-speaking congregations and churches with a predominant constituency connected to Central and South America. Second, we acknowledge that neither “Hispanic” nor “Latino” conveys the intricacies of the cultures under them, since no Portuguese or French speakers were identified in these churches. However, the term Hispanic is more representative of the participant congregations. Nevertheless, operationally speaking, Hispanics and Latino were both used interchangeably during the research interviews.

The term “thriving church” describes a congregation that loves its communities, neighbors, and congregants through acts of fellowship and service. Furthermore, the

congregation has clarity of values and mission; they seek to share the gospel in word and deed. Early in the process, the research team acknowledged that the proposed definition, although good, was incomplete. Because of its subjective nature, many churches could fall under the original meaning; it was critical to allow the findings to determine the distinctive of such churches. As the characteristics emerged from the research, the understanding of a thriving congregation became more evident and comprehensive. Consequently, the thriving Hispanic congregation markers encompass a trusted pastoral leadership, a membership in continuous pursuit of biblical literacy, a leadership-followership service orientation, an outward ministry, a relationally connected community, and a robust sense of denominational belonging. In this grounded theory, we argue that the presence and operation of these six attributes produces a natural mobilization and multiplication of Christ-followers.

Two other terms used in this paper must also be addressed: ethnicity and culture. Moreau defines ethnicity as an individual classification encompassing physical attributes, cultural identity, and geographical origin (2000:323). In addition, Mallampalli (2006) argues that ethnicity is part of the Christian experience for both Westerners and non-Westerners. We acknowledge the complexities of the Hispanic ethnicity concerning race, culture, and religion in the American context. Therefore, for this research, we use the terms ethnicity and culture together to emphasize the multiple intricacies of the Hispanic experience in the United States.

Methodology

The research employed qualitative and narrative inquiry analysis (Merriam and Tisdell 2016). A list of questions served as interview guidelines to stay focused on the research topic, however, flexibility was necessary to accommodate particular circumstances. As a result, in some instances, the researchers altered the order and omitted some questions depending on the development of the conversation and the information gathered. The data-gathering compass was a narrative inquiry. Therefore, its collection required in-depth, semi-structured, personal interviews in a natural-conversational manner to allow participants to share their stories.

Interviews took place between February and May 2021 in six different geographical locations. Participants included four main groups: 1) District Superintendents who oversee the geographical or ethnic district in which the Hispanic church was located; 2) lead pastors; 3) church leaders such as board members, deacons, elders, assistant pastors, and ministry leaders; and 4) church members (See Table 1.1). Once the lead pastor agreed to participate in the research, he was asked to put together and summon a diverse and balanced representation of church leaders and members (e.g., gender, age group, time attending church). Then, in coordination with the lead pastor, the research team spent no less than three days in each church conducting interviews and observing one or more regular gatherings.

Table 1.1: Participant Makeup

CHURCH INFORMATION		PARTICIPANTS				
Location	Name	District Superintendent	Lead Pastor	Church Leaders	Members	Total
Mercedes, TX	Río Life Church	1	1	11	12	25
Colorado Springs, CO	The Crossing Church	1	1	8	10	20
Manassas, VA	Iglesia Alianza Cristiana y Misionera de Manassas	1	1	10	27	39
Lyndwood, CA	Ministerio Nuevo Amanecer	N/A	1	18	13	32
Kissimmee, FL	Iglesia Alianza Cristiana y Misionera de Kissimmee	Same person overseeing Manassas. Counted as one.	1	24	12	37
Barceloneta, PR	Iglesia Alianza Cristiana Misionera, Cruce Dávila	1	1	10	11	23
Grand Totals		4	6	81	85	176

Most of the interviews were in-person, except for one over the phone and two via Zoom. Participation in the interview was voluntary, and all participants were given or read a consent form. District Superintendent and lead pastor interviews were conducted one-on-one, while leaders and members were conducted in focus-groups. The interviews lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and were recorded on the researcher's phone or laptop. Later, interviews were transcribed using voice-to-text software and uploaded into qualitative data analysis software.

