

**Culture and Evangelism:  
A Latino Perspective on the Lutheran Mission in Puerto Rico**  
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## **Introduction**

In 1998 the Hispanic/Latino Ministry Program of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (LSTC) began the Evaristo Falcó-Esteves lecture series. This lecture series was established as an initiative for the pastoral and theological reflection of lay, clergy, seminarians, seminary, college and university professors interested in the Lutheran legacy and its relevance in responding to the challenges of today's world, from a Hispanic/Latin American perspective. Tonight, in my inaugural lecture as professor of systematic theology, and in my roll as director of LSTC's Hispanic/Latino Ministry Program, I want to continue these efforts with a reflection on the topic of theology and culture. My goal is to join the endeavors of those whose concern for a better understanding of the relationship between history, culture and human spirituality, engage in exploring the role of the Gospel as a transforming and liberating element of the human predicament. My focus tonight will be on the relationship between culture and evangelism in the expansion of Lutheranism in the island of Puerto Rico.

## **Rationale for this Study**

The rationale for this study is very personal. It has to do with my cultural and religious identity. I have always been intrigued with the fact that when I am away from my country of origin, and this is especially true of my experience in the United States, people perceive a significant conflict between my Puerto Rican and Lutheran identity. Those familiar with the 16<sup>th</sup> century European conquest of these lands know that Puerto Rico was included in the Spanish conquest of that time and consequently, subjected to its Roman Catholic missionary venture. Given this fact, how can a Puerto Rican claim to be Lutheran?

The answer lies in another significant fact of our historical development that is mostly neglected. Puerto Rico, along with most other people constitutive of the cultures indigenous to these lands, was subjected to a second major European conquest that led to the Anglo/Saxon Protestant missionary expansion in this part of the world. The full consequences of these two great events are still being explored. To be sure, the significance of the Lutheran experience in the Protestant expansion to the island of Puerto Rico has not been yet adequately studied. Tonight I want to contribute to this research by exploring the expansion of Lutheranism in Puerto Rico from a Hispanic/Latino perspective.

## **Methodological Assumptions**

My approach to this subject will follow the one characteristic of the emerging Latino theological perspective in the United States. By this I mean the one developed by an increasing number of Latino men and women who, along with other sectors of our society and people around the world that have been silent for generations, are now speaking up and claiming an authority that past centuries have denied them.<sup>1</sup>

From its inception, Latino theology became the effort to reflect on the implications of correlating faith with the social, cultural and religious history of our people. Nurtured by the insights of Latin American theology and other liberation perspectives, it applies the hermeneutics of suspicion to our peoples' experience. This effort leads to focus on the popular expression of our people's faith and knowledge as a vehicle and witness of divine revelation.<sup>2</sup> While this initiative aims at recovering those foundational elements that give meaning to our identity as a people, it also provides a focus on those basic dimensions of the church's teachings that make possible a continuous renewal of our understanding and confession of the Gospel.

### **Reading in Spanish as a Key for Interpretation**

My analysis of the Lutheran missionary expansion to Puerto Rico will use as the central key for interpretation what Justo L. González established as a reading in *Spanish* of the history and teachings of the Christian tradition. To clarify this approach González argues for a reading of the Bible in Spanish. His proposal is not a chauvinistic appeal for Latinos to give up biblical research based on the historical-critical method. Nor does he emphasize using just a Spanish translation of the text. His point is to recover a central feature in the Protestant tradition of making the Bible available to the people in their *vernacular*. For González, the emphasis of this approach—in contrast to the one characteristic of the dominant culture—is to read the Scriptures as presenting a history of the people of God *beyond innocence*, that is, to view biblical history as *responsible remembrance*, leading to *responsible action*. Such an approach provides an interpretation of the Bible compatible with our own history, riddled with ambiguity, joys and failures. When the Bible turns into a resource accessible to the people, and the people discover in the Bible their own particular perspective, then the Bible becomes the people's book, a subversive book no longer under the control of the dominant groups in society.<sup>3</sup>

Vitor Westhelle, a fellow professor of systematic theology at LSTC contends that one of Luther's most significant contributions was providing a language to give voice to the voiceless of his time. The reformer's importance for the normative nature of the German language is generally recognized. Yet, his contributions in providing a means of communication capable of constituting knowledge for empowering the aspirations and desires of the common people in 16<sup>th</sup> century European society, has received very little attention.<sup>4</sup> My study intends to provide an example of the significant impact of this

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<sup>1</sup> Justo L. González, *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 47-8.

<sup>2</sup> To be sure, for Latino theology popular religion becomes first and foremost an epistemology, that is, a way of imagining reality and constructing knowledge. It is a bearer of culture and identity. It is also a receiver and witness of our peoples' understanding and practice of God's self-revelation.

<sup>3</sup> González, *Mañana*, 75-87.

<sup>4</sup> Vitor Westhelle, "Looking People in the Mouth: Luther, Language, and Oppression" (Soon to be published). Also from the same author, *Voces de protesta en América Latina* (México: Hispanic/Latino

contribution of Luther, re-appropriated by the Latino perspective, for a better understanding of the relationship between culture and religion in communicating and witnessing to the transforming power of the Gospel.

