

How Non-Spanish-Speakers Developed a Ministry with Hispanic/Latino People



The Love and Wisdom
of
Fred and Eunice Kramer

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Lutheran Latino Ministries

PO Box 293

Mt Angel, OR 97326

<https://lutheranlatinoministries.org>

email: lutheranlatinoministries@gmail.com

English language classes at Trinity Lutheran Church in Portland, Oregon opened the door for ministry among the Hispanic/Latino people in the area. Fred and Eunice Kramer initiated Latino ministry although neither Fred nor Eunice speaks Spanish. The ministry flourished under their loving care. In this booklet we sought to capture a little of their wisdom and spirit, their passion for mission and their desire that everyone should know Jesus. The Kramer's stepped away from active roles in the ministry at the tender ages of 90 and 91. Their zeal for the ministry and their love for the people is still a major influence in many lives as demonstrated in the tribute below shown in Spanish and English.

Honramos a los señores Kramer por los tantos años de servicio y dedicación a nosotros los Latinos. A pesar de no hablar español, ellos siempre estuvieron con nosotros. Ellos tomaron la iniciativa del programa de inglés y también trabajaron dando doctrina a nuestros hijos. Algunos tomaron clases de música y canto con Mr. Kramer. Fueron tantas las formas en que ellos estuvieron presentes en nuestras vidas. Para muchos de nosotros son como nuestros padres, para otros, ángeles que Dios nos ha enviado. Ellos fueron y son unas personas muy lindas que nunca vieron en nosotros raza o color. Al contrario, nos enseñaron que Dios nos ha hecho a todos por igual.

We honor Mr. and Mrs. Kramer for their many years of service and dedication to us Latinos. In spite of not speaking Spanish, they were always with us. They took the initiative of starting the English program [English classes], and also worked at teaching Bible stories and lessons to our children. Some took music and singing classes from Mr. Kramer. There were so many ways they were present in our lives. For many of us they are like parents, for others, angels that God has sent. They were and are beautiful people who never saw race or color in us. On the contrary, they taught us that God has made all of us the same.

Angelica Juarez Ek, May 25, 2021

Translated by Pam Bridgehouse

What challenges did you encounter as an English-speaker working with Spanish-speakers?

We didn't experience many challenges with language. We found adequate interpreters. We immediately felt comfortable with Latino people. Perhaps the fact that we lived in Japan for six years and had befriended Arab students attending Concordia University helped.

Not speaking Spanish, how do you communicate when you visit Hispanic/Latino people in their homes?

We hope that children are available who can interpret for us. If not, we speak English with lots of hand motions. If we are announcing an event such as ESL we have Spanish language fliers. Both parties pretend that we understand a great deal more of the conversation than we actually do.

How do you invite Hispanic/Latino people to send their children to Sunday School and other church activities?

When we were younger, and lived in Portland, we offered to pick up children for Sunday School. At times, both Eunice and I and one or two additional families picked up 10-12 children on Sunday mornings. In several instances this led eventually to parents attending.

When Hispanic/Latino people come to an English-language worship service, how do you greet them? How do you support/help them during the service?

When we enter the church, there are typically Latinos in the narthex. We greet them with "Hola" or "Hello." If we know them personally, we ask about the family. As we enter church we attempt to greet and smile to those who are seated.

We sit near the front. We hope that the Latinos will follow our example. But most of them sit near the rear. When the peace is passed, we make a strong effort to get to the Latino people.

After the service many of them come to us to greet and/or to hug.

When Angelica and Santos began attending English services, before we had Spanish services, we would attempt to sit next to them to help. We would take the children to communion with us. After a few Sundays, Santos and Angelica began attending communion, even though they hadn't received Lutheran instruction.

We go to coffee time and mingle and converse as best as our English will allow.

There are a few families we feel especially close to that we have provided birthday gifts to the children.

As an English speaker, how do you support Spanish-language worship and Bible study?

When Spanish services began, the pastors did a good job in helping people follow. Since then, the Latinos help the newcomers.

Until the pandemic we attended Spanish language services. We attended Spanish services, nearly every week, in order to show our support and to be able to meet and greet people. We recognized and followed the order of worship as best we could. We followed the Scripture readings in an English Bible. We sang the best we could. During the sermon we read scripture and prayed. We never felt strange in the service. We participated in the Lord's Supper, even if we had previously attended an English service. We made use of participant's English skills to visit with them during fellowship time.

