

New Roads to the Ministry

A pastor's experiences with Hispanic worker training

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for Professor Korthals

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PREFACE

When a young man in the WELS decides that he would like to study to become a pastor, what is his plan of action? Simple. He goes to MLC for four years, then on to the Seminary for four more. If he is a “non-traditional” student, a second-career man, then the path is a little different—but still quite clear. He spends a couple of years at the college and then moves on to the Seminary. In our church body here in the United States, we have a well-defined system of theological education in place that can accommodate the vast majority of our would-be pastors. The only tough decision that most of our men face is whether they actually want to be full-time Gospel ministers; once they decide that, the choice of where to go next is easy. Here the road to the ministry is well-marked. It is a road that men have traveled for many years.

This is not the case in many of our sister synods; until very recently, this was not the case in Mexico. For many years, confessional Lutherans had the desire to train Mexican pastors, but not always the means or resources to do so. It was often easier for a young man to decide that he wanted to be a pastor than for him to figure out exactly how he would make that happen. There was no typical course of action; they were all “non-traditional” students. There was no road map to follow. The roads to the ministry that did exist were often under construction, or even dead ends.

This video is an interview with Rev. Esequiel Eliú Sánchez, a pastor in the IELC (Confessional Lutheran Evangelical Church), our sister synod in Mexico. Throughout his life he has witnessed many of the different forms that Hispanic worker training has taken on in the United States and in Mexico. As a young man desiring to enter the ministry, there were no clear roads open to him that would lead him to the ministry. As a seminary student in two different synods, he was a “guinea pig” in training systems that were very experimental in nature. As a pastor in the IELC, he has seen and even helped orchestrate changes in the pastoral training system of that church body.

The interview follows Pastor Sánchez’ life, focusing on his experiences with the church and specifically with worker training. While it includes plenty of details from his personal history, those details are intended to be the framework for the purpose of the interview, which is to highlight the new and changing roads to the ministry in Mexico, both past and present.

SUMMARY

Esequiel Eliú Sánchez Flores was born and raised in Nueva Rosita, Coahuila, Mexico, a mining town that lies a few hours south of the Rio Grande. He came from a Protestant family that attended a Baptist church. He mentions that as a boy, he always liked going to church. However, his family did not attend all that faithfully, so often he walked to church with a friend. Being Protestant in an overwhelmingly Catholic society, he did suffer his share of pressure from the majority.

Around the age of 14 or 15, he went off to school in the state capital, Saltillo. It was there that he became disenchanted with the church, due to a combination of the teenage desire for independence and his distaste for the legalism that he saw in the Evangelical denominations. A few years later he moved to the border, where he had extended family, to continue his studies. There on the border—a unique area that is neither truly Mexico nor truly United States—he was exposed to a large variety of Protestant churches, a phenomenon that is rare in other parts of Mexico. It was there that he first came into contact with Lutherans, through a girl he met at school.

The Lutheran church

This young lady was a member of a Lutheran church in Del Rio, Texas. She told Esequiel about this strange Lutheran church that he had never heard of before. While his initial interest was mostly the girl, he eventually began to appreciate what the local Lutheran church had to offer—a structured liturgy, vestments, and most of all the clear, Scriptural sermons. He became a member, as did many of his extended family members. He also became good friends with the pastor. He helped out at church as much as he could in his free time from his job, which was testing prototype automobiles.

Obviously the pastor noticed that he was eager to become more involved. He took a vacation, and left Esequiel in charge for two Sundays. The future Pastor Sánchez preached two prepared sermons, did the liturgy, and even played the guitar. In his own words, it was the best experience of his life. It was then that he decided that he wanted to become a pastor. The problem was figuring out how.

Finding a road to the ministry

Esequiel's Lutheran pastor knew of some older pastors in Mexico who had been trained by the Missouri Synod decades earlier, but did not seem to trust them. So he had Esequiel get some materials from them so that he himself could train the eager young man to be an evangelist. He also had him quit his job to become a full-time student with him. This was the first "road."

After three months of evangelist training, they began looking for more formal options. Apparently the only real option was a Missouri Synod seminary in Argentina. Leaving Mexico for the southern hemisphere would have been very exciting! The problem with this road, however, was that this Concordia Seminary was a bit on the liberal side. Nonetheless, it seemed to be the best choice out there, so they started the visa process.