### **Popular Religion: The *Vernacular* of the People in the Margins**

In his ground-breaking study of Popular Catholicism Orlando O. Espín argues that for Latino theologians, the importance of the study of *popular Christianity* is its role as a source for a theological discourse rendered *Latinamente*<sup>5</sup>. For him and for an increasing number of Latinos/as from Roman Catholic and Protestant backgrounds, popular Christianity is not just a collection of beliefs or practices, regardless its exotic, curious or orthodox nature by our denominational standards. Popular Christianity is first and foremost, an epistemology: a way of imagining reality and of constructing knowledge. It is a bearer of culture and identity. It is an instrument for listening and witnessing to divine revelation in culturally authentic and specific ways, which, among Latinos/as (as among all peoples) bear the impact of both grace and sin.<sup>6</sup> Yet, to avoid a naive perception of this means of expression, Espín alerts us to the fact that the rites, beliefs and symbols commonly associated with popular Christianity, rather than ends in themselves, need to be discerned as playing the important mediating role of vehicles to a better understanding of the faith of our people in their daily struggles for life.

Alejandro García-Rivera—alumni of our advanced program in theological studies at LSTC and presently Associate Professor of systematic theology at the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley—, produced a creative study on the power of the religious imagination and profound wisdom of popular Christianity by examining the devotion to San Martín de Porres of marginalized sectors of society. His careful and critical semiotic study of the “little stories” of San Martín de Porres, provides a creative contribution to the wider discussion of culture in a wide variety of contexts, and the role of human agency in confronting the power of the dominant sectors of society.<sup>7</sup>

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Ministry Program at LSTC, 2000). Another valuable study exploring the impact of Luther’s understanding of the *vernacular* for the transmission of ideas in the Lutheran Reformation is Helga Robinson-Hammerstein, “The Lutheran Reformation and its music,” in *The Transmission of Ideas in the Lutheran Reformation*. Helga Ribinson-Hammerstein, editor, (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1989), 141-71.

<sup>5</sup> Orlando O. Espín, *The Faith of the People: Theological Reflections on Popular Catholicism* (New York: Orbis Books, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> Espín, “The State of U.S. Latino/a Theology,” 34-5. “The rites, believes and symbols commonly associated with popular Christianity are *not*, in and of themselves, what is important in this religious universe: rather, they are like doors through which we may sense the faith of our people and their daily struggles for life. Because of this, some Latino/a theologians have argued that popular Christianity is a source for an authentically Latino/a theology.”Ibid., 35.

<sup>7</sup> In his introduction to the publication of García-Rivera, Robert Schriber describes the author’s contribution to current research in postcolonial studies: “In contemporary postcolonial writing, formerly subjugated peoples are trying to reconstruct their identities, not simply by imagining a precolonial past, but by coming to terms with the many strands of culture in which they participate. With the unprecedented migration of peoples around the planet, as well as the impact of global communication technologies and circulation of cultural images in music and video, nearly everyone everywhere is part of a great cultural churning. This creolization of hybridization of cultures undercuts long-held assumptions about cultures being relatively enclosed, integrated wholes. García-Rivera adds to that discussion with his expanded concept of *mestizaje*, especially to the role of human agency as it encounters the power of the conqueror.”

Tonight I want to move forward the significance of these efforts by exploring the historical and theological significance of three stories taken from the Lutheran mission in Puerto Rico. These stories are produced by the process of integrating the witness of Lutheran missionaries, testimonies of North American and Puerto Rican church leaders, but mostly, the attempt to recover the experience and beliefs of those early Puerto Rican converts emerging from traditionally underrepresented communities and sectors of society. My goal is to pursue and bring to light what Espín has called the *faith of the people*, that is, the faith and beliefs of popular Lutheranism in the island of Puerto Rico. My effort to explore the emergence and content of this witness is the endeavor to retrieve the *vernacular* of the people in the margins.

### **I- First Story: In Search of the Messiah in the Mission Field**

The first story takes place at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and relates to the efforts of establishing a Lutheran church in the island of Puerto Rico. I want to place this story in the context of a biblical narrative that has a special significance to the people of Puerto Rico. The Scripture's account comes from the gospel of Matthew. It is the story of the Magi. The impact of this story on Puerto Ricans has been so great, that for a long time, prior to the North American presence on the island; it was celebrated as a national holiday.

John Shea, a popular contemporary religious speaker points out in one of his publications that, throughout the history of the church, the original story of the Magi of only twelve verses in the gospel of Matthew, has turned into the symbolic bearer of many spiritual insights that poets, story tellers and spiritual writers have made into volumes, in their effort to explore its potential for witnessing to the powerful and transforming experience of God's self-revelation in history.<sup>8</sup> I want to continue this tradition of Christian imagination by reading the Magi story in the context of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Lutheran mission in Puerto Rico.

