

COMADRE LEADERSHIP AMONG PROTESTANT LATINAS/X:  
BRIDGING THE STRUGGLE WITH STRENGTHS

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## ABSTRACT

COMADRE LEADERSHIP AMONG PROTESTANT LATINAS/X:

BRIDGING THE STRUGGLE WITH STRENGTHS

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What does the leadership development of Latinas/x look like in the United Methodist Church (UMC) and the Presbyterian Church (USA)? This paper is an ethnography of 14 interviews I conducted with Latinas/x ministers serving as clergy and laity.

Through the lens of the *Mujerista* theology of Ada Maria Isasi -Diaz, the theoretical framework of feminist scholar Gloria Anzaldúa, and the auto-ethnography of Alicia Vargas, I analyze their stories of lived experiences as they follow the call to ministry and develop their leadership in two predominantly white mainline denominations.

In the data analysis, patterns relate to the dangers and obstacles they face, such as identity, disorientation, and economic equity. Moreover, their stories demonstrate leadership strengths and capacities, such as emotional intelligence and lifelong learning.

Finally, features expected in *comadrazgo* relationships, in which family values inform the relationship among *comadres*, point to the importance of developing networks that nurture, equip, endorse, and deploy Latinas/x towards their ministerial journeys.

My goal is to document their experiences and lessons learned to equip emerging leaders in their journey so that they are less blindsided and have tools to help navigate the current church systems.

## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to all the *mujeres* in my life, especially my grandmother Amelia Santana Valentín, whom I held in my heart as I reflected on all the wisdom, she left me with, even when she could not write nor read.

To my prayer and companions in the faith and life: my mother Maria Rosa Santana and my sister Michelle Matos Rosa.

To my daughters: Dyanne Marie Rivera-Matos, Cassandra V. Post, Dyséré Michel Rivera-Matos, and Alana Kendall Post; the vision of the preferred future in this work is my contribution to leave the world a better place for you. Thank you for teaching me so much! Live your lives free.

Lastly, to my partner, best friend, and love of my life, who is the epitome of what an ally to Latinas/x in ministry ought to be, Kenneth A. Post.

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## INTRODUCTION

What does it look like for Latinas/x to develop our leadership in the United Methodist Church (UMC) and Presbyterian Church (USA), PC(USA)? That is the question that I sought to answer through this project. At first, I focused on Latinas/x who have broken the institutional glass ceilings in the church: the first Latina to be licensed to preach, the first Latina to be ordained, the first Latinas/x commissioned to serve as bishop, and others. Despite the opposition, the stories of those who persevere and triumph in ways that are affirming and recordable in history texts inspire us. However, as my conversation with these Latinas/x, first in different ministry settings, progressed, I realized that "being first" provided insights and wisdom about leadership development in places foreign to us.

Moreover, these 14 Latinas/x consistently recalled by first and last names, women before them blazing the trail, paving, and showing a way forward. I cannot name them all here, but to them, this space to honor all how they made it possible for us even to have these conversations. They were wise sages, Bible school teachers, prayer intercessors, *abuelitas, madrinas, and comadres* who did not let anything, or anyone hold them back from sharing their faith and serving their families and communities despite anything or anyone who stood in the way. Others were watching, and like one of the interviewees, Vilmarie said, "Upon their weary shoulders, we stand."<sup>1</sup>

In the following chapters, through their stories, I explore how Latinas/x develop their leadership in the church, what conditions nurture or stifle it, and what type of leadership emerges from the patterns and connections.

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<sup>1</sup> Ruling Elder Vilmarie Cintrón-Olivieri, interview by author, Zoom, January 24, 2023.

In Chapter One, I share my story of faith and how my leadership developed in the United Methodist Church. By using auto-ethnography as the methodology to initiate this conversation, I apply one of the tools of Mujerista theology: sharing the stories of our everyday lived experiences and theological reflection. Feminist theorist Kathleen Scott-Myrhe writes,

The telling of one's experience is not to attempt to explain or to seek the singular truth but rather to bring attention to the complexities of lived experience...instead of trying to analyze the past it provides a story so that readers decide for themselves what meaning it has for them in their lives.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout this work, I share stories of my experience as a religious leader to introduce theological reflection in conversation with scholars and the Latinas/x who participated in these interviews. In this chapter, I share the interview process, importance and nature of the study, methodologies used, description of my ministry context, and definitions of concepts used throughout the paper.

In Chapter Two, I develop the theoretical framework by conversing with Latina minister Alicia Vargas, Mujerista Theologian Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, and feminist Gloria Anzaldúa. Vargas' article, which includes her auto-ethnography, is the foundation for my argument that our stories carry wisdom and healing. I share how reading her work impacted me, thus generating the benefits of the features *comadre* (godmother) leadership offers Latinas/x in religious leadership. Isasi-Diaz's Mujerista Theology offers the framework and tools to approach the stories of Latinas/x in these interviews and a lens through which to analyze their offerings. The insights and findings are the building blocks to building our preferred future or Anzaldúa's *Mundo Zurdo*. Finally, Anzaldúa's

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<sup>2</sup>Skott-Myhre, Weima, and Gibbs, *Introduction*, xv.

work helps articulate the Latinas/x experience as a mestiza, defining our roles as bridges and crossroads and inviting us to transcend the bridge and walk towards a world we create with our lives.

Chapter Three highlights the finding from the interviews and organizes that data by the patterns that emerged. The conversations produced stories that provided the insights and wisdom possible within a *comadre* network. I divided this chapter into two parts. First, the struggle as context defined commonalities of the obstacles and dangers, such as identity, disorientation, economic inequity, and rejection Latinas/x face in life and ministry. The second part highlights the leadership strengths demonstrated in the interviewees' stories. Capacities such as emotional intelligence and lifelong learning defined the signature leadership of these 14 Latinas/x leaders. The call to ministry occurred as both an obstacle and a strength. Similarly, our relationship with the local church was complex, serving as the place where we suffered expressions of the -isms and the catalyst for our leadership development.

Chapter Four explores how women's networks can play an essential role in providing a sense of belonging in an environment that nurtures, equips, endorses, and deploys Latinas/x to be in ministry in whatever capacity they feel led to. Finally, I provide an ethnography of my observations while attending two women's network conferences and share the best practices that align with a *comadre* network's principles.

Finally, in Chapter Five, I share the vision of my preferred future and *Mundo Zurdo* by defining the attributes of a *comadres* leadership in ministry and *comadrazgo* networks. In addition, I offer to Latinas/x, the local church, and institutions guiding questions, best practices, and recommendations gleaned from the wisdom of this *comadre*

network. The questions provided invite Latinas/x, the local church, and institutions to exercise self-assessments that will help reflect on how to enable leadership development in ministry. In addition, the best practices and recommendations will provide Latinas/x's reflection to help Latinas lead their journey of transformation toward a more inclusive church.

## CHAPTER ONE

### IT STARTS WITH OUR STORY

"*Nadie sabe lo que hay en la olla más que la cuchara que la menea*" is an old Latin American adage that, translated to English, says, "No one knows what is in the pot more than the spoon that stirs it." It suggests that those closest to any given situation are more apt to describe it, critique it, and make changes. Given that I cannot remove myself from this process, like the spoon in the pot, I come closer to the soup in what in his book *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, John Swinton defines as *participatory research*. "Participatory research recognizes the importance of the starting position of the research enterprise and seeks to ensure that the perspective of the research subject is consistently held in constructive tension with that of the researcher and the research process."<sup>3</sup> At heart, this method of qualitative research provides for the researcher to be as close as possible to the research topic. In my case, the questions I ask emerge from my lived experience of seeking to live out a call for ministry and seeking endorsement within the UMC to do ministry in the United States. Therefore, this project of writing the oral stories of Latinas/x in leadership within the UMC and the PC (USAA) starts with my own.

My name is Teresita Matos-Post, and I am from Fajardo, Puerto Rico. I identify not only as Puerto Rican but as a daughter of the city of the Rising Sun, whose skirt is hemmed by the eternal bubbling of crashing waves, stirred in with waters from the Atlantic Ocean and the Caribbean Sea. I was born in 1976 at the local hospital in my hometown, where I also gave birth to my first daughter, Dyanne, nineteen years later. My

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<sup>3</sup> Swinton and Mowat, 283.

mother, Maria Rosa, gave birth to me after returning home from New London, Connecticut. Before that, she experienced the same journey Puerto Rican playwright Rene Marques described in his 1953 play *La Carreta*. In his work, he tells the story of peasants who journey from the countryside of Puerto Rico to San Juan and later to New York City. Thousands of Puerto Ricans made this journey in the late 40s and 50s experienced. Similarly, my mom moved at age eight from the Fajardo countryside to Rio Piedras, a borough of San Juan City, to live with my grandparents in the Bronx, New York City. Seeking better opportunities for her four daughters, my grandmother, a single mother, worked as a seamstress most of her life. She passed on her sewing skills to my mom. My suspecting aunts believed my mom was the favorite one. My grandmother's endearing nickname for my mother was *negrita* (my little black one). Because of all the different shades of brown in the household, my mom's was the deepest shade of brown when touched by the sun.

One thing my grandmother did not pass on to her daughters was the lifestyle and worldview of the Mita Congregation, “an indigenous Puerto Rican group that developed within the larger Pentecostal movement on the island”<sup>4</sup> in which my grandmother was raised. My mother grew up without the Christian faith as the center of her life. In her teens, a neighbor in the Bronx took an interest in my mother's and her cousins' spiritual lives and invited them to the Catholic Church with the keen interest of "getting these kids baptized." As a teenager, my mom chose Catholicism for herself as her faith and passed on her faith to me by teaching me the Lord's Prayer and the Hail Mary at the foot of my

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<sup>4</sup>J. Gordon Melton, "Mita's Congregation." In *Encyclopedia of World Religions: Encyclopedia of Protestantism*, by J. Gordon Melton. 2nd ed. *Facts on File* (2016)  
[http://ezproxy.drew.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/fofecvt/mita\\_s\\_congregation/0?institutionId=1119](http://ezproxy.drew.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/fofecvt/mita_s_congregation/0?institutionId=1119)

bed every night. She brought us to catechism and Mass every Saturday when I was old enough.

My dad was 20 years her senior and had recently retired from 25 years of military service. He had a rough childhood growing up in the Southwest region of Puerto Rico, where there was a famine in the late 20s and 30s. Hunger and violence defined my dad's childhood. Against all odds, he managed to enlist in the US ARMY and served in both the Korean and Vietnam Wars. He is a white man with grayish-blue eyes and tells stories of the beatings he received from his comrades at bars when he was assumed to be white. He would pass as white until he opened his mouth, and his thick accent would give him away. He polished his English to pass as white, stripping away any hints of his Caribbean heritage. He traveled the world passing as a white man. In doing so, my dad absorbed all the racist rhetoric, mentality, and behaviors he learned from his peers. Some of that I evidently learned from him when at age 5, I gently touched the soft skin of my mother's arms, the ones that swayed me to sleep and embraced me when I was hurt, and asked her, "Does it hurt to be black?" My dad did not share with us any form of religious faith. What was faithful about him was his ability to provide economically, his bursts of anger and violence, and his obsession with death and dying.

My journey with religion in the Catholic Church halted when I learned that the priest would be slapping my cheek upon my arrival at the altar for confirmation. A gesture within the Catholic Confirmation liturgy in which "The bishop gave a light slap to the cheek of the candidate, signifying their readiness to bear trouble for the sake of the Gospel (*Le Pontifical Romain au Moyen-Âge: Le Pontifical de Guillaume Durande*, ed.

Michel Andrieu, *Studi e Testi* 88, 3:333–335).”<sup>5</sup> Given my experiences of violence perpetrated by my father, I instinctively perceived that as an act of violence upon my body. This was not of God. Alternatively, I would not put myself through that, for no God would require that. In my journey of developing my religious leadership within a denomination, I continue to resist any forms of tradition, doctrine, and polity that I perceive as an affront to my personhood. Although powerholders among Christian Denominations perceive my resistance as unwillingness to abide by mores of the institutions, I consider it a response of self-preservation and care.

In Puerto Rican culture, we are taught early on that "*la cara no se toca*," (We do not touch the face.) What added insult to that potential injury was when Sister Dolores asked me what role I wanted to play in the Mass led by youth in preparation for confirmation. I chose the place closest to the altar to help serve communion. Sister Dolores placed her hand upon my shoulder, gently squeezing it, and said, "No, anything else but that." I wonder if her squeeze on my shoulder was one of solidarity. Did she recognize that moment as a chance where, if circumstances were different, she would counsel a girl as she explored a call to serve? Did she reflect on her own call and the obstacles she faced? I will never know. She stated simply I could not because I was a girl. That was a pivotal moment in the formation of my understanding of God. When Sister Dolores asked us, there were no limitations in her question. She assumed we knew where we could locate ourselves based on doctrine and catholic tradition. As I sought to find my place in the Church as a religious leader in the United States, I have been doing so

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<sup>5</sup> P. Turner. "Confirmation." In *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed. 4 (2003): 84-92. <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX3407702676/GVRL?u=madi95127&sid=bookmark-GVRL&xid=23caba49>.

without proper training in what racism, sexism, and prejudice look like in a different socio-political landscape. I positioned myself in a place, the church, where I later learned that the people around me asked: who does she think she is to assume she belongs? Part of the exploration in this project will be to identify the obstacles that we know not to expect when you are a person whose colonized mind is yet to be challenged. By this I mean, that as a product of the process of colonization of the US in Puerto Rico which grants me the benefits of being a US Citizen, I never questioned my sense of belonging, that is until I arrived in the continental US and sought permanent employment by the UMC I believed wholeheartedly that if God loved me, therefore, my gender ought not to be a boundary to where I can serve.

When in 2004, I had a conversion experience, what followed was a seeker journey. I had disavowed the existence of God and adapted to a more humanist understanding of life without the spiritual world. After that, my search was to seek to understand the Spirit that came over me. After its touch in my heart, I could no longer rationally, mentally, intellectually, nor physically deny the existence of a Supreme Being, whom we cannot see or touch but that I could undoubtedly feel. That seeker journey brought me to Christ Hispanic UMC in Orlando, Florida. I surrendered to the pastoral leadership of Rev. Angel "Gary" Garay, who "saw" me from our first encounter and mentored me through my discipleship journey. His wife, Rev. Amparito Garay, whose powerful testimony of returning to life while her body was on the journey to the morgue, converted me again, as it did many all-over Latin America. When wrestling with the early embers of the call, it was Rev. Amparito who taught me that divorced women and single mothers have a place in the vineyard. That faith community was vibrant in worship,

diverse in cultures, and Latinx countries represented, with dysfunctions as any family, but a place where I found a home away from home. In a later section I will expound on the role the local church plays in nurturing Latinas/x's leadership. Ideally, the local church is the place where Latinas/s feel free to explore their call and develop their leadership, the way Christ Hispanic UMC played its role in developing mine.

My leadership journey developed there as I first used my idled career as a journalist and communications major to publish the church newsletter and lead the audiovisual ministry. While serving, I also faithfully attended Bible Study. Brother Mario Delgado was my teacher and mentor. Humbly he taught within the precepts of Methodist doctrine, but at heart, Brother Mario believed and taught me about the power of the Holy Spirit and its second baptism. I owe much of who I am as a minister and religious leader to these humble servants who saw in me what I did not yet see. They mentored me and ushered me to a place where I could see the vision of God's power operating in my life. Because they could see me, I wholeheartedly believe that if this calling were from God, anyone on my path toward credentialing and endorsement would see it as well.

In 2006 I wrote my first letter to the District Superintendent expressing interest in entering the discerning process towards candidacy in the UMC. Those early steps I best describe as the "playing hard to get" dynamic, where I had to prove my "real" interest and conviction by relentlessly pursuing District officials to meet with the superintendent and assign me a mentor, which are requirements for the process. I was attempting to do these things as a single mother with two young girls, working full time and barely making my rent, and serving as a volunteer full time in my local church.

Finally, in 2019, still not ordained or endorsed by the UMC, even after years of serving, I had the opportunity to chat briefly and exchange emails with the new District Superintendent. He wasted no time putting the burden on me, that he had done all he could do to "get" me through the process but that I did not follow through. Choice words came to mind but remained not uttered. The system's anecdotal rhetoric states that candidates who do not make it to the end: did not want it hard enough, were not called at all, or did not want to submit to the scrutiny and process as everyone else (put in the work).

This work emerges from this experience. Where a newly transplanted Latina finds community in a mainline denomination church that does what it is supposed to do: make disciples and send them off to the world to serve. Where a Latina receives, cultivates, pursues, and proves her worth as a minister. However, the sins of prejudice, racism, sexism, and patriarchy embedded in the polity and culture of mainline denominations make it nearly impossible to acquire endorsement and credentials. It is often the case that Latinas/x put in the work by following the directives, proving their loyalty and commitment to the denomination, and still see their journey stifled in and by the process.

This work is for Latinas/x who earned stars within mainline denominations in the United States but will unlikely serve Latinx communities. That is unless she is willing to do the job of pastoring or ministering to two racially and linguistically diverse congregations. Latina leaders are tending to the demands of a predominantly white Church while doing the hard work of planting a Latino/x faith community within a power-imbalanced structure and church politics. Through this research project I seek to provide access to Latinas/x and the churches who nurture and affirm our leadership to

testimonies the experiences Latinas/x have in their journeys within the UMC and the PC(USA), name the most common obstacles we encounter, how we navigate them, and what we can do to change so that more Latinas/x have more access to develop their own leadership journeys and are fruitful contributors to the local church and the world.

### Importance of the Project

This project is important to me because I know that despite the shortcomings of Christian denominations, God will continue to call Latinas/x to serve in ministry. Despite my own disappointments with the Church and the local church, I believe God uses the church as the most effective vehicle and tool to develop disciples, who are then called, equipped, and deployed to serve their communities. As the Latino/x communities continue to grow in the United States, I believe that Protestant churches, such as the UMC and the PC(USA) already have the resources and are best positioned to develop meaningful ministry with these communities. As I write I hold in mind all the *mujeres* (women) who are part of the Beth-El community here in Florida. I think of their struggles, and of how our churches fail them on the daily. I hold the dream that the church can serve as one vehicle for them to define and achieve, With God's and the church's help, their own dream in this country.

Latinas/x play an important role in ministries serving Latino/x communities in the United States. To increase the possibilities for Latinas/x within them, both the UMC and the PC(USA) must expand their understandings of ministry and develop a diversity of pathways towards endorsing Latinas/x leaders.

## The Problem and Purpose of the Study

A 2014 Pew Research Religious Landscape Study indicates that 6% of Mainline Protestants in the United States identifies as Latino<sup>6</sup>. A 2014 report by the UMC General Commission of Status and Role of Women (GCSRW) reflects that 1.3% of the clergy population identifies as Hispanic, out of which only 0.3% are Latinas/x.<sup>7</sup> A similar 2020 PC(USA) Minister Survey: Demographic Report shows that only 2% of ministers within the denomination identify as Hispanic/Latinx, out of which half are Latinas/x. A calculation based on available data would suggest that in the PC(USA) and UMC respectively there are an estimated 39 Full time Latina Clergy and 14 Full time Latina Clergy. These numbers could be slightly higher. But they stand in contrast to a 2019 Pew Research report that recorded the USA Hispanic population at 60.6 million nationwide. In high density states like Florida, Texas, California, and New York, Latinx persons represent an average of 30% of the total population.<sup>8</sup> What will it take for denominations like the UMC and the PC(USA) to close the nearly 28% gap between the neighbors in our communities and the persons who sit in our pews, lead ministries, and preach from our pulpits? One strategy is to ensure that Latinas/x are in visible and meaningful positions of leadership, where the growing community of Latinx persons can see themselves in the

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<sup>6</sup> “Mainline Protestants,” Religious Landscape Study, Pew Research Center, accessed March 23, 2023. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/religious-tradition/mainline-protestant/>.

