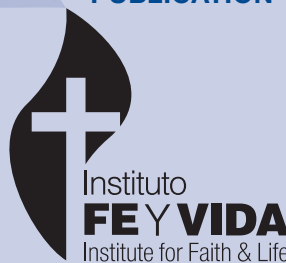




**Perspectives
on Hispanic Youth
and Young Adult
Ministry**



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Welcoming Hispanic Youth / Jóvenes in Catholic Parishes and Dioceses

by Ken Johnson-Mondragón

In early 2001, the first data from Census 2000 became available, revealing that the young Hispanic population in the United States had grown much larger than anyone expected. However, very little reliable information was available about youth ministry with Hispanics in the Catholic church.

In order to answer some of the questions raised by the new census data, Instituto Fe y Vida established the National Research and Resource Center for Hispanic Youth and Young Adult Ministry at the end of 2001. In its first year, the Center published a preliminary study on the status of Hispanic youth and young adult ministry in the United States.

The purpose of this article is to summarize some of the more important contributions on the pastoral needs of Hispanic youth and young adults from the earlier study, to update the demographic data with the latest information from the U.S. Census Bureau and other sources, and to offer some specific suggestions for the growth and development of ministry with Hispanic youth and young adults.

Hispanic growth from 1990 to 2008

A simple comparison of the ethnic/racial background of young Catholics between 1990 and 2008 reveals the extent of recent demographic shifts. Since the U.S. Census Bureau does not track religious identity, Figure 1 was compiled utilizing the best information available from 1990 and 2008 on

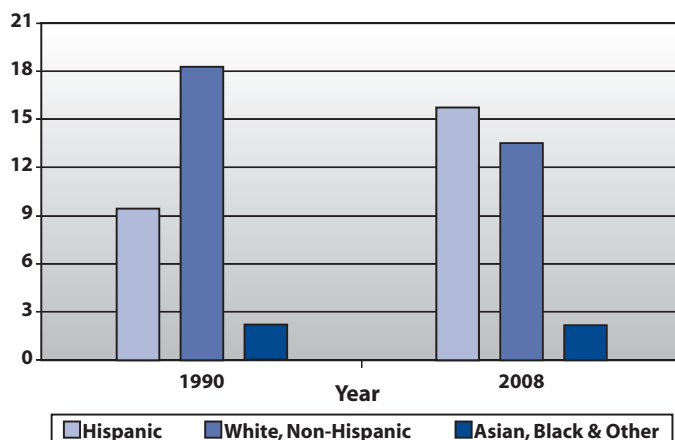


Figure 1: Estimated Catholics Under Age 30 in the United States by Race / Ethnicity and Year, in Millions

the religious identity of each ethnic/racial group, weighted and balanced to the census population data.

The graph shows that the number of white, non-Hispanic Catholics under the age of 30 in the U.S. has decreased from about 18.3 million in 1990 to about 13.5 million in 2008. This 26 percent decrease reflects the aging of the Baby Boom generation that resulted in a 7 percent decrease in the overall white, non-Hispanic population under age 30 during those 18 years. The general trend in the U.S. away from organized religious practice is also a factor.

In contrast, the number of **Hispanic** Catholics under age 30 has **increased** from about 9.4 million to about 15.7 million—a 67 percent increase. The number of black, Asian, Native American, Pacific Islander and other Catholics under age 30 remained unchanged from 1990 to 2008 at roughly 2.2 million. Overall, Hispanics now account for about 50 percent of all Catholics under age 30 in the U.S.

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Catholic population by age in 2008

The graph below provides a more precise breakdown of the Catholic population by age and race/ethnicity:

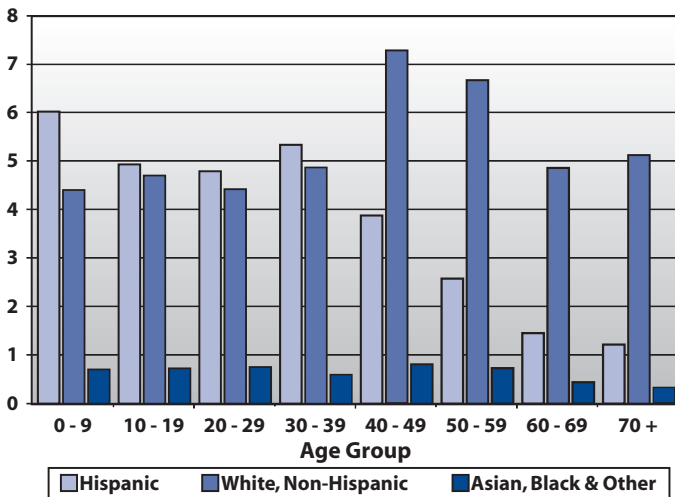


Figure 2: Estimated Catholic Population in the United States by Age Group and Race / Ethnicity in 2008, in Millions

Among white, non-Hispanic Catholics, the contours of the population graph reflect the size of the Baby Boom generation, as well as the tendency of young adults to stray away from organized religious practice. Thus, there are 64% more white Catholics in their 40s than in their 20s.