G. K. Chesterton wrote an essay on three modern Wise Men. They journeyed to a city of peace, a new Bethlehem. They wanted to enter this city and offered their gifts as passports of admission. The first put forth gold and suggested it could buy the pleasures of the earth. The second, instead of frankincense, brought the modern scent of chemistry. This scent has the power to drug the mind, seed the soil, and control the population. The third brought myrrh in the shape of a split atom. It was the symbol of death for anyone who opposed the way of peace. When they arrived at the palace of peace, they met St. Joseph. He refused them entrance. They protested, "What more could we possibly need to assure peace? We have the means to provide affluence, control nature, and destroy enemies." St. Joseph whispered in the ear of each individually. They went away sad.

This tale is a critique of contemporary wisdom. The Wise Men come with the benefits of wealth and technology, and they think that those assets will bring peace. The

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Alex Garía-Rivera, *St. Martín de Porres: The "Little Stories" and the Semiotics of Culture* (New York: Orbis Books, 1995), xiv.

<sup>8</sup> John Shea, *Starlight: Beholding the Christmas Miracle All Year Long*. (New York: Crossroads, 1996), 128-47.

real problem is not what the modern Wise Men had brought, but what they had forgotten. They had forgotten the child.<sup>9</sup>

As I've become acquainted with the 19<sup>th</sup> century Protestant expansion to the Caribbean, one of the prominent features driving the spirit of North American missionaries was their struggle against the Spanish religious and socio-political rule of the region.<sup>10</sup> In the case of Lutheranism, this combative spirit was powerfully expressed in the life of Gustav Sigfrid Swensson. This 2<sup>nd</sup> year student for the ministry at Augustana College in Rock Island, who's missionary driven initiative contributed in establishing the present Lutheran work in Puerto Rico, expressed this missionary zeal in an article written shortly after his return from the island to the United States.

The development of the war I followed closely. Finally, Puerto Rico was ceded to the United States. I saw the Puerto Ricans as people in misery, ignorance, superstition and fatal errors. There I could see and learn what the Catholic church is and what fruits she has produced when not influenced by any other church."<sup>11</sup>

As the modern Wise Men of the story of Chesterton, the Protestant missionaries came to Puerto Rico to bring education, health and a new social order to lift up the standards of life of our people. The significant impact in the economic, cultural and political life of Puerto Ricans was so impressive that they are difficult to avoid. Yet, as in the case of the modern Wise Men, these North American missionaries forgot the child. Their passion to spread the Gospel and the benefits of the Protestant nation blinded them to the fact that this process was imposed by a military rule. Their unfortunate tendency to confuse the Gospel with the ideological, social and political structure of the North American way of life, unable them to resist the impositions and colonial interests of this military rule, from the perspective of the Gospel.

The enigmatic symbol of the child points to the missing ingredient of modern wisdom. It is not rooted in the graciousness of the divine presence. Often we let our personal interests and self-seeking motives rule, even at the expense of the well being of others. We need to constantly be reminded that the mind, alienated from God's wisdom is, very seldom, life giving.

## The Hard Search

The Magi were engaged in a very important search. They were in pursuit of the Messiah. Yet, they lacked precise directions and could not travel by daylight. A star led them, a tiny point in the sky. Their quest was mainly darkness and minimally light. The

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>10</sup> Two major works on this area that focus on the Protestant expansion to Puerto Rico are, Daniel R. Rodríguez, *La primera evangelización norteamericana en Puerto Rico 1898-1930* (México: Ediciones borinquen, 1986) and Samuel Silva Gotay, *Protestantismo y política en Puerto Rico 1898-1930: Hacia una historia del Protestantismo Evangélico en Puerto Rico* (San Juan: Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1997). Both studies provide comprehensive bibliographical resources for this area of research.

<sup>11</sup> Gustav Sigfrid Swensson, "I Went to Puerto Rico," in *El Testigo* (Octubre, 1948), 16. The article was found among the papers of the late pastor Gustav Sgfried Swensson. He wrote it shortly after his return to the United States in 1900. It was sent for publication by William G. Arbaugh.

success of their search depended not just in their best resources, but on their trust in the gracious divine initiative, coming always from the most unexpected places.

“On December 3, 1898 Gustav Sigfrid Swensson was walking along a San Juan street when a voice called out in English from the doorway of a tailor shop across the street: ‘Can you preach? You look like a man of God.’ A student for the Lutheran ministry, forced by lack of money to give up his theological education temporarily, young Mr. Swensson could rely in the affirmative—he had been doing lay preaching for several years. And he had long felt the call to be a man of God. It was his keen missionary zeal that had brought him to Puerto Rico in October. Forthwith he crosses the street and entered into a conversation that founded the Lutheran church in an island where, for four hundred years, Lutheranism had been denied the right to raise its voice and its representatives, at one time, had to answer the so-called ‘Holy Inquisition.’”<sup>12</sup>

Searching for the Messiah has never been an easy task. For the Magi in the Gospel story, it took not just the long and costly search, but the crossing of national and cultural borders and the willingness to be led, in trust, by a star and the initiative of others. The experience of Lutheran missionaries in Puerto Rico followed a similar path. The original visionary initiative of young Sigfrid Swensson failed to receive the support of his own denomination. Being critically short of cash, he withdrew from his College studies, borrowed money from a friend and, at his arrival in Puerto Rico, looked for a teaching job expecting to begin a new mission field in the island. Other North American Lutheran missionaries followed a similar self-giving ministry by giving up good and stable salaries in the mainland, risking tropical diseases and depriving themselves and their families of many other comforts. An article narrating the early years of the Lutheran mission in Puerto Rico eloquently describes the sacrifices and resilience characteristic of these early missionaries.

