

**Reaching Latinx Millennial Spiritual Seekers as The United Methodist  
Church**

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**ABSTRACT**  
**REACHING LATINX MILLENNIAL SPIRITUAL SEEKERS AS THE**  
**UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**

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The purpose of this project was to prove that Latinx Millennial spiritual seekers need to be a priority for The United Methodist Church and why original and contextual resources are highly important. The research included a series of interviews from UMC Hispanic/Latino general agency staff of various generations and Latin American backgrounds. A common theme discovered through the qualitative interviews was that agency staff felt the denomination has not invested enough resources and contextually appropriate personnel for a growing segment of the U.S. population. Additional quantitative research from entities such as Pew Research and Barna Group further supported the growth potential of Latinx Millennial spiritual seekers.

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I would like to acknowledge United Methodist Communications for allowing the flexibility to work and simultaneously be part of this program. I want to thank my colleagues for being there for me and always checking in on my progress. I do not want to name specific people in case I leave someone out. All of you were instrumental. I want to give a special thankyou to my Seeker Advertisement and Communications Team for being patient with me the many times my attention was divided between my work at UMCOM and my schoolwork. Thank you for holding down the fort while I was traveling to campus or taking days off to complete this project. Thank you to the rest of the Communications Team. Each one of you helped me in some sort of way. In the middle of this project, I moved into the Communications Team, but when I began this journey at Drew, I was part of the United Methodist News Service. During those first few semesters, which were some of the hardest for me, that team truly supported me and encouraged me to carry on. Early on, they even talked about the celebration we would have upon my

graduation. Although in my critical analysis of The United Methodist Church and its general agencies I point out some unfavorable elements of UMCOM, I am truly grateful for everyone I work with and I am grateful to be part of this organization. I like to think of this project as constructive criticism, and I look forward to being part of the solution to the various things I talk about in the following chapters, not just in UMCOM but in the UMC.

I want to thank all the Hispanic/Latino and Latinx agency and annual conference staff that encouraged me to tackle this project. Their support was instrumental in finding information and willing interviewees for the research portion of the project. I would like to principally thank Rev. Francisco Caña, Director of the Hispanic/Latino National Plan, for his incredible support during this project. Without his aid and encouragement, I would have not been able to complete this program. Rev. Caña has told me numerous times that he is in my corner rooting for me and rooting for this project.

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University with her Doctor of Ministry. She always told me that as women, we have to work twice as hard to achieve half of what others have. She would also tell me that as Hispanic/Latino women, we had to work three times as hard, and if I wanted to be successful as a young Latina woman, I had to work four times as hard. She would go on to say what better way to fight the system than to have as much higher education as you can? In my youth, I did not understand that as I have in the last five or so years. I now have a doctorate at age 27; maybe I should complete another by 30.

I would like to give a special shout out to God for his excellent sense of humor. In 2008, I accompanied my mother to Drew for her D.Min graduation. I remember thinking, "I will never be so crazy as to go to a Methodist school, and study at a school of theology? No way." Well, I ended up going to a Methodist college for undergrad, I ended up working at UMCOM, which for years I denied the possibility of working for the UMC, and I ended up doing the same degree as my mom at the same school I said I was never going to attend. I am still adamant thought that I will not be a pastor!

## **Introduction**

In my experience, saying, “I am a Christian” in the secular setting at this point in American history is already a charged statement because too often it is associated with some very ugly political views, violence, and intolerance against certain communities. In some religious communities, saying “I am a United Methodist” is a charged statement as well. Between internal fights about human sexuality, former presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, and former senator and Attorney General of the United States, Jeff Sessions, the denomination is not the best example of Christianity right now.

Being the Director of Seeker Advertising and Communications for Rethink Church at United Methodist Communications, one of thirteen denominational general agencies of The United Methodist Church and the official outreach and advertising initiative worldwide, is particularly difficult right now. Our own internal folks have had to come to grips with the fact that they are a part of a divided denomination, and it has proven tedious to market The United Methodist Church (UMC) as a “united” and positive entity to outsiders and seekers when we know this complex denomination is far from it. Things are so rocky that local churches have requested we remove from their resources the official UMC brand promise, or slogan, “Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors” because they feel that is not an accurate and true statement. United Methodist Communications is beginning a series of internal dialogs about the possibility of rebranding and changing the logo, not only because the current one is over 50 years old, but also keeping in mind the feedback from local churches.

Although I oversee Rethink Church’s general audience here in the United States and globally, I am particularly interested in reaching out to “Latinx Millennials,” a

subgroup of Hispanic/Latinos in the United States. It is important that I explain “the great debate” between using the terms Hispanic, Latino and Latinx to eliminate some confusion through the rest of my project. Hispanic means Spanish speakers, this includes all Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America and includes Spain. The term Latino refers to only Latin America, which includes Portuguese speakers in Brazil. Latino does not include Spain, as they are not part of Latin America. In general, the term Latino has been adopted to be inclusive of our Brazilian brothers and sisters.

Stateside, there are arguments against using the term Latino because it excludes Hispanic subgroups out west whose ancestors lived in Mexico, or in what is now the western United States. It is important to note that this land was Mexican land at one time. In an attempt to be fully inclusive and respectful of all communities, many institutions, including the UMC, have adopted “Hispanic/Latino” as an official way referring to Hispanics in the United States. Hispanic/Latino Millennials have taken the debate further arguing that the fact that everything in the Spanish language is gendered, there needs to be a neutral way of referring to people. For example, Latino is male, while Latina is female. With the help of social media, and social justice media warriors, the term “Latinx” began to trend and was eventually adopted by Millennials, and even Gen Z, as the most politically correct word for both males and females as well as for the LGBTQI+ community. The AP Stylebook, which provides writing guidelines for journalists announced in its 2019 updates that it recognized the term Latinx as an official term. Even the Merriam-Webster has included the term in the dictionary. Latinx is currently specifically associated with Millennials in the United States. It is not a term used in Latin America.

Because I am part of this Latinx Millennial subgroup, and I am United Methodist, I am very interested in this audience. The United Methodist Church does not have a platform or resources specifically designed for Latinx young people who are not members of the denomination. As part of my work at United Methodist Communications, I have created an initiative for Latinx Millennial spiritual seekers called *Generación in Between*, which I go into further detail later on. This initiative is the only one created by Latinx Millennials for Latinx Millennials that the denomination has. It is crucial to understand why it is important that Latinx Millennials are creating these platforms and resources. Latinx Millennials are a group of people that are currently being attacked and berated by politics and entities identifying themselves as “Christian” and thus many Latinx Millennials want nothing to do with religious institutions associated with all the “isms.” This Latinx Millennial community is a very unique blend of their family’s Latin American heritage and their own American culture. It takes multiculturalism to a completely new level that only members of this community truly grasp.

At United Methodist Communications, I am tasked with creating marketing campaigns, visuals and content that will attract a variety of audiences, including Latinx Millennials, to visit a UMC, sit in a pew, and eventually decide to join the denomination. But the reality is that “church” for a Millennial is not necessarily the cookie-cutter four walls and a steeple that most local UMCs ordered off a catalog 70 years ago<sup>1</sup>. To attempt to be successful at that goal, I have found that first I need to change the institution and “the way we have always done things” to accommodate the needs and reality of Latinx

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<sup>1</sup> United Methodist Communications . *Methodist History: Church Plans Catalog*. January 24, 2018. <http://www.umc.org/who-we-are/methodist-history-church-plans-catalog> (accessed February 10, 2019).

young people and their subculture in the Trump and “post-Christian” era. The institution’s resistance to change, fear of the unknown, as well as its hesitancy to fund and support “Hispanic stuff”<sup>2</sup> has proven counterproductive.

Latinx Millennials under the age of 30 make up 58 percent of the Hispanic/Latino population in the United States according to a Pew Hispanic investigation in 2015<sup>3</sup>. Yet the General Council on Finance and Administration of the UMC says that Hispanic/Latinos make up about 1.61 percent of The United Methodist Church<sup>4</sup>. There are no statistics on how many Latinx Millennials make up that one percent. Based on similar trends most mainline denominations have been experiencing a decrease of Millennials<sup>5</sup> over the last few years. However, even though as the Hispanic/Latino population of the U.S. grows, and in general their numbers seem to be growing in the mainline denominations,<sup>6</sup> when looking at the Hispanic/Latino United Methodist community, the number of young people is shrinking.

This project aims to suggest if not prove two realities that Latinx Millennial spiritual seekers need to be a priority for the denomination and why original and contextual content is highly important. There are currently few initiatives that cater to the

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<sup>2</sup> Anything viewed as not important or not a priority to the dominant majority because it concerns Hispanic/Latinos and the Spanish language. This is a term used by Hispanic/Latinos in the UMC structure that is satirical but a common occurrence.

<sup>3</sup> Flores, Antonio. *Statistical portrait of Hispanics in the United States*. September 18, 2017. <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2017/09/18/facts-on-u-s-latinos/> (accessed December 10, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> General Council of Finance and Administration. *2017 Annual Conference Lay Membership by Ethnicity*. 2017. <http://www.gcfa.org/services/data-services/statistical-resources/> (accessed January 4, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Riess, Jana. *Why millennials are really leaving religion*. June 26, 2018. <https://religionnews.com/2018/06/26/why-millennials-are-really-leaving-religion-its-not-just-politics-folks/> (accessed January 6, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Pew Research. *America’s Changing Religious Landscape*. May 12, 2015. <https://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.

needs of Latinx youth and young adults inside the denomination, and there are even fewer for spiritual seekers. Simply translating or applying Anglo youth resources out of context to Latinx Millennials, which is a common occurrence, does not work and only creates a weak temporary solution for what could be a great ministerial opportunity. My fear is that only once the top level of the hierarchy understands and believes that Latinx Millennials have enough numbers to aid the UMC's declining membership and apportionments, will agencies make it a priority to create and fund resources and ministries specifically for Latinx Millennial spiritual seekers. This will not happen until the importance of Latinx Millennials is quantified and presented to the denomination's executives in numbers. I am aware of how blunt this statement is, but that is the reality we are currently in as a denomination, and the data supports it. I am questioning whether the UMC will become an inviting space for this generation and its diversity in every sense of the word.

### **Scope**

In the first chapter, I introduce the project and set the foundation of the context I am working with as a United Methodist Communications and general agency employee of The United Methodist Church. I am working with two audiences, the internal (UMC leaders) and external (being the Latinx Millennial) spiritual seekers. In that chapter I go into detail to set up the context and demographics of Latinos in the U.S., the UMC and specifically Latinx Millennials in both the United States and The United Methodist Church. This will include an extensive look at political, religious, social and geographical elements that influence this group of people. My intent is that non-Hispanic/Latino readers who may not be aware of how dynamic, comprehensive and complex the Hispanic/Latino context is will have as much background information as possible to

understand the full scope of where this project is coming from. Without understanding the denominational, cultural, political and age-related elements inside and outside the church, a large part of the project will not make sense.

In the second chapter, I elaborate why the project is needed, and more specifically why there needs to be quantitative proof for the denomination's hierarchy and general agencies to see that Latinx Millennial spiritual seekers need to become a priority. Although this is a research project, my work is focused around The United Methodist Church so Wesleyan theology will be an influential factor throughout the thesis.

The third chapter of the project reveals my findings. In that section, I discuss my initial expectations and outcomes as well as my original hunches going into the project. I discuss any surprising or unexpected discoveries I made during my research. The fourth chapter is an evaluation of the work and my role in it. This reflection is followed by the conclusion of the project.

In chapter five, I delve into the future of The United Methodist Church and how this study can influence change and possibly elevate the urgency for effective and organic Latinx Millennial spiritual seeker resources and ministry.

### **Methodology**

As I previously mentioned, this project has two audiences, internal and external. Internal being the leaders and members of The United Methodist Church and external being the Latinx Millennial spiritual seekers. My line of questioning dives into both audiences. My internal questions relate more to the hierarchy and gears of the structure, while my external questions are focused on the social aspects of Latinx seekers.

My internal questions include: As a mainly monolingual and older denomination, how do we work inside the structure to allow for diversity in language, culture, and understanding that will eventually lead to the creation of age-appropriate Latinx outreach resources for leadership?

External questions: What would you say is the definition of a Latinx Millennial in the United States today according to your context? How have you experienced the way Latinx Millennials see religion in their multicultural world?