<sup>7</sup> Erin Kane. “Women of Color Less than 4% of UMC Clergy,” Women by Numbers, Resource UMC, accessed March 23, 2023. <https://www.resourceUMC.org/en/partners/gcsr/home/content/women-of-color-less-than-4-of-UMC-clergy>

<sup>8</sup> Renee Stepler and Mark Hugo Lopez. “Ranking the Latino Population in the States,” USA Latino Population Growth and Dispersion Has Slowed Since Onset of the Great Recession, Pew Research Center. Last modified September 8, 2016. <https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/2016/09/08/4-ranking-the-latino-population-in-the-states/>

ministries of the church. But if denominations are unable or unwilling to innovate to include us, what alternatives do Latinas/x, who are seeking to live out their call to ministry, have?

The projections presented above are dismal and point to a disconnect between these once considered mainline denominations and the communities in which their church buildings are embedded. They also point to breaches, gaps, forms of gatekeeping, and other practices that inhibit the full participation in leadership for Latinas/x ministers.

The Covid-19 pandemic posed an unprecedented disruption to local churches worldwide; with in person services pivoting to virtual services and streaming, exploring alternative approaches to funding, and many ultimately closing their doors. This abrupt change to the traditional dynamics and structures provides an opportunity for local churches in the UMC and the PC(USA) innovate strategies for the engagement of Latinas/x with its ministries. However, there is not one effective formula, the UMC and the PC(USA) must develop a diversity of pathways for meaningful engagement to take place. I suggest that limited forms of endorsing bodies preclude the full inclusion of Latinas/x in ministry. What would a network that affirms, creates community, provides accountability, and celebrates leadership of Latinas/x in the UMC and PC(USA) look like? I believe Latinas/x can provide answers to this question.

In her article “Faithful in the Struggle: A Historical Perspective on Hispanic Protestant Women in the United States,” Nora Lozano notes that there is a “lack of available information on the Hispanic Church in general and specifically on women within the church.”<sup>9</sup> She names the “forces of sexism, racism, and classism” as the

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<sup>9</sup> Lozano, 118.

“forces” that disempower this type of work. In the footnotes Lozano quotes historian Daisy Machado stating that very few Protestant churches have supported the writing of the Hispanic church history within their denominations. Moreover, she quotes Gaston Espinoza adding that this lack of support stems from the assumption that all Latinos practice Roman Catholicism. In my own research, I found very limited literature on the role of Latinas/x in the local Protestant church. The few historiographies and articles mainly focus on those Latinas/x who have reached ordination or have broken glass ceilings by being first in being ordained or consecrated to serve in positions of influence where no other Latinas/x have before, leaving out the work and ministry of many others before them who didn’t due to exclusivist policies and practices of the church.

This research is aimed first and foremost at providing Latinas/x discerning their call to ministry guiding posts through the lived experiences of pioneers who have been in ministry in the UMC and the PC(USA). Secondly, through their voices this study seeks to provide the UMC and the PC(USA) best practices that can change the landscape of ministry to be more inclusive and just.

### Significance of Study

I believe this work to be of significance because Latino/Hispanics are the fastest growing minoritized group in the US. The UMC and the PC(USA), resourced and influential denominations in which Latinas/x like me have developed our leadership and ministry, have remained predominantly white. If they are to be in ministry with Latinx communities, the UMC and PC(USA) must make way for more Latinas/x to be part of the ministry. Latinx/Hispanic ministries will not appeal to younger generations, nor will it effectively reach new waves of Latinas/x coming to the USA, if Latinas/x are not visibly

part of the leadership and ministry of the church. This project builds a network of 15 women, including myself, who enter a conversation to share their lived experiences within both denominations. Our conversations generated data that reveals patterns, strategies, features, problems, and solutions that will serve as a resource to produce transformation in faith communities to intend to be in ministry with Latinas/x and the communities we love.

### Nature of Study

I chose five research questions for this study to explore and glean wisdom from the ministry journeys of women who have succeeded in developing their leadership within the UMC at the PC(USA).

The first question was broad, about their sense of call and how that pursuit of the call and the development of their leadership took shape within the denomination and in the cultural context of the United States of America.

The second question was about partners in the journey, such as mentors. I make the distinction between mentors assigned by ordaining bodies as part of the process of discerning the call. For this purpose, we focus on the types of mentors we admire. They are people we identify with, look up to, inspire us, and from whom we continue to learn.

The third question was about equitable compensation and exploring how Latinas/x in ministry within these two denominations experience economic growth and hardships. The framework launches from the understanding that Latinas/x in the US are paid \$.54 for every dollar a white male earns. Moreover, that number is less in the UMC and the PC(USA). The idea was to invite women to reflect upon how economic

opportunity or hardships impact their leadership journey and generate ideas, identify alternatives to make changes, and how that change could happen.

The fourth question was an invitation to interviewees to reflect specifically upon the hardships that no one had prepared them for or that they did not foresee. The assumption is that we all face hardships, but we want to focus on the ones that no one mentions. When naming hardships, obstacles, or challenges, I did not mention any of the -isms because I did not want to influence their mentioning; instead, I was looking for sexism, racism, classism, and other -isms to show up organically in their stories. Many of these Latinas/x were first in their positions of leadership. Therefore, they would not have access to people who had walked the path before them. I assumed that they were blazing a trail, and as they walked, they encountered obstacles and challenges with no other point of reference, but their own resourcefulness. I was very interested in learning what tools they used to navigate those challenges as they emerged.

The last question assumes that something unique happens when Latinas/x in the United States follow their call to ministry. Because of our cultural background and experience in liminality, we bring something particular to the church's ministry. Therefore, I invited the interviewees to explore what particularities they thought Latinas/x bring to the church and what the benefits are to the church.

### Procedures/ Process

The questions were provided to the interviewees prior to the conversations, and they were free to respond in the language of their preference. While some of the interviews were conducted over the phone or in person, I recorded all the interviews on Zoom. I transcribed all interviews using an online platform that transcribes audio from a

list of languages, including Spanish and English. I translated into English all the transcriptions that were mainly in Spanish to incorporate their contributions into this work. I charted their responses to the five questions to isolate them and be able to analyze them closely.

All interviewees signed an informed consent form and agreed to have their personhood and voices recorded. They were all given a choice to opt-out of answering any questions and from using stories or quotes they did not feel comfortable publicizing. In addition, their quotes or stories required a second level of consent via email. In this way we co-created this document together.

#### Description of Process of Interviews

Throughout this process I have reflected about the ways in which I've been touched by the lives and ministries of Latinas/x in my ministry journey. I decided to interview Latinas/x leaders in the UMC and PC(USA), because of my own connection, ministry and understanding within both denominations. I have been a member of the UMC since 2004 and have been leading a Presbyterian ministry since 2020. I hold strong connections within the UMC network, and I am trained on its polity and processes for people to follow their call to ministry. I was not as educated on the polity, policies, and procedures of the PC(USA). My initial understanding was that they were similar with some key differences. I'm dealing with two mainline denominations in the United States that have a long and rich history of ministry in the United States, Latin America, and the world. Both denominations have a global perspective to ministry and have different approaches on how ministry and leadership develops depending on the context.

While I continue to be a member of the UMC and worship locally at a Hispanic UMC church, my ministry leadership context is Beth-El Farmworker Ministry, a mission of the Presbyterian Church(USA) and Cumberland Presbyterian Church. It is from that context that I get to explore the ways in which Latinas/x navigate these two mainline denominations in the United States when responding to the call to serve in ministry. Both denominations share in the Protestant tradition and were pivotal in the formation of the religious landscape of North America from colonial times to the present. Both denominations' origin story starts in England and in Europe, therefore neither are originally American. However, iterations of doctrine, theology, and political structure have further developed in America to include women in ministry, people of color, and the LGBTQIA+ community.

#### Research Experience: Accomplishments and Obstacles

If I do nothing else, this work is my life's work. I am overwhelmed by the understanding that I hold the life stories of pioneers in the faith. My work here will serve as one or many secondary sources that will enable the work of these leaders and changemakers to be shared widely. Their wisdom is a gift to us today and will continue to bring joy, hope, and practical roadmaps for Latinas/x worldwide who seek to remain faithful to their call. This work provides guidelines to institutions to organize themselves structurally in just ways. In pursuing this project, I achieved the development of a community of thinkers in solidarity. In the process I found healing in telling my own story and listening to theirs. In reflecting on our combined history and writing this body of work I feel to have accomplished what Chicana feminist and theorist, Gloria Anzaldúa refers to when she writes, “Because the world I create in the writing compensates for

what the real world does not give me. By writing I put order in the world, give it a handle so I can grasp it.”<sup>10</sup> My prayer is these pages provide many handles that many can hold on to. To find their footing, and to launch forward into their preferred future.

### Assumptions and Biases

Initially, I intended to research five Latinas/x who had become the first pastors, preachers, ordained ministers, and bishops in all mainline denominations. Unfortunately, that research proved hard because very little literature about them exists beyond the one-liners in the denominational history timelines.

I knew I had to interview them for more profound insights about their journey. It became evident that, while worthy of celebration, their breaking of the glass ceiling moment was only a tiny part of their story. So then, I broadened my scope to include Latinas/x in religious leadership, laity, and clergy, who had been first in any role, capacity, and ministry context. The movement was to include Latinas/x in various contexts and levels of ministry, in addition to those who made history by being first ordained or consecrated to the highest levels within their denomination.

I approached this work to prove that Latinas/x who have achieved ministry endorsements by the UMC and PC(USA) had successfully passed under the radar by assimilating into the dominant culture. On the contrary, in the fourteen interviews, what I discovered in each interviewee was a tenacity to navigate traditional systems wisely while remaining unequivocally authentic to their sense of self and signature leadership.

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<sup>10</sup> Anzaldúa, *Speaking in Tongues*, 83

Based on my experiences of perceived competition among women in ministry, I assumed I would find glaring samples of how institutions tend to pit women against each other, especially women of color. Divide and conquer is a foolproof tactic of the dominant culture that fosters competition for the scarcely available positions in ministry. Instead, what I found in the stories shared in the interviews was a commitment to maintaining strong bonds among the sisterhood. Even when the interviewees recalled experiences in which they felt blindsided by other women of color or explicitly betrayed by white women, these Latinas/x offered grace, understanding that all women suffer marginalization in the church.

I suspect that our struggle includes a variety of pressures. That we wrestle with perfectionism and its connection to performance anxiety would limit our willingness to ask for help or accept help. We feel and operate under pressure to be 100% perfect 100% of the time, and we are uncertain when asking for help might be interpreted as a deficiency in leadership. We face the pressure to serve as saviors and representatives of "our people."

When I was typing in front of an Apple computer in 1994 in my first journalism class at the Universidad de Puerto Rico Rio Piedras Campus' School of Communications, and we were learning to write the: Who, when, what, how, and why into the first paragraph of a news story, little did I know that those skills were preparing me for this sacred work. To ask an open-ended question and be the listener and retainer of such wealth of wisdom and life-giving experiences of 14 women is humbling. I am writing a New Testament book yet to be included in the canon. The Apostle Paul alluded to this when he wrote in 2 Corinthians 3:2,

You, yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known, and read by everyone. You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

These Latinas/x's shared stories are letters that speak of the work of God through their lives, call us to a journey of solidarity, and inspire us to follow the path no matter how treacherous, reminding us of God's work through our lives as well.

Their vulnerability inspired me, and their generosity is evidence of the gifts of the spirit in them. Their lives work, and God's work within and through them gives me hope. We are indeed like the old hymn says, "*sembrando la simiente preciosa*" (planting the precious seed.) Beautiful flowers and delicious fruit we shall harvest.

### My Ministry Contexts

As I shared earlier in this paper, I have been a Christian disciple and minister in the United Methodist Church since 2004, first through the Hispanic ministries of the Florida Annual Conference. As a layperson, I was a delegate to the General Conference in 2008 and an alternate delegate in 2012. At the Dallas Fort Worth General Conference, I was in awe at the reach, resources, and power of my denomination. At that moment, I truly believed that I was witnessing the embodiment of Psalm 24:1, "The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it." The whole world gathered there together, and God was the owner of it all. Indeed, there was enough for everyone. I sometimes thought of my local Hispanic church in Orlando struggling to pay the bills and its ministries. I thought of all Latino/x people in America finding a home in a church with a bounty. That was my American dream. It is in the context of the General Conference that we zoom into all the inequities of the church and all the things we get wrong.

There were:

- Witnesses of those seeking full inclusion of LGBTQIA+ people in church ministries.
- Those who were fighting to shorten the ordination process.
- Those advocating for women's rights and equal pay for female clergy.

And the list went on and on. Despite learning all the dents and wrinkles of the denomination, I was in love with the UMC I owed her so much of my personal and spiritual growth, and I believed she could do the same for many others trying to find their place in a foreign land. Still, today as I write this paper, despite my disillusionment, there is hope for the UMC. Moreover, I believe that Latinas/x ministers, clergy, and laity alike can help build back a more inclusive church, Christ and ministry centered.

While walking away from the ordination process in the UMC, I landed back in Florida, where a former Drew colleague who is an Ordained PC(USA) minister and I went to lunch. She told me about a PC(USA) ministry working with Central Florida farmworkers. They were searching for an Executive Director at the time, and she suggested that I apply for it. I did not know what it would take to do that type of work, but I recalled a few details in the recent past that gave me the courage to pursue it. In my last year in parish ministry with the UMC in NJ as a local pastor, I sought alternative work. We knew early in the transition that I had minimal chances of being a pastor at the Florida Annual Conference. Several insiders had already confirmed that for me, including the most recent pastor at my home church, who suggested that if I wanted to pastor, my best bet was to stay in NJ. The reasons are varied and some speculative. The most tangible reason is that many pastors nationwide considering retirement in Florida seek to

have their last appointment in the state. Therefore, the pastor pool is saturated, and local churches that can afford a full-time pastor are limited. Another feature is that anecdotally, most, if not all, Hispanic Churches prefer male pastors. Moreover, the Florida-Cuba pipeline provides many male Hispanic pastors positioned to take available seats. Moreover, my former pastor's concern was that I was coming from a very liberal seminary and that I would not be a good fit in any church in Florida.

With that news, I started researching alternatives. I learned that the skills I had acquired as a solo pastor in a local church were transferable to doing non-profit work: Executive Director was the equivalent. I entertained that idea for months. Another event that suggested that I might be a good fit for this new employment opportunity with the PC(USA) was a prayer I lifted after feeling silly after a prayer vigil at a family detention center in Elizabeth, NJ, where numerous families of immigrants awaited deportation. I had shared a spoken word, and as a witness, we all placed our hands upon the wall, praying for the walls to crumble. They did not. Close to my departure, I was starting to engage with local ministries that visited with immigrant detainees. I was passionate about this work. Leaving for Florida felt like abandonment, but we decided to move to help my mother-in-law Barbara, who had health issues.

At that time, I felt a strong call to ministry with immigrant families. I prayed, "I cannot go to the border." Which, in my mind, would be the most logical place. Upon researching the opportunity at Beth-El, I realized that this ministry was a borderland in and of itself. The name "Beth-El," which in Hebrew means "House of God," compelled me. How appropriate for those who have journeyed long and far to find welcome in a place called a house of God! A place to call home while away from home. I applied and

got the job. In the three years of ministry there, I have learned a lot. First, I was required to learn about Reformed Theology to understand the polity and ways of being of PC(USA) churches. In many ways very similar to that of the UMC and, in others, so different. At Beth-El, I report to two presbyteries of the PC(USA) and one presbytery of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. We are in ministry with hundreds of churches in Florida and the nation who stand with and fight for justice for farmworkers everywhere. In my role as Executive Director, I lead the charge of providing vision and leadership in achieving the mission of the ministry, which is: “to feed the mind, body, and spirit of farm workers and our neighbors in need through hunger relief efforts, access to education, health, and spiritual growth.”

In that work, I am responsible for the financial health and sustainability of the ministry, the leadership development and performance of the staff, and effectively communicating the story of our work among the farm working community. I used many of these capacities I developed in my work with the Girl Scouts of Citrus Council and refined them as a solo pastor of two UMC local churches in New Jersey. At Beth-El, the Board of Directors, comprising representatives of two PC(USA) presbyteries and the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, receive, affirm, support, want, and most importantly, trust my leadership. They have prayed and walked alongside me in ways that I cannot number. Their work with me has exemplified how churches and organizations ought to be in ministry with Latinas/x. It has been such a positive experience that I wish it for all my sisters and colleagues in *la lucha*.

Similarly, the PC(USA) has resources, platforms, and structures to carve space for the ministry of Latinas/x like me. Transformation and renewal can enable a meaningful

ministry to emerge that serves and develops the leadership of all Latine families who live here in the United States. First, however, their current reality must change.

### Who is Minister?

To most, a minister is a pastor. The definition of the term minister in practice is limited in mainline denominations. Through this body of work, I have re-defined and affirmed what I already thought to be consistent with my understanding of Scripture and theological praxis. In Christianity, the minister is any person who follows Jesus and serves the church and the community as an outcome of a call to serve. This definition is informed by my interpretation of 1 Peter 2:4 and 9:

Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and live like living stones let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ... But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people,[d] in order that you may proclaim the excellence of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.<sup>11</sup>

God calls all believers to share in the “holy priesthood,” in Greek, *ιεράτευμα* (*hieráteuma*), which translates to “priests of kingly rank, exalted to a moral rank and freedom which exempts them from the control of everyone but God and Christ.”<sup>12</sup> . The UMC and PC(USA), like other mainline denominations, generally use the term minister to define those employed and compensated by the church. However, Scripture reminds us that a minister is people God has chosen to serve and respond to that call, clergy, and

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<sup>11</sup> 2 Peter 2:4; 9 (NRSVUE).

<sup>12</sup> “Strong G2406, *hierateuma*,” Lexicon, Blue Letter Bible, accessed March 25, 2023. <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g2406/kjv/tr/0-1/>

laity alike. Therefore, when I write about ministers and leaders in religious leadership, it includes clergy and laity, and no denominational endorsement is required.

### Who are a Latinas/x and *Latinidades*?

Many of the articles that I have read that deal with Latino/Hispanic ministries and theologies do the work of explaining what it means when we say Latino or Hispanic. Moreover, they go to great lengths to explain how in the USA we named a particular group: Hispanics/Latinos. The second movement explains how different groups within the Hispanic/Latino community identify themselves. Currently, there are debates about using the terms Latinx and Latiné. In this paper, I use Latinas/x to include as many identities as possible within the Hispanic/Latino community in the United States who identify with the struggle.

I will say this, Latino or Hispanic has never done anything for me; these are epithets to aid the dominant culture to locate us within the sociopolitical landscape in the USA appropriately. I am Puerto Rican. Even when I did not ask the question directly: "What term do you prefer or identify with?" many of the Latinas/x I interviewed spoke about their preference, how foreign it was for them to use the word Latina as part of their identity, and most often spoke of their preference of naming their nationality: *puertorriqueña*, *cubana*, *mexicana*, and other nationalities as part of their identity.

I am Latinas/x in the United States because the forms of oppression (the struggle or *la lucha*) I experience align with all the forms of oppression that all Latinas/x in the USA experience. Therefore, to say that I am Latina/x defines my marginalization within the dominant culture more than my ethnic and cultural identity, which I do define by richness.

The x in Latinas/x refers to persons who identify as Latinx or Latiné, which are part of the LGBTQIA+ community and have carved out a space for themselves in Latin America and the USA. However, there is great debate over the use of Latinx and Latiné, mainly due to homophobic sentiments prevailing among Latino/Hispanic churches and because Spanish language purists experience it as a deterioration of Spanish grammar.

The term Latina/x allows for including non-Spanish speaking women from countries like Brazil, Belize, Haiti, and women from over 800<sup>13</sup> native peoples in Mexico, Central America, and South America who speak over 300 different native languages<sup>14</sup>, in some cases, in addition to Spanish.

Whether we use Latino, Hispanic, Latinx, or Latiné<sup>15</sup>, all these variants of ethnic names for people from Latin American countries point to the complex and problematic colonial relationship of the continental United States to their subservient neighboring countries. Therefore, using either term has historical and political implications.