“Their faith was greater than that of the Church which failed to support them, so that one of these pioneers was compelled to accept the hospitality of the United States Navy and come home on a transport because no money was forthcoming either for salary or passage. The burning words of his report awakened many to the great task which lay before our church in the new possessions of the United States, and support was secured for the missionary who remained on the field. Later on other missionaries were sent, but meager support compelled these self-sacrificing workers to hold services and to live in woefully unsuitable and inadequate quarters. Unflinching they persevered, and with more adequate support in later years a work was established of which the church need not be ashamed.”<sup>13</sup>

This was also the call to which Gabriela Cuervos,<sup>14</sup> Demetrio Texidor,<sup>15</sup> Eduardo Roig,<sup>16</sup> and a host of other Puerto Rican men and women responded, pioneering with

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<sup>12</sup> William G. Arbaugh, “Because He Looked Like a Man of God,” in *El Testigo* (Abril, 1948), 16.

<sup>13</sup> Rev. Lewis R. Fox, “The Lutheran Church in Puerto Rico,” in *El Testigo* (Mayo, 1936), 11.

<sup>14</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Puerto Rican Lutheran missionary in the island.

their conviction and initiative new models of lay and ordained ministry throughout these 100 years of Lutheranism in Puerto Rico.

### **The Call of The Stranger**

The Gospel story mentions that the Magi found the Messiah in the most unexpected place. When they arrive in Palestine, their background and common sense led them to Herod's palace. Yet, they were to find the newborn Christ in Bethlehem, lying in a manger, among lowly folk, celebrating the disclosure of God's self-revelation in history.

I've always been bewildered by the scandalous nature of God's manifestation in our midst; a presence that, following the witness of Scriptures, takes place in the least expected places. Luther's narrative of the reaction of the Wise Men upon finding the newborn Jesus is illuminating:

“Let us observe how these Wise Men took no offense at the mean state of the Babe and his parents that we also may not be offended in the mean state of our Neighbor but rather see Christ in him, since the kingdom of Christ is to be found among the lowly and despised, in persecution, misery and the holy cross... Those who seek Christ anywhere else, find him not. The Wise Men discovered him not at Herod's court, nor with the high priests, not in the great city Jerusalem, but in Bethlehem, in the stable, with lowly folk, with Mary and Joseph. In a word, they Found him where one could least expect it.”<sup>17</sup>

Gustaf Sigfrid Swensson had a similar shocking experience as he went along his task of establishing a Lutheran mission in Puerto Rico:

“It happened that on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of December, 1898, when I was walking home from one of my classes that coming up Sol street an English Negro from Jamaica was standing in the window at number 87 and as he beheld my insignificant being passing by he said to me, ‘How do you do! You look like a man of God. Can't you preach?’ I stopped and returned greetings and although the Negro, with whom I was not acquainted, did not look very dignified, yet I advanced toward him and with a blush on my face such as I never felt before... After I conversed with Mr. Browne, for that was the Negro's name, I promised him to come again on the morrow, Sunday, and conduct a meeting at 9:30 AM. Sunday, the 4<sup>th</sup> of December, 1898, came, and the 1<sup>st</sup> Protestant meeting was held in San Juan. In The morning about 8 attended and in the evening about 30—officers, soldiers and English speaking Negroes.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Along with Salustiano Hernández and Guillermo Marrero, they were the 1<sup>st</sup> Lutheran Puerto Ricans to be ordained in the field.

<sup>16</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Lutheran Puerto Rican ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacrament.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Roland Bainton, *The Martin Luther Christmas Book* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1948), 64. This section is taken from one of Luther's sermons: “The Gospel for the Festival of the Epyphany, Matthew 2: 1-12 (1527),” *Luther's Works* edited by Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann. 55 volumes (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955. (52: 159-286).

In establishing the foundations of the Lutheran mission in Puerto Rico, this young and enthusiastic lay missionary from Swedish-American background, as well as the men and women that followed, had to overcome the prejudices and biases of their epoch and be willing to be led by God's messenger, an African Caribbean humble tailor,<sup>19</sup> who provided the location, recruited the people and identified the preacher to hold the 1<sup>st</sup> Protestant service in the city of San Juan. This is how the Lutheran mission was established in the island of Puerto Rico.

## **II- Second Story: Breaking the Mold**

(Radical inclusiveness: the power of the Gospel  
in the expansion of Lutheranism in Puerto Rico)

The second story takes place early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, at the time of the emergence of Puerto Rican men and women, eager to play a leadership roll in further developing the Lutheran mission and ministry in the island.