### **Importance of questions**

These questions, from a Hispanic/Latino United Methodist perspective, have been asked before but very few have been researched by the denomination. Because of this, I developed a mix of quantitative and qualitative questions to look for information and numbers I discovered do not exist, yet. Through United Methodist Communications and our partnership with Barna Research, I have had access to some denominational data that spans several years. UMCOM and Barna recently conducted some studies regarding Millennial spiritual seekers. Out of those multiethnic and multiracial participants, Latinx Millennials were identified and their data was pulled to create a small scale Latinx Millennial seeker study, parallel to the larger one UMCOM was conducting with Barna. This portion was more of an afterthought. In light of this experience, my questions for this project use the Latinx seeker study as a foundation and as my preliminary research, but I elaborated the questions and refined the ages for this project since Millennials and Generation Z are sometimes blended together. Being part of this Latinx Millennial segment has allowed me to ask very specific questions that would otherwise not be considered important for the research.



I have observed over time in my ministry setting that general agencies of The United Methodist Church need to quantify information before accepting it. Many if not all of these questions can be answered by any Hispanic/Latino or Latinx Millennial in the UMC structure, but the challenge is to prove to the denomination that these answers are facts. My goal was to quantify why the denomination needs to invest time, staff and money on Latinx Millennial seekers initiatives.

Because I am based in Nashville and work in a general agency, I have access to resources, both data and people, which will be key in completing this project. I identified Hispanic/Latino staff from seven of the main denominational general agencies that I served as my interviewees. They all have a wealth of information that was valuable to this project. These individuals are identified by pseudonyms to protect their identities given the tense political environment at the different agencies regarding controversial topics and critical analysis of their place of employment. I also had a pool of 5-8 Latinx Millennials between the ages 18-30 in my list of interviewees. Part of my work with Rethink Church is overseeing Generación in Between which is a parallel channel for Latinx spiritual seekers which functioned as a crowdsourcing tool.

### **Complications Encountered**

I expected complications in answering my proposed questions when dealing with the internal line of questioning. I foresaw some initial resistance from interviewees commenting on the politics of the denomination, as well as resistance to talking about the underfunding and lack of support for racial/ethnic ministries and resources because of the dangers of possibly being let go. As I previously mentioned, I made it clear to the interviewees that their identity would be concealed. I anticipated the possibility of interviewees resigning or recanting after completing their interviews.

I also expected difficulty finding quantitative data of Hispanic/Latino presence, ages, and ministries in the denomination from the UMC's General Council on Finance and Administration, or GCFA, because the numbers do not exist or they are outdated. Over the last three years, on my very own, I have expanded GCFA's list of Hispanic/Latino ministries by adding missions housed under Anglo congregations as I came across them in person or through social media. I relied heavily on that database for the most accurate numbers in combination with other resources UMCOM has for tracking ministries. I was aware that my project has the potential to strain or endanger my position at UMCOM as I made and am making a critical evaluation of our agency, sister agencies and the denomination itself. After the Special General Conference of 2019, we as employees of UMCOM were warned against publicly taking a stance on political matters inside the denomination. I was conscious that this project may have violated that mandate. As I previously mentioned, I was also aware of the danger my interviewees faced at their agencies and annual conferences. Although the UMC encourages research project, such as the ones other sister agencies have conducted, I wanted to be cautious and protected my interviewees and their livelihoods.

During my time at United Methodist Communications, as the Associate Director of Hispanic/Latino Communications and now as the Director of Seeker Advertising and Communications for Rethink Church, I have met Hispanic/Latinos in all 13 agencies, at most annual conferences and at the top levels of the denomination that have expressed interest in this work. I am uniquely positioned to have access to some information, denominational data and key people through my network of agency Hispanic/Latinos, officially called the Hispanic/Latino Leadership Platform. I was and am uniquely

qualified to research this demographic because I am a Latinx Millennial and a United Methodist. I know what to look for, and what questions to ask.

### **Relationship with Previous Scholarship**

In my preliminary research, I found many studies about Hispanic/Latinos in the United States, their financial impact on the country and other statistics about political preference, religious tendencies, and immigration numbers and patterns. I found studies about Latinx youth and young adult's educational levels, social media usage, stats on how many are US-born versus foreign born and data that shows lack of religious affiliation yet identify themselves with their parents' religion, for reasons I explain in Chapter 1.

In The United Methodist Church, I have had access to research specifically about spiritual seekers and their views of the denomination. These studies were all-inclusive and had very little Hispanic/Latino representation in the participants. GCFA has data about how many Hispanic/Latinos make up the denomination – although they admit that number is incorrect- and they also have research showing how many Hispanic/Latino churches exist in the United States- but they only count chartered churches, not Hispanic/Latino ministries in Anglo congregations.

There was no research about Latinx Millennials in The United Methodist Church or Latinx Seekers in The United Methodist Church. There are were no studies or commentaries on how the denomination could separate itself from the current politics to appeal to seekers, specifically Latinx seekers. My project is unique and much needed at this time and in my specific context.

## **Writing, Evaluation and Analysis**

The first and second chapters of this project include a comprehensive background look with some research to support the need for this project. As part of the background information, I discuss the different audiences I am serving with this project and how these contexts vary. The third chapter goes into the research I have conducted. I organized the qualitative answers from my interviews with supporting quantitative numbers. I used some of Barna's research for the denominational aspects and Pew Research for the secular and overall social data. I used the Latinx Millennial interviews as further supporting evidence for my general agency interviews.

In summary, I organized a group of Latinx Millennial peers, both in and out of The United Methodist sphere, that helped me evaluate ideas and my work. Throughout this project, I checked in with them to make sure I was on track and had all the pieces I needed to move to the next phase. I relied on them for their feedback and evaluation of my leadership throughout the entirety of this project. My self-evaluation was influenced by their observations. I assessed my peer's feedback and evaluation of my work with my own thoughts regarding how I think I did.

The research phase of the project began in the fall of 2018 and I commenced writing in December 2018. The Special General Conference of The United Methodist Church took place in February 2019. The importance of that conference in regards to this project and the future of the UMC are highlighted in Chapter 5. This project was concluded in May of 2019.

## CHAPTER 1

### UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT OF THIS PROJECT

Before continuing on to the rest of the project, it is important to lay down a contextual foundation in order to understand this project, its audiences, the results, and why this type of work is needed in The United Methodist Church. This foundation involves some background information starting with the general agencies of The United Methodist Church as well as the denomination at large from a Hispanic/Latino perspective. This chapter provides a comprehensive look at Hispanic/Latinos in the United States, but most importantly will set up the framework to understand Latinx Millennials in and out of The United Methodist Church. This part of my project may seem redundant, or be considered common knowledge to many Hispanic/Latinos, especially United Methodist Hispanic/Latinos. This informational foundation is meant for readers who do not have a Hispanic/Latino background or that may not be aware of the dynamics of being a Hispanic/Latino in The United Methodist Church, its general agencies and institutions.

#### The General Agencies

The United Methodist Church has 13 general agencies, which make up the denomination's headquarters. The 13 agencies include: Archives & History, General Board of Church & Society, United Methodist Communications, General Board of Discipleship Ministries, General Board of Global Ministries, General Council on Finance and Administration, General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, Wespath, General

Board of Religion and Race, General Commission on Status and Role of Women, United Methodist Men, The United Methodist Publishing House, and United Methodist Women. For each of their functions and physical locations, see Appendix A.

Working at the agency level of what I call the denominational hierarchy, see Appendix B, I view the church from a different perspective. I see the business, administrative and highly political side, which sometimes does not resemble what we typically know as “church.” In many ways, it mirrors the structure of the United States government as well as the political climate coming out of Washington D.C. Because seven out of the 13 agencies are located in Nashville, TN, I have had the opportunity to interact with the various agency staff and have learned about how their individual internal structures work. Each building has its own identity, politics and way of conducting its work that feeds into the larger denominational hierarchy. However, in many ways there are things that transcend agency boundaries and distances. One of those things is the lack of Hispanic/Latino agency staff.

There are no studies that have researched and published what the exact percentage of UMC agency staff is Hispanic/Latino. There is one study, called *Women by the Number: General Agency Desk Audit*<sup>7</sup>, conducted in 2017, which looked at racial/ethnic women employment numbers in each of the 13 agencies. This study broke that number down to reflect how many racial/ethnic women are in high leadership positions. Those numbers represented the diversity the terms “racial/ethnic” encompasses, however, the numbers were quite low. Based on my firsthand knowledge of my own agency, United

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<sup>7</sup> Rev. Leigh Goodrich, Alexa Eisenbarth. "Women by the Number: General Agency Desk Audit 2017." *General Commission on the Status and Role of Women*. 2017. <https://gcsr.org/MonitoringHistory/WomenByTheNumbers/tabid/891/post/women-by-the-number-general-agency-desk-audit-2017/Default.aspx> (accessed January 3, 2019).

Methodist Communications (UMCOM), and those sister agencies I am close to physically and because of my day-to-day work, I know that number would be much lower if this study was focused on only Hispanic/Latino women and men.

The Hispanic/Latino representation in the agencies is minimal compared to the total agency staff numbers. For example, the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, or GBHEM, only has two Hispanic/Latinos on their staff, one Hispanic and one Brazilian (Latino). In my own agency, for many years I was one of three Hispanic/Latinos, and I was the only Hispanic/Latino under the age of 45. Later I was one of four, yet still the only one under the age of 45. As the agency expands its work in other languages, they have seen the need to hire more diversity. As of June 2018, UMCOM has added four more Hispanic/Latinos to the staff ranging in ages from late 40s to early 20s. UMCOM currently has eight Hispanic/Latinos employed, but compared to the agency's total staff and contracts physically in the building of around 120 people, eight is still a low number.

Because the agencies have little Hispanic/Latino representation, there are very few resources or initiatives specifically for Hispanic/Latinos produced for conferences and local churches. There are even fewer organically created. When I say organically created, I am referring to products, resources or initiatives created by Hispanic/Latinos for Hispanic/Latinos. The agencies habitually create resources for Anglo congregations, then ask the few Hispanic/Latino employees to translate the text to Spanish. However, when the resources are not well received, the agencies question what went wrong and in some instances decides to not spend the time or money on creating more resources. Organically created resources take into account the dynamic and complex reality of being Hispanic/Latino in the United States and in The United Methodist Church because the

people creating and brainstorming live among the audience they are working with. Likewise, with the lack of Millennial Latinx at the agency level, it is very difficult to create organic resources for Latinx young adults because there is no support or buy-in from others.

### Audiences

This project involved an analysis of two separate audiences. The first audience I worked with was the Internal Audience, which consists of United Methodist leadership at a general agency level or above. These were people who were officially employed by The United Methodist Church, had an interest in the politics of the church, and had some degree of influence in their respective areas of the denomination. This audience included the Hispanic/Latino agency staff. Although I worked with the top of the UMC structure, this project can be of interest at all levels of leadership in the denomination. I can see it being of interest to a local pastor and being a tool to understand the importance of making Latinx Millennial spiritual seekers a priority. The second audience was the External Audience, which was made up of Latinx Millennial spiritual seekers. Latinx Millennial spiritual seekers are Latino and Latina young adults between the ages of 23 to 38<sup>8</sup> who are not a part of The United Methodist Church, do not have any other denominational affiliation or are part of any other faiths. These Latinx Millennials are still seeking for meaning in their lives, trying to figure out if “church” in general, not necessarily the UMC, is for them, or are right at the beginning of their faith journey, all while being Latinx in the current political climate of the United States. Latinx spiritual seekers, as

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<sup>8</sup>Dimock, Michael. "Defining generations: Where Millennials end and Generation Z begins." *Pew Research Center*. January 17, 2019. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/> (accessed February 10, 2019).



they are categorized by my work at UMCOM, are young people who do believe something is out there. They believe in God, they just have different ways of expressing their faith and spirituality. This group of young people can be influenced in other words. Atheist, for example, are more set in their beliefs. Although they are technically seekers, they are not actively seeking for meaning through religion or religious practices.

### Generational Differences

There are some differences between referring to young people, especially young Latinx folks as second and third generation and Millennials as Gen Z. In the Hispanic/Latino context, first generation refers to foreign-born immigrants who moved to the United States as adults, usually searching for a better life for their infant children or future children. Generation 1.5 are those who are foreign born but arrived to the U.S. as young children and have no recollection of their country of origin. The second generation are the children born in the United States to those parents who immigrated. The third generation are those immigrant's grandchildren.

Mixing the arrival generations with the aged generations has proven confusing. While the first generation is usually considered older, the reality is that we have a continuous influx of immigrants entering the country whose ages range drastically. For example, there are first generation Millennials and second generation Gen Z. It is because of these situations that it is imperative to have bilingual content. I have seen third generation Gen X and even fourth generation Baby Boomers, who at that point usually do not speak any Spanish at all. However, Latinx Millennial immigrants entering the U.S. need Spanish-only content. This element adds to the understanding that Millennials in general are the most multicultural generation.