In addition to interviews and observation of worship gatherings, the researchers collected data from the churches' Facebook pages, web pages, and physical pamphlets or brochures. These data collection methods provided a more concrete understanding of church community engagement, social media presence, missional focus, and member participation.

Selection Criteria

Initially, the researchers selected six churches out of 144 churches classified as Hispanic congregations within the C&MA to participate in the study. The selection criteria for these churches had three main components: 1) identification as a Hispanic church within the C&MA, 2) demonstration of a consistent attendance growth of 5% or more between 2016 and 2019, and finally, 3) a positive screening of health indicators that encompass (a) attendance of over 100 to the main gathering, (b) an inclusive membership of 200 or more, (c) annual income of over \$100k, and (d) a minimum of 20 years of church accreditation with the C&MA. These selection criteria were influenced by internal research conducted by the C&MA into significant contributing factors related to church closures within the denomination, and in consultation with outside experts including Warren Bird and Alan McMahan and others who agreed with these conclusions (Christian and Missionary Alliance 2020a; 2020b; Lifeway Research 2019).

As reported in Table 1.1, the researchers interviewed 176 individuals from six different churches across the United States and Puerto Rico. However, after researching these six churches, and following a careful examination of each church, the researchers decided to exclude from the investigation the C&MA Cruce Dávila church, located in Barceloneta, Puerto Rico. Although all the findings were also present at Cruce Dávila, the church's cultural, social, and ethnic nature and surroundings differed from the rest of the churches located in the continental U.S. Consequently, only 153 participants from five churches are considered in this grounded theory: 1) Río Life Church, 2) The Crossing Church, 3) *Iglesia Alianza Cristiana y Misionera de Manassas*, 4) *Ministerio Nuevo Amanecer*, and 5) *Iglesia Alianza Cristiana y Misionera de Kissimmee*. These churches and their locations provided a reasonably diverse demographic representation of ministry to and from the Hispanic population within the U.S.

All participant names are pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. Only churches and their lead pastors are identified by their real names. All participants signed a written consent form or gave verbal approval in lieu of the physical document in the cases of Zoom or phone calls.

Findings

Six common characteristics of thriving Hispanic congregations emerged from this grounded theory research project. These categories are trusted pastoral leadership, the presence of a distributive leadership model, the use of biblical literacy as a means for development, a relationally oriented community, and the presence of salient denominational attributes. What follows is a more detailed description of each characteristic.

Factor 1: Trusted Pastoral Leadership

Each thriving congregation had a senior pastor who had served in the role or had associated with the church for a considerable amount of time before assuming the senior pastor role. At the time of this writing, the average tenure for all active Alliance senior pastors was 8.93 years, whereas the average tenure for all active Hispanic Alliance senior pastors was 8.88 years. However, the average tenure of the senior pastors of these thriving Hispanic congregations was 16.5 years. This term difference is nearly double the national average. This pastoral stability allowed for the development of deep connections between the congregation and the pastor that were visible in both conversation and observed interactions (Strunk, Milacci and Zabloski 2017). For example, Susan, from Kissimmee, shared that the pastor proved to be very consistent over the years. That consistency gives her a strong sense of reliability: "I know what to expect [from the pastor]." Similarly, Jason, a member of The Crossing for over 15 years, said that he treasures his friendship with Pastor Garrido: "Over the years, we have built a strong friendship here [at the church], and outside." Jason believes that this close relationship with the pastor has helped him through the "ups and downs" of his Christian walk.