On February 1<sup>st</sup> of this year I had the privilege of preaching at the concluding service of the 2<sup>nd</sup> celebration of the Evaristo-Falcó Esteves' lecture series in Puerto Rico at San Marcos Lutheran Church. This service also served for the installation of Ms. Carmen Rabell as Executive Director of El Centro Luterano de formación teológica José D. Rodríguez (Lutheran Center for Theological Formation José D. Rodríguez). The center, which LSTC contributed to establish and continues to support, plays a significant roll in the theological education of lay, candidates for the variety of ministries in the church, the continuing education of pastors and witnessing to the relevance of the Lutheran legacy in the Caribbean and Latin America. I took this opportunity to reflect on the roll of indigenous leaders and the challenges they faced in developing the Lutheran mission in Puerto Rico.

The biblical text for the sermon focused on the gospel of Luke 4: 21-30. This reading provides a description of the beginning of Jesus' ministry in Nazareth, at a time when he reveals the nature and extent of his mission, thus suffering the rejection of those offended by the radical inclusiveness of the gospel. What captured my attention in the reading of this text was its description of the radical inclusive nature of the power of the Gospel. Not only is this incident paradigmatic of Jesus' life and ministry, but it is also a reminder that God's grace is never subject to the limitations and boundaries of any

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<sup>18</sup> Swensson, 16. In my studies on the Lutheran missionary expansion to Puerto Rico, I have a special debt of gratitude to Rev. Ronald Will for enriching my research with a number of important documents sent to me for the celebration of the centennial of Lutheranism in Puerto Rico. One of such documents written by Rev. William G. Arbaugh after visiting with pastor Swensson in Detroit, Michigan in 1948 argues that, 1) it was on November, about a month after Swensson's arrival in San Juan that he was confronted by Mr. Browne; 2) Mr. Browne's tailor shop was at 11 Luna street; 3) while the exact date of the Lutheran service in Puerto Rico is uncertain, Arbaugh favors as the most probable the date of November 11, 1898. William G. Arbaugh, "Gustav Sigfrid Swensson and the Puerto Rico Lutheran mission." (This essay was written in March 22, 1948 and mimeographed for distribution at Frederick Lutheran Church, St. Croix, Virgin Islands during the 1960's.)

<sup>19</sup> The name of this tailor was John Christopher Owen Browne, a Jamaican Negro (African Caribbean) of Protestant background who had been in St. Thomas where he formed a decided liking for the Lutheran Church. On learning that Mr. Swensson was a Lutheran he offered his tailor shop as a meeting place for services. Arbaugh, "Because he looked like a man of God," 16.



nation, church, group, or race. Those who would exclude others thereby exclude themselves. Human beings may be instruments of God's grace for others, but we are never free to set limits on who may receive that grace. Throughout history, the gospel has always been more radically inclusive than any group, denomination, or church. We are called to break the patterns of prejudice, racism and injustice that set people apart, to struggle for a witness that may show the radical inclusiveness in the power of the gospel.<sup>20</sup>

Francisco Molina, a native Puerto Rican pastor and writer, captured the popular celebration and support for the struggle of those native leaders who pioneered the Lutheran mission in Puerto Rico in a delightful and compelling poem. The poem tells the story of 3 young men whose candid and faithful yearnings, led them to pursue a lifelong quest. As they moved forward in their mission, they confronted a sorceress who tried to dissuade them from their journey. "Don't you know," she said, "the negative consequences of your quest? Give it up, it's not worth it." They replied, "We are willing to pay the price. It's our choice and we want to carry on." Again she tried to discourage them saying, "Don't you know that when the going gets rough, you'll be disregarded and abandoned by those who now support you?" They answered, "Our convictions will not tremble, for we know well what we are up to." "Fools!" She riposted, "yours is an ungrateful and unfortunate quest. You still have time to turn back. Give it up, it's not worth it." But the 3 young men stood their ground. "It's too late to turn around," they said. "Our call is from up high and we are moving on forward." The author ends the poem with the following remarks. "They were 3 courageous young and good men. One has already given account of his stewardship. We hope to have the other 2 with us for a long time. We pray God to have a greater number like them among us."<sup>21</sup>

One of the most intriguing chapters in the history of the North American Protestant expansion in Puerto Rico deals with the challenge posed by the emerging Puerto Rican leaders. For most North American missionaries the idea of integrating these leaders in the missionary project consisted first of all, as assisting in congregational tasks, or responding to the social needs of the people in the island.<sup>22</sup> The main role of indigenous leaders was to provide the support for North American missionaries to carry out their pastoral ministry. An incident in the history of the Lutheran mission in Puerto Rico places this Protestant missionary experience in a wider perspective, if we are willing to discern it in light of the reading of Luke's gospel mentioned above.

To prepare capable and competent indigenous leaders, the missionaries established in 1908 a *seminary* located at Divino Salvador Lutheran Church, in the city of Cataño. According to Rev. William G. Arbaugh, the lay preachers had been under the impression that their studies at the *seminary* in Cataño would eventually prepare them as candidates for ordination. Living costs had risen sharply and had seriously aggravated the chronic financial plight of the workers and of their growing families. The North American missionaries on the other hand, had selected three young men to train and instruct them at the "seminary for native helpers," with the goal of making them efficient

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<sup>20</sup> The New Interpreter's Commentary on the Bible, 106.