Before Esequiel could leave, however, other Hispanic pastors in the U.S. heard that he was looking to study and came forward with their own prospective candidates for the ministry. Apparently the fact that Esequiel had become semi-famous in the LCMS for his successful VBS program in Mexico helped get him and his plight noticed. Soon there were others in the same situation as he, so the Missouri Synod decided to start a pilot program to train them.

Seminary training in the Missouri Synod

There was no way to get all of these Hispanic men from all over the country together in one place to study, so the LCMS decided to make education centers in some key cities, utilizing the Concordia college system's infrastructure. Esequiel and six others from Texas and Louisiana gathered at Concordia in Austin. They stood out from the college students at Concordia because of their age—while Esequiel was only about 20, the next youngest was 30 and many of these students were near retirement age!

In Austin they trained under Spanish-speaking professors—four days a week, ten hours a day. Besides the grueling class schedule, these men also had to go back to their home congregations every weekend, where many of them were already serving as lay evangelists. The synod didn't want them to lose touch with their churches, so they would bus or even fly them back every weekend.

On the other hand, they did receive some fairly privileged treatment in Austin. They got to stay at an expensive hotel for months at a time, where they usually ate for free. They were given all kinds of refreshments every morning during break.

In addition to classroom work, they also received practical training. During the school year they got to practice at local churches and missions. During summer vacation, they were sent to summer vicarships. Esequiel served back on the border. During his time there, he started two separate missions on the Mexico side.

After three years, these men finally graduated and received calls. But shortly after arriving at their new congregations, they received word that their education was not yet finished. The Synod wanted them to spend a year at the seminary in St. Louis, so that the professors there could give their final stamp of approval. So, they all went to St. Louis.

The Seminary there was obviously not ready for them. Often there was not enough room on campus, so they had to sleep on couches or stay in fancy hotels again. At that time, none of the professors there spoke Spanish, which led to a confusing, almost comical classroom scene. At first they used a complicated United-Nations-like interpreting system. They paid professional interpreters good money to translate for the students, using a system of microphones and earplugs, with a technician running the controls. Difficulties arose in translating idioms and theological concepts. They also had to pay to have each piece of homework translated into English. Later, they brought in professors who knew Spanish to translate live for the other professors. (These Spanish-speaking professors could not actually teach the class because they did not have the appropriate doctorate.)

In St. Louis the seminarians studied four to five days a week. Again, since these men had already been called to congregations, the synod flew them back twice a month to serve their congregations. Finally, after that year, their education was complete, and they all returned to their churches. At the time when Esequiel returned to his congregation near El Paso, he also was holding three other calls—to Los Angeles, Denver, and Michoacán, Mexico. He took a little vacation to go back to Mexico, and that is where he met his future wife.

Change of plans

The problem was that this woman did not have the proper papers to be able to go back to the United States with him. He asked for some extra vacation time to stay there in Mexico, then some more—and finally, when they were engaged, he asked for five months to instruct her. Unfortunately, not being able to cross the border also meant that she was unable to attend a Lutheran church. She ended up joining a Methodist church in Mexico, which complicated things even more.

By this time Esequiel had given up on that church in El Paso. The Methodists saw that he apparently had no church, so they asked him to teach at their seminary. Apparently this was allowable according to Missouri's fellowship rules, so he went there to teach. It seems that he was just the "traditional" kind of person they had been looking for to stem the charismatic tide in their midst.

But soon the Methodists had another idea. They had been running a youth shelter in the mountains that technically belonged to some Lutherans. They decided to send this Lutheran that was working for them to be the director there, in hopes that he could persuade those Lutherans to give the Methodists full control of it. So he and his family moved to Galeana, Nuevo León.

While he was there, he decided to call about renewing a subscription to the Lutheran Messenger, which is the WELS' Spanish-language periodical. He had gotten some copies during his Concordia days and wanted more. He ended up talking to Pastor Paul Hartman in El Paso, who referred him to missionary Ernest Zimdars in Monterrey, Mexico. Zimdars offered to give Sánchez the magazines if he would come and visit him.

Coming to the WELS

Esequiel and his family went to Monterrey. There Zimdars, missionary Larry Schlomer, and national pastor Otoniel Rodríguez were all waiting for him. They talked for a while, and finally Zimdars asked if Sánchez wanted to come over to the Wisconsin Synod. After receiving his wife's blessing in a brief huddle outside the church, Esequiel said yes and asked what he should do.

Again, the road to be taken was far from clear. The three Wisconsin men each had their own idea. Finally they decided to go with Pastor Schlomer's suggestion, which was to have Esequiel come to Monterrey and study under him for two years.