For Hispanic Catholics, the reverse is true—there are 24% more Hispanic Catholics in their 20s than in their 40s. In fact, 52% of all Hispanic Catholics are under the age of 30, versus only 32% for white Catholics. Because Hispanics continue to have larger families than their white counterparts, and most immigrant Hispanics come to the U.S. as young adults, this concentration of Hispanics among the young is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. In addition, as of July 2008, Hispanic Catholics outnumber all other Catholics combined in the under-30 age group.

Ministry with young Catholics

Not surprisingly, the changing demographics in the Catholic church are most visible in the ministries that serve young people. Religious education is now available in Spanish in many parts of the country, including many places that have not had large Hispanic populations until very recently. Considering the fact that more than half of all Hispanics under age 10 are the children of immigrants (see Figure 4), it makes sense that there would be a need to offer this ministry in Spanish.

But what about ministry with Hispanic adolescents and young adults? Are there enough young Hispanics in the church to justify the development of special programs to meet their needs, as has been done for their younger brothers and sisters? This is a difficult question to answer, and each diocese and parish should give it careful consideration based on the characteristics of the population they serve.

A good starting point might be to look at the Catholic population in age groups that correspond roughly to the stages of the life cycle in the U.S.: preschool, elementary

and middle school, high school, young adulthood, early middle age, late middle age, senior, and elderly. Figure 3 shows how the Catholic population breaks down at each of these stages in the life cycle:

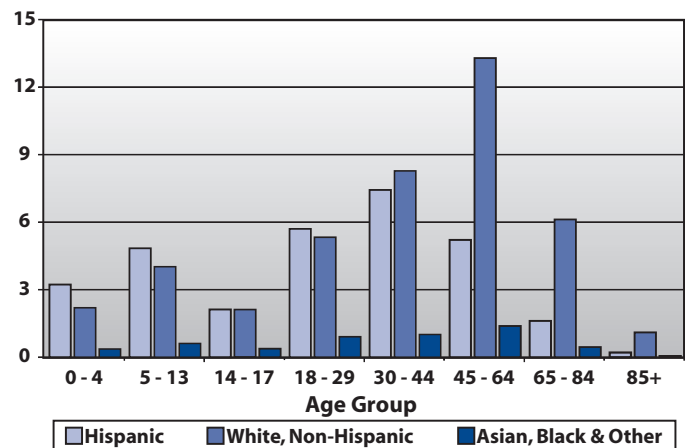


Figure 3: Estimated Catholic Population in the United States by Age Group and Race / Ethnicity in 2008, in Millions

Hispanics now make up about 47% of all Catholics of high school age (14 to 17), and about 48% of all young adult Catholics (18 to 29). However, these numbers do not say anything about the language abilities of Hispanic youth and young adults. Nor do they tell how comfortable these young people will be when placed in settings organized and directed by people of a different cultural heritage, such as most parish youth groups.

The generational factor

The structure of generational diversity among Hispanics in the U.S. sheds some light on the experience and needs of young Hispanics, as depicted in the following graph:

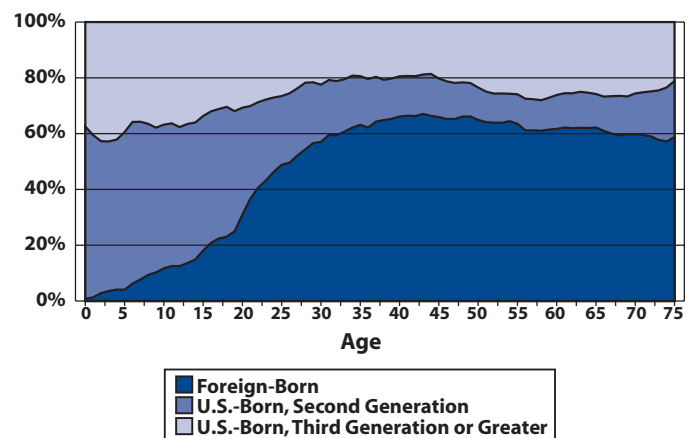


Figure 4: Generational Diversity Among U.S. Hispanics in 2009 by Age

Figure 4 shows tremendous growth in the immigrant population between ages 18 and 30—the prime years for young people seeking a better life in the United States. Above age 35, about 64% of all Hispanics are immigrants, while below age 20, only 10% are immigrants.

As a result of this generational diversity, the generation

gap between adult and adolescent Hispanics often represents a culture gap as well, between immigrant adults and U.S.-born adolescents. This culture gap makes it difficult for the immigrant adults to relate to the young people in their parishes—even if the young people are mostly Hispanic!