<sup>21</sup> This paraphrased translation is by this author. Francisco Molina, "Hace muchos años: Para Sergio Cobián y Guillermo E. Marrero," in *Ciudad allende el alba* (Dorado: Sínodo Luterano del Caribe, 1999), 106-8.

<sup>22</sup> For this purpose the early Puerto Rican leaders served as readers of the Bible in the worship services, lay congregational workers and preachers, etc.

collaborators in the missionary work. The missionaries were obviously thinking of their immediate needs and not of implications as to the future status of the student assistants. In following this procedure our missionaries were doing exactly what most other Protestant missions were doing. They probably did not seriously consider the possibility that the “helpers” would eventually stand in line for ordination.<sup>23</sup> They did not stop to think that the situation in 1918 was not in harmony with the best Lutheran practice. At this time the Lutheran mission was mostly focused among the poor sectors of the Puerto Rican society, leading to neglect the need for developing a more rigorous educational program for the preparation of native helpers to work in this setting. The consequences of this attitude soon followed. The first of these students (Manuel Hidalgo) left the work after 2 years; the next 2 students (Lorenzo Hurtado, Pascual López) left within one year.<sup>24</sup>

To be sure, we need to acknowledge the great contribution of North American Protestant missionaries for the proclamation and expansion of the gospel in Puerto Rico. At the same time, we need to point out that this expression of the gospel was strongly influenced by the prejudice in the dominant culture of their country of origin, against our people in the mission field. Gustav S. Swensson to whom the establishment of Lutheranism in Puerto Rico has been attributed by many, once mentioned in a published article that,

“I saw the Puerto Ricans as a people in misery, ignorance, superstition and fatal errors...”<sup>25</sup>

As we learned from the reading of Luke, Jesus’ proclamation of the gospel can not be restricted to a specific nation, culture, race, gender or sexual preference. We are call to witness to God’s gracious initiative to all peoples. For this reason we need to resist the temptation to limit, not just our understanding of the recipients of this gift, but also our perceptions of those that become the most effective vehicles of this gracious divine initiative among us.

William G. Arbaugh states that eventually, the native lay preachers studying at the seminary in Cataño were able to successfully complete the requirements established for ordination and,

“In the presence of a large congregation at San Pablo Lutheran Church in San Juan, Demetrio Texidor, Guillermo E. Marrero and Salustiano Hernández were Ordained to the ministry of the gospel on Sunday July 10<sup>th</sup>, 1926.”<sup>26</sup>

The installation of Carmen Rabell as executive director of El Centro Luterano de Formación Teológica at the Caribbean Synod on February 1<sup>st</sup>, and Francisco Molina’s

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<sup>23</sup> This is shown by the practical but elementary course of study provided. Ironically, three-fourth of the preaching, with nearly all the catechizing and other pastoral work, was performed by the lay assistants who were not permitted to perform such pastoral functions as the administration of the sacraments, confirmation and marriage. In addition, the salaries of the lay preachers were never sufficient to allow their families a decent standard of living. Arbaugh, “Fred W. Lindke and the era of Transition: Puerto Rico Lutheran history from 1918 to 1928,” in *El Testigo* (Enero, 1949), 13-16.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>25</sup> Swensson, “I went to Puerto Rico,” in *El Testigo* (Octubre, 1948), 16.

<sup>26</sup> Arbaugh, 7

poem celebrate the continuous and collective effort of people from Europe, North, Central and South America, Puerto Rico and many other countries, in their faithful contribution of their leadership and gifts, to the call of expanding the borders of God's reign in the context of the Lutheran mission in Puerto Rico.<sup>27</sup>

## **II- Third Story: Doña Juana de Sardén and the Contribution of Puerto Rican Women Lay Workers**

The third and final story points to the contribution of Puerto Rican women for advancing the Lutheran mission in the island. The roll played by these women in the mission and ministry of the church was, from the beginning, very significant. As I mentioned earlier, the conviction, resilience and initiative of these native pioneers, served to establish creative models of lay and ordained ministry throughout these 100 years of Lutheranism in Puerto Rico.

There is a song in the new Spanish hymnal produced by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) for its Spanish speaking constituency in the U.S. and Puerto Rico, that brings to my mind some important dimensions of the contribution of these women. Its title, *God's calling now is for a new experience* (Dios hoy nos llama a un momento nuevo) suggest the type of vision and commitment expressed by these women as they accepted their call for ministry. The hymn is a celebration of the foresight and stimulating witness of these faithful leaders, compelling us to join them today in moving forward the transformative power of the gospel.

God's calling now is for a new experience,  
to walk along with God's people.  
Its time to transform that which has no future,  
our separation and loneliness  
will render barren our efforts.

So, come,  
Join us and let's be together with others,  
You are very important.  
Therefore come,  
join us in our circle of togetherness,  
your presence is very significant, so come.