When used by the church, one of the impacts of the term Latina or Hispanic women is that you miss the true nature of its rich complexity in lumping together a group of people with different historical, cultural, and socio-political experiences. You miss the opportunity to know your neighbor as they are rather than as you assume they should be.

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<sup>13</sup> “Indigenous Peoples in Latin America,” Population and Development, Economic Commission for Latin America, and the Caribbean (CEPAL), last modified September 22, 2014, <https://www.cepal.org/en/infografias/los-pueblos-indigenas-en-america-latina>.

<sup>14</sup> “Indigenous Languages,” Projects, Endangered Language Alliance (ELA), accessed April 1, 2023, <https://www.elalliance.org/projects/indigenous-languages>.

<sup>15</sup> The terms Latinx and Latiné are gender inclusive and there is debate among Latino/x communities over its use. In the article, “Latinx, Latiné or other? LGBTQ Houstonians weigh in on debate over gender-neutral terms,” Jhair Romero reports that disagreements emerge from concerns about the preservation on the proper use of grammar in Spanish. Others state concerns of erasure of tradition, culture, and identity.

So that when we form an agency, organization, committee, or initiative that, in good faith, wants to ensure the full inclusion of Latinas/x within their fold, they already have a stereotypical picture of who fits the profile, risking excluding the voices of whoever does not match.

Isasi-Diaz suggested only the broadest descriptions by talking about Mujeristas "as persons who opt for Latinas, who have our liberation/fullness of life as their goal because they see it as an important element of who they are."<sup>16</sup> She adds, "Yes, this means that men can be Mujerista. Yes, this means that non-Latinas or non-Latinos can be Mujerista."<sup>17</sup> In that spirit of broadness, inclusivity, self-determining, and self-defining, Latinas/x ministers are all those who identify as female and have strong cultural ties to communities in our countries of origin in Latin America. Moreover, it includes those who live in the USA as "others" struggling daily with ethnic prejudice, sexism, and economic exploitation within and outside church spaces.

Finally, I questioned the Hispanic/Latino label's inefficacy when I joined the Hispanic Caucus at Drew Theological School. The Hispanic Caucus was for those who spoke Spanish, but not necessarily, because some of us were born and grew up in the US and spoke two languages or more at home. The Hispanic Caucus was for people who came to Drew from Hispanic Countries, but not really, because some of us have been here all our lives. The Hispanic Caucus was not necessarily for people who worshiped in a particular way. We were white, black, and brown people who identified as Latinos based on our experience as "other" in all the communities where we were present. In the

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<sup>16</sup> Isasi-Díaz, "Mujerista Theology: A Praxis", 83.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

small bubble of our seminary experience, it was evident that within the Latinx community, there are varied expressions of *latinidades*. The use of the word *latinidades* broadens the spectrum of inclusivity to all communities within the United States that embrace *latinidad* as their identity and co-create their versions of *latinidades* through their life experiences.

### Who is Comadre?

Comadre translates as co-mother, describing the relationship between a mother and the godmother of her child. Latinas/x rely on the comadre figure not just as a friend but also as a trusted confidant and loyal companion in their everyday lives. If there is something good to share that can ease the struggle for today, comadres do not hold back. Puerto Rican psychologist and researcher Lillian Comas-Diaz, a Mujerista practitioner, studies the "cultural healing" in the comadre/madrina relationship. She writes, "comadre (co-mother) therapy is based on the relationship between the mother and the godmother of a child as a mirror for the multicultural feminist therapeutic alliance." In other words, comadres are allies in the struggle, not for survival alone but for healing and wholeness. Comadre leadership is a call for Latinas/x and their supporters to prioritize their relationships in religious leadership to create new pathways for ministry on a global scale.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK, THREE COMADRES IN CONVERSATION

My feet dangling from the pews at the Catholic Church in my hometown would swing to the sound of Sister Dolores's guitar. From our bench set at the middle point of the sanctuary, I could trace a path ahead of me of white-haired low buns hanging by the napes of women. Around their necks are embroidery collars featuring their best dress for Mass. That trail of beauty, wisdom, and faithfulness ended with the priest anchored between the sacristy and the table of the Lord. It was in that context that I noted my first sense of call. I was first captivated by the verses of the hymn *Pescador de Hombres* (Lord, you have come to the lakeshore)<sup>18</sup>. The verses "my boat carries, no gold and no weapons" captured my imagination as I could see myself in one of my hometown's fishermen's boats carrying "nets and labor." The lyrics' message of humility and peace conveyed images I still did not understand but suggested that creating a better world without wars was possible. This hymn alluded that I could do something for God at eight years old. The sense of being called to an adventure where peacemaking and keeping was the purpose spoke the language of my heart. This hymn first produced in me the desire to serve God. At eight, neither my age, gender, nor ethnicity presented themselves as obstacles to following the noble call to follow Jesus. After all, women's ministry nurtured my sense of call in the first place.

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<sup>18</sup>Cesareo Gabarain, "Tu has venido a la orilla (Pescador de Hombres) (Lord, You Have Come to the Lakeshore)," in *Mil Voces Para Celebrar, Himnario Metodista*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 195.

My innocent mind was ignorant of all the "dangers" I would face later in life when this call would emerge again, and I would pursue it with fierceness. Little did I know then that I would be pursuing this call within a new shore, the landscape of the United States of America. A landscape I knew of from afar because of the political relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States, but only to understand once you set foot on the land.

Since then, the United States has represented for many the promised land. The opportunity to mine "gold" by generating decent income or even the chance of starting their own business motivates many to leave their homelands and arrive on its shores. However, when I left my desire for gold and my swords at the shore to become a UMC minister and local pastor, I had little to no resources to navigate this new ocean. I needed a network of *comadres* to welcome me, teach me to navigate this migrant experience, and support me and each other as companions. In this work, I found in Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, Alicia Vargas, and Gloria Anzaldúa that network that offered me a theoretical and lived experience to understand my position as a Latina/x in the United States. Varga's testimony affirmed that I was not alone in the struggle, Isasi-Diaz defines the struggle and calls for a preferred future for, by, and with Latinas, and Anzaldúa offers concrete roles and approaches for Latinas/x to create the world we need.

Whereas I came to faith through my mother's determination to initiate us in the life of the Catholic Church, the witness and testimony of the sea of our female pew partners, and the leadership and service of Sister Dolores, I also did not estimate that the biggest obstacle to my journey would be what Alicia Vargas names as the "systemic

exclusivist sin"<sup>19</sup> of the Church. It is this idea that even when denominations affirm public statements of inclusion, it does not guarantee their integration in practice within local churches, agencies, and ministries. For example, in speaking about the affirmation of LGBTQIA+ persons to ministry within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) in comparison to the affirmation of the ministry of people of color, Vargas writes, "After all, the official policy of our church is not that people of color be excluded from its pulpits, but they are certainly have been, are, and will continue to be excluded for a long, long time!"<sup>20</sup> Varga's statement resonates with Anzaldúa's notion that the dangers Latina/x face is unavoidable. What would it look like for Christian denominations such as the UMC and the PC(USA) to intentionally enable the ministry of systematically disenfranchised communities? What would it take for Latinas/x in the United States to fit into carved spaces for their ministries within these two denominations? Or what would it look like for Latinas/x to desist in our intent to fit into existing institutions and invest our creative energies to create a new world, a Mundo Zurdo, a preferred future, a kind-dom of God?

When I became a member of the UMC and entered for the first time in 2006 its process of discernment of a call to ministry, I believed what the UMC Book of Discipline states in paragraph 301.1, that all Christians are called to participate in the ministry of the Church by Baptism and Holy Communion, and that the Church "received and accepted this call."<sup>21</sup> I trusted the "all" in my denomination's statement, included me. I navigated

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<sup>19</sup> Vargas, "Through Mujerista Eyes," 185.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2016 (Nashville, Tenn.: United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), ¶301.

for 13 years the various interpretations of UMC polity as embodied in the three different District Committees on Ordination (DCOM) that intended to help me discern my call to ordination. Throughout those years, these DCOMs affirmed me as a candidate for ministry. Meanwhile, I served as a part-time youth pastor, completed a year of supervised ministry at a local African Methodist Church, completed a Master of Divinity, served as a part-time pulpit supply pastor, received a local pastor license, completed two units of Clinical Pastoral Care training, and interviewed to be considered as a candidate for ordained ministry. Ultimately, after what I call the most bizarre of interviews in the candidacy process, in which the DCOM told me for the third time "not yet" to continue to the next phase of the process, I decided not to pursue ordination in the UMC. A discerned decision that many of my colleagues could not understand, especially after so many years and resources invested in the process.

In reading Vargas' article, I too identified with the image of "Jesus as that rejected pastor, whose "pulpit" was condemned because he did not quite fit the temple establishment at the time, who was brought to trial by systems of power that found him guilty of going against oppressive and exclusive and clubbish but powerful systems."<sup>22</sup> Throughout my career in the UMC, I have asked probing questions, challenged systems within the local Church and the annual conference, and challenged people with much power within the system. According to best practices in leadership, all of these are signs of good leadership. However, when a Latina/x or woman of color leads with authority, these leadership initiatives are seldom welcomed.

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<sup>22</sup> Vargas, "Through Mujerista Eyes," 182.

Vargas names a feature in the ELCA that is also like that of the UMC, "there are not enough ethnic-specific congregations for those aspiring pastors who hear the call of God and believe the rhetoric of our church about multiculturalism, which supposedly is grounded in our theology."<sup>23</sup> When interviewing for the DCOM, I looked around the groups of my peers, many with whom I shared classrooms in seminary and were moving forward in the process. One year seven candidates from my district moved forward, while the DCOM said to me, "Not yet." A good half were white and moving into the workforce for the first time; at least three were South Korean immigrants, and the remaining one or two were black or brown, entering their second or third career later in their life journey. The competitive pool of pastors is saturated. As local churches dwindle, the opportunities of "guaranteed appointments," a feature in United Methodist polity that guarantees an ordained elder a church, are scarce for ordained elders of color. Even when I understood the statistics logically, I could not help but question the veracity of my call and compare my fitness to ministry, considering those who could move forward. After much wrestling, I accepted that I was blackballed in the candidacy for ministry process by ¶ 304.1. in the UMC Book of Discipline, which states that those fit for ordination are to be "persons in whom the community can place trust and confidence."<sup>24</sup> In this phrase, the community is not explicitly defined. However, within the UMC polity, it is the committees, boards of ordination, and ultimately the college of ordained elders who make up "the community"

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2016 (Nashville, Tenn.: United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), ¶304.1.

that decides if a candidate for ministry is worthy of trust. In her work, *Mujerista Theology*, Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz states:

Latinas cannot presume, as others in the society do, that they will be trusted and respected unless they do something to forfeit that trust or respect. Latinas know that we must earn trust, that we must earn respect, and that we must keep earning it or we will not have it.<sup>25</sup>

I learned first-hand that this is a privilege "not yet" afforded to Latinas/x because "the community," especially that of ordained clergy, can "not yet" place trust and confidence in us. In part because denominations and churches have not given Latinas/x chances to earn that trust.

Vargas reflects on her journey:

The suffering of Jesus, our next of kin, on that cross redeems our suffering - the incarnated consequence of systemic sin - and restores our honor even within the oppressive systems that surround us and threaten to annihilate us by ignoring, rejecting, and casting us aside as worthless - as worthless as I felt when no congregation would even interview me for a call simply because I was Latina.<sup>26</sup>

The combination of church polity, social realities within the local churches, and the practices within and among networks make it so that Latinas/x and other persons of color whom God is calling show signs of fitness for ministry, and hold a promise of fruitfulness, see their journeys stifled by the system. Like Vargas and many others before us, I am also someone that others identify as called and fit for ministry but "not yet" authorized by the Church to do ministry within its framework.

I am grateful to have found Alicia Vargas's "written, oral history" in this article because I felt isolated. I believed I was the only one having these experiences. Even when

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<sup>25</sup> Isasi-Diaz, *Mujerista Theology*, 112.

<sup>26</sup> Vargas, "Through Mujerista Eyes," 185.

I understood that there were systemic issues in matters of ordination within the UMC and limited endorsements for certain types of ministries, I still thought I was who needed fixing. I failed to understand that it was a systemic matter and that what I experienced was happening to others. It was my search for "others" like me that inspired me to pursue this project. Moreover, in this search, healing came my way in the form of Alicia Vargas' testimony, who, even when we have never been in the same room, has become a *comadre* to me through her writing.

I do this through a Mujerista lens from Dr. Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz's Mujerista Theology. I first struggled to see the connection between my experience and this theological framework. I understood Mujerista theology to speak to the realities of women in the Catholic Church, Isasi-Diaz's context for her early work. Initially, I was offended by what seemed to me Mujerista Theology's practical use of Scripture, Isasi-Diaz writes:

the Bible, biblical truth, and revelation are not repudiated by Latinas but, for the majority of Latinas, they are not central, they are not considered very important, they do not play a prominent role in our lives. Most of us seldom read the Bible and know instead popularized versions of biblical stories versions Latinas create to make a point one can consider these versions to be distortions but for us they are quote "valid" interpretations, albeit imaginative ones, insofar as they contribute to the liberation of Latinas<sup>27</sup>

I should have appreciated the liberation of this commitment. After all, I had very conservative views on Scripture; I was from the literalist and inerrant camp; you take all or nothing. Until then, my understanding of Christianity was undisputed by a decolonized lens.

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<sup>27</sup> Isasi-Diaz, *En La Lucha*, 46.

As I grew in my study and articulation of my theology, I embraced the fluidity of a Mujerista framework. It first and foremost acknowledges the individual and collective experiences of Latinas/x, emerging from the conviction that Latinas/x' "religious understandings and practices...are a source for theology"<sup>28</sup> and listening "from them about God and how they [we] relate to God"<sup>29</sup> are particularly informed by *la lucha* (our struggle).<sup>30</sup> Hers is a decolonized approach because it allows Latinas/x to engage theology in their daily lives without considering what theologians have already said about God as a starting point.

However, the starting point for a Mujerista lens is the acknowledgment that economic disadvantage informs the everyday lives of Latinas/x in the United States. Isasi-Diaz writes that the "unequivocal option for the poor...[privileges] their way of seeing and understanding reality."<sup>31</sup> In my work with farmworkers in West Central Florida, I have used this lens as part of the ethos of our work because economic disadvantage defines *la lucha* (the struggle). According to an American Association of University Women (AAUW) report, Latinas/x are still "compensated just 57% of what non-Hispanic white men were paid in 2020."<sup>32</sup> The economic gap put Latinas/x at a 27.9% poverty rate, three times more than our white sisters. For Isasi-Diaz poverty is always in interplay with intersectional oppression: "classism/economic exploitation,

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<sup>28</sup> Isasi-Diaz, *Mujerista Theology*, 1.

<sup>29</sup> Isasi-Díaz, "Mujerista Theology: A Praxis," 83.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>32</sup> "Latinas and the Pay Gap," *Workplace and Economic Equity*, AAUW, accessed March 3, 2023, <https://www.aauw.org/resources/article/latinas-and-the-pay-gap/>.

sexism, racism/ethnic prejudice, and many other -isms."<sup>33</sup> Pay equity is essential in this work because the journey for any person seeking endorsement by mainline denominations is costly. The cost includes not only the cost of tuition in theological schools but also time off work to travel to meet with endorsing committees, meetings with mentors, training, and other required gatherings. When we consider the average compensation for Latinas/x, the process is unaffordable. Especially when the average compensation package for Latinas/x most likely does not include benefits such as paid time off.

Mujerista Theology was "done by those who are marginalized and oppressed because we are women and because we are Latinas/x."<sup>34</sup> In the United States of America, if you are Latina, you will experience ethnic prejudice, sexist mindsets and practices, and economic exploitation. For Isasi-Diaz, these three are ailments that define the struggle of Latinas/x in the USA. As more Latinas/x in the USA do the work of ministry, as laity or ordained, within Protestant churches and climb the ladders of leadership, authority, influence, and power, a Mujerista theology done by practitioners from these places is crucial. We can safely assume that these three primary forms of oppression are part of Latina ministers' experience as we develop our leadership within Protestant churches in the USA

One could argue that you are not marginalized and oppressed if you are in a position of leadership, authority, influence, and power within any institution, especially the Church. However, while it may be true that some Latinas/x who rise in leadership

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<sup>33</sup> Isasi-Díaz, "Mujerista Theology: A Praxis," 80.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 81.

have life experiences of privilege in the USA, such as: earning higher education degrees, by listening to the stories of colleagues in the field, it seems pervasive that even when Latina ministers have titles, such as pastor or The Reverend, that would traditionally, historically, and automatically carry authority, influence, and power when embodied by white males, we still have to earn and prove our worth to retain our place in the organizations we serve.

Moreover, in the UMC, one can pastor a church without being ordained, performing the same tasks and responsibilities as those who are, and not even falling within the range of compensation provided to churches to compensate their clergy adequately. Latinas/x in the Protestant churches in the USA are executing the proper administration of a congregation for a fraction of the pay. Due to this understanding, I do not assume that being in a leadership position within religious spaces automatically grants Latinas/x authority, influence, and power.

What I appreciate about the Mujerista Theology framework is that it makes space and expects its reach to expand as new Latina voices emerge. This ongoing engagement of Latinas/x in theological thinking and praxis is liberating. The struggle itself is liberation because there is a self-determining activity by giving place, space, and complete attention to our stories, affirming our humanity, the value of our presence, and the need for our contributions. Mujerista Theology is a tool for Latinas/x in religious leadership in the United States of America to build networks of influence and power to do justice for all. The Mujerista theology approach resonates with me because it mirrors how our *abuelitas* (grandmothers), *madres* (mothers), *tias* (aunts), *comadres* (co-mothers), *madrinas* (Godmothers), and allies would solve everyday problems. For

example, in the kitchen cooking all three meals from scratch, on the porch peeling grains, and in the garden tending the chickens, as our ancestors did the work to survive, they would share their stories, offer counsel, and pray together. In Psychology, Lillian Comas-Diaz defines these exchanges as *comadre* (co-mother) therapy and *madrina* (Godmother) mentoring. In her field, "*Comadre* (co-mother) therapy is based on the relationship between the mother and the godmother of a child as a mirror for the multicultural feminist therapeutic alliance."<sup>35</sup>

Mujerista Theology does not happen in a vacuum or isolation, where one researcher observes and draws conclusions. Mujerista theology allows me as the researcher to belong to the community, asking for and listening to how faith informs the daily struggle of Latinas/x like me and allowing my own story to inform my approach to this theological reflection. This work is done in the community, engaging in deep conversations. (Isasi-Diaz, *A Praxis*, 85). In talking colloquially with other women of color in ministry, it never fails that we would share anecdotes of experiences in which we have encountered prejudice, racism, sexism, or exploitation at some point in the conversation. I identified some patterns; we first assume we are responsible for what happened to us or must have done something wrong to elicit it. We seldom ever assume first that we are experiencing prejudice, racism, sexism, or exploitation. This way of perceiving the world is a result of colonial mentality, which Comas-Diaz defines as "a condition where the colonized believe that they are inferior to the colonizer (David & Okazaki, 2006) ...As a consequence, a colonized mentality frequently leads to internalization of negative stereotypes, estrangement from the oppressed's native culture,

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<sup>35</sup> Comas-Diaz, "Journey to Psychology," 164.

and a desire to become more like the colonizer (Freire, 1970). Regrettably, this kind of oppression results in identity confusion among the colonized (Fanon, 1967)."<sup>36</sup> *Comadre* therapy has a role in healing and sharing knowledge among networks that will enable Latina Ministers to thrive in the USA by having the collective knowledge that the tools of oppression are not of our own doing but strategically designed to keep our leadership subdued. Therefore, a network of *comadres* is a community that shares knowledge, wisdom, and solutions and creates a space for allyship and solidarity from the understanding that the systems of oppression affect all Latinas/x in the United States.