As America becomes increasingly diverse, Millennials are trailblazers when it comes to growing up, working and being in relationships with others who don't look like them. There are more minorities among Millennials than any other adult generation. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, over 40 percent of Millennials identify as an ethnic minority. A multicultural community is a gift, but it has tense and lonely moments in a by-no-means post-racial society. It is easier to stay in our homogenous comfort zones. But Christ has called his Church to something more.<sup>9</sup>

### Demographics

According to the United States Census Bureau<sup>10</sup>, there are 58.9 million Hispanics in the U.S. as of July 1, 2017. Based on those statistics, 18.1 percent of the nation's population is Hispanic. This number is estimated to be higher because of the presence of undocumented people not counted in the census. Hispanics are considered to be the youngest racial/ethnic group in the U.S. "About one-third, or 17.9 million, of the nation's Hispanic population is younger than 18, and about a quarter, or 14.6 million, of all Hispanics are Millennials (ages 18 to 33 in 2014), according to a Pew Research Center analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data."<sup>11</sup> In The United Methodist Church, there are roughly 12 million members worldwide.<sup>12</sup> Of those 12 million, 7 million are located in the United States.<sup>13</sup> The number of Hispanic/Latinos in the denomination is estimated to

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<sup>9</sup> Barna Group. "Barna Trends." In *The Truth about a Post-Truth Society*, by Barna Group, 107. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> United States Census Bureau . "Hispanic Heritage Month ." *United States Census Bureau* . September 12, 2018. <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/visualizations/2018/comm/hispanic-fff-2018.pdf> (accessed December 29, 2018).

<sup>11</sup> Patten, Eileen. "The Nation's Latino Population Is Defined by Its Youth." *Pew Research Center Hispanic Trends*. April 20, 2016. <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2016/04/20/the-nations-latino-population-is-defined-by-its-youth/> (accessed November 29, 2018).

<sup>12</sup> The United Methodist Church. *United Methodists At-A-Glance*. 2016. <http://www.umc.org/who-we-are/united-methodists-at-a-glance> (accessed December 20, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> The United Methodist Church. *United Methodists At-A-Glance*. 2016. <http://www.umc.org/who-we-are/united-methodists-at-a-glance> (accessed December 20, 2018).

be 76,864 or one percent.<sup>14</sup> There is no data that reflects the number of Latinx Millennials within that 76,864 overall Hispanic/Latino estimate. “If U.S. Latinos were a country, they’d be the seventh largest economy in the world.”<sup>15</sup> According to Forbes, Latinos in the United States have a gross domestic product of \$2.13 trillion. They compare that number to the GDPs of Canada, Brazil and Italy.

### Influences

Over the last few years, politics in general in the United States have not been very “Latino friendly.” With the Trump administration’s stances on immigration and illegal immigration, a somewhat dormant spirit of racism and intolerance has woken up across the country. This phenomenon, which stems from the rhetoric of immigration, seems to be more prominent in individuals who identify with the Republican or Conservative political parties<sup>16</sup>. Because the Republican Party has long affiliated itself with “Christianity<sup>17</sup>,” Christianity is currently being associated with some very negative political views, violence and intolerance against certain communities of color. Within the UMC, many communities of color have experienced that the denomination as a whole leans Republican. I recall in 2016 when Pew Research released its finding on religious groups and their political leanings, my white Anglo colleagues were shocked that the

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<sup>14</sup> (McAnally, Thomas S. "History and Demographics ." In *Questions and Answers*, by Thomas S. McAnally, 18.

Nashville: Abington Press, 2018

<sup>15</sup> Acevedo, Beatriz. *U.S. Latinos: The Blind Spot Of America*. February 20, 2018.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesagencycouncil/2018/02/20/u-s-latinos-the-blind-spot-of-america/#6d6b9c931096> (accessed March 19, 2019).

<sup>16</sup> Chkshi, Niraj. *75 Percent of Americans Say Immigration Is Good for Country, Poll Finds*. June 23, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/23/us/immigration-polls-donald-trump.html> (accessed January 6, 2019)

<sup>17</sup> Pew Research Center. *Members of the United Methodist Church*. 2014.

<http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-denomination/united-methodist-church/> (accessed February 14, 2019).

UMC's membership identified as Republican. According to the study, 56% of the denomination identifies as Republican while 35% identifies as Democrat<sup>18</sup>. Advertising "church" to Hispanic/Latinos in this climate is very difficult and advertising "church" to Latinx Millennials who are "woke"<sup>19</sup> is especially difficult.

Aside from the political perception of Christianity, there are the cultural perceptions that are influential as well. Culturally for Hispanic/Latinos, Catholicism and Christianity are thought to be two separate things, or, two separate religions. It is common to hear, "Are you Christian?" and the answer be, "No, I am Catholic." There is no understanding that under Christianity Catholicism, Orthodoxy and Protestantism exist. Catholicism is still very prominent in Latin America<sup>20</sup> as it is among Hispanic/Latinos in the U.S.<sup>21</sup>. Catholicism by inheritance is also still prominent among the younger generations.

I use the word "inheritance" because generally in Latin American cultures, while living under a parent's or grandparent's roof one is essentially obligated to have the same religious beliefs, even if over the age of 18. In a Latino household, if I live at home with my parents or grandparents and I am over 18, I am not considered an adult. The only two ways to be considered an adult in the eyes of the culture is to get married, which mostly applies to the women, or completely moving out and proving financial independence.

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<sup>18</sup> Lipka, Michael. *U.S. religious groups and their political leanings*. February 23, 2016. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/02/23/u-s-religious-groups-and-their-political-leanings/> (accessed January 8, 2018).

<sup>19</sup> Woke- a slang term mainly used in social media to imply awareness of social issues.

<sup>20</sup> Pew Research Center. *Religion in Latin America*. November 12, 2014. <http://www.pewforum.org/2014/11/13/religion-in-latin-america/> (accessed January 15, 2019).

<sup>21</sup> Pew Research Center. *The Shifting Religious Identity of Latinos in the United States*. May 7, 2014. <http://www.pewforum.org/2014/05/07/the-shifting-religious-identity-of-latinos-in-the-united-states/> (accessed January 15, 2019).

There is a third option or category for women when they have children at a young age. Teen mothers living at home are not considered adults, but moms in their early to mid-20s living at home are. It is in this dynamic that Millennials claim a religious affiliation they may not identify with. Studies done by the Public Religion Research Institute in 2013<sup>22</sup> showed that 69 percent of the youth and young adults they studied were raised Roman Catholic, but only 53 percent remained Catholic as “adults.”

It is difficult for a mainly white denomination to create outreach resources for Hispanic/Latinos and Latinx young people without bringing Hispanic/Latinos into the development process to explain these characteristics, realities and challenges.

#### Geographical Latino Presence

The 58.9 million Hispanic/Latinos in the U.S.<sup>23</sup> live in various regions of the U.S. Generally speaking, there are areas of the United States where Hispanic/Latinos reside because of their country of origin or their parent’s country of origin. For example, large numbers of Mexicans and Central Americans can be found in the western part of the U.S.<sup>24</sup>, while Caribbean folks from Puerto Rico, Cuba and Dominican Republic usually stick to the east coast. This can be broken down to the state level. For example, New York has a large Puerto Rican population and Washington D.C. a heavy Bolivian

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<sup>22</sup> Robert P. Jones, Daniel Cox, Juhem Navarro-Rivera. "How Shifting Religious Identities and Experiences are Influencing Hispanic Approaches to Politics." *Public Religion Research Institute*. 2013. [https://www.prii.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/2013\\_HVS\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.prii.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/2013_HVS_FINAL.pdf) (accessed February 10, 2019).

<sup>23</sup> United States Census Bureau . "Hispanic Heritage Month ." *United States Census Bureau* . September 12, 2018. <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/visualizations/2018/comm/hispanic-fff-2018.pdf> (accessed December 29, 2018).

<sup>24</sup> Metcalfe, John. *Mapping 22 Different Latino Populations Across the U.S.A.* October 18, 2013. <https://www.citylab.com/equity/2013/10/mapping-22-different-latino-populations-across-america/7284/> (accessed February 15, 2019).

presence<sup>25</sup>. The data can be broken down even further. In my home state of Florida for example, Miami is Cuban territory; Ft. Lauderdale is collectively South American, while Orlando is purely Puerto Rican. Okeechobee is Mexican and Tampa has the highest number of Spaniards living in Florida.<sup>26</sup> For the undocumented Hispanic/Latino immigrant presence, we have to look at agricultural or industrial areas such as the Midwest or in specific pockets such as Central Florida's citrus plantations or Georgia's peach fields. When speaking about the geographical presence of Hispanic/Latinos we have to also consider the commonwealth of Puerto Rico, because even though it is part of Latin America, it is also part of the United States. Many immigrants move to Puerto Rico because it resembles their country of origin, there are no language barriers, or because of the agricultural work. The largest number of immigrants in Puerto Rico are Dominicans and Cubans<sup>27</sup>.

#### United Methodist Church Politics

I mentioned previously that The United Methodist Church can be a highly political environment, and much of the time, it mirrors the politics of the United States. All of the “isms” found in secular politics are found inside of the life and structure of the church. Sexism is an issue that is prevalent in this country, as it is in the denomination. Roughly,

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<sup>25</sup> Metcalfe, John. *Mapping 22 Different Latino Populations Across the U.S.A.* October 18, 2013. <https://www.citylab.com/equity/2013/10/mapping-22-different-latino-populations-across-america/7284/> (accessed February 15, 2019).

<sup>26</sup> Vogel, Mike. *Hispanic diversity in Florida.* May 1, 2013. <https://www.floridatrend.com/article/15517/hispanic-diversity-in-florida-map> (accessed February 14, 2019)

<sup>27</sup> Duany, Jorge. *Foreign Migration to Puerto Rico.* September 16, 2014. <https://enciclopediapr.org/en/encyclopedia/foreign-migration-to-puerto-rico/> (accessed January 29, 2019).

56 percentage of the denomination is female<sup>28</sup> yet an estimated 27 percent of all UMC clergy are women<sup>29</sup>. Only 28 percent of bishops are female<sup>30</sup> and female representation at other levels of the structure and in leadership positions is significantly lower. The General Commission on the Status and Role of Women in the UMC found that 34 percent of District Superintendents are female and 30 percent of Annual Conference leaders are female. In 2015, the General Commission on the Status and Role of Women did a study focused on female pastor's salaries and found that clergywomen were making 16 percent less than clergymen.<sup>31</sup> That was in improvement from 2011 where women made 13 percent less. Aside from statistics, I see the signs of sexism in our denomination. I see and experience the "mansplaining"<sup>32</sup> in meetings, men cutting off the women to give their opinion, and sometimes not acknowledging women at all. These types of incidents are not isolated but as a society, we have made a shift to call more attention to these behaviors and correct them. When I was a journalist for UMCOM, there was an assignment after hurricane Maria passed through Puerto Rico that I was supposed to go on. It was an assignment I was looking forward to because I knew the language and its

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<sup>28</sup> Pew Research Center. *Members of the United Methodist Church*. 2014. <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-denomination/united-methodist-church/> (accessed February 14, 2019).

<sup>29</sup> General Commission on the Status and Role of Women. "UMC Bishops: Race and Gender." *General Commission on the Status and Role of Women*. June 29, 2016. <https://gcsr.org/MonitoringHistory/WomenByTheNumbers/tabid/891/post/umc-bishops-race-and-gender/Default.aspx> (accessed February 19, 2019).

<sup>30</sup> General Commission on the Status and Role of Women. "Women By The Numbers." *General Commission on the Status and Role of Women*. 2014. <https://gcsr.org/MonitoringHistory/WomenByTheNumbers/tabid/891/post/united-methodist-clergy-2014/Default.aspx> (accessed February 19, 2019).

<sup>31</sup> Bethune, Magaela C. "UMC clergywomen still receive substantially less compensation ." *General Commission on the Status and Role of Women*. 2015. <https://gcsr.org/MonitoringHistory/WomenByTheNumbers/tabid/891/post/umc-clergywomen-still-receive-substantially-less-compensation/Default.aspx> (accessed February 10, 2019).

<sup>32</sup> Mansplaining- to explain something to a woman in a condescending way that assumes she has no knowledge about the topic.

caveats. I had contacts on the ground and I knew my way around the island.