It is not surprising, then, that most of the young adult immigrant Hispanics tend to dedicate their pastoral efforts to the parish *grupo juvenil* (Spanish-speaking youth and young adult group) in preference to the youth ministry. The problem here is that very few Hispanic adults are serving in youth ministry as role models for the mostly U.S.-born Hispanic teens.

To make matters worse, many parish youth ministers are not well-prepared for cross-cultural ministry. In 2002, the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry (NFCYM) published a summary of recent research on youth ministry as a profession in the Catholic church. Their survey of about 800 parish and diocesan youth ministers from all areas of the country showed that the area in which youth ministers feel least competent is “responding to the needs of youth from different cultures.”

At the same time, only about 5 percent of the youth ministers themselves were Hispanic, and “courses in various cultural backgrounds” were among the elements most frequently omitted from ministry formation programs. So where does that leave today’s young Hispanic Catholics?

Pastoral reality of Hispanic youth

It may be helpful to take a closer look at how the Catholic population breaks down among teens of high school age:

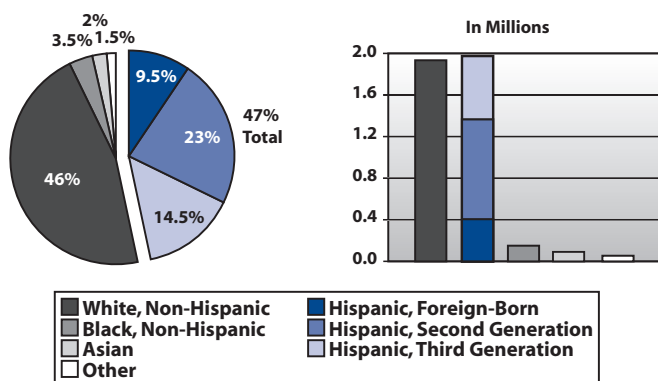


Figure 5: Estimated U.S. Catholics of High School Age (14 to 17) in 2008 by Race / Ethnicity and Generation

Figure 5 shows that about 47% of the 4.6 million Catholics of high school age in the U.S. are Hispanic. Nearly half of these Hispanic teens are the children of immigrants.

Data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s March 2009 Current Population Survey suggest that about 31% of the immigrant Hispanic youth and about 14% of the U.S.-born Hispanic youth will not complete high school before age 20. Altogether there are about 375 thousand Catholic Hispanics of high school age who will not complete high school.

Linguistically, about 22% of the Hispanic Catholics of high school age speak primarily Spanish at home. About

35% speak Spanish and English equally, and about 43% speak primarily English at home, although many of them have some ability to speak Spanish when necessary.

More will be said later in this article about the challenge of reaching larger numbers of Hispanic youth in Catholic youth ministry. For now it is sufficient to mention that low educational attainment, linguistic differences, and cultural differences between Hispanic youth, their parents, and the youth ministers, all conspire to make mainstream Catholic youth ministry unattractive to many (not all) Hispanic youth and/or their parents. If Hispanic Catholic teens have not felt comfortable in their parish youth groups, it follows that as they become adults they may also be underrepresented among youth ministers, and indeed in the leadership of the Catholic church at every level, as they currently are.

There seems to be a myth among Catholic youth ministers that Hispanic teens will be cared for by the Hispanic adults who are of their culture, so the non-Hispanic ministers need not reach out to them. The reality is that most Hispanic youth are living between two cultures, neither of which is fully theirs. This means that adult leaders of youth ministry—both Hispanics and non-Hispanics alike—must learn to do cross-cultural ministry in order to reach more of today’s Hispanic youth.

Many of today’s youth ministers (both English-speaking and Spanish-speaking) are ill prepared for this challenge. Until this situation is changed, a significant sector of the young Catholic church will continue to be isolated and alienated from the pastoral care offered in their parishes.