In my work among female farmworkers, the most exploited Latina community in the United States of America, solutions for their liberation lie within their stories and collective knowledge. Liberation will not come to all until the most exploited among all of us is liberated. Furthermore, because they hold the solutions, we must listen. The robust well-connected structures of mainline Protestant denominations could potentially offer the mechanisms and resources for Latino ministries to flourish within communities across the United States. We must make way for Latinas/x to lead from our context with our knowledge.

There is no space for doubt throughout the study of the biblical text, history, testimony, and evidence of righteousness and anointing that God calls women to serve in ministry in all its expressions, capacities, and roles. God does not exclude any humanly created leadership position from the roles and responsibilities reserved for female church leaders. The perseverance of a tradition and a cultural position that insists women's leadership should be limited is a sin. It is a rejection of God's will. God calls women into

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<sup>36</sup> Comas-Diaz, "Journey to Psychology," 160.

ministry, and the Church systematically excludes women. It is a sign that there are people, groups, and denominations who worship tradition for the sake of sheltering themselves from the discomfort that requires growth. However, it is also a sign of greed for influence and power that a few want to retain for themselves. If women participate in all seats across the board, power, and influence for those in the dominant culture become diluted, and seats of power centered and secured by race and gender decrease. Inclusion and collaboration are signs of progress and growth. In those areas, women we are pioneers and masterfully skilled. Moreover, because of these skills among Latinas/x in leadership, we can also create a network of solidarity that creates a new world outside of already defined religious institutions. My third *comadre* Gloria Anzaldúa adds to this exhortation to the conversation.

Gloria Anzaldúa's identity as a *mestiza*, whose work aligns with the *Mujerista* framework in enriching ways, defines *mestiza* as "a dual or multiple personality...plagued by psychic restlessness...a product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another"<sup>37</sup> helps describe the experiences of Latinas/x in religious leadership in the United States as a people between two or more worldviews. As *mestizas* we hold from within multiple identities and roles that have a symbiotic relationship with each other at any given time. As we create these networks of *comadrazgo* and support with one another, our roles as *madres*, sisters, *comadres*, professionals, interpreters, translators, learners, and educators are also constantly integrating and reconciling the identities that emerge from within ourselves. According to

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<sup>37</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 84.

Anzaldúa, the mestiza's worldview is tethered to the borderlands. In her poem titled by the first verse, she writes:

To live in the Borderlands means you  
are neither hispana india negra española  
ni gabacha, eres mestiza, mulata, half-breed  
caught in the crossfire between camps  
while carrying all five races on your back  
not knowing which side to turn to, run from...<sup>38</sup>

In the last stanza, Anzaldúa resolves,

"To survive the Borderlands  
You must live sin fronteras  
Be a crossroads."<sup>39</sup>

In her poem, the borderland is not necessarily a physical space defined by geography, but it is a state in which Latinas/x inhabit and the same time, do not belong. In Scripture, Jesus often spoke of not belonging to this world, "You are from below, I am from above; you are from this world, I am not from this world."<sup>40</sup> Jesus can relate to the experience of the borderland; Christ is mestiza. For Latinas/x who experience a call to serve the Church, a community all Christian believers ought to belong to and are expected to show up and contribute, yet when we are in leadership positions, one feels like a foreigner in their own home.

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<sup>38</sup>Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 194.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> John 8:23 (NRSV).

In her essay *Speaking in Tongues, A Letter to Third World Women Writers*, Gloria Anzaldúa writes of the dangers women of color as writers, but also in general, face. She states, "I wanted to call the dangers "obstacles" but that would be kind of lying we can't transcend the dangers can't rise above them. We must go through them and hope we do not have to repeat the performance."<sup>41</sup> In this work, we explore the obstacles Latinas/x face in their leadership development journey and work of ministry. In the findings that emerged from their stories, I also consider it appropriate to use "dangers" because the common pitfalls we experience threaten our already fragile livelihoods. Obstacles suggest that, somehow, we can bypass the experience. However, Latinas/x in religious leadership will always suffer experiences at the hands and words of sexist mindsets entrenched in Christianity, unchecked racism, and well-meaning actions by allies who are not yet ready to stand with the plight of the oppressed to make changes out of fear of the whiplash that may erupt from disrupting the status quo of the dominant culture. Isasi -Diaz identifies this as part of the struggle, and Anzaldúa speaks of it in this way, "Cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems, la mestiza undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, and inner war."<sup>42</sup> For Anzaldúa' this experience is one we cannot avoid.

Anzaldúa may sound to some like a pessimist. However, I read her as a realist. Acknowledging the presence of these dangers in our journey requires that we incorporate strategies in our capacity-building activities and equip ourselves with tools to "go through them," and hope we do not have to use them again, as Anzaldúa suggests. Finally,

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<sup>41</sup> Anzaldúa, "Speaking in Tongues," 70.

<sup>42</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 84.

Anzaldúa's prescription for surviving this borderland living is to become the crossroads. However, if Latinas/x in religious leadership are to be free and fruitful, we cannot remain in constant survival. Acknowledging that we navigate present dangers does not mean that we can, as Anzaldúa exhorts, "afford to stop in the middle of the bridge with arms crossed"<sup>43</sup> There is something we can do to cross the bridge we carry.

Anzaldúa names *Mundo Zurdo* (Left-Handed World) the world she speaks of a world that goes against the grain of dominant culture. Anzaldúa found writing as her tool to create the world she needs. Similarly, Latinas/x in religious leadership must use our natural gifts, talents, and passions to create the world we prefer and need. This transformation of the world to meet the needs of Latinas/x is not only for our sake. Our contribution to the broader society is what the world also lacks and needs.

The mere presence of Latinas/x in religious spaces will transform how we experience our connection to the Divine and each other. One of the critical features of that *Mundo Zurdo* I have found is Latinas/x's ability to create connections across cultures and communities. When we embody a crossroads or a bridge, we hold the tensions between the here and there. Our role of bridging and connecting communities allows us to transcend beyond our identity. In that sense, Anzaldúa's vision for the future suggests that what Isasi-Diaz calls the *proyecto histórico* (historical project), or preferred future, is possible. The key is to identify the binds that already tie us. Anzaldúa writes:

We have come to realize that we are not alone in our struggles nor separate nor autonomous but that we -white black straight queer female male - are connected and interdependent. We are each accountable for what is happening down the street, south of the border, or across the sea. And those of us who have more of anything: brains, physical strength, political power, spiritual energies, are learning to share them with those that do not have. We are learning to depend more and

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<sup>43</sup> Anzaldúa and Keating, ed., *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, 72.

more on our own sources for survival, learning not to let the weight of this burden, the bridge, break our backs. Haven't we always borne jugs of water children poverty? Why not learn to bear baskets of hope, love, self-nourishment, and to step lightly?<sup>44</sup>

The therapeutic alliance Comas-Diaz speaks of that forms among comadres is a tool we can use to build the bridges that are part of Anzaldúa's "ongoing, planetary transformational project."<sup>45</sup> Alternatively, Mundo Zurdo is a place we create within the cultures we navigate. Anzaldúa writes, "Both cultures deny me a place in their universe. Between them and among others, I build my universe, El Mundo Zurdo. I belong to myself and not to any one people."<sup>46</sup> Isasi-Diaz's futuristic worldview imagined that Latinas/x take on the *proyecto histórico*, doing the necessary work to build our "preferred future." In that sense, both Isasi-Diaz and Anzaldúa agree that when there is no place for us, then we must create our own. My healing and empowering experience connecting with Vargas' story we can replicate. If Latinas/x trust each other with our stories, we build a healing network that informs and simultaneously creates the world we need.

### Mujerista Leadership Tools for Latinas/x

Mujerista theologian Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz developed the term Mujerista theology as an option within feminist theology to explore the experiences of Latinas/x in the United States. "Mujerista theology, which includes both ethics and theology, is a liberative praxis: reflective action that has as a goal liberation."<sup>47</sup> Like many of the

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<sup>44</sup> Anzaldúa, *This Bridge*, 253-54.

<sup>45</sup> Anzaldúa, *This Bridge*, xxiii.

<sup>46</sup> Anzaldúa and Keating, ed., *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, 49.

<sup>47</sup> Isasi-Diaz, "Mujeristas: Who We Are," 108.

fourteen women I interviewed, I am a feminist theologian who understands the experience of Latinas/x to be distinct from that of women from the dominant culture and distinct from that of other women of color who have struggled for much longer against the oppressive systems that operate in the United States and have developed tools to understand, navigate, and challenge these systems.

Latinas/x, especially those of us who migrated to the USA or have been raised in the United States closer to the heritage of our ancestors, must critically reflect on how the motif of the American dream and freedoms of the promised land might tint and delay our understanding of oppressive socio-political structures in which we live, develop our leadership, and do the work of ministry.

Isasi-Diaz developed *Mujerista Theology* as a liberative praxis that would help Latinas/x to understand better these systems and their dynamics to disrupt our willing participation in them and create new systems that contribute to the *proyecto histórico* (historical project) a theological and hermeneutical tool that helps Latinas/x devise our "preferred future" by interpreting Scripture in light of our everyday experiences (*lo cotidiano*).<sup>48</sup> Part of our every day is the struggle (*la lucha*) to survive; to make it through the day.

I see the potential impact the tools *Mujerista* theology provides in the lives of the Latinas/x I am in ministry with at Beth-El Farmworker Ministry. Farm-working women are in one of the most disenfranchised communities in the United States. However, every day I witness their survival in their struggle, how they make do with the limited resources they have available, and how they watch out and support one another. I grow more

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<sup>48</sup> Isasi-Diaz, *Mujerista Theology*, 150-155.

convinced that their collective wisdom holds the best solutions to the world's worst injustices. After all, their proximity to "what is in the pot" is the lived experience they wrestle with daily, and most days, they get to see another day.

The UMC and PC(USA) hold higher education and knowledge in high regard, and the Church's mission culture tends to prescribe their best solutions to disenfranchised communities. We seldom ask people who live in oppression or poverty for their contribution. On average, women who work the fields hold a fifth-grade education and have low literacy, yet the clues, formulas, and best answers that the world needs lie with and within the stories of our lived experiences.

The stories of women in the Bible are central to our lived experience. They demonstrate to us that leadership takes many forms. I have always gravitated to Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well found in the Gospel of John, chapter 4. Jesus' reproach to her about her political status as a woman without a husband but has had five husbands and the one who is with her at that moment is not hers,<sup>49</sup> suggesting that this woman from Samaria was reproachable by her community. She is coming at noon at the height of the sun to gather water, another suggestion that she was avoiding the socialization that took place early in the morning when the women prepared to start their day. Often, we hear interpretations of this passage that focus first on Jesus and the water. If we focus on the woman, it is only to point out her sin, the benefits of encountering Jesus, and how we, despite our sins, can benefit from the water Jesus provides. Through a Mujerista lens, we zoom into a woman's life, facing her everyday struggle head-on. When Jesus asks her for a drink, she does not immediately comply.

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<sup>49</sup> John 4:17-18 (NRSV).

Instead, she asks: "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?"<sup>50</sup> Does she really have something to contribute? She does not have much, and yet her bucket, the one tool she carries, is what is needed at that moment in time to solve the issue of Jesus' thirst.

When Jesus confronts her with her shortcomings, she then engages in a theological discussion with Jesus about the place of worship. She was concerned with more significant matters, not only for herself but also for her people. She states with conviction that the Messiah is coming and is "proclaiming all things to us." The Samaritan woman, like a Mujerista, has her vision set on a historical project, a preferred future for her and her people. When Jesus affirms her, it is all the endorsement she needs to return to the city and share what she has just experienced with others. No longer burdened with how others see her, she shares her wisdom with others so they may participate in it. She must have been a woman of influence. She must have had some efficacy in her manner because the Gospel records that as a response to her message, "they left the city and were on their way to him"<sup>51</sup>. Moreover, verse 39 states "that many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony."<sup>52</sup> Through her ministry, what should have been a lunch visit in Samaria turned into a two-day revival.

Through this passage, we can see how the tools of Mujerista Theology can offer Latinas/x in ministry in the United States a hermeneutic of leadership that speaks to and

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<sup>50</sup> John 4:9 (NRSV).

<sup>51</sup> John 4:30 (NRSV).

<sup>52</sup> John 4:39 (NRSV).

of our everyday lives and how the struggle informs how we engage with our communities and the world. For Isasi-Diaz, Mujerista theology rises from understanding how Latinas/x think of and practice their faith theologically.

This project stemmed from my struggle for endorsement for ministry in the UMC is more than about providing access to Latinas/x for ministry as a sustainable career. The more significant concern is ensuring that the needed ministry of Latinas/x is available to care for, attend to, and be in service with over 60 million Latinos in the United States. Another reason I desisted from seeking ordination within the UMC was that I saw the investment of time and resources in the process would not ultimately contribute to the effect. Instead, I would end up as an ordained clergy sent by a bishop to serve white churches that could afford my compensation packet if they had a Latina as their minister. I believe the local Church has all it needs among its ranks of the laity to do the work that it is needed.

In my letter to the Florida Annual Conference, I best expressed my position on the power and influence of laity in the life of the Church. In it, I report my decision to withdraw from the candidacy process.

I have realized very concretely, that being ordained was my obstinate way of giving back to my beloved United Methodist Church all the goodness that She has given me. A place to grow as a Christian disciple, a leader, and an effective worker in the vineyard. Being ordained meant being part of the team "until death does us part." I realize I do not have to be ordained to do that, and I am delighted to be an influential layperson.

With that, I state with a great sense of peace that ordination might not be part of my Christian leadership journey among you.<sup>53</sup>

Protestant Churches, such as the UMC, give so much weight to the role of the clergy, often only considering their work as "being in ministry. "In doing so, we ignore, neglect, and undervalue the ministry that the laity develops to move the Church forward. What I appreciate about the Mujerista Theology framework is that it makes space and expects its reach to expand as new voices are heard, and the lived experiences of Latinas/x in the USA shift and grow in numbers and power. This ongoing engagement of Latinas/x in theological thinking and praxis is a liberative praxis that goes beyond the ordained. The struggle itself is liberation because there is a self-determining activity that gives place, space, and complete attention to our stories. Our personhood is affirmed, our presence valued, and all our contributions to the Church and society are needed.

#### Profile of Latinas/x Ministers in the Interviews

This group of women, like any group of Latinx people, is rich in its diversity. I interviewed eight UMC leaders, out of whom five are Ordained elders, two are local pastors, and one is a layperson, seminarian, and seeking candidacy in the ordination process. In addition, I interviewed six Latinas, who are all ordained in the Presbyterian Church (USA) It is important to note that all PC(USA) ministers are ordained because the denomination ordains clergy and laity. In addition, four are Ministers of Word and Sacrament, also called teaching elders or pastors, and two are Ruling Elders.

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<sup>53</sup> Teresita Matos-Post, email to The Florida Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, October 26, 2021.

Their connection to their *latinidad* is expansive and diverse concerning their connection to the USA. Seven of the women I interviewed came to the USA as adults; three were born here, one was born here and raised in Mexico, two came as teenagers, and two served their church in the United States from their country of origin. They never moved to the USA, though their work included substantial travel and creative accommodations to work remotely. This information about their connection to the land informs that *Latinidades* are complex and diverse and inform how we connect to the church and each other.

It is common for people in the United States to assume that all Latinas have Catholicism as a point of origin in their faith journey. Many, if not all of us, have some proximity to Catholicism, whether through the cultural aspect of the faith, our active engagement in it, or by differentiation, that is, our rejection of tenets of the Catholic Church, particularly if we experience our faith formation in a Protestant church. From the sample of Latinas who participated in the interviews, only one spoke of their formation in the Catholic church until they were teenagers. Three Latinas stated that they were born in the UMC. Four have been in the PC(USA) since birth. Those in the PC(USA) since birth also reported their families' connection to the denomination for several generations. The remaining six came from various faith journeys that included other denominations, such as the Pentecostal church. Others grew up without a formal relationship with the church in any way.

Another area for improvement in what defines Latinas/x is language. The ministers who participated in these interviews had different levels of fluency and connection to Spanish. For the most part, Spanish is their first language. However, those

born in the USA have been bilingual from a young age. Those who received formal education in English further developed their fluency through English and diction classes. They all live in a bilingual world, translating their lives back and forth from Spanish to English, and vice versa, into Spanglish. As we conducted and recorded the interviews on Zoom, they had the freedom to use the language of their preference.

Furthermore, it was often that they would pivot back and forth. One peculiar note on the use of language; when they recalled stories that took place in a “Spanish” context, whether it was in their country of origin, home life with relatives, or stories in which all the characters were Spanish speakers, they would use Spanish to tell their stories. When recalling narratives and concepts learned in the United States, they would use English. So many of these terms were related to USA culture, denomination, or church experience that they could not translate.

The Latinas/x who participated in the interviews were also representatives of all the current generations: Boomer, Genexer, and Millenials. Their theological thought was diverse, even within those of the same denomination. However, their connection to the local church was similar and essential to their faith journey and leadership development. All shared similar experiences and challenges throughout their journey, and all of them took different approaches and strategies to navigate them.

This group is highly educated, all holding higher education degrees or equivalent, resulting from their need to fulfill their denomination's education requirements. In addition, almost all hold professional degrees and workforce experience outside of the church. This data point marks a difference between these Latinas/x leaders, the average Latinas/X in the USA, and those sitting in our church pews. While a 2020 report from the

Pew Research Center shows a substantial increase in education among recently arrived Latin American immigrants, only 26% of Latinos hold a bachelor's degree.<sup>54</sup> This data also compares starkly with the level of education of Latinas who fall under the radar report. For example, in surveys conducted at Beth-El Farmworker Ministry, where I serve, Latinas who are undocumented report having, on average, a 4th-grade level education. In addition, most have limited literacy in Spanish and depend on their children to read, interpret, and translate in Spanish and English. This information is essential because as we develop religious leaders to serve the diverse populations from Latin America, we must develop capacities to serve as interpreters and translators of doctrine, theology, and culture.

These Latinas represent four Latin American countries and the USA. Over 50 % are from the Caribbean, mainly from Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. In addition, I use the term Latinas/x because at least one of the interviewees identifies with the LGBTQIA+ community. I did not intentionally seek to interview Latinas/x in the LGBTQIA+ community because I assumed, based on the prejudice that persists among Latino religious communities towards the LGBTQIA+ community, that they would not disclose this aspect of their identity. However, I was thrilled when one of my interviewees boldly and proudly identified themselves as lesbian. Their voice is essential and needed to change the Latino/Hispanic spheres in the church.

These women have served our church teaching children, moderating your meeting, teaching Sunday school, preaching, offering pastoral care, missionaries,

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<sup>54</sup> Noe-Bustamante, 2020. "Education Levels of Recent Latino Immigrants in the USA Reached New Highs as of 2018." Hispanic/Latinos, Pew Research Center, April 7, 2020. <https://pewrsr.ch/2UNGR8a>

developers of resources in Spanish, translators, accompaniment to funerals, doctor's appointments, as listeners and prophetic voices in the marketplace, are writers and intercessors praying for you, your family, your community, and your country. These women have presided over boards and brought their life and professional experiences to enrich the church's life. These leaders have been first among communities that only looked once to consider inviting women into the leadership fold. However, the God who sees. saw them fit and opened a way when there seemed to be none. Moreover, they have done this work comparatively, with limited resources and opportunities and little to no compensation.