One year I asked the Trinity choir to sing at a Spanish Christmas service. About eight choir members attended. One of them, a former professional church worker, said, "I felt strange in my own church." I wanted to say, "How do you think Santos and Angelica felt when they entered an English service, as the only Latinos, not sure whether they would be accepted or rejected?"

How did you and Eunice get involved in Latino ministry?

Concordia University applied for and received a grant to write an ESL curriculum, and to field test it at a local church. Chuck Kunert convinced them to use the Trinity site. Publicity was sent out for the first class. A CU faculty member, Sergei Polozov, had it featured on a Russian speaking radio station. At the first class, 57 Russian speaking persons showed up. They soon realized that this curriculum wasn't suited for their needs, and they dropped out. Very slowly a few Latino people showed up.

Two different Trinity members served as leaders of the program, for a year each, before they moved out of the Portland area. I had served as a volunteer. Without ever being officially asked to do so, I assumed leadership.

Parents brought children with them. We provided recreation in the gym. It soon occurred to us that we could make better use of the time than having them run around in the gym. We introduced Bible story classes. Eunice taught the classes.

When Angelica first came to ESL classes she brought her children with her. Eunice suggested that the children come to the Bible story class. The expression on Angelica's face said, "I don't know. I don't trust leaving my children with someone I don't know." So Eunice invited Angelica to come along and join the class. After class, Angelica said, "What a beautiful way she has of teaching children. I wonder whether I could learn to teach that way."

For nearly all of her life, if you would ask Eunice to make a presentation to a group of adults, she would decline. She would feel highly uncomfortable doing so. But any time you put her with children, of any age, something magical happened.

Latino families don't have many treasures. Their children are their treasures. Latino mothers and fathers noted Eunice's relationship with the children. Eunice has a long history of reaching out to people, especially women, who she thinks are mistreated or neglected. There are examples of this wherever we have lived, Memphis, St. Louis, Tokyo, Portland. In Latino women

she recognizes individuals that have hard lives and endure prejudice. Her heart goes out to them. We have attempted to provide assistance in the form of cash, gift cards or food.

We began having 15-20 adults in ESL classes and about as many children in Bible story classes. We also had a caregiver for 10-12 young children.

I concluded that Trinity had a ministry and a mission beyond ESL classes. I began to promote the idea. I didn't receive a great deal of enthusiastic response. One night when 21 students attended ESL classes, I passed out a Spanish language questionnaire.

Did people think it would be a good idea for Trinity to offer Spanish language worship services? Twenty-one said "yes."

If such services were offered, would you attend? Nineteen said "yes." One person said, "I will attend and will bring all of my relatives and friends."

Trinity Church agreed, somewhat reluctantly, to authorize a Spanish service, and to provide \$100 per service for the services of a Spanish speaking pastor, if we could find one.

Rev. Polo Garcia [House of Zion Christian Fellowship, Woodburn, Oregon] served in that capacity for several years. We had large attendances at several Christmas and Easter services, featuring a children's pageant with costumes, an Easter egg hunt, and meals. Otherwise, typical attendance involved two or three families.

Polo Garcia Jr. and his wife served us on a part time basis for about two years. Under their direction the food program was started.

Lutheran Latino Ministries provided the services of Pastor Miguel and Marta Luna. Church attendance began to increase. The ministry became much more organized. It took on a sense of permanency.

Over the years, in addition to Pastors Garcia and Luna, and Trinity's full time and interim pastors, we have been richly blessed through the services of Pastor Paul Gossman, Vicar Ruberto Ek Yah, and now Pastor Eric Moeller. Pastors Mark Hoelter and William Shimkus have been supportive of the ministry, through activities such as attending and providing children's messages in Spanish services.