The senior pastors of these churches also display a healthy measure of authenticity. They were willing to share their flaws and shortcomings both with the researchers and their congregations. Victor, a member of *Ministerio Nuevo Amanecer*, recounted the time he met Pastor Moisés Valentín. Victor recalls that a friend told him that a Peruvian pastor had a church nearby and that he should check it out. One day, Victor decided to drive to and look at the church. He remembers it was almost 9:00 pm. Despite the late hours, Pastor Moisés was at the church and initiated a conversation with Victor. Enthusiastically, Victor emphasized, "[That night] I not only found a pastor, but I also found a friend." Two weeks later, Victor was assembling some furniture at his house when Pastor Valentín showed up. "I was astonished to see him on the floor helping me assemble the furniture ... I saw his humility... That is something you do not see very often," Victor concluded. Several studies show that not only does visible authenticity by a pastor often create a strong bond between the pastor and the congregation, but it also contributes to ministerial efficacy (Clapp-Smith, Vogelgesang, and Avey 2009; Puls, Ludden, and Freemyer 2014).

These senior pastors were also effective vision-casters. While the vision of each church varied considerably, the pastors all spoke with passion about the plans God had for their congregation. For example, Héctor Villanueva, lead pastor of Río Life Church, enthusiastically shared about the new mission groups about to be launched at his church: "I think we've done some good things throughout the years, but I think the component of being on mission has been missed... [S]o I am saying to the church that is the next thing!" The church's vision was also present within the membership of the congregation. Lay leaders and congregants alike were able to communicate to varying degrees the vision of the church and their part within it.

Factor 2: Distributed Leadership

Distributed Leadership (DL) is, in its simplest form, an approach to leadership that sees greater value in extending the work of leadership within an organization beyond a single individual. Samancioglu, Baglibel, and Erwin (2020) list four fundamental elements that distinguish DL from other leadership models. A deeper look at these four elements and how they emerged within the visited churches will provide evidence of DL within thriving Hispanic congregations.

First, DL allows for an interplay between individual leadership and collective leadership. While DL does value variety in leadership, it does not go so far as to say that within an organization, everyone is a leader. Nor does DL argue that there is no use for the CEO or formal leader within an organization. Instead, DL strikes a balance within leadership that avoids these two extremes (Spillane and Diamond 2007). What emerged through observation and conversation was a balanced leadership in these churches expressing itself through the leadership of the lead pastor and the leadership of congregants in a variety of settings.

Jorge Iván Rivera has been the lead pastor of his church located in Kissimmee, Florida, for the last 25 years. Pastor Rivera's church is an example of DL with a leadership team consisting of over twenty-five volunteers. Commenting on his leadership style, Pastor Rivera said: "You grow when you realize that you are not the best preacher. That you are not the best teacher. When you recognize that you open yourself to be blessed by those around you who are stronger than you. I have no problem with that... to help them develop." Pastor Rivera understands that his congregation is served better by allowing volunteers to emerge as leaders and helping them develop their strengths. Elías, a church leader, reported, "He's not a dictator. He's not going to tell you, do this or don't do that. There is flexibility." Also, Orlando, who has been attending the church for five years, noted that Rivera is consistent and intentional in bringing leaders together to develop the church calendar, creating good communication among leaders, and promoting a cooperative environment.

Second, DL defines leadership as a practice rather than a role or title. In other words, those who use DL are more concerned with the practice of leadership than they are with the formality of the leadership office. Before each church visit, we invited the pastor to gather a group of leaders from the church to meet with the researchers. No parameters were given by the researchers as to what constituted a leader. Instead, the pastor was free to select qualified individuals for the meeting. One common factor among all the groups of leaders gathered by the pastors of the researched churches was that each group was comprised of both those who held formal leadership within the church and those who did not.

Third, DL values an interdependent organizational structure over a bureaucratic model. The interdependency of DL actualizes in two ways. First, there is a formal-informal interdependency within an organization that practices DL. Second, DL is brought to life through a valuing and contribution of the many instead of the few (Bennett et al. 2008).