## CHAPTER THREE

### INSIGHTS FROM THE COMADRE NETWORK

In Puerto Rico if you ask someone, “How are you?” You will receive a couple of common responses: “*En la brega*” o “*En la lucha*.” *Bregar* is the kind of struggle in which the person who is in it, has an active role and participation. In the *brega*, you have a sense of ownership on the outcome and a sense of agency, even when you do not have much say whether you want to be tossed into the mix. “*En la lucha*” similarly to *la brega*, you don't have much say whether you are in it, but you are facing adverse circumstances in which you are fighting hard to come out on top, or at least to survive and come out alive. Other Latin American countries may have different variants of this expression. A friend from the Dominican Republic shared “*en la luchita*” which makes it diminutive as it makes the opponent smaller and less threatening. Another Dominican shared that “*el trote*” is a way of referencing an activity that requires a lot of effort and makes us tired in the end. In the Dominican Republic it is also common to say that we are “*ejetriao*” which is a collegial word that stems from the word *ajetreo* (the hustle) which suggests a series of intense activities and busyness. One of my colleagues at Beth-El Farm Worker Ministry, where nine out of 12 employees are from Mexico or claim Mexican American identities, said in Mexico when someone is striving to survive, they say they are “*jalanduro*” which translates to pulling hard, or with a lot of effort. It suggests someone or something at the other extreme is attempting to pull us over so that we fall flat on our faces as in tug-of-war. In all, for Latin Americans the struggle is something we name, because it is a faithful companion. Similarly, when they say do not name a pet because

then they will stay forever with you; because the struggle has been a faithful companion, we have named it as a well-known friend and adversary.

The struggle emerged in the 14 interviews I conducted in explicit ways and implicit ways. For those who named it explicitly, the struggle was “the fight in us” as something that develops within us from being in the struggle for so long, all our lives.

Ivelisse, a local pastor in the UMC expresses with conviction and a powerful voice:

There's a fight in us that we have had to have for survival since coming out of the womb because of the systems, the social constructs of our countries, our families, our communities. And we have had to fight to have a voice. Sometimes by the time we get to ministry, we're beat to shit and we cannot be part of that.<sup>55</sup>

Like the many iterations for the struggle Latinas/x face in the United States, the fight this UMC pastor speaks of it is a compilation of all: the fight we participate in which we have a role, our participation will impact the outcome, and in the end, it has the capacity of leaving us spent and burned out. However, “the fight in us” emerges also as strength in leadership that comes along with its shadow. The fight in us allows us to face head on any obstacle and not give up as easily. Rev. Amparito Garay, a retired UMC pastor when speaking of the obstacles she faced early on in seeking to enter the candidacy process in the UMC, and encountering different forms of gatekeeping; first by a Latino mentor who openly said she would not go far in the process because she was a woman and her level of education: she responded to him with a verse of one of Antonio Machado's poems: “*caminante no hay camino, se hace camino al andar.*” (Walker, there is no path, the path is made by walking.). Not long after that experience she was an assigned white female pastor who later refused to meet her a second time. Instead of

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<sup>55</sup> Rev. Ivelisse G. Bishop, interview by author, Zoom, January 3, 2023.

feeling discouraged Amparito<sup>56</sup> said she was inspired. “She made me dare; I dared to take the bull by the horns and enter the process on the right foot because I knew it would be long and tedious.”<sup>57</sup>

A Presbyterian pastor was cautious about expressing any statements that would stereotype Latinas/x in any way, however she identified a fortitude that emerges from the struggle this way:

I do think that Latina women have strength and resiliency. [We kind of] have this [thing] I'm going to call “emotional duct tape” that it's like we figure out a way to make it work. We figure out a way.... I would say the whole bit about the strength and resiliency is more.... Hispanic women than Hispanic men. If I ever had to put my money on a fight, I would put a Hispanic woman against it in terms of fortitude and just that inner strength, I just think we bring a flavor to life that is not there otherwise.<sup>58</sup>

But the fight can also make it hard for us to know when to back off, change course, or not to engage in all the fights that come along the way. The struggle might help strengths emerge that are useful in leadership in the church; serving as a kiln to forge in us skills and capacities that help us thrive in life and ministry, but it can also leave us tired, feeling alone, inadequate, and burned out. While “the struggle” emerges in this study as a faithful companion that will just not let up, then it is a requirement for Latinas/x in the Ministry to lean into the struggle and learn to navigate it without letting it run our lives and work of ministry. And because the struggle serves as an isolating force, perpetuating the colonizing tactics of “divide and conquer,” for Latinas/x to have a fighting chance in ministry within any Christian denomination in the United States we

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<sup>56</sup> Name is changed by mutual agreement.

<sup>57</sup> Rev. Amparito Garay, interview by author, Zoom, December 9, 2022.

<sup>58</sup> Rev. Loli Reiter-Ros, interview by author, Zoom, January 6, 2023.

must find or create networks that connect us to one another, so that we can in the everyday engage in the struggle together. Because we experience cognitive dissonance about our identity in relationship to the work, the sense of serving as an ambassador and representative of all Latinas/x, managing emotions while navigating through the manifestations of all the -isms in our lives, we must remain aware of the how the bridging and crossroads role influences our relationships with one another.

June<sup>59</sup>, a clergy woman of color, invited me to serve in a committee to design a workshop for pastors of color. I was joining a diverse team who were serving the church in different capacities. The workshop that emerged was an experience we've never seen done before, and we were pleased with the result. In a time when race relations were becoming even more difficult in the church, this was exactly what our pastors needed! There was a synergy and level of productivity that made me feel very proud of our work and I felt humbled about being part of this team of leaders.

Upon our return from the meeting, June and I were reviewing the experiences we just had. There was a moment of silence and June cleared her throat and said, "Teresita, you know you are amazing," she continued, "you have great ideas. You have a brilliant mind...I mean to say you have moments of brilliance, and then there are other moments, that not so much."

In just a few seconds, I went from feeling affirmed to a sense of cognitive dissonance, confusion, and pain. At this point I was trying to listen, but I am trying even harder not to take it personally. I decided to listen to her as feedback coming from someone who wanted me to do well. After all we are two women of color who were

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<sup>59</sup> Name changed.

colleagues, and we had a common experience of dealing with racism and sexism in the church. She continued, “Don’t get me wrong, I think you are great, but sometimes I listen to what you have to say, and I think to myself, ‘What is she talking about?’ It just does not make sense. I do not know what happens to you. What is going on?” I thought, is that really a question? The silence suggested that it was. I felt blindsided by this not so friendly deconstructive criticism. I stammered as in my mind I stumbled down a precipice quickly scanning through and scrutinizing every possible event, conversation, and interaction we had in the last 60 hours. I was trying to figure out what I did wrong. In hindsight, I could have asked for an example that would give context to her commentary. I could have used a coaching question: “Tell me more.” But honestly, I did not want to hear more. I felt taken for granted. I left my family for 3 days, for a modest stipend for my time to offer my best, and my best was not good enough. When I’m finally able to speak in response to her question, I tell her that English is my second language, that I think faster than I can speak. That I get super excited when I have new ideas, and my excitement gets in the way of thinking through all the details. I think big and the details escape me. I externalize the internal dialog I have had for most of my life in the United States. This narrative assumes first and foremost that I must have done something wrong. This personal internal scrutiny is not new to me, but this time it has been validated and triggered by someone outside of my head who must have seen what I always knew to be true, but I thought I was doing a great job at keeping undercovers. She had me and had seen the big impostor I am. In the end I submit my confession to her question: “What is going on?” or how my spirit interprets it, “What is wrong with you?” I simply respond, “I don’t know.” Almost consenting that yes, after all, I am not that brilliant.

In the UMC pastors who are serving in “cross-cultural” appointments are serving churches whose culture and ethnicity are different to their own. On occasion, clergy who are members of the dominant culture would argue that all appointments are cross-cultural, because every church has a different culture. While there might be a smidgen of truth to that statement, when white ministers serve white churches, they already have universal commonalities and understandings of codes, structures, and policies that facilitate quicker cohesion with minimal conflicts. Cross-cultural suggests that the two cultural bubbles that encounter one another possess an unchangeable homogeneity and upon the encounter with the other bubble both bubbles remain unchanged. However, when Latinas/x serve within the context of main-line or old-line denominations such as the UMC and the Presbyterian Church (USAA) we have already crossed the border from our family’s culture, we have lived and embodied culture through education and work life and have created our own version of American culture through our lived experiences. Serving as leaders in the old-line denominational churches we cross another layer of barriers in terms of language, tradition, history, and church culture. We enter a learning process for decodifying culture, discernment of our identity in that space, and navigating the implicit and explicit insidiousness of -isms as they are embodied in their current context for ministry and learning how to navigate them. The encounter of Latinas/x leaders in the UMC and PC(USA) is not a simple crossing in and embracing of church culture. Latinas/x we retain a loyal entanglement with our nations of origin while embodying the features of culture that is dominant in the United States. When we serve within the framework of predominantly white churches and systems designed by the tenets of dominant culture, we are also creating a ripple effect to the status quo that

makes persons interested in retaining that status quo anxious. In all, the encounter is assumed that the one who holds difference is responsible for assimilating to the environment they are in. But we know that the encounters and exchanges are too complex to extricate on this paper. But it is important to know that Latinas/x serving in ministry in the United States are troubled by layers upon layers of complexity that is further troubled by issues of intersectionality.

A closer look at interaction with June serves as a snapshot of the everyday struggle and reveals the layers and complexities that Latinas/x like me and June face in religious spaces in the United States. This struggle with all its nuances emerged from the conversations I had with 14 Latinas/x who developed their leadership within the UMC and the Presbyterian Church (USA) In my conversation with June I encountered all the most common features of the struggle as they emerged in the 14 conversations with Latinas/x ministers.

Like many Latinas/x, I faced our worst fear presented in June's challenge to me: "What is going on?" or "What is wrong with you? What is wrong with me? We consistently struggle against the temptation to strive for perfection which produces performance anxiety, self-limiting the ways in which we choose to show up and participate in community. We struggle with a sense of belonging and often suffer from impostor syndrome. In addition, my story reflects a snapshot of how issues around economic equity develop around equitable compensation to contributions Latinas/x make to the larger church. Finally, my relationship with June foreshadows our exploration of the key players that emerge in the development of leadership in Latinas/x in the UMC and the PC(USA). These are the features, not an exhaustive list, that comprise *la lucha*,

or the struggle that is part of the leadership development journey of Latinas/x in the United States that will be the focus of this paper.

### The struggle as context

In the bulk of her work Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz deals with “the struggle” as part of the identities Latinas/x carry with us, “*la lucha es vida*” (the struggle is life), and it is “the daily bread” for Latinas/x in the United States. It is a constant in our life that does not only happen to us, it is not a strange opponent we encounter, but rather a companion we carry with us. “The Struggle” is the context because wherever a Latina goes to serve while in the United States, we will always have “The Struggle” with us. Moreover, “The Struggle” is not the ideal, and the church ought to continue to strive towards the dissolvement of all forms of oppression that make the struggle possible. In the meantime, Latinas/x in religious leadership among old-line denominations must lean into “the struggle.” At the risk of romanticizing survival and battle motifs, which it is not my intention, I do want to suggest that the struggle, an unavoidable reality in the lives of Latinas/x, serves as a catalyst that develops strengths in the leadership of Latinas/x that help us thrive and make important contributions to the life of the church. In that sense, “the struggle” is reminiscent of the story of Joseph in Genesis. After his experience of rejection and inflicted harm upon him by his brothers, and other hardships, he then was in a position of leadership with influence, resources, and power, and was able to say to his brothers, “Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people...”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Genesis 50:20 (NRSV).

In the conversations with the 14 Latinas/x for this project, they all in some way or another reflected this same sentiment. That if we are to make change for the upcoming generations of Latina leaders we are to lean into the struggle with courage, because the outcome is increased viability for a thriving life for our *hermanas*. That way we are part of the historical project of USA Latinas/x, which Alicia Vargas writes,

is one of securing the fullness of life that God destined for us concretely within the realities and experience of day-to-day living. The fullness of life for Latinas/x starts with survival, the satisfaction of both the basic needs to sustain physical life and what makes for a full and pleasant existence, as Isasi-Diaz puts it. Jesus Christ's story of crucifixion and resurrection empower us to engage in this historical project through our own daily stories of our *lucha* ("Struggle") to survive rejection, ignorance, and devaluation of us in an oppressive context in and out of the church.<sup>61</sup>

### Struggle with Identity

When I sent email invitations to all the Latinas/x in my networks and other contacts that were referred to me by my sisters, I was overwhelmed by the response. I was hoping to secure a minimum of five interviews, yet I was able to conduct almost three times the amount. As we started to have these conversations a pattern started to emerge. These Latinas/x were eager to talk and effusively thanked me for the opportunity. The reason why they responded affirmatively to the invitation to these interviews was revealed. They all expressed feeling honored to be included. When

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<sup>61</sup> Vargas, "Through Mujerista Eyes," 187.

overwhelmed by their gratitude, after all they were doing me a favor, I dug a little deeper seeking to understand. Where does this sense of gratitude come from?

In her initial work, Isasi-Diaz reported that what they found time and time again in conducting the retreats in which women reflected on their religious practices and beliefs was that: “The simple fact that they were taken seriously and that their input was valued, affirmed them as persons or, in ethical terms, enhanced their moral agency.”<sup>62</sup> In engaging in conversation with the 14 interviewees in this project, I too have carved space to take seriously their stories and contributions.

One of the Latinas/x reflected, “No one has ever asked me to share my story before. In fact, because I serve a white church, my Latino/Hispanic colleagues very seldom include me in their activities. I guess I am not Latina enough.”<sup>63</sup> Another Latinas/x clergy spoke of a time she was asked to leave a meeting because of her role within the denomination she was deemed unsafe for others to share their own stories.<sup>64</sup> As if she did not have anything to contribute to the conversation due to her perceived power. Her presence represented more of a risk than a value. A LGBTQIA+ clergy, shared that the fact she serves a white church, was born in the United States, her Spanish is not as fluent as her English, and identifies as Lesbian, she also felt there were too many degrees of separation from what is considered Latina.<sup>65</sup> Another shared simply saying, “I

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<sup>62</sup> Isasi-Diaz, “Mujerista Theology: A Praxis,” 82.

<sup>63</sup> Interview with local pastor, December 9, 2022. In some instances, due to the nature of the content the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement.

<sup>64</sup> Interview with clergy, February 8, 2023. In some instances, due to the nature of the content the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement.

<sup>65</sup> Interview with clergy, December 15, 2022. In some instances, due to the nature of the content the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement.

am not Latina enough. I did not teach my children to speak Spanish,”<sup>66</sup> she confessed, carrying feelings of guilt for not passing her mother tongue to her children.

This disconnection from what it means to be Latina, a concept intended to lump together who is considered “other” is best described in Gloria Anzaldúa's work on mestiza consciousness<sup>67</sup>. For Anzaldúa a *mestiza* is a “fifth race”<sup>68</sup> that results from the mix of all races, and she “is plagued by psychic restlessness.”<sup>69</sup> This restlessness of continuously navigating spaces and taking the form, personality, culture, and behaviors depending on the context, but never truly belonging to any. This living in a bilingual world Anzaldúa defines as “a struggle of borders”<sup>70</sup>. I heard this struggle in the voices of the women who spoke with me. We resist the Latina category as one that does not completely define our experience, but “Latina” as a concept fails to deliver that which it can do for us on our behalf; it fails to provide us a sense of belonging among other women who experience the same type of struggles in the church in the USA. Because we are in constant movement among cultures, we struggle to find ourselves and each other within the roadmaps, structures, and communities in which we live, work, and serve.

Their incredible sense of gratefulness stemmed from the notion that the invitation to an interview to explore the leadership of Latinas/x in religious leadership was in and of itself an affirmation to their Latina identity. It was more than an invitation, someone else

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<sup>66</sup> Interview with clergy, December 6, 2023. In some instances, due to the nature of the content the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement.

<sup>67</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 77.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

had found them. In the interaction, we found each other. It means that someone other than themselves saw them as Latinas/x and that meant something. At times in ministry Latinas/x we are so enmeshed in the culture of the church, that can be so foreign to our own, that we start to feel disconnected from the community that nourishes us and gets us. We must develop rules of life and intention to find and see each other, and when we do, we must name it as such. It's almost like atoms circling each other with a charge of energy, but never colliding, avoiding each other fearing a sonic boom at the encounter. Instead of fearing the clash, we must seek and lean into each other, for there is power in that encounter of mutual recognition.

Sometimes we do not know what it means to be Latina, after all we did not choose this for ourselves. It was put on us like a dress for which we missed the fitting appointment. Then what does it look like to be Latina enough? We cannot put our finger on it. This same uncertainty that makes it difficult for us to choose to be clothed with the garment of *latinidad*, ironically gives us space to redefine and claim it as our own as we develop our leadership and live our lives in the United States. To be Latina enough is to claim it as our own and it is what it looks like on you.

One of my favorite lines in the song of the Puerto Rican nova-trova band *Fiel a la Vega* (which translates to faithful to the plain/valley/land) states: “*Y asi le grito al villano, yo seria borincano aunque naciera en la luna*” (“and so I shout to the villain, I would be *borincano* even if I was born on the moon”). Here the villain is the United States or the dominant culture, and the *trovador* (a singer who is skilled at improvising rhyming lines), shouting resists the notion that the land underneath their feet right at that moment or even in the moment of birth does not get to dictate their identity. In this song

the singer chose *borincano* (another term used by Puerto Ricans that stems from the native name of the island Borinquen/Borikén) as the term for their identity. This fluid understanding of what it means to be *borincano* in this song gives us something to hold on to when defining and defying our sense of identity with the term Latinas/x. To name our identity in the terms of our own choosing is an act of resistance, but most importantly the act of self-definition is an act of liberation. This approach provides for the inclusion of people who were born anywhere in the world. To be Latina is a feeling deep within our soul that identifies with the people in the United States who struggle for survival and strive to thrive in a hostile environment.

Whereas Ruth told Naomi, ‘Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God,’<sup>71</sup> Latinas/x we go where God takes us, but we take our own version of our *latinidades* in their full spectrum within us. Our task is to recognize each other and affirm our presences in the spaces we share. Our task is to provoke the sonic boom that is bound to take place when we collide in solidarity. This is of most importance especially for Latinas/x serving in predominantly white denominations where finding groups to belong to can be difficult.

### The Struggle: Being First

Because Latinas/x in so many ways are making their way into leadership within the UMC and the PC(USA), all the participants have been the first Latinas/x in one way or another in all levels of leadership. Whether they have been the first female to serve in a leadership role in the local church, the first Latina pastor to their congregation, the first to

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<sup>71</sup> Ruth 1:16 (NRSV).

be ordained in their conference, denomination, or country, they all have felt the impact of being first, and sometimes the only Latina in the room. One thing that was clear for those who had made history in their denominational ranks is that being first was not in their view. It just happened to work out that way. We will explore their impressions on that experience and what the church needs to learn from them.

Rev. Blanca E. Otaño-Rivera, known as Blanqui Otaño, the first Latina and *puertorriqueña* to be ordained by United Presbyterian Church before the merger to form the PC(USA), said, “I was never thinking if I was the first or the second, I didn't even know. I was so selfishly involved in my process.”<sup>72</sup> She spoke of how she had not grown seeing female pastors even when there were some lay pastors in other denominations. Blanqui was the first to have formally gone through the ordination process at the presbytery and synod level in Puerto Rico. It was clear to her she was not the first Latina to serve as pastor of a congregation in the island and Cuba. This might seem like semantics; however, it speaks of the work done by Latinas/x, in this case *puertorriqueñas*, that helped make it possible for the PC(USA) today to have such a strong presence in the island that feeds to the leadership of the larger denomination in the continental USA.

Maya\* learned she was the first woman to be ordained in her conference the day of her ordination. She recalls,

And then one of the members of the Board of Ordained Ministry, I think he was the secretary at that point, asks for a moment of special privilege.... And the bishop extended it to him, and he announced that it was a historic day because that day they were ordaining the first woman. And I had no idea. And I had no idea because there were three women in our conference who served churches, and I had learned so much from them. I followed them. I got together with them

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<sup>72</sup> Rev. Blanca E. Otaño-Rivera, interview by author, Zoom, February 15, 2023.

whenever we were together because I was always trying to learn from them. I learned that they were lay women who were serving as lay ministers. One of them was on the route to becoming a local pastor, but I was the first one to be ordained.<sup>73</sup>

Again, Maya was clueless about how she was about to make history in her denomination when she accepted the call and pursued it. This ‘cluelessness’ was due in part because to women in ministry, other women are not invisible. We do not seek to follow or emulate people with titles and positions. We see the women around us who serve as role models, and we learn from them and follow their lead. To Latinas/x our local churches have never been devoid of Latina leadership. What has been missing is the affirmation from the larger context, opportunities for Latinas/x to lead with the support of their counterparts, and the investment in the development of that leadership.