Unfortunately, was told it was “too dangerous” for me. However, not so for the men. It is difficult to cope with sexism out in the secular world and heartbreaking to experience it inside of the church environment. Barna’s research results show that,

The makeup of the American workplace is transforming. According to the Department of Labor, the number of women in the labor force has grown from 27 percent in 1948 to 57 percent in 2016. Barna [research] found that the majority of Americans (77%) are comfortable with the future possibility of more women than men in the workforce, including both men (75%) and women (78%). But the younger generations are more open than their older peers: Millennials, many of whom have come of age in the wake of third-wave feminism, are the most comfortable (84%) compared to Elders (57%). Though a majority of evangelicals are comfortable (52%), they remain the most hesitant, perhaps due to a more traditional interpretation of women’s roles as primary caregivers at home.<sup>33</sup>

There is also the issue of age discrimination. The word “ageism” is usually associated with the elderly being discriminated particularly in the workforce, but the term ageism has become more popular as a description of all age related discrimination.<sup>34</sup> An estimated 62 percent of The United Methodist Church is over the age of 50<sup>35</sup>. The denomination is quite literally dying as older generations pass, yet I find that there is hesitance from the older leadership to let go of their power and influence, and pass the reins on to younger generations who are ready to continue the work in fresh and relevant ways. I have found that it is because of this resistance that it is difficult to create resources or initiatives specifically dedicated for youth and young adults. Another face to the ageism is the perception that younger people do not have the experience or

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<sup>33</sup>Barna Group. "Barna Trends." In *The Truth about a Post-Truth Society*, by Barna Group, 73. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017.

<sup>34</sup> Dictionary. "Dictionary.com." *Ageism*. n.d.

<sup>35</sup> Pew Research Center. *Members of the United Methodist Church*. 2014. <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-denomination/united-methodist-church/> (accessed February 14, 2019).



knowledge to take up the mantle. When I first started at UMCOM, I was the youngest person in the building and I felt I had to prove I had the knowledge and maturity to be there. I would like to note that I already had several degrees verifying that I am an expert in my field. Now that I have been at UMCOM almost four years, I have been part of the hiring process for other positions and have been part of the discussions regarding candidates well into their 20s and 30s that are “too young” and “inexperienced.” I was told by a colleague that they had those same exact conversations while I was going through the interview process years ago. The age discrimination is also blended with the leadership of the denomination not having the initiative to prepare the next generation for leadership.

Last on the list of “isms” is the issue of racism. In a denomination that is “global,” I find that there is a lot of racial tension and prejudice. As I referenced earlier, the UMC mirrors the United States’ political climate. Pew Research found that 56 percent of the denomination identifies as Republican while 35 percent identifies as Democrat.<sup>36</sup> These percentages inside the church also align with their respective views in secular politics regarding immigrants, immigration, LGBTQI+, and the environment. I provide these percentages again for your understanding on where the UMC is politically.

In the denominational Book of Discipline, The United Methodist Church’s official law book, states in its Social Principles:

The amended section on ‘Rights of Racial and Ethnic Persons’ makes explicit the church’s awareness of and response to white privilege: “In any cultures white persons are granted unearned privilege and benefits that are denied to persons of color. We oppose the creation of a racial hierarchy in any culture. Racism breeds racial discrimination.” Further, “we commit as the Church to move beyond

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<sup>36</sup> Lipka, Michael. *U.S. religious groups and their political leanings*. February 23, 2016. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/02/23/u-s-religious-groups-and-their-political-leanings/> (accessed January 8, 2018).

symbolic expressions and representative models that do not challenge unjust systems of power and access.”<sup>37</sup>

Since I can remember, I have been aware of racism in the UMC. I experience it and see it more now that I am part of the institutional side. It is disheartening to know that some of my colleagues consider me less than because of the color of my skin.

An interesting fact that many people do not know is that The United Methodist Church only has four recognized official languages<sup>38</sup> which include English, French, Portuguese and Kiswahili. French, Portuguese and Kiswahili solely respond to the UMC’s presence in Africa. It does not address the European languages, the Asian languages and their dialects, or the second most spoken language in the United States, Spanish.<sup>39</sup> Through my research for this project, I discovered that John Wesley knew Spanish. He learned the language in order to speak with Native Americans in Georgia who were taught Spanish by Spanish Catholic missionaries in 1736.<sup>40</sup>

I have learned to deal with racism aimed at my person. Nevertheless, it is discouraging when that racism is reflected in how few Hispanic/Latinos are pastors, specifically elders. The lack of Spanish resources for local churches is very saddening to me. The disinterest I have personally seen from general agencies in funding “Hispanic stuff” is hard to hear. I see the resistance to welcome that we, Hispanic/Latinos, Latinx

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<sup>37</sup> The United Methodist Church. "How does the church speak though the Social Principles?" In *Social Principles of The United Methodist Church 2017-2020*, by The United Methodist Church, 16. Nashville: Cokesbury, 2017.

<sup>38</sup> The United Methodist Church. "The Book of Discipline." In *The Book of Discipline*, by The United Methodist Church, 370. Nashville : The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016.

<sup>39</sup> Lopez, Jens Krogstand and Mark Hugo. *Use of Spanish declines among Latinos in major U.S. metros*. October 31, 2017. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/10/31/use-of-spanish-declines-among-latinos-in-major-u-s-metros/> (accessed March 20, 2019).

<sup>40</sup> General Commission on Archives and History. *United Methodist Church Timeline*. n.d. <http://www.gcah.org/history/united-methodist-church-timeline> (accessed March 31, 2019).

Millennials and Gen Z are the fastest growing racial/ethnic group in the nation, and stating it bluntly, I see that resistance as fear of the projected numbers that say Hispanic/Latinos will be the majority in a few more decades.

These “isms” continuously crossover. For example, sexism and racism go hand in hand. I referenced earlier in the chapter the study called *Women by the Number: General Agency Desk Audit*<sup>41</sup>, conducted in 2017, which looked at the number of racial/ethnic women employment numbers in each of the 13 general agencies of The United Methodist Church. This study broke that number down to reflect how many racial/ethnic women are in high leadership positions from department directors to general secretary.

Sometimes gender plays into the ageism. Another example is highlighted in the *Clergy Age Report*<sup>42</sup> from 2017, where elders age 55-72 made up 56 percent of the denomination’s pastors. Only 7 percent were under the age of 35. Within that group under 35, 62 percent were men and 38 percent were women.

What would John Wesley do regarding the “isms”? The Book of Discipline says that, “John Wesley invested in relationships with people most affected by societal inequities, making ministry to the poor or otherwise vulnerable a priority in the Methodist Movement.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Rev. Leigh Goodrich, Alexa Eisenbarth. "Women by the Number: General Agency Desk Audit 2017." *General Commission on the Status and Role of Women*. 2017. <https://gcsr.org/MonitoringHistory/WomenByTheNumbers/tabid/891/post/women-by-the-number-general-agency-desk-audit-2017/Default.aspx> (accessed January 3, 2019).

<sup>42</sup> Lewis Center for Church Leadership. *Clergy Age Trends in the United Methodist Church 2017 Report*. 2017. <https://www.churchleadership.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Clergy-Age-Report-2017.pdf> (accessed February 26, 2019).

<sup>43</sup> The United Methodist Church. "Introduction to the Social Principles." In *Social Principles of The United Methodist Church 2017-2020*, by The United Methodist Church, 5. Nashville: Cokesbury, 2017.

## CHAPTER 2

### WHY IS THIS PROJECT IMPORTANT AND NEEDED?

The United Methodist Church has its own internal research entities such as the Lewis Center for Church Leadership. Every general agency conducts their own research, like the General Council on Finance and Administration, the General Commission on the Status and Role of Women, General Commission on Religion and Race and United Methodist Communications. Some secular and non-UMC affiliated entities, like Pew Research Center and the Barna Group, have done research on the UMC. I have plenty of research and statistics about Hispanic/Latinos in the United States, their financial impact on the country and other statistics about political preference, religious tendencies and immigration numbers and patterns. I have found studies about Latinx youth and young adult's educational levels, social media usage, stats on how many are U.S. born versus foreign born and data that shows lack of religious affiliation. However, very few of these religious entities and UMC agencies focus specifically on Hispanic/Latinos, Latinx Millennials or Gen Z. There is data missing in regards to Hispanic/Latinos in the denomination and plenty of research opportunities that are waiting.

#### Missing Voices

In developing my project and not successfully locating the research I needed, I found that it is important to hear from Hispanic/Latinos at the general agencies of the church to understand the denomination and the ministerial work through their lens.

The main objective of this project was to lift up the importance of Latinx Millennials at the agencies and make this group a priority for the denomination. I find

that the importance and why this work is needed is best explained by the Social Principles. The Social Principles of The United Methodist Church are a set of guidelines on how to live out our Christian faith as United Methodists.

The Social Principles, while not to be considered church law, are a prayerful and thoughtful effort on the part of the General Conference<sup>44</sup> to speak to the human issues in the contemporary world from a sound biblical and theological foundation as historically demonstrated in United Methodist traditions.<sup>45</sup>

The Social Principles are adopted every four years by the legislative body of the UMC, the General Conference. The last time the body convened and made changes to the book was in 2016. “Also new to the Social Principles is a section on ‘Culture and Identity’ which states: ‘We affirm that no identity or culture has more legitimacy than any other.’”<sup>46</sup> With this statement alone, as mandated by the Book of Discipline’s<sup>47</sup> Social Principles, it can be argued that Latinx Millennials should be a priority to the various institutions. The Social Principles go on to say that,

We call the Church to challenge any hierarchy of cultures or identities. Through relationships within and among cultures we are called to and have the responsibility for learning from each other, showing mutual respect for our differences and similarities as we experience the diversity of perspectives and viewpoints.

“Anglo church leaders have much to learn from history and current circumstances if they want to halt the perpetuation of some unhelpful and insensitive practices and if

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<sup>44</sup> The General Conference of the United Methodist Church is the denomination's top legislative body for all matters affecting the United Methodist connection.

<sup>45</sup> The United Methodist Church. "The Book of Discipline." In *The Book of Discipline*, by The United Methodist Church, 105. Nashville : The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016.

<sup>46</sup> The United Methodist Church. "Introduction to the Social Principles." In *Social Principles of The United Methodist Church 2017-2020*, by The United Methodist Church, 5. Nashville: Cokesbury, 2017.

<sup>47</sup> The Book of Discipline constitutes the law and doctrine of the United Methodist Church. It has a brief history of the denomination, its constitution and theology. Some facetiously call it the second Bible. Others joke that some segments hold it in higher standards than the Bible

they want to create a level of positive engagement across cultural and ethnic boundaries that are consistent with faithful and fruitful ministry in the name of Christ.”<sup>48</sup>

In my search for resources and projects similar to mine, I found that most racial/ethnic groups were lumped together as one group, and that group as a whole was studied. Putting so much diversity into one category is a habit of the United States, as is of the UMC. While looking for research projects conducted by our sister general agencies, I came across a project put together by the UMC’s General Commission on Religion and Race, or GCORR. This project studied the importance of cross-cultural and cross-racial ministries and urged annual conferences to be intentional in appointing the appropriate pastors to these diverse congregations. “Demographic data of The United Methodist Church and of the United States clearly point to a significant growth of cross-racial or cross-cultural ministries in the immediate future. Both theology and church data call for a significant change in appointment priorities.”<sup>49</sup>

My project and this GCOR report have much in common. “The sustainability of The United Methodist Church depends upon conferences’ willingness to re-think and re-imagine their processes... there is no conference that is not affected by the new demographic complexities of local communities... The White/People of Color dichotomy cannot capture the current realities of contemporary life in the United States; simplistic distinction is not helpful conceptually or programmatically... Conferences should and must begin to take simple measures, immediately, to increase the likelihood of ministry

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<sup>48</sup>Jr., Lovett H. Weems. *Key Observations for Reaching Latino/a Populations*. March 20, 2019. <https://www.churchleadership.com/leading-ideas/latinoa-ministry-in-the-united-states/?id=li20190320> (accessed March 20, 2019).

<sup>49</sup>Hodge, G. Derrick. *Learning from Strangers*. Washington D.C.: General Commission on Religion & Race, 2018.

success.”<sup>50</sup> These excerpts mirror what I am proposing in this project but at a higher level of the church structure and more specifically referring to Latinx Millennials.

Nevertheless, most importantly, I am reiterating the importance of increasing the Hispanic/Latino presence at the top to create appropriate and contextual resources. GCOR’s project is called “Joys and Challenges of Cross-Racial and Cross Cultural Ministry Learning from Strangers.” It was the wording “Learning from Strangers” that concerned me. When I came across this study, I convened my Latinx peers and asked them what they thought about the name. They all agreed that this title implies that other racial/ethnic people are “strangers” that do not belong here. This title does not address the possibility that part of this diversity is U.S. born. The word “stranger” may have been a reference to biblical texts, but I the use of that term at this moment in time in the United States and in the life of the UMC inappropriate. I wonder if other people of color and of various ages were surveyed for their feedback in regards to the term “strangers.” When I first encountered this study my first thoughts were, “we are not strangers, we are your neighbors.”

