



Finding a home in the immigrant church

Kretcha Roldan-Rodriguez
Associate Director of Literacy,
School of Social Work,
Baylor University,
Waco, TX



In the photo above, Kretcha takes some of the youth group from Primera Iglesia Bautista Church in New Brunswick, NJ, on a social outing.

As a migrant learning to speak English, I found that my 12 years of private schooling hadn't quite prepared me to live among the English speakers. As soon as I opened my mouth, people in the Northeast, where I first lived, knew that I had studied the language, but I felt too self-conscious of my own accent. As conversations developed and involved knowing the context of a new culture, I ran out of words.

I wanted desperately to say what I was thinking; I wanted to communicate my inner-most feelings and my deeper thoughts about my new experiences. This was possible, but with only some success, and it was always complicated and extremely frustrating. It was simply not easy to find the correct and exact words to make an informed argument without sounding like I was going in circles. Some have argued that the Spanish language does go off in circles and that English is more linear. Hence, I have always felt a heavy heart. Experiences I processed incredibly in my mind felt trapped there, without any promise of liberty. I was beginning to feel imprisoned in my own world.

When I found the immigrant church, however, I felt a sense of relief and new freedom. In that place, I could be me. It was a refuge and a secret place where other immigrants suddenly found acceptance. They came from all different countries in Latin America — Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Colombia, Mexico, Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic and others. We celebrated each other during the Hispanic Awareness Month and found out about what made each country different and special. During family gatherings, we shared about our country's history and political struggles, our people, differ-

ent food and diverse use of Spanish words. Our gatherings made us feel at home. Suddenly, the intensity and stress of living as a foreigner was less painful and more manageable.

To this community of faith I owe so much. When I had difficulties in my job they listened. When I was preparing for tests and papers in college they prayed. When I got sick they visited. When I felt lonely they were there. We lived as a community bonded by the love of Christ and a commitment to each other.

Immigrant churches have been instrumental in providing a range of ministerial services. They provide support through social networks, helping with basic needs (food, shelter, transportation and money), pastoral guidance and fellowship, empathy and advocacy, among other things. They also are a healing place for all the suffering caused by civil wars and extreme poverty. These stories are very important in our communities. I have heard stories of pain and suffering on the lips of very brave and faithful men and women.

This is how we, as immigrants, process the reasons for leaving what is familiar and important to us. We tell each other about our migratory travel and our first day in the United

States. We share how God has provided for us and our families abroad and how much closer our relationship has been because of this experience. We seek stories in the Bible that mirror our experiences, such as Ruth and Naomi, and Abraham and Sarah. Suddenly these stories have a new meaning for us; now they seem real. When we look at our trespasses, we often first think about whether or not we have lied to get into the United States, and if we have, our hearts feel heavy and remorseful. We know that we have sinned, but we also know that we are justified in Him through His blood, and we again feel redeemed.

Our experience is full of contradictions: sometimes we wished we could go back to our native countries with our families, and other times we know that we have improved the quality of life for our children by coming here. It is a struggle between the heart and mind that has no resolution in this life. We are most certainly pilgrims in this land seeking for an eternal one where there is no more suffering, tears, hunger, violence, corruption and injustice. We seek a place that for eternity we can call home.

Serving and worshipping together

Kretcha and Rady moved to the continental United States from Puerto Rico soon after they married in 1993. Rady had been accepted at the graduate sociology program of Rutgers University, NJ, and they planned to both pursue graduate degrees and then return to Puerto Rico. They found, though, that their lives were enriched as a result of working with immigrant churches and their plans changed.

They have participated in three immigrant churches: at Primera Iglesia Bautista that targeted Latino urban youth in New Brunswick; at Primera Iglesia Bautista de Trenton, NJ, where Rady pastored

and Kretcha worked with youth as social outreach coordinator; at Primera Iglesia Bautista en Everett in Lawrence, MA, where they worked with Latino youth from throughout greater Boston; and currently as founders of the Hispanic-American Baptist Church of Hewitt, TX.

In 2004, the family, now with son Benjamin and daughter Gabriella, moved to Waco, Texas, when Rady accepted a faculty position at Baylor's George W. Truett Theological Seminary. Kretcha most recently worked in the Baylor School of Social Work with literacy programs for Texas churches.