All these women who have received endorsements from church denominations did not know they were the first because they saw women from whom they learned the basic tenets of Christian leaders do the work. The difference is that some Latinas/x now have the affirmation and support of the Church's structures, while women before them did so without titles or compensation.

This notion of embracing the concept of being first has an immediate impact on our sense of identity. For Latinas/x who have been historically first in positions of leadership within the denomination, pride is not the most common feeling they express but rather a hefty weight of responsibility. After hearing the words from the member of the board on ordination announcing that she was not only the first Latina, but the first woman to be ordained in her conference, Maya recalls, “I remember my knees turning to

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<sup>73</sup> Interview with clergy, February 8, 2023. This interview was confidential; \*Name is changed by mutual agreement.

*Jell-O* because suddenly I felt the weight, and I felt this sense of responsibility and sense of, I must do this well because my sisters who come after me are depending on me.”<sup>74</sup>

Vilmarie Cintrón-Olivieri is an ordained Ruling Elder and was the first Latina to be elected to serve as Co-Moderator of a General Assembly. While other Latinas/x were not aware they would hold the “first” title, Vilmarie was aware that her candidacy for this position was trailblazing not only as a Latina in the United States but also as Puerto Rican. She hesitated to accept the invitation to be nominated for this position, she reminisced,

Until one night, the thought woke me up. If my partner (also running for co-moderator) and I got elected; a Hispanic, Latino, and Puerto Rican woman, will have access to the General Assembly plenary until the day she dies because the past moderators of the Assembly are corresponding members. We always have a voice.<sup>75</sup>

This was a game changer for Vilmarie. She recalls preparing for the Co-moderator election while Puerto Rico was still recuperating from the devastation in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria. Having relocated in 2011 to the US with her husband, who is a Presbyterian minister, Vilmarie reflects that had she been in Puerto Rico during that time, her election to General Assembly would have never happened. All Puerto Ricans in the US diaspora felt helpless watching from afar and we understood very well how not “having a voice” delayed aid for our people. She took it upon herself that she would be able to be the voice of not only Puerto Ricans but all Latinos at the General Assembly of the PC(USA). In reflecting on this access to power, Vilmarie said that often in the places where she serves, she is asked to share her opinion and speak up. She always wants to

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<sup>74</sup> See note 76.

<sup>75</sup> Ruling Elder Vilmarie Cintrón-Olivieri, interview by author, Zoom, January 24, 2023.

leave space for others to have the opportunities to express their thoughts, so she is not quick to take the air space. I reminded her that because of her position her voice is not only important because of what she has to say, but because she has reached this level of leadership not only does she have a voice, but she also has influence. People will not only listen to her but act upon it. And that is a privilege that does not come along often.

“Being first” thrusts upon us another layer of responsibility. Latinas/x feel the pressure and accept the expectation of serving as representatives of our communities. I call this phenomenon ambassadorship. As an ambassador who is a representative of their country in a foreign land, Latinas/x who are first in positions of power in the church immediately become representatives to ‘our people’. This does not mean that we only serve for the benefit of the communities we belong to, but that we are keenly aware that our performance, success, and lack thereof could be definitive to the ways the dominant culture assesses the leadership of all Latinos within their structures. It also means that all the communities that identify as Latino have expectations on how we are to behave, what issues to support, and how we are to represent them as well. There is very little room for error, at a great risk. Latinas/x also feel the responsibility of making sure that they do not hinder opportunities for those who come after, and that our role modeling serves as a roadmap and our work to facilitate enhanced access to our sisters in the struggle. When Latinas/x are at the top, it might be lonely, but we are never alone. We bring and carry with us all these communities who rely upon us to create change in the church and the world.

### Struggle: I Did Not Know

We have already learned how many of the Latinas/x I interviewed did not know that they were the first in their denominations to reach certain positions of leadership. But the phrase “I did not know” came up enough times to pay attention to it. When were these leaders acknowledging their lack of knowledge and understanding about their own leadership journeys? It almost always had to do in their relationship to the political structures and processes of the church.

When Maya was standing before the clergy body at her annual conference, she did not know that it was unlikely not to be approved for ordination. Instead of having happy nerves, she was rather afraid of embarrassment at the potential of not being approved for ordination after her family and friends made sacrifices to be present for that important milestone in her life. She stated, “We were all nervous. We didn't know the process that well. We didn't know that it was unusual for a body to say no to the board of ordained ministry.”<sup>76</sup>

Even after almost a decade of serving as a local pastor, Sonia names not knowing or being sure about how to deal with matters of polity in the church. She does not feel confident on how to explain to the local church the purpose and rationale regarding apportionments or shared ministry due to the conference. She also mentioned how local pastors are not properly trained to deal with matters that are most important to the life of the congregation. Such as providing funeral service for people who you don't know. This type of uncertainty and limited access to knowledge of systems feeds into what many expressed as feelings of anxiety, impostor syndrome, and our struggle with perfectionism.

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<sup>76</sup> Interview with clergy, Zoom, February 8, 2023.

In addition to the struggles already mentioned, one area that comes with a lot of uncertainty for Latinas is ministry is the viability of a living wage.

## **THE BIGGEST STRUGGLE: ECONOMIC EQUITY**

“The laborer deserves to be paid.” - 1 Timothy 5:18

We must talk about Latinas/x in religious leadership by talking about class and how economics impact the conditions under which we accept doing ministry. I wonder how Latinas/x in religious leadership make a way to the Spirit to build a life-giving ministry. What would ministry look like if we removed the hostility towards us? In which ways does ministry take shape? What emerges from the fragments we salvage? Where do we find the glue that pieces all these broken pieces to make our lives in ministry healthy and whole, so that we can be a receptacle of the Spirit that pours out unto others? That is the ministry of Latinas/x; we harvest pieces and make things whole for others to drink and eat. Unfortunately, this artistry is only sometimes affirmed, acknowledged, and celebrated. Seldom are we offered the full vase at the well. Instead, we receive shreds and must figure out how to compensate for the rest.

At least twice, the church shamed me for "begging" the church for money. These two experiences marked me, especially considering the value the church gives to generosity and charity that the Church and local churches call us to employ. I thought the church and the local church would be there for me. However, I quickly learned that charity and fair compensation were available for certain people, and I did not fit that criterion.

The first incident happened when I started my leadership at the local church. I was passionate, my heart was burning, I wanted to do everything and anything for God,

and I was doing much work. I did the newsletter, led the communications ministry, and taught Bible school. At one point, I made a chart to track my volunteer hours at church, and I was working just as many hours as I was working on my full-time work with the Girl Scouts. I was doing all this while pursuing a call to ministry and being a single mom. I did have a bachelor's degree, and my career with Girl Scouts was secure. However, I needed more than my income to cover our expenses. I was receiving child support for both of my children, which was a big help. However, when my ex-husband went to serve in Afghanistan, the payments for child support were not making it through for eight months. I was trying to make ends meet, but it caught up with me, and I needed \$600 to pay for my rent. I went back to my pastors, and I asked for help. My pastor, who cared a lot about my family, quickly said, "Of course!" Later, another church leader called, along with confirming they would help with the \$600 also came words chastising me for not managing my money. They said the church did not have money to sustain me, that they would do it this once but that it could not happen again, and finally, that I needed to pay it back. It was the first time and last time I ever asked my local church for help.

I felt unsettled. Not that I was keeping score, but at that time, an assessment of how much time and money (I was a tither) I was giving to the local church would reflect that my offering was disproportionate to the \$600 I needed to pay rent. I could not believe that when I was the recipient of the church's charity, it came with questions about how I manage my money. As part of the leadership, I knew very well that when we helped others, it was considered an essential part of the church's charity work. However, because I was educated and working, it was a shame that I did not have money to pay my rent. All my work for the church was not an investment that warranted my community to

step off for me in a moment of need. My local church leaders deemed my volunteer service to the ministry as my duty to the body of Christ as a Christian leader.

I had another similar experience when I struggled to find a setting for my supervised ministry the second year I was in seminary. While many of my peers were placed in desirable locations through their connections, I was still learning to navigate being a single mother of two, translocating from one state to another to pursue this dream of ministry that going to seminary was going to afford me. Finally, a new friend introduced me to a ministry leader in Latino ministries in Manhattan, N.Y.C. This would have been an opportunity to serve a historically Latino church in what used to be Spanish Harlem. An idyllic setting where so many of my family's stories take place. Stories of those ancestors who once immigrated to N.Y.C. from Puerto Rico seeking a better life.

I met with the minister through a phone call, and he offered me the chance to explore the possibility. Different from my peers who would be traveling less, I was not to expect a stipend, which I accepted. They expected me to do youth ministry and be present for Sunday worship. That would mean I would have to travel three days a week at \$22 for each round trip, plus any other subway fees to get there. He offered a tiny attic apartment where I could stay to save on transportation costs. I would also have to leave my two daughters at home alone in New Jersey. Even though they were old enough to stay alone, the distance made me uncomfortable. However, I talked to friends who would keep an eye on them in my absence; after all, it would only be for ten weeks. After counting my pennies, I realized that \$22 for ten weeks was still an amount I could not afford. I was living on campus with no car, relying on child support, work-study compensation, and student loans to barely make it through. I did what every leadership conference told me to

do: ask for what I needed and deserved. I knew what I would pour into this ministry and my worth.

I did the math and asked the minister if I would get a stipend of \$300 to help pay for transportation costs. He promised to check and circle back with what they could do. Unfortunately, I am still waiting to hear back from him. Later, my friend who introduced me to him mentioned that in a recent conversation, he chastised her for introducing her to someone more interested in money than in doing ministry. According to her, his words were, "She dared to ask for a stipend."

So, while in the Bible, we read in 1 Timothy 5:18 that laborers deserve to be paid, I quickly learned that even in New York City, it is not always commendable when a leader demands their worth. It did not seem very respectful, particularly when a woman of color asked for more. I should have been grateful just to be considered for a position gratis that others would have accepted sheepishly. It felt to me that when invited to take up space in ministry, it feels like we are taking something that does not belong to us, but when we dare to ask for more, in this case, the bare minimum; then I was made to feel like a brazen thief.

One of the things that puzzled me from this experience was that the minister I was negotiating the terms of the potential supervised ministry position with was a black Latino. What did I expect from him as a minister? What I did expect from him, as a fellow Latino and person of color, was to "get it." Latino clergy and ministry colleagues played an essential role in all the ministry journeys of the Latinas/x I interviewed. Latino men: ministry colleagues, *abuelitos*, fathers, and husbands served as friends and allies, rivals, and gatekeepers. All the women named Latinos in their life who opened doors

helped navigate systems and mentored, supported, and empowered them on their path. They also recalled other Latinos who were not warm to the idea of women in ministry and actively worked against them in all possible ways. One aspect that was staggering in their stories was that when men, white or Latino, came after them, they did so openly, stating their opposition and self-righteously threatening to remove them from places of leadership.

Blanqui recalls numerous names of Latino pastors and professors who taught her about ecumenism, service, and ministry in general. They were foundational, along with her parents and grandparents, in encouraging her to pursue her academic goals. Once serving in ministry, she did encounter the opposition of male colleagues who did not agree with women in ministry and who acted in ways that impacted her job opportunities and ultimately her employment. Because she is pleased with her career development and ultimate outcomes, she did not see this opposition as an obstacle. Now looking back, she reconsiders it as unnecessary but not sufficiently important to have hindered her path. However, it is essential to document how these dynamics occur so that as Latinas/x enter ministry contexts, they are aware of these play out and so that colleagues in ministry become self-aware of the potential harm they inflict. Blanqui recalls,

I had a colleague...who I felt did not include me. He was my boss and said, 'Wherever they invite you to participate, try to participate.' However, when I was invited to certain events, this man would keep them from me because he said that I should be busy [in the office]. And that happened many times since I had to work with him for many years. I understand that he did not like the idea of a female pastor. But since I had so many invitations that I couldn't accept [them all], that did not bother me. I was always busy, so no, I did not see it as an obstacle at that moment.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Blanqui, interview.

Later when Blanqui was sent as a missionary to Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador, in the thick of the war, she was suspected to be either a communist or a CIA agent by local leaders. This was of course logical to her because they were amid the war, and foreigners were deemed suspicious. After an intense debate about her intentions, Blanqui found out that the reason why her peers did not trust her was a money issue. She recalls,

The missionaries that were coming, including Presbyterians had money assigned to give. But I did not. At the time, my boss, the man I told you that didn't like [women pastors] never told me that I had the right to have money [as part of my budget.] I thank God, he never gave it to me. I think that was God's plan. Because unless I needed money on hand to go to the store, everything else I would have to distribute. You know in that way you are buying people. A person later told me, 'I could not understand how as a missionary, representing the Church, you had no money to give us or me. The missionaries always gave me money....' [S]ome had been excellent people of God but there were others who did buy favors with money. Ah, but [while I was there] when there was a need it was covered through special requests and proposals. It was not covered to obtain some type of personal benefit or power. So, if they have ever offered [the money] to me, I would tell them 'No,' because my style of work and service is different.<sup>78</sup>

While Blanqui interprets these events through her theological lens of God using for good what others meant for harm and as a blessing in disguise so that she could perform her ministry strategies that were more aligned with her values and signature leadership. I think the fact that her access to funds was concealed from her by a fellow Latino colleague put her at risk in a volatile context. While it worked for her good, she was not given a choice as to how, when, and where to invest the funds allocated for work abroad.

Pay equity plays an integral part in this work because the journey for any person who seeks endorsement by mainline denominations is costly and not in ways that are spiritually enriching. The cost of seeking a master's in divinity, time off work to travel to

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

meet with endorsing committees and mentors, to attend training and other gatherings is oppressive for Latinas when we consider that the average compensation package for Latinas most likely does not include benefits such as paid time off. However, the fact that a Latina reaches well-paying positions in ministry does not guarantee her seat.

When Latinas in well-compensated positions are not at risk of losing their livelihood, most serve in part-time positions or work full-time for stipends. In the UMC and PC(USA), a Latina/x can pastor a church full-time and be paid part-time. In the UMC, you can do so without being ordained, performing the same tasks and responsibilities as elders, who under UMC polity have guaranteed full-time employment and compensation. Unfortunately, most Latinas/x who serve as part-time local pastors receive compensation packages that do not even fall close to the range of equitable compensation. There are Latinas/x in both denominations in the USA right now, meeting all the expectations required for the proper administration and leadership of a congregation for a fraction of the pay.

For example, Sonia, who is a bi-vocational pastor, holding a day job as an educator and pastoring a predominantly white church the rest of her time, received a \$100 monthly salary. When she asked her District Superintendent to negotiate a raise for her, the church family, who were the power players, opposed and threatened to taunt her by disrupting her while she delivered her sermons. She perceived this as punishment for asking to be paid more. Sonia spoke of a burning desire to do ministry full-time but cannot because she needs medical insurance to attend to her health conditions. While she feels pressured to serve her congregation with limited time, she still preaches weekly, makes pastoral care visits and calls, responds to family emergencies, and helps design

Sunday worship. When required to participate in activities related to the denomination, she uses her secular job's paid vacation time, leaving her with limited paid time off to rest. When Sonia dreams of working full-time for the church, she does not ask for much. As of now, it seems that when she retires from her secular job and receives Medicare benefits, if the opportunity to pastor a church includes a parsonage and a house with utilities paid by the church, she could then consider dedicating herself entirely to ministry.

Another recursive experience is the relationship between a Latina/x's marital status and compensation. At least two interviewees reported experiencing compensation decreases or expectations of no pay based on their marital status. Karina was recruited to participate in a program for church planters, she recalls:

I found out after I was sent that I needed to find the money to fund the mission. Something that I was not trained to do.... The conference told me that I was going to get paid for a month. It was money enough to specifically pay for transportation and pay a babysitter for three hours so that I could do the work. I told my supervisor how little this money was. And his response was, *esto uno lo hace por amor y aveces ni te va a llegar el cheque*. (This work we do out of love, sometimes the check will not even arrive)... So, there was an expectation that as a [wife] and mother with two little kids, that I was going to do it “por amor a la obra” (out of love for the work).<sup>79</sup>

This idea that she did not need the money because it was assumed that her husband's salary was enough to cover the household expenses was cemented yet again later when she was going through her seminary studies while pastoring a church and the topic of lowering her compensation was brought up, she explained:

There was a time when [my husband] was the only one working, and we did not have enough food because I was going to school with three little kids. The district superintendent told me..., 'Well, at the table there is a discussion to lower your compensation because your husband works.' That was a shock for me. I was like,

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<sup>79</sup> Rev. Karina Feliz, interview by author, Zoom, January 12, 2023.

well, my husband didn't go to school for me. I am the one who went to seminary.<sup>80</sup>

When I heard this, I was not shocked, but I was bewildered at the brazenness of the action. I do not know anyone in the secular marketplace who would get away with saying or suggesting something like that. However, this was only one account shared in conversation with Latinas/x during my interviews. After Ivy demonstrated impactful ministry in her local church, helping the congregation negotiate property sales, putting their finances in order, and restructuring a leadership team with promise, she received a letter proposing to lower her compensation to \$20,000 less. Understandably, she objected:

It was insulting that [they: meaning the denomination, district, and local church] was okay with reducing my salary because I was getting married. They thought that because I was young and they thought that I was eager to be a pastor, I was going to take whatever they would give me. I said, 'Listen, I have a student loan, and I did not get married to drop my responsibilities on my [husband's] lap and say, fix it. That money you are taking away from me is the money I need to repay my loan responsibly.'<sup>81</sup>

Similarly, in reflecting on equitable compensation concerning the arduous work of ministry, Amparito disclosed that in her retirement, the amount she receives from Social Security is minimal, and the retirement insurance she received from the church is about to end this year.

She noted,

I worked a lot and I worked hard, but I was not compensated [fairly]. I pastored three churches at the same time. I was never compensated with the same salary as [my husband, also a minister], having in my charge three Bible studies with prayer and three services on Sundays. [...] They didn't cover me fairly and the

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ivelisse, interview.

salary, well, I was very short and the retirement compensation too. I worked hard, hard, very, very, very hard, but I was never fairly treated financially.<sup>82</sup>

These stories are a small sample of the question on equitable compensation produced. In them, we hear the stories of dedicated ministers whose salaries were used to pay church debts. Ministry couples who have access to each other compensation packets and know the Latina/x minister is significantly underpaid compared to her partner for the same job. Latinas/x ministers with two jobs still struggle to pay with credit card and student loan debt. Volunteer lay ministers who lead offices within the denomination only get reimbursed for travel expenses and use their secular job's paid vacation to serve. At the same time, their clergy counterparts receive total compensation while doing the same work. I was overwhelmed by the response to this question. It became clear that economic exploitation is pervasive in both denominations, mirroring the economic oppression in the secular USA, especially concerning the ministry of Latinas/x.

I assumed that because talking about money is something we rarely do in Latin American culture, Latinas/x would be reluctant to share these stories. While they were generous with their personal experiences concerning this topic, I found a subdued resignation regarding finding solutions to this issue. Nora puts it this way:

I haven't thought a lot about that, probably because I don't want to get depressed and anxious. If there is no solution, why bother? Like when people say, oh, the stock market has gone down. I have lost \$20,000 while in retirement, and I can do nothing about it. So, I don't even look at it when I retire; whatever it is, it'll be.