As I have mentioned, GCFA has data about how many Hispanic/Latinos make up the denomination. They openly admit that number is incorrect. GCFA also keep track of how many Hispanic/Latino churches exist in the United States, but unfortunately, they only count chartered churches, not Hispanic/Latino ministries in Anglo congregations. Part of this problem is because GCFA relies on local churches to report back to them the presence of Hispanic/Latinos mission congregations. From my experience in working for the UMC and in analyzing the existing data UMCOM has, I am comfortable saying that

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<sup>50</sup>Hodge, G. Derrick. *Learning from Strangers*. Washington D.C.: General Commission on Religion & Race, 2018.

there are enough Hispanic/Latino United Methodist congregations considered missions under Anglo churches that would drastically change GCFA's estimate, which is currently roughly over 200 chartered Hispanic/Latino UMCs.

According to UMCOM's Marketing department, our internal DMAs, or designated market area, list, there are 288 Hispanic/Latino churches. This list originated from GCFA and through UMCOM's work, it continues to be updated. In the same Excel sheet, the total of "Hispanic Churches by State" equal 348, although this list includes 90 churches in Puerto Rico. See Appendix C. The Methodist Church of Puerto Rico is autonomous from The United Methodist Church. Subtracting the 90 Puerto Rican churches, that number totals 258. This inconsistency in the numbers of churches makes finding accurate data challenging.

I find it difficult to trust some of the data and research coming out of the general agencies and various UMC institutions because of the lack of representation in the staff. In my research, I learned that, "only one-third of Americans (36%) strongly believe churches 'have their best interest at heart.'"<sup>51</sup> It is disappointing that the leadership of the denomination sometimes feels the same. However, 36 percent is a lot more favorable than the statistics regarding universities and the U.S. government. "Six percent believe the government [has their best interest at heart], and only 16 percent trust that universities do."<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Group, Barna. "Barna Trends." In *The Truth about a Post-Truth Society*, by Barna Group, 116-117. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017.

<sup>52</sup> Group, Barna. "Barna Trends." In *The Truth about a Post-Truth Society*, by Barna Group, 116-117. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017.



## Resistance

Resistance to change is a powerful thing. Resistance from our own Hispanic/Latinos is disappointing. When I began project in the fall of 2018, there was no research available about Latinx Millennials in The United Methodist Church, Latinx Seekers in The United Methodist Church or anything related to young Latinx people coming out of the UMC's general agencies. A few months in, a research project called *Sentido*, out of the General Board of Discipleship Ministries (GBOD), funded by the National Plan for Hispanic/Latino Ministries (NPHLM)<sup>53</sup>, began researching where Latinx Millennial spiritual seekers are currently finding meaning in life outside of what we know as "church." This research was to be purely qualitative. When this project was brought to my attention, I was very excited. I thought the UMC had taken a huge step forward in supplementing missing data. I was already anticipating how I would implement the results of that work at UMCOM with Rethink Church and Generación In Between as well as how I would use that research for this project to compliment the Barna quantitative research I already had.

I later heard of the hurdles and roadblocks the institutions had put in the way of the all women research team. Throughout the length of their project, these women told me themselves how difficult it was for them to wrestle through the sexism and racism they encountered in order to move along the project and complete it. In March 2019, my Seeker Communications Team and I were invited to participate in a conference where the results of the *Sentido* study would be shared. I was weary knowing the politics the study

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<sup>53</sup>The National Plan for Hispanic/Latino Ministry (housed in GBGM) focuses on the development of Hispanic/Latino leadership both lay and clergy as consultants. NPHLM also works with immigration matters as well as other social concerns.

had stirred up. I was worried for research team, and I was worried for myself and this project. Nevertheless, I was excited for the results of *Sentido* and how it could help my work at UMCOM.

As we began hearing about the women's methodology, hypothesis and the results, the folks in the room, mostly Hispanic/Latinos, were resistant to the information and questioned the validity of the results because they did not agree with them. Out of an estimated 30 people, only three were Latinx Millennials under the age of 30. These young Latinx Millennials validated the results and confirmed that they saw these behaviors in themselves and in their peers. However, the room full of people over the age of 45 did not agree that the Latinx Millennials knew the Latinx Millennials. I did not reference the results of this study because they have not been officially released. Based on the group's feedback, the researchers will be going back to reevaluate their findings' accuracy and presentation.

I use this anecdote as an example of the hurdles that sometimes make it impossible for Hispanic/Latinos to be equals with the majority in this denomination. It is an example of why we do not have contextual resources produced by the appropriate people. These types of situations are what have made my research so difficult, but incredibly necessary. Unfortunately, this is also what makes my project so dangerous and controversial. Wesleyan tradition urges us, the church, to support multicultural and multiracial ministries. "The growing Latino and Latina population in the United States is transforming the religious landscape, reshaping virtually every Christian tradition."<sup>54</sup> It is

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<sup>54</sup> Jr., Lovett H. Weems. *Key Observations for Reaching Latino/a Populations*. March 20, 2019. <https://www.churchleadership.com/leading-ideas/latinoa-ministry-in-the-united-states/?id=li20190320> (accessed March 20, 2019).

imperative that The United Methodist Church take advantage of this growing population and truly focus its energy and resources in attracting this population, especially the younger generation.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE RESEARCH

It is important that the denomination understand that Latinx Millennials are important. The numbers are coming in and showing that a large percentage of the population is made up by young Latinx. The agencies operate based on quantitative evidence to justify their apportionment<sup>55</sup> spending on not just hires, but in departmental budgets and resources produced. In this chapter, I have presented the quantitative data gathered about Latinx Millennials as well as my qualitative interviews with agency Hispanic/Latinos and Latinx young people.

#### Hispanic/Latinos and Millennial Latinx by the Numbers

In 2017, United Methodist Communications in partnership with the Barna Group conducted a research project called the Seeker Study 2017. This study is conducted every few years to track the way the denomination is perceived by seekers and the different generations that make up that audience. The study was based on the general population and was not specific to a racial/ethnic group. For the 2017 study, participants were asked to check off what racial/ethnic background they identified with. The original study results were released on February 26, 2018 for all general agencies to see. These results were incredibly valuable for my work with Rethink Church, as that audience is mainly Anglo. In anticipation of my work on the Spanglish version of Rethink Church called Generación In Between, I asked if Barna could pull all the Hispanic/Latino and Latinx

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<sup>55</sup>Apportionments - The main way we support the ministries of the church is through our apportioned funds, a method of giving that proportionally allocates the church-wide budget to conferences and local churches.

participant's answers and build parallel results for just that audience segment. On March 16, 2018, those results were presented to UMCOM only.

As general agency employees, we were hired for our expertise in our field. As Hispanic/Latinos and Latinx, the knowledge of our context is also part of our expertise. As I have stated in previous chapters, our general agencies and denomination operate on quantitative data. Bluntly said, even though we are experts in Hispanic/Latino and Latinx matters, our feedback is not received openly. I speak from my personal experience at my agency. However, in my interviews later in this chapter, other agency and conference staff share that they have experienced the same thing in their work places. My interviewees have not seen the Hispanic/Latino Barna Seeker Study, yet their answers mirror the statistics in the final report.

The Hispanic/Latino and Latinx seekers in the sample ranged from age 18 to 49. Fifty one percent were male and 59 percent were female, 21 percent married, 62 percent never married and 79 percent were single. Twelve percent were married with kids, nine percent married with no kids, 21 percent single with kids and 58 percent were single with no kids.<sup>56</sup> The study found that, "Hispanics are more likely to say they feel something is missing from their life and to be seeking something better spiritually," and that "they are more likely to show interest in volunteer activities that focus on helping others, such as participating in Habitat for Humanity or similar projects working in or donating to a food bank, or helping with local or regional disasters, as well as cleaning up or landscaping their community"<sup>57</sup> Participants expressed that they are less attracted to the idea of attending church to get help in developing spirituality.

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<sup>56</sup> Hempell, Brooke. *Seeker Study 2017*. Research study results, Atlanta: Barna Group, 2018

<sup>57</sup> Hempell, Brooke. *Seeker Study 2017*. Research study results, Atlanta: Barna Group, 2018.

There was a section of the study that addressed the differences found between the answers the general sample gave and what the Hispanic/Latino and Latinx sample said.

When it comes to the awareness of the UMC, twice as many Hispanics have never heard of the UMC. Hispanics are slightly less likely to have a very or somewhat favorable impression of the UMC. Half have seen the UMC symbol before, fewer than the average seeker. They are more likely to describe the imagery as offensive or off-putting or confusing.<sup>58</sup>

UMCOM has heard from various panels that other ethnic/racial groups have mixed feeling about the cross and flames as it is a burning cross. That section wraps up by confirming that, “Hispanics are less likely to believe UMC accepts people from all walks of life, or people with diverse opinions and beliefs.”

This study incorporated some additional pieces from Barna’s various projects, such as their studies about Generation Z and how that generation compares and differs to Millennials. It is important to note that Millennials and Gen Z are mixed together quite often. However, Millennials and Gen Z have their own differences. For example, an older Millennial’s child could belong to Gen Z. There is enough of an age gap for there to be significant differences. Barna conducted a study about young people and their worldview in a post-Christian United States. An example of significant difference between Millennials and Gen Z is that according to Barna, in their U.S. Religious Identity in 2018 study, they found that Gen Z was 13 percent atheist and Millennials were 7 percent atheist.<sup>59</sup>

Another interesting finding from Barna was that there are some “interesting differences by ethnicity regarding images of church. Generally, African Americans and

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<sup>58</sup> Hempell, Brooke. *Seeker Study 2017*. Research study results, Atlanta: Barna Group, 2018.

<sup>59</sup>Barna. "Their Worldview is Post-Christian." In *Gen Z The Culture, Beliefs and Motivations Shaping the Next Generation*, by Barna, 24-25. Barna, 2018.

Hispanic teens tend to select images that have a communal feel (and greater diversity), whereas whites are substantially more likely to pick the cross.”<sup>60</sup> This relates back to the UMCOM and Barna study. Hispanic/Latinos did not view the denominational logo of the cross and flame as favorable; rather, they found it offensive.

An important finding that kept coming up in the various studies regarding young Latinx people, and young people in general, was that they do not think “church” is necessary to be spiritual.<sup>61</sup> Media, social media, and pop-culture in general are tremendous influences for young people in regards to their views on religion. In their overall study, Barna asked Millennials who influenced their views of clergy through media portrayals of pastors. The results showed that 44 percent of Millennials’ influence came from them watching Eric Camden (Stephen Collins), the father on the late 1990s and early 2000s TV series *7<sup>th</sup> Heaven*.<sup>62</sup> It does not help that the actor, Stephen Collins, was accused in 2014 of pedophilia when allegations surfaced that he sexually abused underage girls.<sup>63</sup> He admitted to the accusations shortly after the scandal went viral. Studies show that young people’s guides on moral issues are parents (45%), friends (37%), teachers or professors (24%), Google searches (18%) and YouTube (14%).<sup>64</sup> Pastors or any other religious person or entity were not on the list of options.

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<sup>60</sup>Barna. "Images of Church by Ethnicity." In *Gen Z The Culture, Beliefs and Motivations Shaping the Next Generation*, by Barna, 70. Barna, 2018.

<sup>61</sup>Barna Group. "Barna Trends." In *The Truth about a Post-Truth Society*, by Barna Group, 57. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017.

<sup>62</sup>Barna Group. "Barna Trends." In *The Truth about a Post-Truth Society*, by Barna Group, 59. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017.

<sup>63</sup>Effron, Lauren. "Stephen Collins Denies He's a Pedophile After Confessing to Sexual Misconduct With 3 Girls." *ABC News*, December 19, 2014.

<sup>64</sup> Barna Group. "Barna Trends." In *The Truth about a Post-Truth Society*, by Barna Group, 175. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017.

It is in this environment that we hear the phrase, “spiritual but not religious.” As one of my interviewees highlights in the next section of this chapter, “spiritual but not religious” is a common way for young people to express that they are finding spiritual meaning in their life by engaging in activities that have nothing to do with church. Millennials, including those who consider themselves practicing Christians, are meeting their spiritual needs by spending time in nature (51%), practicing silence and/or solitude (32%), meditating (34%), journaling (22%), yoga (22%), praying (22%), reading books about spiritual topics (13%), or by reading scriptures (10%).<sup>65</sup>

#### Hispanic/Latinos and Latinx Millennials by their experiences

For my own research, I decided to directly approach the Hispanic/Latino and Latinx Millennial general agency experts. I interviewed five people that work for The United Methodist Church’s various agencies and annual conferences. Their ages cover Generation Z, Millennial, and Baby Boomer. In my introduction to this project, I mentioned that a critical analysis of the denomination right now would be precarious for my interviewees and me. Because my interviewees spoke candidly about their place of employment, their identities were concealed by pseudonyms that they chose. I omitted any details that reveal what agency or annual conference the interviewees belong to as it is common for there to be very few Hispanic/Latinos in high leadership positions. It otherwise would have been easy to identify them with any bit of information.