Structural exclusion of Hispanic youth

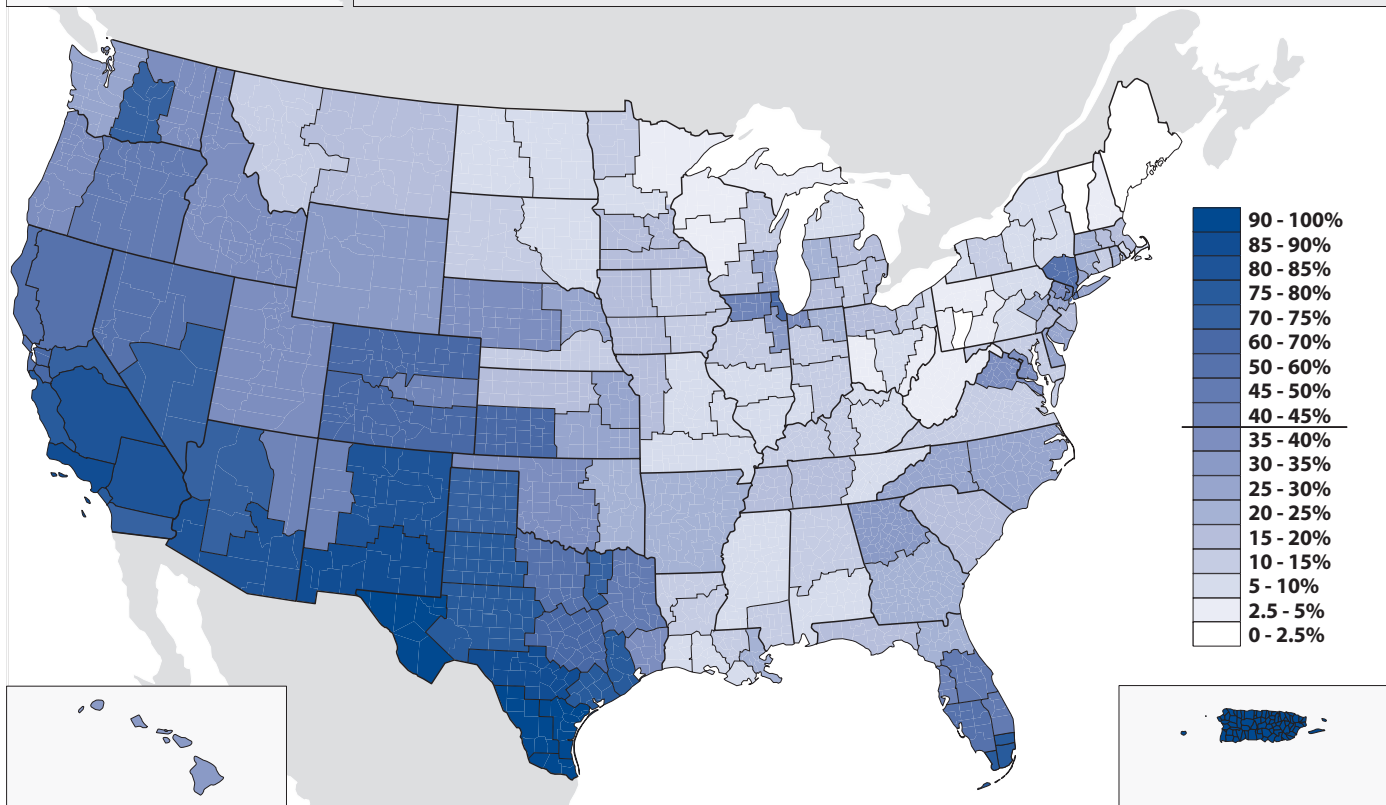
The results of this kind of “structural exclusion” of Hispanic youth are most evident at large national gatherings of Catholic youth. For example, at the 2001 National Catholic Youth Conference (NCYC) in Indianapolis, only about 5% of the 20,000+ Catholic teens attending the event were Hispanic.

This means that 11 times as many Hispanic youth would have had to attend in order to have representation proportional to the size of their population among Catholic youth. For comparison purposes, the Asian and black participants were also underrepresented, but to a lesser degree. Only 3 times as many of them would have had to attend in order to have proportional participation.

This underrepresentation of “minorities” may be due in part to the location of the NCYC, since it was held in one of the areas of the country with the lowest levels of Hispanic presence, as can be seen in the map at the top of the next page. Perhaps there are other reasons for the low Hispanic turnout that are not yet fully understood. Conversations with the organizers in the NFCYM reveal that great efforts were made in preparation for the NCYC 2001 to welcome Hispanic participants, including making \$100,000 in scholarships available; yet the results of those efforts continue to disappoint.

Irrespective of the circumstances, the low participation of Hispanics in national Catholic youth events begs the question of whether it is reflective of a larger failure on the

Estimated Hispanics as a Percentage of All Catholics Under Age 30, by Diocese in 2000



part of parish and diocesan youth ministry efforts to reach the Hispanic youth in dioceses across the country.

A map of young Hispanics by diocese

One of the major obstacles to reaching more Hispanic youth lies in the fact that many diocesan and parish leaders simply are not aware of how many young Hispanics are living in their geographic boundaries. To remedy this obstacle, the National Research and Resource Center for Hispanic Youth and Young Adult Ministry has compiled census and regional data on race, ethnicity, and religious preference. Based on this data, the map above shows the proportion of Hispanics among Catholics under age 30 for each diocese in the U.S.

A detailed explanation of how this map was created is available from the Center; however, it is worth mentioning here that the areas of the country with the lowest concentration of Hispanic Catholics are also generally the areas that have seen the greatest percentage growth between 1990 and 2000. In many cases the Hispanic population in these areas is made up mostly of recent immigrants, thus creating a need for Spanish-language ministry in many dioceses where Hispanics make up only a small percentage of the overall Catholic population. As the Hispanic population in the

U.S. continues to grow over the next 20 years, it is expected that Hispanics will increasingly make up a sizeable portion of the Catholic population in these dioceses as well.