Similarly, Loli expressed a sentiment of defeat on the matter. In referring to what Latinas/x get paid while in ministry, she responded:

I do not look at those details, but my husband does. And after being a part of the presbytery, he pulls out that list that shows all the different pastors and what they

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<sup>82</sup> Amparito, interview by author, Zoom, December 9, 2022.

get paid, and he is always reminding me that I am not being paid equitably. He gives me the talk every time. But because I'm in a position where thank God, I have enough to provide for my home and my family, what I often tell [my husband] is, 'I do not have time to do that. This is what I need to focus on right now. But it is a cop-out.

If the Covid-19 pandemic has anything to teach the church, it is the need to reimagine what it looks like for ministries to develop innovative funding models. When churches closed, the most common and primary ministry funding model was collecting tithes and offerings by passing a plate down the church pews. As a result, small congregations that make up most churches in both denominations lost their only source of income and were forced to explore digital platforms that until then had insisted on avoiding. However, giving and fundraising is more than the methodology and tools. It is a mindset and, in Christianity, a biblical mandate with theological implications. As the person with the fiduciary responsibility of ensuring funding for our ministry at Beth-El, I have learned that people fund generously that in which they believe and trust. Have Christians in both denominations lost faith in the ministry of the church?

Moreover, if that is the case, what can local churches do to turn their members' perceptions on funding the work of their church? This is the task before we enter a conversation on compensating Latinas/x equitably. At the most basic level, local churches that denounce economic exploitation and stand by their commitment to equitable compensation for women and Latinas/x must hold themselves accountable for how the church culture perpetuates exploitive practices. Local church leaders must reconsider ethically and theologically traditional tenets such as: "going the extra mile" and "doing the work out of love" and how they inform how the work of church members, volunteers, and ministers is valued. In contexts where ideals such as these prove to

exploit people's work within the church further, this language ought to be extricated from their theological narrative.

For Latinas/x who are nourishing a call to ministry, learning about finances, economics, and fundraising is no longer optional. Depending on denominational funding is no longer a privilege worth pursuing, as those "at the top" are fighting for the few positions and dollars available. For example, I was surprised to note that the few UMC conferences I follow, even in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, still had millionaire budgets. This shows resistance to curtailing spending and needing more innovative approaches in the stewardship of resources and sustainability practices. Latinas/x pursuing ministry must develop models, such as enterprising social practices and virtual fundraising, to self-fund their work. I also believe that in the Spirit of strengthening networks of support for Latinas/x in ministry, people who believe, affirm, and want to support the ministry of Latinas/x should develop crowdfunding approaches that grant resources to Latinas/x who demonstrate aptitudes, vision, and plans for the ministry they believe in. In the following section, I will expand my observations and recommendations on the crucial role women's networks and church networks generally play in solidarity with Latinas/x in ministry.

### The call as struggle

The feeling mentioned most often by the Latina leaders I interviewed in relation to the call was discouragement. Not because the call was the source, on the contrary, the call was a source of joy and feeling blessed. The feeling of discouragement emerged most often as an outcome of sharing the call with others. Latinas/x mentioned that the feeling of discouragement came when others would pigeon-hole them into

specific ministries that were traditionally for women. The most common: children ministries. Both Nora and LVR<sup>83</sup>, a UMC deacon and Presbyterian Ruling Elder respectively, expressed confidently that they knew children's ministries were not the right fit for them. Nora states, "I was discouraged by my pastors who invited me to teach Sunday school with children."<sup>84</sup> She recalls knowing well that she was not interested in children's ministry. She continued, "So the default was, you are a woman, you are going to teach children. Yeah. I was not good at it. That is not my call."<sup>85</sup> On the other hand, LVR, a Presbyterian Ruling Elder, recalls being ordained as a young adult. She was also placed to work with children, but later found a better fit working with youth. She recalls, "I got involved in Sunday school and I have always liked working with young people. With children, I don't think I'm good at working with children, but I do like working with young people."<sup>86</sup> Only Vilmarie noted that she bypassed the traditional rite of passage for Sunday School teachers to teach the children first before they were allowed to teach Adult Sunday School.<sup>87</sup> Denominations, local churches, and church leaders would benefit from practicing assessments of impressions and opinions regarding the ministry of women. For example, do we have specific ideas about what type of ministry women should do? If the answer is yes, then we are restraining the development of leadership in our community and hindering the growth of our ministries.

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<sup>83</sup> Initials used in lieu of full name by mutual agreement.

<sup>84</sup> Deacon Rev. Nora Colmenares, interview by author, Zoom, December 20, 2022.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ruling Elder, LVR, interview by author, January 16, 2023.

<sup>87</sup> Vilmarie, interview.

For Sonia, the marks of her struggle with the call were a series of check-ins with God in which she would say, "I need more time."<sup>88</sup> Sonia wanted to do life: get married, develop as a professional in her field of choice, and have and raise her children. Following the call to ministry and living her life were mutually exclusive. One could not fully develop simultaneously with the other. I resonated with Sonia's experience as I also tried to imagine what it would be like for a single mom to fully develop my call to ministry while doing all the other things I needed. When I attempted to start seminary at Asbury Seminary (Orlando Campus), I felt deep envy of the men who came fully prepared to class, delicious food in their prepared lunch boxes, their papers neatly written and completed, and had ample time to spend hours researching at the library. I looked around and compared myself to them. What was different? They all had wives. I wanted a wife, too, someone to take care of the house, the children, laundry, grocery shopping, and cooking meals so that I could dedicate myself to the call. For Latinas/x, the traditional role of wife and mother, homemaker, and caretaker, continues even if we have a call or professional life. A man can delegate these responsibilities completely to their wife, but for Latinas/x, even though our husbands might help, a big part of these responsibilities will always fall on us, and some of us prefer it that way.

The struggle is also manifested in wrestling with the call. We resist it for all the right reasons. Because as Amparito puts it, "the journey is uphill."<sup>89</sup> Because of her immediate family's reaction to her announcement of her call, Maya kept it in silence for a long time.

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<sup>88</sup> Local Pastor Rev. Sonia Cancel, interview by author, Zoom, December 9, 2022.

<sup>89</sup> Amparito, interview.

She recalls,

I never told another person for seven years. But I held on to it because as I prayed about it, the thought that kept going through my mind was, I am the one that will have to give account for my life before God. Not my mother, my father, not my pastor. I'm the one. And I felt the call so strongly that I thought I've got to hold on to it.... And part of my not telling anybody else was that I was afraid that I would buckle under the pressure, that I would let it go, that I would allow others to convince me...that my call was not real. So, I didn't tell anyone. Didn't tell anyone until I was graduating from college.<sup>90</sup>

When Latinas/x we make a public statement of our call, in most contexts we are boldly pushing back on centuries old tradition and biblical interpretation that believes that women's ministries are limited, and some areas of ministries are not accessible to women. Even when denominations, such as the UMC and the PC(USA), have statements for the full inclusion for ministry, at the local church level, these statements are strong suggestions at best, and long held beliefs that women have limits in ministry continue to prevail. Moreover, we are not to underestimate the power of cultural idiosyncrasies that support that women's first and preferably only ministry is her family and the home. Therefore, in some communities any announcement by a Latina who declares she is being called to serve God, to dedicate their lives to the work of ministry is a provocation to a world view that distorts the socio-political status quo and will ensue resistance in the least or whiplash that could put an end to the "non-sense."

It leads us to wonder how many Latinas/x, facing these hardships, kept their call to themselves and opted to bury it deep where no one could see, not even herself.

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<sup>90</sup> Maya, interview.

### Strong Sense of Call - it is our strength

It was 6:30 p.m. on a Saturday at Christ Hispanic United Methodist Church in Orlando, FL, and the contemporary worship service was about to start. I was in my early 30's and served then as the Director of Communications. I put on my headphones and turned on the mixing console in the Audio-Visual station in the back of the sanctuary. The pastor was leading the small group to sing worship songs with his guitar in hand. I was clicking on the slides projected with the lyrics of the songs, so that everyone could follow and sing along. All was going well. Well into the second song, I started praising God, while lifting my right hand in praise, and maneuvering the mixing sound board and mouse with my left hand. The atmosphere of worship was sublime, and I did not want to miss out in participating, yet I had a function to perform. I struggled to do both, so I decided I did not want to hinder others' experience by not doing a good job with the slides. As I was about to resolve to focus my attention on the computer, suddenly, I felt an overwhelming force that pushed me off my chair and I started to wail. That went on for a few minutes. Embarrassed that I had disrupted the service in an even more distracting way, towards the end I apologized to the pastor and church leaders who came to check up on me and offer some support. I explained to them what I had experienced saying, "God is asking me to do more..., but what more does he want from me?" At the time, I was so involved in many ministries of the church and had very little time for myself and my family. I rationalized; I could not possibly take on one more thing. I remember my pastor looking into my eyes with a gentle gaze, "*Dios te esta llamando al ministerio, hijita.*" (God is calling you into ministry, daughter).

That was not my first call. When I first felt the sense of God calling me to do something, it was to go on a mission trip to Honduras. It was very compelling. So

convincing of a call because it was a far-fetched idea considering that, at the time, I was a single mother of two struggling to pay the rent on time. I did follow that call and went to Honduras, and it was a life-changing experience that accelerated my personal and spiritual growth. There I learned many life lessons. In watching my fellow male missionaries, I witnessed them as capable of being sensitive and expressing love. I learned that leading a simple life is a possibility and our responsibility. I learned that I needed not to engage in our culture's consumerist behaviors that adversely affect our neighbors in Latin American countries. That move to go where it made no sense was made possible by the slightest inkling; That it was God who wanted me to go. I went against the opinions of others who thought it was irresponsible. In hindsight, it also propelled other people in my life who watched me struggle, step up, and do what God had called them to do. I was able to see the ripple effect that my following the call had in my life, my family, and the church's ministry. In hindsight, that trip to Honduras opened in my heart an aching void that hurts and compels me to be in solidarity with our Latin American community, especially the immigrant community within the United States. My response to that little call to take a 10-day trip equipped me with everything I would need 13 years later to lead Beth-El Farmworker Ministry. During this mission, I serve as Executive Director and offer services to the farm working community in West Central Florida, where most farmworkers are from Central American countries.

Not all calls for ministry are as dramatic as Paul's. I did fall from the chair, as Paul fell from his horse. We hear most about Paul's conversion and call because of the dramatic story behind it. The ministry of Jesus could not have been possible without first the response by his relative (cousin) Zechariah to serve in the temple. He was from the

tribe that would take turns serving in the temple once a week. It was his turn and chosen by lot. That is by sheer luck. There he had a dramatic encounter with the angel that would announce the birth of his son John, to his, until then, barren wife Elizabeth. Similarly, Jesus' ministry would have not been possible had his Mother Mary accepted the call to serve not only as his mother, but also as a fellow worker in his ministry. When Jesus called his first disciples, they had been casting nets all night without catching any fish. Jesus asks them to do so again, this time from deepest water along the shore. And even though it made no sense, they did so anyway. (Luke 5: 3-6). Jesus called women as well, and they followed providing resources. (Luke 8:1-3). What matters most is not the dramatics of the moment of call, but how strong the signal is long after the initial episode. Especially if we know that the journey to follow, care for, defend, protect, and live or our call is one filled with hardships.

This paper is not intended to convince anyone about the fact that God has been calling women to serve in ministry at all levels and will continue to do so. The purpose of this section is to demonstrate the ways in which leadership develops in relationships as the call emerges for Latinas/x and what it looks like to follow the call and develop our leadership in the United States. It is also meant to offer Latinas/x who might be discerning a call to study the experiences of the Latinas/x who came before them or who are further along in the process of following the call.

In the interviews the strong sense of call emerged as a leadership strength. Whether the call was a feeling, a conviction, a curious search for answers, the message God sent through our mentors, or revelations that came to us in dreams, the audible voice

of God and such, the higher the level of clarity about the call the further and deeper in ministry these leaders would journey.

### The Call is Something We Feel

In UMC tradition, we have the Aldersgate moment when after 20 years of serving as an Anglican priest, the founder of Methodism, John Wesley, experienced his heart "strangely warmed," which provided for conviction of righteousness and salvation. The continuous beating of that moment in his Spirit propelled him to lead a type of reformation for the Anglican church that evolved into a social movement.

Among the Latinas/x I interviewed, the call would manifest most often as an internal feeling or something we would feel through our bodies. For example, Karla says she felt the call at age 16 while serving in the leadership of the Youth Council in the UMC in Mexico. Her sense of call first emerged as a liking for the ministry model employed in the United States, focusing on serving our neighbors. She was not a fan of the fire and brimstone preaching that was popular among churches in her town and that scared people with notions of burning in hell for eternity. Once in the United States, years later, a clergy friend asked her, "When are you going to become a pastor?"<sup>91</sup> She pointed into the crowd of whiteheads before her, stating, "Look, there is no place for me."<sup>92</sup> Her clergy friend responded, "I understand, however...",<sup>93</sup> her friend insisted. Minutes after this exchange, Karla describes what she felt in these words:

My heart began to pound. And I started to hyperventilate like I was having an anxiety episode, and what I did was run out of there. And when I was about to

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<sup>91</sup> Karla Michelle Olivares, interview by author, Zoom, December 21, 2022.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

leave the building for the parking lot, I heard a voice, it said.... And I remember the words very clearly. Where are you going? I turned around, but there was no one, so I kept walking. I heard the voice again, "I do not need another Jonah." And I turned around, and there was no one. I know that it sounds crazy, and I know of people who have experienced hearing the voice of God; So audible. And it was very funny because it was not in my head. It came from here. (She points behind her right ear). It is not like I heard it coming from heaven. They were not thoughts in my head. It was something audible.

Other Latinas/x who participated in this interview also spoke of the sense of call as something they felt, sometimes bringing their hands to their heart. Phrases like "I had a burning desire to minister" and "when I felt the call" were the most common. I am not suggesting that people of other ethnicities do not have feelings or physical experiences related to the call. However, I found the ease with which this group of women spoke of having an unexplainable feeling. A couple even suggested that they might "sound crazy" but that the feeling of the call was so compelling that they could not deny it. The Oxford English Dictionary defines *objectivity* as "the ability to consider or represent facts, information, without being influenced by personal feelings or opinions; impartiality; detachment."<sup>94</sup> Feminist Philosopher Naomi Scheman states that our need for objectivity, even when unattainable, seeks to minimize the chances that others may challenge our shared knowledge at the risk of credibility.<sup>95</sup> The dominant culture, especially in the marketplace and the church, values the ideals of objectivity that go along with those of professionalism. In these settings, objectivity and professionalism concerning expressing emotions or divergent stories that do not pass the empirical tests are mutually exclusive. Because of this feature of the dominant culture, I have experienced in the church that we,

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<sup>94</sup> "Objectivity, n.". OED Online. March 2023. Oxford University Press. <https://www-oed-com.ezproxy.drew.edu/view/Entry/129639?redirectedFrom=objectivity&> (accessed April 24, 2023).

<sup>95</sup> Scheman, Naomi. 2011. *Feeling Our Way toward Moral Objectivity*. New York: Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/acprof:osobl/9780195395112.003.0007.

too, are cautious of using the "feelings" language, at risk of sounding too subjective and less professional. In doing so, we limit the depth of our conversations with each other and curtail the stories of our experiences that could enrich our faith and propel us to engage the imagination. Imagine the rich language we can deploy within our communities that would enable more people to articulate their longings, dreams, and experiences with the Divine. The Latinas/x in this project can easily talk about feelings among *comadres*. Moreover, even when, in its aftermath, they sought affirmation, the feeling of the call was sufficient to declare it and follow it.

This aspect of feelings is essential to this paper as we later explore the importance of vulnerability and emotional intelligence as signature marks of a good leader. The Latinas/x in this project are consistently comfortable with vulnerability, naming the things they do not know nor understand, not feeling compelled to have all the answers, and feeling confident and comfortable embracing mystery and thriving even when navigating the unknown. I think having to live with "the struggle" has generated in them these capacities. The struggle is, in many ways, a constant stranger that is both predictable in showing up and unpredictable in its form daily. These capacities that arise from continuously practicing navigating uncharted territories and waters are crucial to the type of leaders the churches like the UMC and PC(USA) need today in their current uncertain status as mainline denominations.

#### The questions that lead to the call

When Jesus asks Peter three times: "Peter, do you love me?" (John 21:15-17) He is setting the stage with a question for the call to ministry that follows: "Tend my sheep." In conversation with the Latinas/x who participated in these series of interviews, another

pattern emerged, the call was their response to a question that compelled them or puzzled them or that they sought to answer. Lucia's future husband preached a sermon on this passage, which sparked a calling within her. "I didn't sleep that night. I felt that the Lord was calling me. God kept asking me; Lucia, do you love me? So, from that experience of the sermon and the call that God gave me that night, from that moment on, I consecrate myself to the Lord."<sup>96</sup>

Previously, we learned that Rebecca was pursuing studies in environmental ecology and became curious about the church's stance on environmental issues, such as ecology and theology concerning the earth. It was this search for answers that led Rebecca to seminary, where she described her experience in these terms, "it's like if someone had handed me a stick of dynamite and it blew up. And so, the next three years of seminary, it was like or actually, my whole life it's been remembering bringing all that back. How do I integrate all that I was experiencing in seminary?"<sup>97</sup> Rebecca's leadership emerged from the questions and not necessarily the answers. She exemplifies the type of leader who does not get bogged down by uncertainty but rather it is the uncertainty that energizes her quest for the Divine in places, spaces, and people.

For Jeniffer, a Presbyterian pastor, the questions that engaged her were: "What are you doing here?" And "What are you waiting for?" She attended a women's conference for the first time, with other women from her church. During a workshop the presenter asked these two questions. She recalls:

At the end of the event, we made a circle to bless each other and when I get to her, she gives me a hug and tells me: 'We need you.' I was crying. Everyone was

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<sup>96</sup> Rev. Lucia Martinez, interview by author, Zoom, February 10, 2023.

<sup>97</sup> Rev. Rebecca Reyes, interview by author, Zoom, December 15, 2022.

crying. When I returned [home]. That's when the bomb exploded, I could say, because [everywhere] I went to the supermarket, stores, pharmacies, even coffee shops; people I had never seen in my life, they would sit next to me and start talking to me about their problems. One day I was preparing for a book club and went to make copies. A lady stopped me, and she also began to talk to me about her life. An errand that was supposed to take me 20 minutes maximum, it took me almost two hours and after that, I said no, this is something I can't keep postponing, the Lord is calling me.<sup>98</sup>

Jeniffer specifically pointed out that it was the fact that the conference was attended by women only, that she liked so much. In my non-profit work with the Girl Scouts, we learned that there is greater success for developing leadership in girls when the male gaze is absent. Women's networks play an important role in expediting the sense of call-in women, especially in Latinas/x.

In addition to posing the questions that engage the participants imagination and sense of purpose within the potential answers to the question, the follow up invitation, "We need you," cements the notion that we are seen among a sea of people, it affirms that indeed we can own the question, invitation, and explore further what the answers are for us. Jeniffer seemed to have started to screen her everyday events through the lens of those two questions and started seeing clearly that she was indeed needed, but also that she had something valuable to contribute to the life of the church.

### The call as a tool

The call serves as an initiator for disruption and its effects ripple out into all areas of our lives. The call is not a simple instance, or an inkling is also a tool that according to Maya shapes us. She says, through the call "that shaping that God is doing, like the

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<sup>98</sup> Rev. Jeniffer Rodriguez, interview by author, Zoom, January 19, 2023.

potter. Shaping us, reshaping us, reforming us when we get broken along the way.”<sup>99</sup> The call compels us to engage in that shaping that at times is painful, for it invites us to shave off and leave behind things that we have grown attached to, such as familiar places, and even people we love. It also convicts us to assess deeply who we are and to transform according to the rigors of the call and to grow mentally, intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally; all processes that are arduous.

Belief in the call is that conviction in which we do not allow ourselves to doubt if even for a single moment that the call is real. Amparito put it this way, “I believed in my call, and I was convinced that the Lord had called me and chosen me for the holy Ministry. I didn't have an iota of doubt about that.”<sup>100</sup> Amparito pointed out that it was her resolute conviction that inspired her to push through and move forward. Maya also stated, “I've never had any doubts that this is what God wants me to do.”<sup>101</sup> For Maya it has been this belief that has helped her stay strong even through moments of intense conflict.