The following section introduces the interviewees and provides their age range. Pepper Hernandez is a Millennial between the ages of 23 and 26. Catalina Marie is an

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<sup>65</sup> Barna Group. "Barna Trends." In *The Truth about a Post-Truth Society*, by Barna Group, 170-171. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017.



older Millennial between the ages of 29 and 35. Rosa Santana is a Baby Boomer between the ages of 50 and 56. Miguel de Cervantes is a member of Generation Z and is between the ages of 18 to 21. Lastly, we have Manuel Carlos, who is an older Baby Boomer between the ages of 55 and 60. My interviewees cover the diversity that can be found between the age of 18 and 60. In terms of racial/ethnic diversity, they are all Hispanic/Latinos and Latinx from various Latin American countries such as Central America, South America and the Caribbean. Two of the three youngest are U.S.-born while one is foreign-born, making them a first generation. The Baby Boomers are both first generation as well.

Earlier, I explained that this project has two audiences, internal and external. Internal being the leaders and members of the UMC and external being the Latinx Millennial spiritual seekers. Therefore, my line of questioning is for both audiences. My internal questions related to the internal structure and hierarchy while my external questions were focused on the social aspects of being Latinx and a seeker in the U.S. My internal questions included queries such as: As a mainly monolingual and older denomination, how do we work inside the structure to allow for diversity in language, culture, and understanding that will eventually allow for the creation of age-appropriate Latinx outreach resources for leadership? My external questions included: What would you say is the definition of a Latinx Millennial in the United States today according to your context? How have you experienced the way Latinx Millennial see religion in their multicultural world?

Below are the questions I asked my interviewees followed by each of their answers. Before moving on to the next question, I highlighted some common themes found in their

answers. In Chapter 4, I discuss the challenges I had gathering interviews because of the risks of getting involved in this project. However, I would like to note in this section that Manuel Carlos was only comfortable answering the first question. He initially declined to answer the rest of the questions and the ones he had, he later asked that I omit them from my project. Per his request, you only hear from him once.

### The Interviews

As a mainly monolingual and older denomination, how do you work inside the structure to allow for diversity in language, culture, and understanding that will eventually allow for the creation of age appropriate Latinx outreach resources for leadership?

#### **Pepper Hernandez**

“Having representation in bodies within an organization is crucial when planning for the future. I think that even the presence of diversity creates that pavement that will allow for a more inclusive, complete and relevant representation of the communities across the United States.”

#### **Catalina Marie**

“I realized that most people in positions of power are generally looking for the same thing: to save the denomination. Understanding and realizing the fragility of the situation that the UMC is facing, I have tried to challenge assumptions by sharing new information in small doses. I think that the most frustrating thing for someone who is not used to challenging his/her own assumptions is to have someone like me (not religious, young, Latina and female) make them feel insecure or challenge them directly. However, people tend to be more comfortable with data and have a decreased tendency to oppose it, because after all, it is fact, not opinion.”

#### **Rosa Santana**

“As a director in my area at my general agency, I work in partnership with other general agencies, annual conferences and entities within the church to create resources in Spanish in a way that honors and values the Hispanic/Latino UMC leadership with its diversity, culture, values and needs.”

### **Miguel de Cervantes**

“To navigate the complicated Anglo-centric structure of the denomination, I have learned how to “play the game” to earn the respect of leaders. This involves taking up leadership roles at a wide range of levels and outperforming peers of greater age, with more education, and less melanin. I noted how Hispanic congregants blended their church with their everyday life, whereas Anglo congregations drew a line in the sand between their church and social lives.”

### **Manuel Carlos**

“When translating and producing work for my general agency, I have intentionally substituted English content with originally written work in Spanish. This gives the audience a diversity of experiences and a sense of identification with products coming out of my department. That way people do not feel that it is just an adaptation or translation of Anglo centric material. I have a variety of writers with varying experiences that cover all the cultures within our Hispanic/Latino audience and it helps give a sense of our diversity but that we are one family. In that sense, I feel that within the structure I am opening awareness of diversity.”

Common themes: Representation and respect of the culture.

What would you say is the definition of a Latinx Millennial in the United States today according to your context?

### **Pepper Hernandez**

“A Latinx Millennial is a young person, ages 20-35, of Latino descent. They don’t necessarily have to speak English and Spanish – they can speak either or.”

### **Catalina Marie**

“They can be 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> generation immigrant to the US that self-identifies as Latinx. They would be around 18-35 years old. They would hold a bi-cultural perspective about their identity by considering themselves to come from 2 places and may or may not speak Spanish and/or English.”

### **Rosa Santana**

“18-30 years old. Regarded as being more open-minded, and more supportive of gay rights and equal rights for minorities. Confident, self-expressive, liberal, upbeat and receptive to new ideas and ways of living. They are able to speak Spanish and English; however, the majority tends to speak more English than Spanish, but this fact does not let them feel less Latino. Values their roots/country of origin.”

### **Miguel de Cervantes**

“A Latinx millennial is someone ranging from ages 23- 38 who self-identifies as a Hispanic or Latinx descendant. They can range from 1<sup>st</sup> generation to the fourth or higher generation.”

Common themes: Latinx Millennials are between the ages of 18 and 38, they do not have to speak or know Spanish to be considered Latinx, they can belong to either first, second, third or fourth generations, and they can either self-identify as Latinx or be direct dependents of Hispanic/Latinos.

How have you experienced the way Latinx Millennial see religion in their multicultural world?

### **Pepper Hernandez**

“Family is an important part of Latino culture but we often forget that faith is also important. Since millennial Latinos are in a multicultural world they have the option and ability to navigate between both of them, choosing which traditions, customs and phrases to use depending on the culture/context. That also applies to religion. Millennial Latinos are turning away from religion, specifically from the United Methodist Church.”

### **Catalina Marie**

“I have had many friends who are mostly not religious. They have tried to join different denominations. But it seemed to be a phase in their lives. Structured religion is a complex thing, and young people are generally not too interested in being part of the structure. Many reasons that have been cited for this include their perceived lack of authenticity, hypocrisy, lack of concern for the individual, not a place where a person can bring their WHOLE self, difficult to navigate, a hassle, or as unnecessary for their spiritual progress. Latinx Millennials have expressed to me their desire to be exposed to other religions, other rituals, other cultures. By the way, the young adults who have mostly expressed this to me are members of the UMC. They are more comfortable with cultural and religious diversity than older individuals.”

### **Rosa Santana**

“My experience and perception is that this group is more eclectic in the ways they express their spirituality, and less likely to affiliate with a Christian denomination. They are more likely to call themselves “spirituals”; but not “religious”. They are more likely to

tolerate and validate people of different religions, race, ethnicities, cultures, and walks of life.”

### **Miguel de Cervantes**

“I’ve experienced the Latinx Millennial’s perspective of religion as an action, not a suggestion. Latinx millennials take change into their own hands and execute it, with or without approval. They see ministry as living faith outside of the walls of a church and influencing a local community for good.”

Common themes: Traditions are influenced by the culture. Latinx Millennials are not interested in belonging to the structure because they do not need church to find spirituality, hence the widespread “spiritual but not religious” idea.

Historically, what has your agency or annual conference done in regards to Latino ministries?

### **Pepper Hernandez**

“Historically, about ten years ago, the annual conference I’m a member of hired a Hispanic/Latino coordinator. The coordinator was ill equipped. They did not speak the language or understand the culture. While it was an effort, I do not think it was successful. There is lack of representation at the annual conference level. Another important factor for their lack of success is that the Hispanic/Latino people are not a priority for the annual conference.”

### **Catalina Marie**

“My general agency has focused on the low-hanging fruit, meaning those who are already in church, either because they were brought to church by their parents, and/or those who seek out church.”

### **Rosa Santana**

“It has been a challenge, not only with Latinos, but also with our sisters and brothers from other racial-ethnic groups. Their words say that they extremely value the Latinx young people, but their actions are not equal to their words.”

### **Miguel de Cervantes**

“My agency has produced print content and resources for Hispanic ministries. Unfortunately, we no longer produce these materials. We are moving into translating more digital content and contextualizing content via video and social media platforms.”

Common themes: Inadequate attempts to engage the Hispanic/Latino and Latinx needs. Lack of representation and hiring people who do not understand the culture.

Do you think your agency or annual conference is doing effective ministry with Hispanic/Latinos? Why or why not?

**Pepper Hernandez**

“In my experience, there hasn’t been much support in terms of information, communication and opportunities for leadership development and growth offered to these ministries as there has been for Anglo congregations. There isn’t a drive because they don’t see the benefit of improving and cultivating Hispanic/Latino ministries.”

**Catalina Marie**

“No. They are focusing on low hanging fruit. They are ignoring the real opportunity.”

**Rosa Santana**

“Even though we are trying to do as best we can with the scarce resources, we still have a lot to do.”

**Miguel de Cervantes**

“My agency is doing fairly effective ministry to reach Hispanic/Latinx people. Their thought process is slowly changing to include different perspectives on how to engage the growing population. Although the agency is not perfect, it is making a conscious decision to invite the representative voices to the decision-making table as often as possible. My agency has developed a Latino leader engagement panel to gather more opinions outside of the building to tailor their strategy as well.”

Common themes: Conferences and general agencies are not doing enough.

Do you think The United Methodist Church is ready for Latinx Millennial seeker outreach?

### **Pepper Hernandez**

“I don’t think the United Methodist Church is ready for Latinx millennial outreach. While some agencies of the United Methodist Church are working towards becoming global organizations, as the denomination claims to be, the changes at the top level have not seemed to trickle down to the local churches. As a Latina and a millennial, I know that people fear changing tradition because they have grown comfortable within their roles, perks, power and income. Latino millennials are entering the workforce with education! This can be scary when your job security is threatened. The case of the UMC is not too much different from the workforce.”

### **Catalina Marie**

“If by seekers, you are referring to people who are **not** looking for traditional church and who need something more authentic in which they are accepted as bi-cultural, thriving, and contributing individuals, no, or at least not systematically. If by seekers you are referring to people who are looking for a church that has a more contemporary feel, but still fall within the more traditional form of church style, then still no. The church is stuck in seeing Latinos in general as a mission church. The Anglo church doesn’t realize that Latino seekers are becoming more and more educated, earning higher wages, more nuanced in their belief systems, and more born in the US. Lacking this shift in perspective, the church will have a hard time thinking about Latino seekers as a community that has a lot to give, instead of one who needs to take.”

### **Rosa Santana**

“There is a great desire. What the denomination needs to learn is how to approach it differently. As a denomination we need to detox the old paradigm of doing things, and listen more to this audience.”

### **Miguel de Cervantes**

“Honestly, no. after facing institutional challenges I can assure you that the church’s focus has not yet shifted to the second decade of the millennium. Our concerns are focused on Hispanic/Latinx leaders in the church, we want to equip them to succeed and grow in our churches across the US – as long as they follow our rules.”

Common themes: The United Methodist Church is not ready to do ministry with Latinx youth even if the desire is there.

Do you think the Hispanic/Latino United Methodist church segment is ready for outreach with Latinx Millennial seekers?

**Pepper Hernandez**

“My answer is the same as for the general UMC.”

**Catalina Marie**

“My answer is also no. Hispanic/Latino church generally tends to be more traditional, more stuck in traditional gender roles, more stuck in hierarchy, and expecting a lot more sacrifice from Latinx seekers.”

**Rosa Santana**

“The leadership need to detox from old ways of thinking. Need to learn who the Latinx young adults are, how they feel and think, what they need and how they needed. Plan with them. This younger generation has many good things to teach us!”

**Miguel de Cervantes**

“Yes. While the denomination is not currently, ready to affirm the Latinx identity as a place to foster growth in Christ, the current people engaged in equipping their leaders are looking outside of the church to increase their numbers. Although they haven’t “cracked the code” yet, those leaders are aware of the opportunities to enrich Latinx seekers’ lives through the word of God.”

Common themes: Three of the four interviewees agreed that the Hispanic/Latino United Methodist Church is not ready to do ministry with Latinx Millennials.

How are current US politics affecting Latinx Millennials?

**Pepper Hernandez**

“Many Latinx Millennials are children of immigrants. So, they have seen the political motions their parents have gone through. It is my understanding that Latinx Millennials see their voice and their vote as a right and a privilege. They are taking advantage of the opportunities their parents did not have.”