It is not possible in a map of the entire United States to show how many young Hispanics are living in the geographic boundaries of individual parishes. However, the U.S. Census Bureau publishes racial and ethnic population data for geographies smaller than parishes, and Instituto Fe y Vida's Research Center is prepared to assist in doing this type of analysis within individual diocesan or parish boundaries if it would be of assistance to the pastoral team.

Pastoral reality of Hispanic young adults

The above map is based on Catholics under age 30. This includes a large number of young adult Catholics, ages 18 to 29. For the sake of comparison with the Catholic youth of high school age discussed above, Figure 6 on the following page shows the racial/ethnic and generational segments of the young adult Catholic population in 2008.

There are two significant points to note here. First, in 2008 the white, non-Hispanic Catholics made up less than half of all young adult Catholics. Second, the immigrant population is significantly larger here than it was for

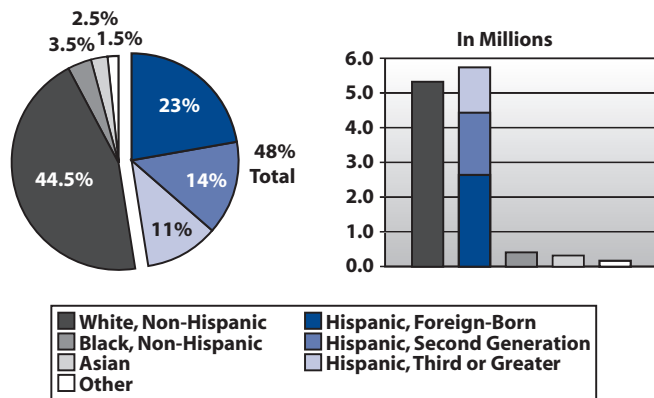


Figure 6: Estimated U.S. Catholics From 18 to 29 Years Old in 2008 by Race / Ethnicity and Generation

the high school age Catholics. This is due to the continuing wave of Hispanics who come to the U.S. looking for work, starting at about age 15.

Not surprisingly, the language picture is also different. About 26% of the Hispanic young adults speak Spanish and little or no English; 53% are bilingual to various degrees; and about 21% are monolingual English-speakers. The perennial question in ministry with Hispanic youth and young adults is: should programs be in English or in Spanish?

According to a survey done by the U.S. Bishop's Secretariat for Hispanic Affairs in 1997, 63% of U.S. parishes offered high school youth ministry (in English), while only 6.5% offered *pastoral juvenil hispana* (youth and young adult ministry in Spanish for single Hispanics ages 16 to 30). With about 2.9 million foreign-born Hispanic Catholics between the ages of 16 and 30 living in the U.S. today, there are likely many more parishes that are now ministering with Hispanic youth and young adults in Spanish, yet this population continues to be underserved.

There are presently no reliable data available on the number of Hispanics participating in each of these ministries across the country. This absence of information makes it difficult for the Catholic church to assess its effectiveness in reaching its young Hispanic members, relative to the outreach offered to other ethnic and racial groups.

Pastoral categories of young Hispanics

Faced with this challenge, Instituto Fe y Vida has developed a tool to assist parish pastors and diocesan offices of youth and young adult ministry to gauge the extent and effectiveness of their outreach to Hispanic youth and young adults. Based on research and pastoral experience, Hispanic youth and young adults can be segmented into four pastoral categories according to their pastoral needs.

Of course, the lives of Hispanic youth and young adults involve complex interactions between individual experiences and cultural influences. Although U.S. society often lumps them all together in one category, their reality defies such a simple description. In fact, most young Hispanics will not fit neatly into any one of the categories defined below. Nevertheless, segmenting the population provides a useful point of reference for evaluating current programming to

determine how effectively the church is proclaiming the Good News of Christ to Hispanic youth and young adults of different backgrounds and needs.

Immigrant Workers
(20% to 40% of Young Hispanics)

- Mostly Spanish-speaking
- Mostly of Mexican origin
- Many are undocumented
- About 74% are Catholic
- Many seek moral and spiritual support from church
- Mostly at the lower end of the economic spectrum
- Little formal education
- Have large families
- Motivated and hopeful
- Willing to work hard

Most of the foreign-born Hispanics who come to the U.S. after age 15 can be considered "immigrant workers." More than half are from Mexico, the rest coming from Puerto Rico, Central and South America, and the Caribbean. They are highly motivated to work, and they are usually able to find jobs in the agricultural, manufacturing, and service sectors of the economy. The majority arrives without a high school education, and unless they have strong encouragement from others and are documented (about half are not), they likely will never complete their studies. Most continue to speak Spanish at home and at work, and they prefer to attend church services in Spanish.

Because of their hopefulness and willingness to work hard, their potential for pastoral leadership is tremendous; what is often lacking is the human and spiritual formation to provide stability and direction for the development of their gifts. In parishes around the country, many of these "immigrant workers" are seeking training and offering their gifts for ministry among their peers in *pastoral juvenil*.