WELS seminary training

In Monterrey Pastor Sánchez and his family lived in a church office that had been adapted to be an apartment. In the seminary he had only one classmate, Eduardo Vásquez, who is now pastor in Monterrey. He had already been studying in Torreón with Pastor Rodríguez for two years. Pastor Sánchez comments that with only two students sitting right in front of the professor, it was tough to daydream or come unprepared. Because of that, he has said that he got an excellent education there. After two years the two men graduated together and received calls; Pastor Sánchez was called to Puebla.

Worker training in Mexico today

While Pastor Sánchez served in Puebla, the WELS seminary in Mexico was still undergoing lots of changes. There was one man in Ciudad Juárez who was taking part-time classes under Pastor Schlomer's guidance. Then Schlomer moved to Mexico City to teach a seminary student there. When Pastor Sánchez took a call to Torreón, another student began studying in Puebla; Pastor Schlomer then had to cover both Mexico City and Puebla.

One of the main developments in the last few years has been the formation of LATTE. LATTE is a group of traveling seminary professors who train pastoral candidates all over Latin America. In Mexico, their base of operations is Puebla. Pastor Sánchez mentions that two men completed their studies at the seminary there in the summer of 2004.

Pastor Sánchez also says that there is an extension of the Mexican seminary now in Torreón. At first there was only one student there, and Pastor Sánchez was training him. In November 2003 Pastor Mike Hartman moved to Torreón to be the professor there. In 2004 another student came to that seminary, and an apartment was built for him and his family on church grounds. Finally, Pastor mentions that another missionary, Paul Rydecki, would be coming in 2004 and that he would be sharing teaching duties with Hartman and Sánchez.

One note that Pastor Sánchez adds is a comment on the WLS vicars who have been coming to Mexico for the last six years or so. He says that it has been a blessing for the Mexican seminary students. With such a limited number of Mexican seminary students, it is not every year that Mexico has a national vicar. For that reason it can be difficult for the seminarians to picture exactly what a vicar does; the only models they usually see are the full-time pastors. But for the last six years they have been able to observe the Mequon vicars and see that they are really students who are practicing, and are not expected to be pastors yet. That, along with the companionship the seminarians have enjoyed with the vicars, has been a blessing.

Pastor Sánchez gladly announces that there is finally a "roadmap" laid out for prospective pastoral candidates in Mexico. There is a system in place in the Mexican national church that includes seminaries, professors, financial aid, recruitment, and theological supervision. The system is set up to be able to accommodate any student. Ideally seminarians will study full time, but there are provisions for men to study part time if family or work obligations demand it, or for a seminarian to study part-time as he also serves a congregation. Pastor Sánchez thanks God for the many ways in which he has blessed worker training in Mexico.

POSTSCRIPT

Missionary Paul Rydecki did arrive in August 2004 and now shares teaching duties with Professor Hartman and Pastor Sánchez.

There are still two students at the seminary in Torreón: Juan José Olvera, who is in his second year, and Samuel Pérez, a first-year student.

This year there is also a national vicar, Israel Rodríguez, who is serving in Monterrey under his bishop, Pastor Eduardo Vásquez. He had finished his studies in Puebla in July 2004. (In Mexico the vicar year comes last, after three years in the seminary.)

The other man who completed his classes in Puebla in July 2004 is Pastor Carlos Cajas. After graduating, he received and accepted a call to the church in Mexico City and is currently serving there.

The seminary student in Puebla that Pastor Sánchez mentions, Miguel Alba, has since discontinued his studies. Currently there are no seminary students in Puebla. When members of LATTE are there, they help a little with the vacancy at that church and are also looking to train lay leaders there.

Apart from teaching seminary classes occasionally, Pastor Sánchez serves one established church and two young missions in Torreón.

NOTES

1:36 – cristiana

“Christian.” In Mexico, the word Christian generally refers to Protestants. In the United States we would place both Catholics and Protestants under the broader category of “Christians,” but in Mexico the terms “Catholic” and “Christian” are regarded as opposites.