**Catalina Marie**

“They are affecting Latinx Millennials differently. If Millennials are 1<sup>st</sup> generation and happen to be undocumented, DACA or naturalized, then they are much more attentive to their fellow Latinos who are reacting to the immigration rhetoric taking



place. 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> generations, Puerto Ricans and Cubans have a different take because they might not be as impacted as 1<sup>st</sup> generation when it comes to immigration, but they are still deeply committed to all-generations of Latinos and their struggles. I have started to see a spirit of resilience, strength, and pride in being Latinx that is truly inspirational. From rural Washington State to rural Delaware, from urban Orlando to urban New York, there is a sense of community in our Latinx identity that is gaining strength and that is taking up more and more space in our conversations, our exchanges, our art, and our efforts.”

**Rosa Santana**

“Current US politics are violent, racist, ethnocentric, greatly xenophobic; a terrible environment for them to flourish. The good thing is that there are also many allies and organizations that are supporting and protecting them in different ways.”

**Miguel de Cervantes**

“Current U.S. politics make it extremely difficult to meet 1<sup>st</sup> generation millennials where they are because of the fear of being detained by ICE during a gathering. While some of the church’s greatest minds are occupied on division between congregations on the basis of ideology, there is a physical divide being discussed between an entire culture. Because of this, many leaders have missed their opportunity to prove to Latinx Millennials that they matter. Regardless of political party, Latinx Millennials are getting more involved in forms of government to institute change without the help of the church.”

Common themes: Immigration and documentation issues, the struggle of immigrant parents influences Latinx Millennials deeply as does the United States’ political rhetoric.

What can your agency do better in regards to your work with Latinos?

**Pepper Hernandez**

“My agency can identify what they want to do with Latinos. But do they even want to do anything? If they want to understand a point of view on a specific topic, then they need to listen to the Latinos they know personally instead of conducting thousands of dollars of research. If they want to include Latinos in the administration and organization of the church, they need to make these opportunities more available to them.”

**Catalina Marie**

“Challenge denominational leaders to rethink their assumptions, train them in more practical but powerful ways to be in RELATIONSHIP with young Latinx, and challenge the church to make this audience a priority. I understand that the positions agencies are put in are tricky, but they can and should lead the way.”

**Rosa Santana**

“I think we are doing a great move through the research project *Sentido*.”

**Miguel de Cervantes**

“My agency can incorporate more Portuguese voices and leadership in their messaging and marketing. They should let go of some of the control around the decision making process when those decision makers don’t happen to be experts on the subject of Latinx Millennials.”

Common themes: The dominant majority needs to let go of some of their power and listen to and connect with the Hispanic/Latinos and Latinx Millennials in the room.

Do you feel like your advice regarding Latino ministry is taken seriously by your agency or annual conference?

**Pepper Hernandez**

“It depends. I feel that my advice is taken seriously but it might not always align with the goals or agenda of the annual conference or agency. It depends on the people in leadership who know the true motives behind actions of the organization.”

**Catalina Marie**

“It has been a struggle. The issue is whether leaders throughout the denomination and within agencies will take advantage of the momentum being created by *Sentido* to inspire leaders to do more and be more for Latinx young adults. At my agency I am seen as too young to contribute something worthwhile.”

**Rosa Santana**

“I feel that the new leadership in my general agency is more receptive now than it was years ago.”

**Miguel de Cervantes**

“Yes, by the people who choose to set aside their pride and are willing to listen. The folks who decide instead to make themselves the expert almost always end up failing.”

Common themes: It depends on who is in leadership and what their agenda is.

### My Findings

Going into this project, I had a vague idea of the various ways my questions would be answered by Hispanic/Latino and Latinx Millennial general agency peers. Some of their answers were anticipated while other's feedback was surprising to me. Overall, I found these interviews help confirm my concerns and arguments in this project. All of their answers in general were very similar. I was surprised by Miguel's response regarding the Hispanic/Latino UMC's readiness to work with Latinx Millennials despite the other interviewee's disagreement. He does clarify that there is an awareness for the opportunity, but he was very optimistic in his response. I was certain he would respond in an opposite direction, as he was the youngest in the group.

Overall, there are no new finding for me based on the interviews I conducted. These issues are prevalent enough that I anticipated these responses and experiences. I did allude in my introduction that for a Hispanic/Latino in The United Methodist Church, this project highlights a phenomenon we are too familiar with. However, I see the value in these interviews and this project as an affirmation to those Hispanic/Latinos and Latinx working in the structure that they are not alone. I see the value in this project as an educational tool in our denomination for my Anglo sisters and brothers, as well as for anyone from other backgrounds. This may be a learning opportunity that opens the door for conversation about what we are doing in our agencies and annual conferences in order to truly live into being a global denomination.

## CHAPTER 4

### EVALUATION OF MY WORK

Tackling this project under the current political climate of The United Methodist Church, as well as the secular political environment was a true challenge. I found myself often wondering what this project would look like if I had completed it prior to the Trump administration and the final vote of the General Conference of 2019.

#### Laying Low

The majority of this project took place during the period leading up to General Conference 2019. During that time, many agencies were experiencing budget cuts. Many were hearing rumors of cutting down staff, and some agencies were in their second or third wave of letting people go. It was in the midst of that uncertainty that I began my research phase. I originally had planned to interview ten people with a great wealth of knowledge and diversity, in every sense of the word. I had reached out to all of them and introduced my project and the reasons why it was important. They all agreed that it was important, but half said it was too risky to get involved at that time. They were trying to lay low and avoid being caught up in politics and possibly the next round of firings. I continued to reach out to people but kept getting the same responses. I understand their hesitancy and I acknowledge that this project was conducted during times of uncertainty for participants and for me as well.

I ended up with five participants out of my original ten, yet one of those participants was only comfortable answering one question. He later asked that I omit the other answers he had given. I am aware that this situation affected who accepted to be

part of this project, how much involvement they had, and that it may have influenced the answers to my questions. After General Conference 2019, I made many more changes as more people backed out of the interviews. The aftermath of the conference was very challenging. The air was, and continues to be, thick with speculations and rumors of which agency would suffer more, which departments would be cut first, and how much of a loss we would collectively feel in budget reductions. It was difficult to balance all this uncertainty with the secular politics that continue to effect the denomination and its people individually. I also found it strenuous to move around in this environment while working on this project, yet trying to lay low and protect my position and myself.

A member of my peer group suggested I use the sections interviewees asked that I omit because those answers further supported my claims. While those sections indeed supported my point of why Latinx Millennials are important to the church, and validates the fear of getting involved with this project, for their safety I complied with their wishes and redacted their interviews. As I stated to my interviewees in person and in the document they signed, their identities were completely concealed and any information that could identify them was omitted. In the release, I also reiterated that at any point, they could pull out of this study and have their answers and information eliminated. As a journalist, it is important to me to always protect my source.

Just as my interviewees are worried about their future in the denomination, I am too. Nevertheless, I feel an obligation to push for change and be part of that change regardless of the consequences to me. I have been blessed to be in the position that I am in with the bit of power and influence that I have, and I intend to use it for *la causa* (for the cause). A few weeks before the completion of this project, there was another wave of

cuts at one of the general agencies, and one of my interviewees was let go. I am comfortable saying it was not related to their involvement with this project, but it is a strong reminder that the inclination to lay low is not unfounded.

### The Work

I am curious about what this project would have look like if I had conducted more interviews. I feel like that portion is incomplete, and that I could have done more had the circumstances been different. I did my best to reassure my interviewees that I would protect their identity. During the interview process, some of the participants were hesitant to meet with me in person, so I suggested we use one of many video chatting services. That helped ease their worry about being seen with me at a coffee shop or any other public space where someone might see us and connect their participation with my project.

I made similar accommodations for the group of peers that walked with me in this journey. This small group of four people served as a sounding board for ideas and feedback about what direction to take this project. I communicated with them for months face-to-face, over email, text, and through video conference. To keep everyone safe, the interviewers did not learn the identities of my peer group, and my peer group did not know the names of my interviewees.

Finding statistics and data about Hispanic/Latinos and Latinx young people was not difficult. There are thousands of resources online and in print that have valuable information, which I used in a large portion of this project. However, appropriate resources with data about United Methodist Hispanic/Latinos and Latinx were close to impossible to find. I had to take relevant pieces from different reports and put them together to form and organize a cohesive and coherent thought. For example, there were

numerous studies that lumped together all racial/ethnic minorities. There were some studies out of the denomination that looked only at racial/ethnic women and did indeed break it down to show the numbers of Hispanic/Latinos. I took both results and compared them to the percentage of Hispanic/Latinos in the whole denomination, and from that presented all the statistics as I tried to fill in what was missing using my personal knowledge and experience in the UMC. Suffice it to say, it is very challenging to find data that does not exist.

Another challenge I ran into regarding data and studies that belong to other agencies was the territorialism over these projects. Although they were funded by the UMC for the UMC, they cannot be used without permission, or without the entity vetting what project will make use of their data. I had to find reports that were “free” of any of those requirements. I was very fortunate that I already had some studies or access to them thanks to my work at UMCOM. Because of the relationship my agency has with the Barna Group, I relied on the materials we already had from them, which includes the UMC Seeker Study from 2017. I also relied on Pew Research for their information regarding Hispanic trends in the U.S. as well as some of their religion and UMC-specific work. Pew Research Hispanic Trends, more specifically Mark Hugo Lopez, Director of Global Migration and Demography Research, who was the author of various reports I cited, has worked with the National Plan for Hispanic/Latino Ministries in past projects, so that relationship and direct connection to The United Methodist Church was useful for the availability of resources.

### Self-evaluation

Overall, under the circumstances of when this project was initiated and completed, I am confident in the work. I did the best I could given the many obstacles in finding research and getting people to talk candidly without fear of repercussions. I asked my group of peers to evaluate my work and leadership throughout this journey. In those conversations they agree that this was and continues to be a uniquely difficult time to take up a project such as this and achieve full participation from Hispanic/Latino and Latinx Millennial agency staff. One of my peers shared that they were glad I conducted my interviews prior to General Conference 2019, because in the aftermath, people have become more reserved in sharing opinions and criticism of the denomination or about individual general agencies.



## CHAPTER 5

### FUTURE OF THE CHURCH

I waited roughly five months to write this chapter. I had to wait until the General Conference of 2019 occurred and a final vote on whether the denomination would accept full inclusion of the LGBTQI+ community occurred. The body voted to not be fully inclusive. It was a heartbreaking decision for many while the other half quietly celebrated. It has thrown the denomination into a slight schism, yet there is hope that in the General Conference of 2020, the matter can be brought up again and voted on with new delegations and different results.

The 2019 delegation included representatives from the U.S. and from the Central Conferences, which include Europe, Africa and the Philippines. Latin America does not have United Methodist churches. Honduras has a missional UMC presence, with a white Anglo bishop that does not speak Spanish, but not all agencies are heavily involved with Honduras as they are with the other Central Conferences. That relationship is primarily sustained through individual annual conferences and GBGM. These votes together made up the final decision, even though the vote would only effect churches in the U.S. A few days after the conference, the U.S. votes were separated from the Central Conference's and those results were made public. The U.S. delegation voted for full inclusion of the LGBTQI+ community but the Central Conferences, with the exception of Western Europe, voted against full inclusion. To be more specific, the African delegation tipped the scale to maintain the traditional ways of the denomination.

### Latinx Millennials in the Church

For the Latinx Millennial community inside the UMC, this vote was an affirmation that the denomination does not support equality or justice. It has been a blow to those Latinx Millennials who belong to the LGBTQI+ community, but it has also been a hit to racial/ethnic minorities. I was present at the conference and saw everything unfold before me. I heard numerous times that it was difficult to hear that the denomination was not interested in giving equality to a group of people who endure prejudice, violence, and negative rhetoric from the current presidential administration. The sentiment was that if the UMC is not willing to grant equality or stand up for a community that endures all of that, then they are capable of doing the same to racial/ethnic minorities that face similar struggles.

I have publicly never expressed my opinion or views on LGBTQI+ matters because as an employee of United Methodist Communications, we cannot favor a side in order to eliminate bias or the perception that the agency leans a certain way. We actually had an agency wide meeting where we were told to avoid posting our opinions on social media. The LGBTQI+ community often walks hand in hand with my Hispanic/Latino and Latinx sisters and brothers in the fight for social justice in secular settings as well as inside the UMC. They know what it feels like to be oppressed and discriminated by the denomination and by the United States. They make the effort to be inclusive of everyone and fight for everyone. My stance is that if they are willing to march next to brown and black bodies, put their well-beings in danger and demand change, I affirm that I too walk with them and return the favor in their fight for equality in and out of the church. I have met other young Latinx in The United Methodist Church who feel the same way. They

are a small number, but it was encouraging to hear my peers feel the same way I do. However, in the aftermath of the conference, many of those Latinx Millennials are leaving the UMC permanently in support of their LGBTQI+ friends.