All the participant churches had a clear organizational structure in which the lead pastor was responsible for the holistic health of the local church. Such interdependency is displayed at The Crossing. Lead pastor Danny Garrido expressed that he does not feel the need to preach every Sunday morning. Instead, he allows his assistant pastor, elders, and other people under his mentorship to preach and teach regularly. Church members undoubtedly acknowledge Garrido as the person in charge of the congregation. However, they also recognize and respect the leadership of others who help to lead the church. Ramón, a member of The Crossing, articulated: "Leaders are definitely chosen for their service, for their dedication, for the way they conduct themselves. In every circumstance that happens at the church, they are always attentive in one way or another. They try to follow the pastor's guidance so that they can be developed as leaders." Thus, members at The Crossing believe and follow the church leaders because the pastor trusts them.

The interdependent organizational structure that emerges from churches that practice DL expresses itself through a large population of leaders who are interconnected within churches with relatively flat organizational hierarchies. The churches researched all had organizational hierarchies, including pastors, ministry staff, and a formal leadership board. However, in every church, the total number of real leaders far outnumbered formal positions. Such outnumbering is a reality characteristic of DL (Leithwood, Mascall and Strauss 2009). Further, the cross-communication between and among leaders within the organization did not flow through formal organizational hierarchy or communication lines. Instead, leaders connected directly with other leaders based on the task at hand. This open communication among leaders strongly reflects DL in action (Van De Mierop, Clifton, and Verhelst 2019). The extensive collection of leaders, coupled with the ability for leaders to speak with other leaders freely and independent of formal lines of communication, reveal a culture that aligns well with DL principles being developed by the senior pastors of these churches.

Factor 3: Biblical Literacy as a Means for Development

Biblical literacy is a high priority for thriving Hispanic congregations. Hispanic congregations have often used the "institute" model for spiritual education, and these churches were no exception (Eguizabal 2018). While various expressions of Bible literacy programs were present within the churches surveyed, several key commonalities were among them. First, each church leveraged long-term biblical immersion. Thus, the primary mark of progress was actual biblical knowledge. Second, biblical literacy was not delimited to certain age groups, but instead, individuals of all ages were intentionally placed in biblical literacy programs. Finally, knowledge was not divorced from other spiritual maturity metrics, such as service and leadership roles within the church.

Pastor Héctor Castro is the founding pastor of what has become a multi-site church in Manassas, VA. As a lead pastor for three decades, Castro has observed how important biblical

education is for every member of the church. "There are many things that we could be doing as a church... good things I don't discard. But I prefer that people spend time in the Word of God." Pastor Castro continued sharing about the church's early beginnings: "I remember people asked me to invite people to share testimonies. I asked them, 'What kind of testimonies?' They usually responded, 'Well, on how God did this or that in someone's life.' I told them, 'No because I do not want people to anchor their faith in someone else's experience. I want them to anchor their faith in the Word of God.'" Currently, Manassas church has a structured discipleship pathway for everyone at the church. All children, youth, and adults are expected to engage with the Scriptures within their age group. "Even elders have a discipleship pathway," Castro concluded.

The results of these various biblical literacy programs are three-fold. First, continued participation within these programs acted as a bonding agent for congregants within these churches. Second, the programs operate as incubators for new ministry leaders and ideas. New ministries were often formed or spun out of biblical literacy programs. Charles, an elder at The Crossing church, reported that two out of the four main objectives of the church's discipleship program are to develop new ministry leaders and disciple-makers, and to identify where people stand in their Christian faith to help them grow in their biblical knowledge.

Thirdly, these biblical literacy programs served to increase the overall understanding of and involvement in the missional aspect of the church. Those who participated in or graduated from such biblical literacy programs were heavily involved in local outreach, global missions, teaching, and church leadership, in part due to their participation in the programs.