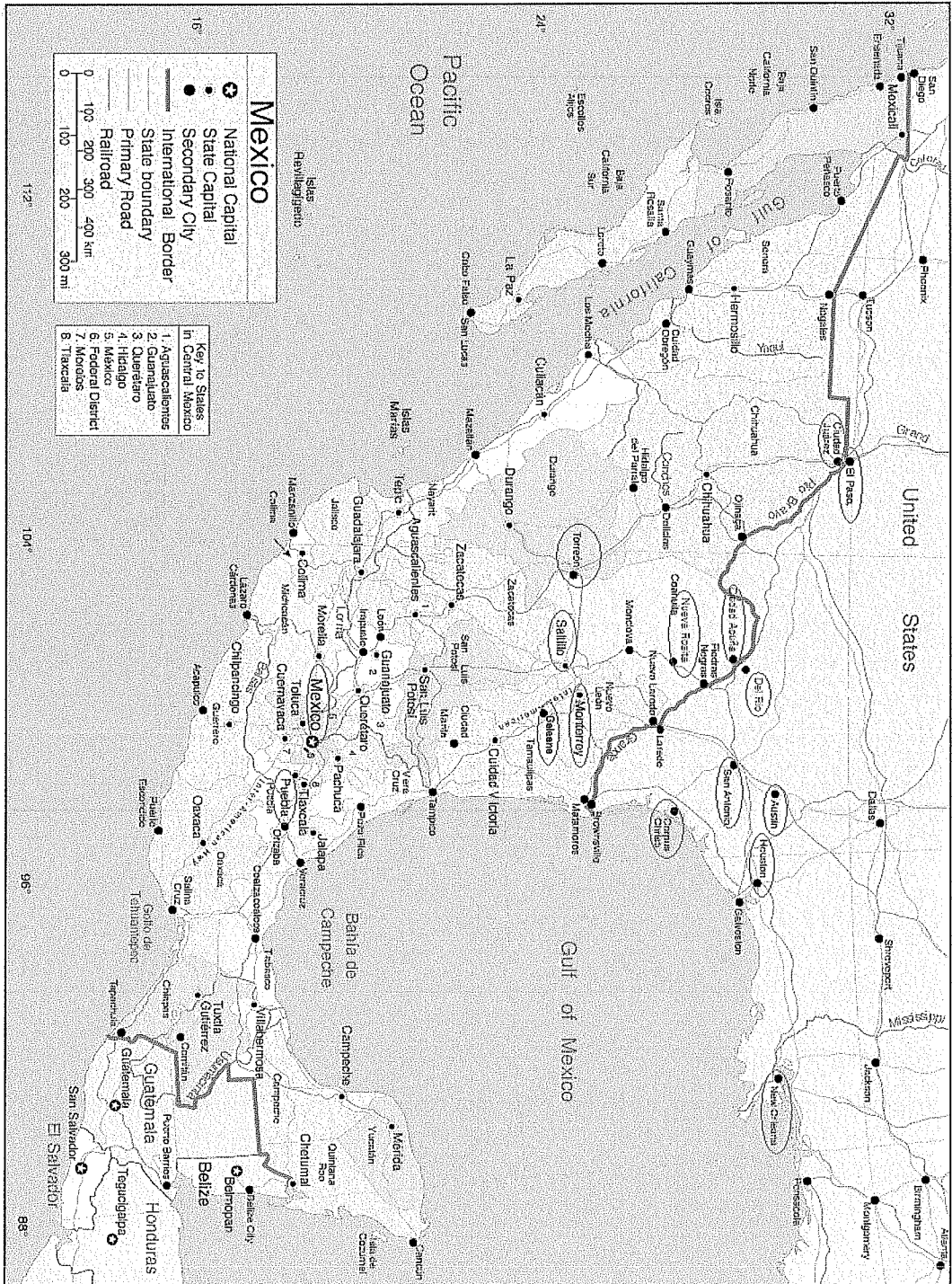
4:28 – frontera

“Border.” The way that Pastor Sánchez uses the term, and how it is commonly used in Mexico, is not just to refer to the border line between the two nations, but rather to the whole border area in general. Pastor Sánchez talks about the border phenomenon briefly. It really has become its own entity, with an identity that is distinctly different from both the United States and Mexico. Cities along the border, no matter which side they are on, often have more in common with the city on the other side of the boundary than with other cities in their own nation. People who live in that region are known as “fronterizos.”

1:16:04 – LATTE

Latin American Traveling Theological Educators. These are men who travel to various countries in Latin American to teach seminary and Bible Institute courses. Generally they spend one or two months at each location. At the moment there are six professors: Ralph Martens, Lawrence Retberg, Larry Schlomer, John Strackbein, Phil Strackbein, and Nathan Wagenknecht. Countries where they teach include Mexico, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Cuba. The strength of this system is that each professor can specialize in specific courses.

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