Trinity Lutheran School has played an important role in the ministry. At one time there were 11 Latino children enrolled. Lately, the number has been more like five or six. If adequate financial aid were available, I don't doubt that we could enroll 100 Latino children. Latino parents have little or no surplus funds to spend on tuition. In a perfect world, no child would be denied admission to Trinity School because of parents' inability to pay. Unfortunately, we don't live in a perfect world. Trinity School has been very beneficial to Latino children. In addition to the spiritual impact, they have done well educationally. They do much better in a small school setting, where there are a very few Latino children per classroom, rather than a majority. The caring personal attention at Trinity School is a blessing. With the exception of two students who returned to Mexico, all Trinity Latino graduates have completed high school. At least three are college graduates. Two are doing graduate work. One is in a pre-med program. At first, a number of foundations and Christian organizations provided scholarship money. They choose not to do so indefinitely. An exception has been the Juan Young Charitable Trust. It has contributed \$6,000 - \$8,000 per year for at least 15 years. Unfortunately, they choose not to do so indefinitely.

Over the years, Trinity Church has provided a number of community services, particularly for its Latino neighbors. Unfortunately, several of the services have ended.

Food Program. In cooperation with the Oregon Food Bank, as much as 30 tons of food per year was distributed. The Church

dismantled the distribution facility to make the land available for sale to help eliminate the church's indebtedness.

- Community Garden. Fifteen plots were available. Again, the land is up for sale.
- Summer school to support English language reading, writing and conversation. For four years, approximately 30 Latino children were enrolled. Instruction was by certified teachers. The program was discontinued because of lack of funding and the fact that Portland Public Schools reconvened summer sessions.

Edgar Burgos and his son, Steven, are conducting a successful Friday night program that features basketball and Bible study.

We have been gratified in the way that the Latino people have stepped up to assume responsibility for the program. At first, they were totally recipients of the services. Pastor Paul Gossman did an excellent job in convincing them that they were responsible for carrying out the program.

What are some significant cultural differences you noted during your work with the Hispanic/Latino people? How did you deal with them?

Latino people have a different understanding and appreciation for the importance of time and punctuality than we do. They are apt to show up for an event 30 minutes late. Once they arrive, they are ready to stay all day or all night.

We would be invited to a birthday party. What time? 6:00 PM. We would arrive at 6:00. The host and hostess had barely gotten out of the shower. They were just beginning to prepare food. Gradually their friends and relatives would arrive and help with food preparation.

You live with the difference. Gradually you attempt to convince them that in the United States they are expected to be somewhat punctual.

Latinos have a different perspective on membership. In good LCMS practice, one gets instructed and confirmed at age 13 or 14, or in adulthood, and then is eligible to attend Communion, hold office, and enjoy other benefits and privileges. Latinos tend to think they are members because they attend with some regularity. A number of non-confirmed Latino individuals attend communion at Trinity. Some attend services regularly.

If a problem arises, such as behavior issues with children, how do you handle it?

In two or three instances we spoke with parents about behavior problems. It usually helped.

Final Thoughts

If you have Latinos living near your church, don't hesitate to reach out to them. It will be easier than you think, and highly gratifying. Although they may not currently be affiliated with a church, they are generally highly spiritual people.

Ask them if there is any way in which the church can help. Ask if they have enough food. Ask whether their children have been baptized. If not, would they like to have them baptized. If there are children, indicate that you will pick them up for Sunday School. Parents may be hesitant. Invite them to come along to observe. Don't say, "They have cars. They can get their children and themselves to the church on their own." It may take years of taxi service before the family becomes committed members. If it never happens, at least the children will have heard and learned the gospel message.

Beginning an English Language Program is easier than you think. Most bookstores have a variety of ESL textbooks. Determine whether there is a need for such a service. Plan to have a class for complete beginners and another for students with some skills. If you have members with experience either as professional teachers, or in Sunday School classes, they will be equipped to lead and to serve in the program.

Do not necessarily expect immediate major results. Latinos may observe you for a considerable period of time to determine whether your interest in them is genuine, rather than self-serving. Be persistent. Eventually the seeds that you plant will bear a harvest.

Jesus' final command was to "Go and make disciples of all nations." God may be bringing the nations to your very door. Reaching out to your Latino neighbors is likely to bring you much joy and many blessings.



Angelica Juarez Ek with Fred and Eunice Kramer June 6, 2021 during an event at Trinity Lutheran Church, Portland, Oregon. The congregation honored the Kramer's after the bilingual worship service for their work in Latino Ministries.

To God alone be the glory.