Its useless to believe that things are easy  
we are encircled by death producing forces  
which bring us pain, sadness and desolation,  
that's why we need to strengthen our union.

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<sup>27</sup> My perception of the reasons leading to the decision to ordain these native candidates point to the collective contribution of the following elements: The perseverance and determination of native candidates to request ordination; the vision and creative initiatives of church leaders (Zenán M. Corbé, B. F. Hankey, Hans Naether and Gustav K. Huf) and two Philadelphia seminarians (Eduardo Roig and William G. Arbaugh) in support of this request to meet the needs for additional partners in ministry for the missionary expansion of Lutheranism in Puerto Rico. *Ibid.*, 14.

The power source that brings life today  
empowers us with its graciousness  
inviting us to join efforts in sharing God's love with others.<sup>28</sup>

The first Puerto Rican chatechetical class prepared by Gustav Sigfrid Swensson and confirmed on April 15, 1900 consisted of 4 young women (Gabriela Cuervos, Eufemia Flores, Belén Martínez and Pascuala Pantojas), from whom Gabriela Cuervos emerged as the first Puerto Rican missionary. She worked for 7 years before being sent to Milwaukee by the Ladies' Home and Foreign Mission Society for training. She returned to her position in Puerto Rico on June 1906 and continued her service in the church. Her tasks comprised teaching, caring for the sick and those in need; leading Sunday school and evangelism programs, working with youth, elderly, women and other church related activities. Upon retirement, the missionary society that sponsored her work and studies abroad provided the funds for her residence.<sup>29</sup>

What caught my attention while being acquainted with her story was that for the first 3 years of her work with the church in Puerto Rico, she received no salary. To be sure, she was not alone in this predicament. Many of the Protestant missionaries from the United States had a similar experience. Its common knowledge that Gustav S. Swensson just had a 5-dollar bill with some change when he arrived in Puerto Rico back in October of 1898. Yet he had been promised assistance that later supported the work in the island. His income as an English language teacher in Puerto Rico also served to support him and his work until the arrival of the financial assistance sent by Lutheran bodies in the main land. The situation of native Puerto Rican workers was different. They didn't have those additional resources.

While I don't ever remember having a conversation with Gabriela Cuervos, I do recall the contribution of many other women who followed in her ministry. Doña Juana de Sardén offered one of such powerful testimonies. During the early 1950's, my father accepted the call as pastor of El Divino Salvador Lutheran Church in the city of Cataño. The church's lay worker at the time was doña Juana, as we fondly called her. Doña Juana was an awesome and terrific leader. She was everywhere doing everything. On Sundays she led the Sunday school program and later sat in one of the pews at the end of the sanctuary, where she took attendance for the worship service. During the week she visited those absent and kept my father and the rest of the congregational leaders informed of the physical, spiritual and emotional needs of the community. She never failed to attend a worship service or any of the church's activities. She served people in the church and the community at large. She was their friend, confidant and advocate. She lived a humble life with her spouse and six children in an apartment in the *caserío*, a location equivalent to the projects in big cities like New York or Chicago.

I've been told that once she requested funds from the church to pay for health insurance. At that time health insurance costs ran for about 60 dollars. For a while, the church refused her petition. In spite of this incident she continued her work with enthusiasm and faithfully. I've always wondered the reason for the church's leaders refusal of her request. My familiarity with the history of the North American Protestant expansion in Puerto Rico leads me to suggest that, rather than focusing on the individual

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<sup>28</sup> Translated paraphrase mine.

<sup>29</sup> "Doña Gabriela Cuervos Vda. De Marks," in *El Testigo*, (Abril, 1936), 2.

intentions of these church leaders, we might be better served by exploring this matter in the broader framework of the economic, political and ideological context of this Protestant expansion to Puerto Rico.

Recent studies show that while the extension of North American Protestantism in the Caribbean accompanied the military and commercial expansion of the U.S. in the region, it also contributed to the ideological goal to *civilize* this non-Protestant world. An imperialistic theology based on the writings of Josiah Strong was intentionally developed to connect the twofold intention of the puritan, Protestant providential vision to civilize and proclaim the gospel in these lands.<sup>30</sup> Lutheran missionaries shared this common vision. An additional consequence of this religious ideological influence, was the disposition of Puerto Rican leaders to internalize this foreign and onerous disposition. These and other related elements provide a better understanding of the decision of these church leaders in rejecting the legitimacy of doña Juana's request.

Not too long ago I faced a similar experience, when during my studies for the doctoral degree at LSTC, I solicited from representatives of the synod, the opportunity of serving as interim pastor in one of the local Latino congregations. While this incident took place way before the organization of the ELCA, their response to my request continues to disturb me. While they affirmed and supported my petition, they warned me that, given the condition of poverty of many Latinos in the *barrio*, I should expect lower pay for my work in the parish. This was probably the common predicament of those choosing to minister with other communities with lower income.