Factor 4: Outward Focused Ministry

The churches that were visited as part of this research displayed an organizational passion for missionary work. This passion expressed itself in several ways. For some, it showed through participation in and awareness of denominational missionary initiatives. It was common to find denominational literature and promotional material prominently placed in these churches. However, missionary support was not only limited to denominational missionaries. Several churches supported missionaries outside of the church's denomination who worked in countries commonly represented within the congregation. This practice is increasingly common among Latino Protestant churches (Eguizabal 2018). For example, the Manassas church actively supports pastors and missionaries in Latin America through offerings, training, and short-term mission trips. Similarly, the Kissimmee church recently paid the medical bills of a major surgical procedure for a pastor in Honduras. The church remains close despite not being part of the denomination.

All the churches visited as part of this research were explicitly involved in church planting. When asked about how you see your church five years from now, Pastor Moisés Valentín replied: "I would love to plant more churches. I would love to see this ministry [of legal assistance to immigrants] in four or five communities." On a similar note, Rev. Héctor Castro

responded: "God willing, in five years, Woodbridge... a fourth church there... and maybe also in Washington Banks." Pastor Castro, foreseeing retirement in a few years, understands that church planting DNA is already part of the church, and that the new leaders will continue that vision. "I will be here to help, anyways," Castro concluded. Beyond this track record of successful church planting, these churches have dedicated both human and financial resources toward church planting efforts and share a multiplication mindset. These churches see church planting as a means for church growth, even if the local church shrinks for a season due to a successful new church planting. "This is a generous church, not only financially, but with human assets... It is not easy for a pastor to send members to plant a church. And this church has planted two churches. To open new fields, you must be generous," reported Nestor, an elder in Kissimmee.

Finally, these churches are invested in their local community. One church heavily invests in ministry to migrants because of the significant population of migrant workers within their community. Another church operates a drive-in food bank that ministers to the under-served in their community. Still another church in a more affluent community offers family-oriented programs designed to attract families from the neighborhood into their church. In every instance, there is a clear connection between evangelism and outreach for these churches. For example, Río Life Church in Mercedes, Texas, has been very intentional in connecting with the surrounding community. The church has consistently created events to connect with their neighbors, such as giving away back-to-school materials for students at the beginning of August, Christmas presents in December, and BBQ outings throughout the year. Moreover, one member shared that there are people in the community who do not come to church but still consider Río Life their church, and Pastor Villanueva their pastor.

Factor 5: Relationally Oriented Community (ROC)

The family unit has long been the cornerstone institution within the Hispanic culture (Montoya 1987; Rodríguez 2010; Clutter and Zubieta 2009). This reality quickly revealed itself in the churches visited through both informal conversations as well as formal interviews. Family-oriented language pervaded the descriptions of these thriving congregations at all levels, as the following examples attest. "[We] are family. When there is a need among us, we are all there. We pray for each other... During the pandemic, the pastor opened a WhatsApp group... we keep the communication flowing," said María, a 25-year member of Manassas. Likewise, from The Crossing, George commented: "I think that the best thing is that they [the church] make you feel family. ... My grandchildren call him [lead pastor Danny] *abuelo* (grandpa)." These thriving Hispanic congregations fostered deep relationships throughout their church community which contributed to their growth.

The interconnectivity found among various groups within the church displayed the ROC of these churches. In conversations among leadership and laity, each group quickly pointed out

that deep relationships were formed within the church. These revelations were significant in that they revealed that deep or formal participation in the church, while helpful at building ROC, was not a prerequisite. Whether a person is a leader within the local church or a casual attendee, each person is a part of the church family.

Local church leaders worked hard at inclusion. The leaders of these churches often spoke of the importance of helping people find a place within the church family to both belong and serve. Usually, people were placed within a smaller group to build deep relationships throughout the church. Marla, from Kissimmee, shared: "When we have someone new to our congregation, members and leaders connect them with the ministry they identify most with... [The ministry leader] will choose someone to walk alongside that person. We Latinos are very relational, ...this helps them to identify with us and to keep communication." While these churches were primarily made up of Hispanic congregants, ethnicity was not the primary identity through which people connected. Instead, people overwhelmingly connected through their Christian beliefs, not their ethnic identity (Mulder et al. 2017). This connection was reflected in the often varied cultural backgrounds found in these Hispanic churches. Churchgoers did not need to be from the same country of birth to connect well with the pastor or parishioners.