Mainstream Movers
(15% to 25% of Young Hispanics)

- Mostly English-speaking
- Mostly born in the U.S.
- May leave barrio behind
- May leave Catholic Church
- May look down on other categories of Hispanics
- Mostly in middle-upper end of economic spectrum
- College education
- Attend private schools
- Motivated and hopeful
- Willing to work hard

A smaller but influential portion of the young Hispanic population might be described as "mainstream movers" because they are well educated and they know what it takes to get ahead in the United States. Most of them are second- or third-generation Americans with parents who understand the value of education. Some are immigrants who arrived legally and have a solid formal education or sufficient financial resources to make a new start here. Perhaps more than half of these young Hispanics have also benefited from education in Catholic or other private schools.

As they witness the pitfalls and struggles of other young Hispanics, some try to lend a helping hand by seeking careers in public service work, education, or politics. Other "mainstream movers" view these less fortunate Hispanics as obstacles in their path to success, so they deliberately

distance themselves from their cultural heritage in an effort to avoid being perceived by others as “typical” Hispanics. Those who are drawn to the church tend to integrate into mainstream youth groups or campus ministry without much difficulty.

Identity Seekers
(30% to 45% of Young Hispanics)

- Mostly born in the U.S.
- Children of immigrants
- Struggle to finish school
- May find hope in work or family relationships
- May seek refuge in alcohol, drugs, or promiscuity
- Mostly in lower-middle end of economic spectrum
- Mostly bilingual
- Low self-esteem
- Unmotivated/apathetic

In contrast to the “mainstream movers” who seem to fit in quite well in the U.S. culture and society, a large number of young Hispanics are looking for a sense of identity and belonging in a world that is neither their parents’ nor their own. Mostly the children or grandchildren of immigrants, they are citizens of the United States, but they and their loved ones have felt the sting of social and religious discrimination, poor education, and dehumanizing public policy. They are frequently bilingual but mostly use English among their peers.

These “identity seekers” are likely to be enrolled in public schools. The majority will finish high school, but few have the desire, the financial resources, and the support to pursue a bachelor’s degree. At school, they tend to avoid associating with their peers in both the mainstream culture and the gang subculture, because they feel neither accepted nor respected by them. For this reason, they will also avoid participating in church youth groups, unless there is a critical mass of young Hispanics like themselves among the leadership and the participants.

With the proper support, these young “identity seekers” have the potential to integrate into either the mainstream culture of the U.S. or the immigrant Hispanic culture, depending on whether they are more inclined to use their English or their Spanish. Their greatest personal struggle lies in developing and maintaining a healthy self-esteem. They need positive role models and a safe place to gather with other teens with whom they can relate and who will not judge them for the color of their skin, their neighborhood, or the music they enjoy.

Without proper support, they tend to busy themselves with immediate-gratification activities such as listening to music, danc-

ing, driving flashy cars, gossiping, and watching television or movies. During this time, they are neglecting their studies and not preparing themselves for their future. As their self-esteem deteriorates, they may become involved in self-destructive behaviors such as drug or alcohol abuse, promiscuous sexual activity, or suicidal thoughts. When their hope diminishes to the point of despair, they may turn to life in a gang, criminal activity, or even suicide as a final escape.

Gang Members and High Risk Youth
(10% to 15% of Young Hispanics)

- Limited bilingual abilities
- Mostly born in the U.S.
- Many live in inner cities
- Most are unemployed
- May become habitual drug users/sellers
- Mostly at the lower end of the economic spectrum
- Little formal education
- Anger towards society
- Experience despair
- Many are incarcerated

The final category includes young Hispanics who are gang members as well as high-risk youth. Gang members are individuals who join a gang for protection or a sense of belonging—usually out of despair that their future will ever offer them anything better. High-risk youth are young people whose lives have been filled with experiences of violence and suffering, leading to a choice for a criminal lifestyle.

Pastoral experience suggests that no one is attracted to the gang lifestyle, but rather defeated young people are pushed into it when they see no other alternatives, and most of them live to regret that decision. Gang members are seldom immigrants, unless they came to this country at a very young age. They may come from many different types of families, but in almost all cases they were raised in poverty.

They are bilingual to a certain degree, yet they generally are not fully proficient in either Spanish or English. Very few finish high school, and without marketable skills, many turn to selling drugs or other criminal activity as a way to survive. Chances are good that they will be incarcerated or killed before

they reach age thirty.