There is a story in Mark's gospel that helps me reflect on this issue. It's the story of the widow's gift (12: 41-44). I am convinced that any ecclesial body committed to expand its mission among ethnic communities whose social and economic history has been characterized by exploitation and racism, will need to engage in a thoughtful reflection of economic models more in tune with the gospel than with the fundamental premises of a market or money making economy. The story in the gospel of Mark serves as a resource for Jesus to share with his followers an important teaching. Jesus' understanding of the widow's conduct subverts the whole notion of traditional religious economy. In contrast to the sterility of the dominant religion, that tends to give so much priority to matters of money, the poor widow demonstrates her strength and true faith in God. With God, all things are possible. God's loving mercy grants us that which we don't even dare imagine. The future belongs to God who has dwelled amongst us, making available an enduring and unparalleled power. We are called to live by faith in God's power and promise. I am convinced this was the source of the vision and witness of Gabriela Cuervos, doña Juana and the host of Puerto Rican women that followed in their footsteps.

### **Concluding Remarks**

At the beginning of my lecture I aimed to provide a reading in *Spanish* of the expansion of Lutheranism in Puerto Rico. My efforts in accomplishing this task incorporated the collective expressions of stories, homiletical reflections, visual images, and music, references to first sources and other documents, in furnishing the testimony of the protagonists of this story. The goal was to render a language closer to the vernacular

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<sup>30</sup> Silva Gotay, 53-101.

of the people in the margins. They are the ones who can best judge the success of my labor.

I do want to conclude with the following reflections. First, this study constitutes just a preliminary analysis of the topic requiring further and more probing examination. I consider my contribution to this task not that of an expert, but rather the one characteristic of a devoted student with a great deal of enthusiasm and curiosity to continue to pursue it. I hope to have stimulated enough interest for others to join in this venture. I am committed to continue exploring this topic, hoping that an increasing number of students will come to our programs of studies to further pursue this area of research.

Second, I am confident that this reading in *Spanish*, or in the *vernacular* of the Puerto Rican people, has taught us something significant about the missionary experience of Lutheranism in the island. One of the most important learnings is to avoid a naive or romantic approach in reading this story, or for that matter, history as a whole. It is clear that traditional efforts to stress the heroism of the North American missionaries, at the cost of demeaning the dignity and contribution of Puerto Rican leaders, is based on the limitations and prejudice of those telling the story. To be sure, an uncritical description of the role of native Puerto Rican leaders is equally problematic. A more faithful account will describe the ambiguities, failures and promise of all the characters.

In assessing the continuing significance of the Christian mission in North America since the 16<sup>th</sup> century the Rt. Rev. Steven Charleston, a citizen of the Choctaw Nation and currently President and Dean of the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, MA, points to the experience of transformation produced by the gospel, as the legitimate faithful exchange among peoples of different cultures, as they encounter each other.<sup>31</sup> This transformative power of the gospel was then, and continues to be today, the most important component of the church's mission. Granted this framework of interpretation, all the characters in the story play, in their unique way, a significant roll in witnessing to the power of the gospel to move forward in their witness, and at times in spite of it, the Lutheran mission in Puerto Rico.

Victor Westhelle has argued that the most valuable contribution of Protestantism in Latin America lies in witnessing to what Luther understood as *teologia crucis*. According to Westhelle, Luther chose the use of the expression "theologian of the cross," instead of "theology of the cross," to emphasize the practical nature of this notion and avoid confusing it with a doctrinal locus. The reformer's intention was not to articulate the conceptualization of another theological topic, but to point to a theological praxis, that is, a unique form of theological reflection that emerges from and is fundamentally expressed through a liberating practice.<sup>32</sup> It is in this sense, that the challenges and

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<sup>31</sup> Steven Charleston, "The Good, the Bad and the New: The Native American Missionary Experience," in *Dialog* 40:2 (Summer 2001), 99-104.

<sup>32</sup> "Lo que une a la Reforma y a los movimientos de liberación en Latinoamérica y en el Caribe, es la visión escatológica, un entendimiento de la revelación, una apocalíptica que reconoce el fin y lo posee como propio, igual que como un lugar apropiado para el comienzo. Este espacio escatológico que, para los poderes representa tan solo el límite, es para los que lo habitan, aquellos que se encuentran en los márgenes, el medio donde experimentan la condenación, pero donde la liberación es una posibilidad verdadera... Unidos por la experiencia de "liminalidad," de estar en el límite, tanto la Reforma, como los movimientos emancipatorios en América Latina y el Caribe, están comprometidos a una gestión

hardships experienced by those participating in the Lutheran mission in Puerto Rico, as well as their vision and enthusiasm to continue their witness driven by the transformative power of the gospel, are examples of Luther's understanding of the praxis of the theologians of the cross. The three stories I chose for my presentation tonight focused on the contribution of Puerto Rican leaders in this witness of faith. Those interested in exploring the experience of other characters, will provide additional components of this story.

To those gathered here tonight honoring me and the ones that I mentioned in my study I want to express my appreciation, as well as defy your response to this challenge.

Thank you very much.

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fundamental que orienta todo su esfuerzo teológico. Esta se puede expresar en la famosa definición de Lutero: *Crux sola est nostra theologia*. Westhelle, 111.