A second way these churches' ROC was evidenced was in the churches' care for the family unit. Of course, some of the more natural expressions of church ministry were evidenced here, such as pastoral visitation. But there were also more nuanced ways that these churches sought to meet the needs of families within the church. For example, Wilbert, a young Peruvian adult attending Kissimmee who has no relatives in the U.S., commented: "The youth teacher, she was like my older sister... [this church] has treated me like a son, ...many leaders had helped me with a place to stay... paid for camp when I did not have money... [helped me] to find a job and to study." Wilbert continued, "My parents are not here, but I do not feel alone because this church is like my family." This example illustrates an important point. In most cases, these churches served as a substitute family for those who did not have kin family within the community.

A third way that the ROC of these churches could be seen was by how they connected with their community. Many churches are involved in evangelism and, as a result, grow their churches. However, the nuanced difference among many of the churches visited was that they were engaged in family-building. As a result, those disconnected from Christ became connected to Him through the development of a new "extended family" experienced in the church. Luz commented that she visited the Manassas church because of her friend: "I loved talking to her, what she said and shared, but I did not want to make any commitment... I considered coming to church and then telling her that I did not like it." When Luz finally visited Manassas church, her daughters asked her to bring them back on Sunday. "I had no excuse," Luz continued, "I loved it too... [because] the way everybody treated me."

Factor 6: Salient Denominational Attributes

Denominational affiliation and denominational allegiance are very different things. In recent years, research has shown that denominationalism in the U.S. is facing many challenges, including a decline in overall church attendance (Pew 2016; Richey 2021). However, denominational engagement within the churches researched was high, and evidenced in several distinct ways. Denominational allegiance was seen in strong denominational branding within the church, adherence to denominational polity, participation within the geographic denominational leadership structure, historical awareness, and the display of denominational core values.

These thriving Hispanic congregations were not only aware of their denominational affiliation, they celebrated it. Laura, a member from Manassas, seems to understand her service to the church not only as an expression of the Great Commission but as a denominational distinctive. "The pastor and leaders spearhead the plan, and we join and collaborate, executing it, to reach others through the different ministries. [T]his is the Great Commission, going to other places. That is what characterizes us as the Christian and Missionary Alliance." There was also a prominent display of denominational symbolism in each church that was visited. Additionally, there was a strong resonance between stated denominational values (such as lost people matter to God) and the practice of local congregants. Pastor Héctor Villanueva commented on what "reaching the lost" meant for his vision: "[It's] reaching lost people... I want to get back to the DNA... reach lost people, disciple-making, empowering them."

Discussion

Emerging from this research are two over-arching categories of factors that contribute to a thriving Hispanic congregation. The first is related to leadership (or leader) factors, and the second is related to organizational culture factors. The following is a consideration of the emerging findings grouped into these two categories.

Leadership Factors Contributing to a Thriving Hispanic Congregation

During this research, it became clear that the senior pastors (leaders) of thriving Hispanic congregations share a few key commonalities. The first commonality observed is the longevity and overall stability of these pastors within their congregations. This significant tenure (16.5 years on average) was considerably longer than the national average within the C&MA. The specific factors that contribute to this stability were not considered as part of this research. However, this is undoubtedly a topic that warrants further investigation, since

longevity appears to significantly impact the trustworthiness of pastors within their congregations.

The senior pastors of these churches were also effective vision-casters. Their ability to see a preferred future, effectively communicate that future to the congregation, and successfully pursue that vision with the congregation positively contributes to creating a THC. Thus, it seems that senior pastors of Hispanic congregations would benefit from instruction directly tied to successful vision-casting.