Pastoral needs by category

The pastoral needs of these four categories of young Hispanics are summarized in the table at the bottom of this page, together with a rough estimate of their relative proportions among young Hispanics today. A quick overview of the pastoral needs reveals that each category is very different from the others, and it is difficult to imagine one parish program that

	Immigrant Workers	Identity Seekers	Mainstream Movers	Gang Members
Spiritual Life	Need to form faith-based communities grounded in their culture of origin	Need mentoring to integrate faith and life amid cultural transition	Need guidance to overcome individualism & consumerism	Need faith to heal and move from anger / hatred to forgiveness
Intellectual Development	Need an accessible alternative system of education	Need encouragement to finish high school and set goals for higher education	Need financial aid and help understanding U.S. system of higher education	Need an accessible alternative system of education
Affective Maturity & Socialization	Need a healthy environment for developing relationships	Need assistance to develop self-esteem and faith in themselves	Need positive role models of social and cultural integration	Need a peer group and a safe place to belong with positive role models
Acquisition of Human Virtues	Need help to avoid the pitfalls of vice / addictions	Need guidance and direction in life	Need to value community service and social justice	Need counseling to overcome bad habits and attitudes
Percent of Young Hispanics	20% to 40%	30% to 45%	15% to 25%	10% to 15%

could adequately meet the needs of all groups, not to mention the needs of young Catholics of other races or ethnicities.

Of course, not every parish has all four categories of Hispanic youth and young adults, but there are undoubtedly many parishes where two or more categories are present. In these cases it may be necessary to make extra efforts to seek out and welcome groups that are being excluded, or perhaps it may be necessary to develop alternative programs to address their pastoral needs.

The monkey and the fish

An ancient Chinese parable about a monkey and a fish provides an excellent illustration of this point. It seems that there once was a great flood, and the river rose to the point of overflowing its banks. In the midst of the flood, a small fish and a monkey were both swept away by the current. As they struggled against the raging waters, the monkey passed under a tree with a low-lying branch, and she managed to pull herself up and out of the water.

While she rested in the security of the branch, she noticed that the fish continued to struggle in the current beneath her. So in a moment of great generosity of heart, she grabbed the fish and rescued him from the dangerous flood. Naturally, the fish was not very pleased in his new situation. So he bit the monkey, and she threw him back into the water just to spite him for his ingratitude.

In this parable, the water can be compared to one culture, and the tree to another. Culture is basically a complex set of interrelated assumptions about the world that allows human beings to understand what they experience and to feel confident in their interactions with others.

When people with different cultural expectations gather, there is a need to build trust through communication before they can feel comfortable and confident about sharing time and space. But that very communication is often problematic and fraught with misunderstandings because of the different sets of expectations.

Is it any wonder, then, that young people who are in the midst of a long process of discovering their own identity, have difficulty in bridging cultural divides as they interact with one another? In some cases, with a great deal of effort, monkeys may learn to scuba dive, and fish may learn to live in a fish bowl in a tree. These are the ones who should be called to share their gifts as leaders in multicultural ministry settings.

In other cases it may be necessary to work with the monkeys and the fish separately until they have grown strong in their own identity and culture, all the while reminding them that they are called to love their brothers and sisters who are different from themselves and introducing them to cultural differences in sacred times and places.

Of course, this parable is a bit simplistic in that it does not account for the fact that human beings are constantly adapting to new circumstances and new cultures in a variety of ways, and as a result, the cultures themselves are in a process of evolution and change. Thus, one can hope for the day when the monkey and the fish will both feel completely at home in one another's native environment.

Challenges for the Church today

With this in mind, some of the most pressing challenges that face the Catholic church in the U.S. today in terms of its outreach to Hispanic youth are:

- 1. Providing pastoral care that addresses the differing needs of the immigrant workers, the identity seekers, the mainstream movers, and the gang members or high-risk youth among young Hispanics.** In the past, it has often been assumed that Hispanic youth ministry means working with immigrant Hispanics in Spanish utilizing the *pastoral juvenil* models that come from Latin America. Diocesan directors and parish coordinators of youth ministry may have been told that they need not worry about welcoming Hispanics into their programs because they are being taken care of through *pastoral juvenil*. Because of the size and diversity of the Hispanic population today, this approach needs to be challenged. Where large numbers of identity seekers or gang members are found, different models need to be developed or implemented.
- 2. Assisting young Hispanics to integrate into U.S. society and further their education.** The low educational attainment of Hispanic youth calls for the efforts of many people to bring about a change. Because most Hispanics are also Catholic, the youth ministers are in a privileged position to bring additional assets to the lives of young Hispanics so that they can finish their education. For immigrants and the children of immigrants, youth ministers may also play a key role in helping them adjust to life in the United States.
- 3. Passing on Latin-American faith traditions while integrating young Hispanics into the Catholic church in the U.S.** If the young Hispanics of today are to be prepared to take on ministry in the Church in the U.S., they must learn to operate within the leadership structures of the Church and take on the vision of ministry that has been articulated by the bishops. At the same time, the Catholic church in the U.S. must learn to value the particular gifts that young Hispanics bring in virtue of their faith, missionary zeal, language, and cultural heritage.
- 4. Increasing the number of ministers and leaders equipped to provide pastoral care to Hispanic youth and jóvenes (single young adults ages 16 to 30).** *Renewing the Vision* and the *National Certification Standards for Lay Ecclesial Ministers* already articulate much of what is needed for youth ministers to be able to provide pastoral care to young people of any culture. Yet working with people of different cultures is still the area that youth ministers feel least confident about in their ministry. Youth ministry formation programs need to address this deficiency with courses on the inculturation of the Gospel in cross-cultural and multicultural youth ministry settings.
- 5. Developing leadership skills among Hispanic youth and young adults, and encouraging them to offer their gifts in ministry with their peers.** By becoming leaders in and through peer ministry, young

Hispanics gain confidence and build relationships that will enable them to serve the church in other capacities as they grow into mature adulthood. Church leaders must also learn to call forth and support young Hispanics as partners in ministry. Only then will the current shortage of Hispanic leadership at all levels in the church begin to subside.