In the days, weeks and months after the conference, the secular press has quite bluntly been moping the floor with The United Methodist Church. The media has been blasting the UMC with headlines highlighting their exclusion of the LGBTQI+ community. While everyone is reading about the publicly disgraced denomination, I am at the office, sitting in meetings talking with our departments about how to advertise the denomination to younger audiences. It is embarrassing to say I am United Methodist right now. It is incredibly embarrassing to tell people that I am working on ads to promote the church in a positive light. How can I continue to put our brand promise, “Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors,” on billboards and commercials? Everyone knows this “promise” was proven false by the final vote.

There are individual congregations that are absolutely welcoming no matter race, ethnicity, sexuality or economic condition, but publicly, the denomination as a whole told the world it is not open. At the agency level, we are all struggling with the General Conference outcome. We do not know what a schism would look like for us, other than the budget reductions that will eventually result in cuts and layoffs. It really comes down to the money.

For the purposes of this project in a post General Conference environment, money is a great influencer for the denominational structure. I have argued throughout this project that the general agencies need to prioritize Latinx Millennial spiritual seekers as a target audience. As I mentioned in previous chapters with supporting data, Latinx

Millennials are the fastest growing segment of the population in the country, it is the youngest in terms of age compared to other racial/ethnic groups, and now that this generation has entered the workforce, their contribution to the U.S. economy is significant. They have higher incomes than their parents or grandparents and they are spending that money. The future of The United Methodist Church would look very different if the amount of apportionments Latinx Millennials would bring in was studied in depth and evaluated.

I am in an interesting position right now, as I am the gatekeeper of introducing The United Methodist Church to younger generations. “Rethink Church” has never been as relevant as at this moment. That name has been around for many years, and conversations about rebranding the department were initiated recently. However, following General Conference, the phrase “Rethink Church” is politically charged enough to really mean something now. I see Rethink Church as a subtle, and not so subtle, way of saying that we are different from the denomination and somewhat autonomous because this platform has the potential to engage young people in a simple and transparent way through content that engages their needs and meets them where they are. *Generación In Between* does not fall behind. *Generación* means generation in Spanish. *Generación In Between* eludes to the Latinx community stuck between two cultures, not belonging to either one independently, but rather belonging to both simultaneously. *Generación In Between* addresses the spiritual needs of a generation experiencing a cultural identity crisis by bluntly and directly calling out the struggles of being Latinx and bringing a word of hope and solidarity *porque no estas solx*.

Acknowledging the idea of being stuck between two worlds is the relevance Latinx Millennials are looking for. Creating a space where this unique community can express and explore their spirituality, faith and even Christianity is what I am striving for. The UMC needs to be revitalized desperately, and I am confident that Latinx Millennials with their multiculturalism and vibrant identity can bring life back to a decaying denomination.

### A Divided United Methodist Church

Right now, it feels like an oxymoron to say The United Methodist Church. To use the exact language that the General Conference uses, “we are not of one mind.” Everyone is off in their camps evaluating what can be done at General Conference 2020 to reverse the vote or how to disaffiliate with the denomination. People that are employed by the UMC are uncertain about their future. There are many entities that either belong or are affiliated to the UMC that are going to be drastically effected by the General Conference’s final decision. There are millions of dollars at stake, investments to consider, and thousands of properties around the world involved. As GBGM’s Jorge Dominquez said to us at a NPHLM workshop two years ago, The United Methodist Church is the second richest religious organization, next to the Vatican.

Even if the church goes into schism and no one tries to revitalize what is left of the denomination by bringing in seeker or specifically Latinx Millennial spiritual seekers, I believe that eventually the denomination will unite again. That reunification may be ten to twenty years from now, but I am certain and hopeful it will happen. Millennials in general, as well as future generations, with their multiculturalism and disposition to be open and more accepting, have the potential to heal not just this denomination, but all

denominations and religious institutions. These generations have the power to heal the harm “church” and Evangelical Christianity has done to society and hopefully one day the world.

This denomination’s predecessors went into schism over disagreements about slavery. It split again when women were fighting for equality and the ordination of women. In more recent history, in an attempt at racial reconciliation right after the Civil Rights movement, the church reunited and granted the inclusion of African Americans. That is when The United Methodist Church was born. While there are always extremists and exceptions, most of the denomination finds it absurd that the church once divided over disagreements regarding slavery and the ordination of women. One day I hope that future generations will look back at the General Conference of 2019 and say how foolish people were back then. I also wonder, what could be the next great debacle for The United Methodist Church? What other topic is there left to debate on this level? Could it be The UMC’s investments in Israel? Its stance on abortion? Maybe artificial intelligence? Will we someday convene at General Conference to debate the ordination of robots?

I truly care for this denomination and what happens to it. I am a life long United Methodist. I am the child of a pastor, so I was quite almost literally born into this church. I have always been very involved deeply in it. As a teen, I was involved not just at a local church level as the “PK,” but I was in it at state level with the Florida Annual Conference, and at the national level with MARCHA.<sup>66</sup> Now as an adult working for a

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<sup>66</sup>Methodists Associated Representing the Cause of Hispanic/Latino American- Official Hispanic/Latino caucus of The United Methodist Church. It operates as its own entity with a certain degree of autonomy within the denomination.

general agency, I am deep into this at a local, state, national and international level. I am part of the politics, I am part of the structure, I am part of the problem and I am part of the change and I am part of the solution.

I feel that I have a responsibility to those Latinx Millennials spiritual seekers out there and to those Hispanic/Latinos and Latinx young people who will follow behind me at the general agencies, or whatever entity is left after the schism and budget cuts. I have this inevitable pressure on my shoulders that I must do an excellent job in this position and at this agency so the doors remain open for anyone that looks like me. I am the first young person and the first Latina to take up a role such as the Director of Seeker Advertising and Communications for Rethink Church at United Methodist Communications. I have been in many spaces where I am the first Latina or the only Latina in the room. I cannot afford to mess up because I could ruin the chances of other Hispanic/Latinos and Latinx young people from being given opportunities like these.

However, even with that pressure, I take great pride in my work and my accomplishments. I can say that I pushed our agency to develop advertising in Spanish and Spanglish. Something they had never done before. Last year, we ran a Spanish advertisement the radio in Texas with *bachata* music in the background. That UMC had never done anything as bold and different as that. If someone would have told me five years ago that Rethink Church had a Spanish radio ad with *bachata* music, I would not have believed it. However, here we are, it happened and I made it happen.

I feel called to be a leader and continue advocating for Latinx Millennials while pushing for change regarding how the denomination treats other non-dominant groups. That is what discipleship looks like for me. Generación In Between is very important to

me, not just because I created the initiative, but because it serves a marginalized community I am part of. Institutionally, I see this initiative as a form of resistance against established paradigms. Regardless what the future of the UMC looks like in the aftermath of General Conference 2019 and 2020, I have given my childhood, my youth and my young adulthood to this denomination. I have invested a large portion of my life already and I will continue to strive for a truly global and inclusive church.



## Appendix A

Functions of the general agencies of The United Methodist Church as defined by the denominational website UMC.org.

**Archives & History (Madison, NJ)** – Preserves the history of the denomination and its antecedents. Historical documents and other elements are housed and displayed by the agency. Archives & History serve as a resource tool for other agencies needing information about historical accounts.

**General Board of Church & Society (Washington D.C.)**- Challenges United Methodists to work in areas of important social concerns and develops resources to inform, motivate, and train United Methodists on issues of social justice in the society.

**United Methodist Communications (Nashville, TN)**- We show how the work of United Methodists do together transforms the world and provide local churches with tools, resources and training to equip them for communications ministry.

**General Board of Discipleship Ministries (Nashville, TN)**- Provides resources and services that assist clergy and laity leaders in annual conferences and local churches as they seek to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

**General Board of Global Ministries (Atlanta, GA)**- The General Board of Global Ministries connects the church in mission.

**General Council on Finance and Administration (Nashville, TN)**- Manages the finances and operational needs of the denomination and serves as the general treasurer of the denomination.

**General Board of Higher Education and Ministry (Nashville, TN)**- Prepares Christian leaders for ordained ministry and provides general oversight for campus ministries and institutions of higher education.

**Wespath Pensions and Health Benefits (Glenview, IL)**- Supervises and administers the pension and benefits programs, plans and funds of The United Methodist Church. It administers and disburses the retirement and benefit funds of the various annual conferences.

**General Board of Religion and Race (Washington D.C.)**- Works for the full and equal participation of racial and ethnic constituencies in the church through advocacy and by reviewing and monitoring the practices of the denomination.

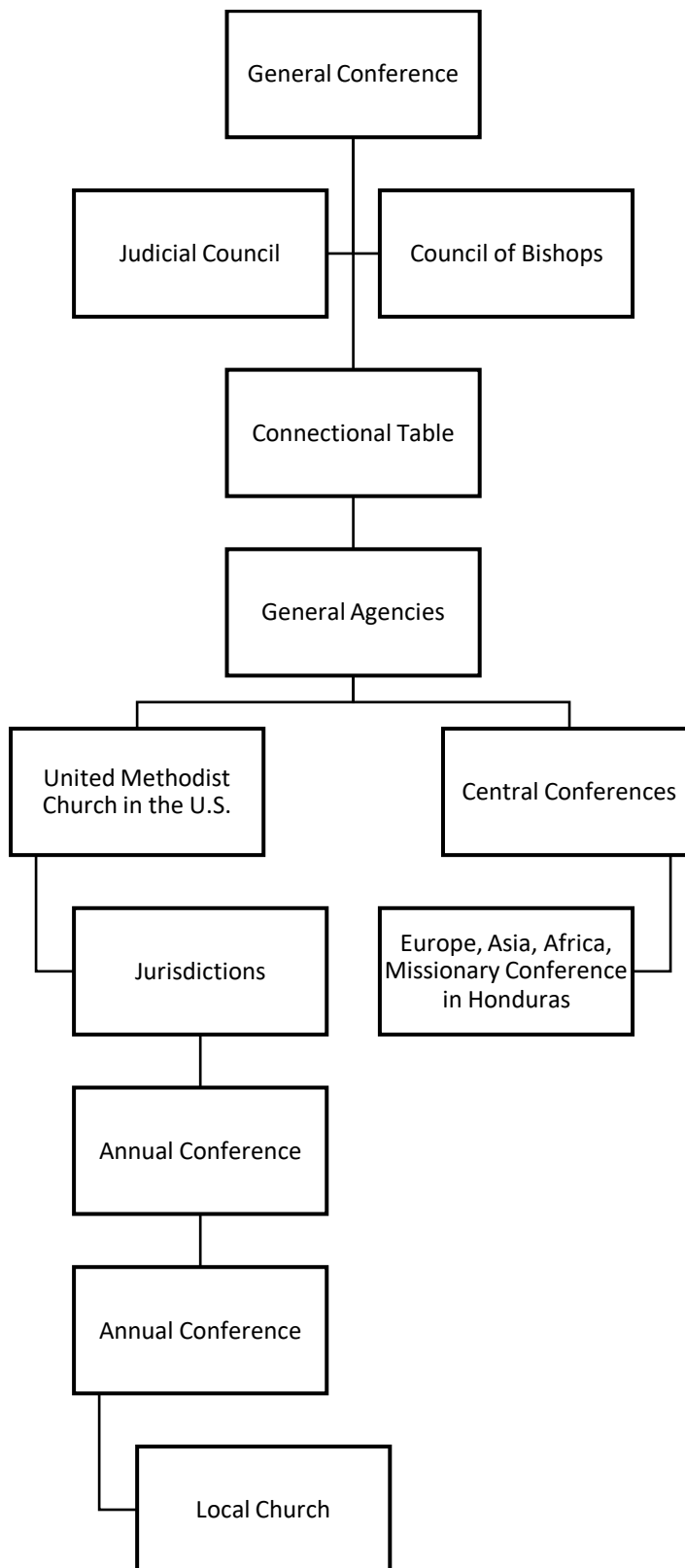
**General Commission on Status and Role of Women (Chicago, IL)**- Advocates for, and on behalf of, women by seeking to eliminate inequities and by monitoring the general agencies, institutions, and connectional structures to ensure the inclusion of women.

**United Methodist Men (Nashville, TN)**- Involves men in a growing relationship to Jesus Christ and his church and provides resources and support for programs of evangelism, stewardship and the needs of men.

**The United Methodist Publishing House (Nashville, TN)**-The United Methodist Publishing House is a publisher and distributor to Christian clergy and laity, with primary responsibilities for the publishing and distribution for The United Methodist Church.

**United Methodist Women (New York City, NY)**- United Methodist Women is the largest denominational faith organization for women with approximately 800,000 members whose mission is fostering spiritual growth, developing leaders and advocating for justice.

Appendix B





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