Finally, senior pastors of THCs consistently displayed a leadership style that practiced a distributive leadership approach. This research lends weight to the idea that a THC requires a leader who is willing to share leadership easily. Within the THCs who participated in this study was a strong group of formal and informal leaders who worked with the senior pastor to run the church's affairs. Hispanic pastors who desire to see their congregations flourish must be willing to empower those around them to share in the responsibility and task of leadership.

Organizational Culture Factors Contributing to a Thriving Hispanic Congregation

Alongside commonalities identified within the leaders of THCs were commonalities related to the culture of these churches (organizations). First, discipleship played a crucial role beyond being a means of spiritual formation. Discipleship was the primary means by which new church members assimilated into the life of the body. Additionally, discipleship was also the gateway to leadership development and leadership deployment within THCs. Therefore, Hispanic congregations desiring to thrive must look deeply at their discipleship process and consider how to use it as a means to both connect and deploy individuals within the congregation.

Another clear commonality that exists among THCs is the value of family as an organizational concept. These churches considered themselves to be family, invited those within their communities to join their family, and worked to build strong interconnected relationships among their congregants. Hispanic congregations that desire to thrive should seriously consider the concept of family and how they position themselves as a family alternative for those without family ties or for those seeking deep familial relationships.

As was stated above, every THC visited was connected to church planting. This factor must be noted and is worthy of further study. First, the churches we visited were more interested in seeing people connect with God than they were in the size of their church. As such, they often sacrificially invested in church planting, even if that meant that their church diminished in size for a season. Additionally, these churches were concerned that people within their communities have easy access to a local church. Some viewed church planting as a way to extend their reach to the surrounding community rather than enlarging their building or creating more activities. As a result of this research, it has become apparent that THCs may have something to teach the U.S. church in general about church planting. Often, these

Hispanic congregations have successfully planted churches using fewer resources than majority culture churches. More profound research is needed to understand the church planting strategies employed by these THC's, and to determine which might be most transferrable to other Hispanic and non-Hispanic congregations.

Finally, these THC's were in tune with the needs of people who lived in their neighborhood. They were highly concerned that those who lived closest to the church had their needs met in or by the church. While this expressed itself differently in various locations, the common theme was that a THC knew and cared about the critical needs of its neighbors. It seems that one key factor in helping a Hispanic congregation thrive is its ability to connect with and meet the needs of those living closest to the church.

As with all research, there is a limit to what we found. As we reflect on our journey, we note two other areas worthy of further study. First, further research is needed to understand better how THC's are choosing to minister to second-generation Hispanics. Second-generation Hispanics often find themselves in a state of "in-betweenness" within their parents' church (Belmonte-Stephens and Jao 2015). This liminal state seems to create some distance between the first and second-generation, often causing the second generation to branch out. Additionally, this research was mainly focused on the internal factors influencing thriving Hispanic congregations. Further research could explore how external factors, such as population influx, demographic changes, and job opportunities impact a Hispanic church's ability to thrive.

Conclusion

This research provides credible insights to help churches enact strategies that foster vitality and create growth. It notes some unique aspects of Hispanic churches that may contribute to their vitality and growth, such as the value of family and the use of a distributive leadership model. However, church vitality and growth strategies cannot be one size fits all in their methodology. Instead, a more nuanced approach that gives serious consideration to the ethnic and cultural makeup and identity of a local church may be more fruitful. For example, the importance of family as an organizational concept may impact the average sized Hispanic congregation more than a majority culture, non-denominational megachurch. Whereas a majority culture church with less than 100 congregants might be considered unhealthy or at risk, a Hispanic congregation of the same size might be right-sized based on their value of the concept of family. But overall, various factors that contribute to church vitality and growth are clearly identifiable, and doable.

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