At a recent gathering of seminarians interested in Hispanic ministry, out of about 70 Hispanics present, only three were born in the United States. Of these three, only one had ever participated in high school youth ministry. Clearly, the question must be asked whether the Catholic church is reaching its U.S.-born Hispanic youth in any meaningful way.

Encuentro and Mission

The U.S. bishops have already begun to address the need for additional resources for Hispanic youth ministry and *pastoral juvenil hispana*. In November of 2002, the bishops approved a document on Hispanic ministry in the U.S. entitled “*Encuentro and Mission: A Renewed Pastoral Framework for Hispanic Ministry.*”

In this document, they describe numerous strategies for enhancing Hispanic ministry in the United States. Two strategies stand out as being important for work with Hispanic youth and young adults:

1. Develop youth and young adult ministry models that effectively reach both U.S.-born and newly arrived Hispanics who live in culturally diverse parishes and dioceses. A collaborative effort between the offices for Hispanic ministry and youth ministry is key to carrying out this action.
2. Involve Hispanic young people and families in the plans and programs of diocesan offices for youth and family ministry. Involvement is measured by the level of participation of Hispanics and other ethnic communities in the planning and implementation of youth and family diocesan celebrations, gatherings, and parish activities.

The Hispanic Youth Ministry and Pastoral Juvenil Hispana Initiative

In November of 2001, the USCCB Committee for Hispanic Affairs endorsed a 10-year initiative to develop resources and pastoral infrastructures for improved outreach to Hispanic youth and young adults. The initiative calls for a broad collaboration between diocesan offices, parishes, schools of ministry, and national leaders.

Diocesan youth workers and leaders of Hispanic ministry in the Northeast have already met to discuss the steps they might take together to increase the church’s pastoral outreach to Hispanic youth and young adults. If other regional *encuentros* are held in the near future, one possible

agenda might include discussing together *The National Pastoral Plan for Hispanic Ministry, Encuentro and Mission, and Renewing the Vision*. In addition, the following two discussion questions might be helpful:

- What is being done in our region to reach out to Hispanic youth in each of the four pastoral categories?
- What new ideas, resources, or strategies can be developed and shared with others?

It would be ideal to include the local or regional leadership of the apostolic movements among the Hispanic leaders involved in any joint pastoral planning. These movements have had a great deal of success in reaching out to Spanish-speaking youth in both Latin America and the United States. Some prominent examples include the neocatechumenate movement, *Jóvenes para Cristo*, and *Encuentros de Promoción Juvenil*.

Because these organizations may serve Spanish-speaking Catholics as young as 12 and 13 years old, or as old as 30 or 35, they often overlap with both youth ministry and young adult ministry. However, their effectiveness in ministry with young Spanish-speaking Catholics makes it important to include them in any pastoral planning for Hispanic youth at the diocesan or regional level.

Promise and challenge

The suggestions for action outlined above may be very challenging to carry out. The linguistic proficiency of pastoral leaders and the historical separation of Hispanic ministry from other ministries in the church may be significant obstacles to overcome. If facilitators or translators are needed, they should be utilized without hesitation.

As the fastest growing, and very soon the largest, segment of the young Catholic church in the United States, Hispanic youth and young adults have been graced by God with a wealth of gifts for the building of God’s reign on earth. With adequate support and pastoral care, they become apostles among their peers, assets for their parishes, and a positive influence on society.

The challenge lies in the fact that there simply are not enough Hispanic ministers to meet the many and varied pastoral needs of Hispanic youth and young adults in the Catholic church today. If the current pattern of ministry continues, much of the potential leadership in this generation of Hispanic Catholics will be lost, abandoned, or simply left undeveloped.

Youth workers with the ability to reach across barriers of language and culture are needed to tap into the great promise that lies dormant in these earthen vessels. Now is the time for the Catholic church in the United States to rise up to this challenge. “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” (Luke 10:2)

Note: The statistical data contained in this document were compiled from a variety of sources including the U.S. Census Bureau, the American Religious Identification Survey, The Urban Institute, and The Latino Coalition. For questions about the sources for particular data, or to purchase additional copies of this article, please contact Instituto Fe y Vida’s Research and Resource Center at: research@feyvida.org or (209) 951-3483.