The call as a tool that shapes us emerged most profoundly in the witness of Blanqui who graduated from the Latin American Biblical Seminary in Costa Rica, now Latin American University, went convinced that she would serve as a missionary. Along the journey she worked at all levels of the church, until it was clear that the pastorate was the clear next step. She identified how changes in her understanding of service concepts took place as she did the work of ministry:

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<sup>99</sup> Maya, interview.

<sup>100</sup> Amparito, interview.

<sup>101</sup> Maya, interview.

All my concepts [had changed]. My concept of service started as a missionary, wanting to change the missionary style.... Later, I already came with a different pastoral concept from the one here. Becoming an ordained minister of the Word and Sacrament opens you up. Not only to be a church pastor, but there can also be countless types of ministries you can be called to.<sup>102</sup>

We are changed by the call because in the search we learn about ourselves, and we also expand our vision that ministry can go beyond the framework of the local church. But also, that functions such as the pastorate expand far beyond the pulpit. If we dare to follow the call as an exploration, we are bound to expand our worldview about the church, ourselves, and the communities we are called to serve.

The call is the power behind the fight. When Lucia was told by her District Superintendent that she might not be receiving a pastoral appointment because a woman's place was with her family and not in the pulpit, she pushed back. She recalls saying to him, "I do have a call for the pastorate and if you pass a male pastor with less preparation before I for a church appointment, I will have no other choice but to take this matter to the committee on the Status and Role of Women."<sup>103</sup> She continued, "I was then the president of the committee in Puerto Rico. I knew the whole structure well."<sup>104</sup>

She stood up and excused herself, and she was about to leave when the District Superintendent stopped her and affirmed, she would be receiving an appointment to a church that year. She continued, "I was not going to allow them to [appoint a male pastor] who did not have the same preparation I had, before me. I was simply not going

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<sup>102</sup> Blanqui, interview.

<sup>103</sup> Lucia, interview.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

to allow it!”<sup>105</sup> However, the power behind the call is simply not enough. Lucia also knew well how the power dynamics and structures worked. Similarly, Rebecca also spoke extensively about the importance of closely studying our context, in this case our denominations’ polity and power structures and conducting a power analysis.

Rebecca points,

That power analysis is very important no matter where you are, whether it's in seminary, where it's in the church, where it's an organization, recognizing what the system is, what the power is, where dynamics are, where conflicts are, who the silent characters are, everything. And being able to do that and assess that and take pause with that.<sup>106</sup>

This analysis of power structures and dynamics can serve as a roadmap on the journey of following the call. In thinking about her own journey to follow the call Ivelisse reflects, “I have understood the calling more now that it's not linear. That is always evolving. That if you start as a pastor, you don't have to end as a pastor.”<sup>107</sup> The journey for these Latinas/x have bumps on the road, detours, and at times we find ourselves lost.

But not all the Latinas/x in this project can relate to these hardships. Loli acknowledges that while many of her Latinas/x sisters have had difficulties in following the call, on the other hand she says, “I consider myself very blessed in terms of what my call looked like, because I feel like I was very supported in my call.... I've kind of been in the church all my life, had been working at camp and really that's kind of where my call formed.”<sup>108</sup> Loli’s description of camp as the context for developing the call and

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Rebecca, interview.

<sup>107</sup> Ivelisse, interview.

<sup>108</sup> Loli, interview.

following it, makes sense. The camp experience by design, one meant to bring us closer to God in an environment where we explore the activities we enjoy, build community, and receive nourishment and support. It is this environment of nourishment and support that speaks to the ways local churches and women's groups can organize themselves as breeding grounds for Latinas/x to effectively develop their leadership in the church. Loli mentioned feeling affirmed and surrounded by mentors who listened, and who also lovingly called her out when she "was playing small"<sup>109</sup>.

One thing I found in common among the Presbyterian ministers I interviewed was their clarity in terms of understanding the Presbyterian Church (USA) polity, guidelines, and structure. As a UMC minister, I find that while the guidelines for discerning the call in the Book of Discipline are cumbersome, in practice they are implemented according to interpretation and the culture of the community. Making it hard for Latinas/x to navigate the systems for lack of consistency. It would serve us well in the UMC to pay close attention to redundancies in the process to discern the call.

To have nurturing contexts that enable the leadership among Latinas/x in the United States, local churches ought to become experts in what it looks like to help people discern their call. Typically, in the local church the level of engagement for lay people stays at the level of volunteerism and there is little guidance and facilitation for discernment and reflection on how we are to think of ourselves as disciples who are leaders. This distinction is important. Because disciples who are called to serve in ministry cannot stay followers throughout their whole lives. We follow Jesus, but in church and society we lead.

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<sup>109</sup> Loli, interview.



### Learners as a capacity

The UMC and the PC(USA) hold education as a value in ministry and prioritize its importance in discipleship and discernment for ministerial leadership. However, the Latinas/x I interviewed, while almost all of them hold professional degrees unrelated to religion or ministry, also demonstrated having education as a value and priority in their lives. In addition, I found them to be lifelong students who did not shy away from opportunities to learn something new.

If a Latina/x is to make it through ministry within the religious structure, not all pointers and secrets of the trade will be easily divulged for our benefit. We must engage in the exploration of seeking answers and learning as we go. In reflecting on her lifelong leadership journey in the Presbyterian church, LVR reflects, “I have learned a lot; without formal training.”<sup>110</sup> She adds that one thing the local church and the church, in general, must learn to do better is to equip leaders intentionally and effectively for their roles.

When facing the possibility of becoming an ordained elder in the UMC, Amparito, whose first language is Spanish, while raising three small children, earned 100 hours of English instruction. Furthermore, even though Sonia has served as a school principal and teacher for most of her ministerial service as a local pastor, at 63, she is still taking the course of study offered as an alternative to seminary training. Amparito also graduated from the same program years later.

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<sup>110</sup> LVR, interview.

## Emotional Intelligence

When the words Emotional Intelligence emerged as a trend in a training provided by the UMC it was related to the work of Daniel Goleman's book *The Emotionally Intelligent Leader*. I avoided reading the book as long as I could. At the time, it was being prescribed in my clergy circles as a solution to responding to conflict in the church. I was reluctant to entertain the notion that I had any physical, intellectual, or emotional power to manage the heavily emotional turmoil the church I was serving and I, were experiencing in relationship with each other. At the stage we were in I could not believe there was anything I could read and apply that would turn the tide. It was simply too late for us this time. If I am going to be honest, I was also afraid the book would relate the ways in which I had contributed to the toxic environment and there were indeed tactics I could have intelligently employed to avoid the complexity it ensued. I did not want to confirm through the reading of the book how emotionally unintelligent I was and how inept for ministry in that context I was and how much of the burden of blame laid on me as a leader. It was simply easier for me to explain that racism and prejudice were to blame for the way that congregation treated me.

I encountered this material again, when as part of my research I participated in a virtual six-week Women's Leadership Program: Leading with Power and Influence provided by Yale School of Management in the Spring of 2022. I think I was more receptive because a lot of time had passed since my turbulent season when I encountered the concept of emotional intelligence first and second because this time the subject matter was brought forward in the context of a women's leadership and the facilitator was female. Since applying the principles of emotionally intelligent leadership and seeing the positive results in the development of our team at Beth-El Mission, I have since become a

champion of Emotional Intelligence as a capacity that is vital to be an effective leader especially when working with younger generations.

In my conversations with the Latinas/x for this project, emotional intelligence as a capacity came up in very concrete ways. We already discussed the importance feelings play in the discernment process of the call and the journey of leadership development of Latinas/x in the UMC and Presbyterian Church. Feelings are those emotions we are aware of, but there are emotions we are not always aware of and cannot predict when and how they emerge in a particular situation. As Latinas/x we will struggle with the -isms in all the places, people, and situations that we encounter. These challenges will trigger in us emotions that we need to be prepared to manage. It is unavoidable to encounter a well-meaning person from the dominant culture who is unaware of their implicit bias. We cannot always trust those who present themselves to us as allies, to stand on our side when the whiplash of the -isms rise in threatening ways.

Emotional Intelligence is our capacity to be self-aware and regulate how we respond, rather than react to a particular emotion.<sup>111</sup> It is also a leader's capacity to read emotions in others and connect for optimal outcomes. What tools that translate as Emotional Intelligence do Latinas/x bring into their leadership that can be particularly useful to the church? When talking about emotional intelligence, what traits or emotions do Latinas/x bring into ministry, and what is their contribution to their context? In my conversations with these leaders, I found many instances that pointed to a keen sense of

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<sup>111</sup> Alba Yela Aránega, M<sup>a</sup> Teresa Del Val Núñez, Rafael Castaño Sánchez, "Mindfulness as an intrapreneurship tool for improving the working environment and self-awareness," *Journal of Business Research* 115 (2020), 186-193, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2020.04.022>. (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0148296320302472>).

self-awareness. As I mentioned, it came through their capacity to openly express their feelings at a particular time in their leadership journey. Their expansive emotional vocabulary points to their capacity to identify several emotions beyond the most common: happiness, anger, sadness, or fear. Below is a list of the emotions mentioned throughout all fourteen interviews. The more clearly, we can tap into the emotion we feel, the more adept we are at self-regulating and responding to a challenge rather than reacting to it. Below is a list of the emotions the 14 Latina religious leaders name throughout the interviews.

Affirmed	Marveled	Difficulties	Pain
Afraid	Motivated	Discouraged	Pressured
Blessed	Pride	Doubtful	Pretty Angry
Cared for	Rested	Embarrassed	Rejected
Encouraged	Uplifted	Foiled	Sadness
Excited	Very Happy	Frustrated	Tired
Forgiven	Anguish	Having a rough time	Trial
Goodness	Bothered	Inadequate	Uncertain
Happy	Broken hearted	Nervous	Unnatural
Helped	Crazy	Not feeling good enough	Upset
Honored	Cowardly	Not feeling prepared	Urgency to please
Joy		Not having the courage to	

Figure 1. Emotions Mentioned During Interviews

Not only these leaders were able to name their feelings, but they also demonstrated a high level of proficiency in self-regulation. They also offered practical techniques that helped them navigate particularly difficult landscapes. When Vilmarie was traveling all over the United States as part of her service the PC(USA) as Co-Moderator of a General Assembly, a life-long educator, she found herself educating

people about who she was, where she came from, and what it meant that she was the first Latina in her position leading the church. Even though, best-practices in Diversity Equity and Inclusion would advise against any activity in which the minoritized person is in the position to educate others about who they are and where they come from, thus putting the person of color at the service of the person of the dominant culture, Vilmarie consciously opted to embrace her role as educator. She leaned into the reality that she held a highly visible position and people were curious about her. She honored that curiosity and looked at those sometimes awkward and cringe worthy situations as opportunities to educate people in ways that could help them grow. When exchanges were blatantly racist, sexist, offensive, or simply ridiculous, she learned to take deep breaths. Breathing deeply is a mindful pause that immediately impacts our nervous system by decreasing our heart rate. This pause allows us to re-appraise the situation and respond rather than react at the emotional level. She often used humor as a tool to gently call people out and speak truth. In that way, Vilmarie demonstrated her high capacity to connect with people.

Because “The Struggle” is the context in which Latinas/x develop their leadership, our best bet is to assume that issues of class, race, and sexism are commonplace in any setting in the United States. Loli identified that Latinas/x have what she refers to as “emotional duct tape.”<sup>112</sup> For Loli emotional duct tape is an emotional fortitude, an intelligence or wisdom that only comes from being in the fight for so long. La lucha or the struggle provides for Latinas/x to have everyday life making situations in which we get to practice often with developing mechanisms to make things work at least to get us through the day. For example, I see this make-a-do approach to life in the farm working

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<sup>112</sup> Loli, interview.

women we are in ministry with at Beth-El Farmworker Ministry. Their response to “How are you?” is often, “Right now, I am well.” They emphasize “right now” as an acknowledgement that their lives hour by hour are at risk and they live in perennial uncertainty. The next moment is not guaranteed. They are indeed resilient women, but more than resilient they are *luchadoras*, they are not simply ensuring and surviving they are taking matters in their own hands and figuring out daily how to make it work for their families. Even though the Latinas/x I interviewed not all of them had faced the incredible challenges farmworker women face, we need not undermine that our *lucha* did not start when we “crossed the border.” The *machista* worldview in Latin America, that is also part of our cultural baggage, provides a society enmeshed at all levels with patriarchy. Our struggle begins the moment our parents find out at our birth that we are assigned the female gender.

Nora spoke about how she curated what aspects of her *latinidad* she would pass down to her daughters. She decided to omit and disrupt the passing down of ideals and expectations about how to care for their bodies, expected age for marriage or even whether to get married, expectations on motherhood, and the many idiosyncrasies that attempt to prescribe the experience of being Latina in a patriarchal society. We do what we can to protect ourselves and our daughters from the hurt our culture inflicts on women. As leaders, Latinas/x recognize that the cultural baggage we carry, even in its richness, also includes features that hold us back or stand in the way of growth. Leaders like Nora ensure that as they encounter these hang-ups, they prepare younger generations of Latinas/x to be freed from those ideas that hold us back. Part of the struggle is

circumstantial, but a big part is what we carry within us as a heritage handed or passed down.

The importance of the call in Latinas/x defining their signature leadership is foundational. The evils of racism, classism, and sexism cannot only be battled with the mind, conversations, engagement. When do we act? When do we remain still and centered? It is an important emotionally intelligent tactic to ensure we remain focused on our call and service. Otherwise, the -isms and all the insidious ways in which they emerge in the day to day will derail us from our purpose. There is a delicate balance between staying in the struggle while resisting and purposefully deciding not to engage in all the battles that stand before us. The progress of the work of ministry we are called to lead depends on our ability to hold that tension. Amparito spoke about how this has manifested in her journey. When she had experienced the ripple effect and impact of the -isms, she advised that,

staying centered in the call that God gave me enabled me to clothe myself in the likes of Debora to face the Sisera(s) that I encountered along the road. I have learned to muster the strength to even [amid my struggle] to motivate the Baracs who were scared on their own journey. To sometimes push the cart uphill, but with an assured confidence.... This is all about filling yourself with courage and taking firm steps supported by the strong arm of the Lord, because the One who called you, supports you, directs you.<sup>113</sup>

Amparito finds inspiration in another leading woman in the Bible, Deborah (Judges 4:1 - 5:31) who was called upon to serve as judge and lead a military enterprise against Sisera, the military commander of the king of Canaan, who was an oppressive and cruel ruler. This centeredness she spoke of is a resting place that allows us to conduct our business amid oppression but also develop the capacity to be there for others who need

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<sup>113</sup> Amparito, interview.

encouragement. An emotionally intelligent leader knows the impact our own emotions and the ways in which we show up influence the emotions of others in the environment we work in.

The clarity of our identity is key in ensuring that the effect of facing the struggle does not redefine us. It is common for people of color to be victims of attacks fueled by implicit biases and unchecked privilege, and at times blatant and explicit racism and sexism. It is important that experience does not redefine how we perceive ourselves as leaders. While going through an intense period in her career when a colleague openly threatened to remove her from her position, Rebecca is clear, she was not a victim. She says, “I participated fully in making things happen so I could walk away not feeling sorry for myself or not, or saying I was a failure.” But her capacity to respond calmly to these challenges is not innate; she had to work hard to develop these capacities, through practice, reframing, and therapy. She adds,

I think if you're LGBTQIA+, you better be prepared for the innuendos, comments or the questions, the language. You ask your allies, how are you navigating this? How do you deal with this? How do you deal with someone that comes and says to you, who are you living with? You ask in return; Who do you live with? And make it a normal conversation by learning to not get defensive. So, it becomes a normal kind of thing, and that takes practice. I think therapy is the part where you come to learn your own deficits or your own vulnerabilities or your own strengths, and you learn how to navigate that coming from an area of, oh, yeah, I don't like that question, and how can I redirect it?<sup>114</sup>

Because the struggle is the context, we also must be aware of the ways it has left a mark on us. As Rebecca speaks of engaging in therapy to address those triggers that might put us on the defensive, it is important to recognize that there is still a lot of stigmas in the Latino community about matters pertaining to mental health. Also, our

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<sup>114</sup> Rebecca, interview.

make-a-do approach to survival and resistance might go a long way, but when the going gets tough it might only bring us to a certain point. Ivy, who is a local pastor and social worker by profession, states:

there's value in taking care of our emotional house as Latinas/x before we serve, I think there's value because we could see things from a different angle, separate things, and believe in ourselves more. And some of us are in denial of that trauma. Some of us are not. But I think because we as part of the Latino community, as women we had quite a tough battle to be women with a voice and to be seen.

Moreover, we cannot undermine the struggle's toll on our emotional well-being and how we see ourselves. An essential part of why I am doing this work is that there are not many Latinas/x in positions of power and influence in the UMC and the Presbyterian Church (USA). Moreover, in more than one way and very significant ways, these leaders are trailblazing a path in one way, shape, or another. Furthermore, the challenge of opening pathways and leading the way is that the challenge is complex and nuanced; there are pitfalls we cannot plan for, and there needs to be a map. We are creating the way as we walk. As Anzaldúa writes, "Voyager, there are no bridges; one builds them as one walks."<sup>115</sup>

Moreover, if we are not trailblazing, we are emulating what we have learned from others, which may cause an identity crisis and struggle with authenticity. It takes so much effort to continuously engage in acts of resistance, to find your self-worth and identity, and work from that place. It takes much courage and emotional capital to do the work. We must prioritize our wellness and mental health.

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<sup>115</sup> Anzaldúa, *The Bridge*, 254.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### COMADRAZGO NETWORKS: PRESENT AND PREFERRED FUTURE

*"Interdependency between women is the way to a freedom which allows  
the I to be, not in order to be used, but in order to be creative."*

*Audre Lord*<sup>116</sup>

I grew up hearing my godmother, and other close friends call my mom *Comay* Mary. *Comay* is an endearing abbreviation for the word *comadre* (co-mother), the title that describes a mother's relationship to the woman who becomes her child's godmother at baptism. However, the term we also extend to close friends with whom you journey life together and share the responsibilities of rearing our children in the community. Isasi-Diaz stated that the *comadrazgo* "institution creates and sustains an effective infrastructure of interdependence that has the family at the center and extends family values such as unity, welfare, and honor in all directions into the community."<sup>117</sup> A few roles in this *comadrazgo* institution are relevant to this conversation: the *comadre* (co-mother) and the *madrina* (godmother). Lillian Comas-Diaz, who has developed a framework for *comadre* therapy through a *mujerista* lens, defines the *comadre* relationship this way, "the relationship between the mother and the godmother of a child as a mirror for the multicultural feminist therapeutic alliance. Since women in relationships heal, the *comadre* therapist invites the client to examine her female relationships in order to obtain support from the positive aspects of the female bond."<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Lorde, "The Master's Tools," 94.

<sup>117</sup> Isasi-Diaz, *Mujerista Theology*, 141.

<sup>118</sup> Comas-Diaz, "Journey to Psychology," 164.

Furthermore, Comas-Diaz defines *madrina* as "a special relationship that involves parenting and mentoring."<sup>119</sup> As mentors, which according to Comas-Diaz we all need to succeed, "women nurture, heal, and mentor future generations."<sup>120</sup> She adds, "*madrinas* assist their goddaughters into awakening their dormant talents. Latinas' cultural background facilitates their leadership through their unique cultural gifts. Indeed, their spirituality is a significant foundation of Latinas' leadership style."<sup>121</sup> Through the lens of Isasi-Diaz and Comas-Diaz, we can enumerate the features and values the *comadrazgo* network can provide to Latinas/x familial relationships that defy bloodlines in their religious context: unity, welfare, honor, healing (which I also define as solutions), wisdom, mentorship, nurturing, culture, spirituality, and accountability. These types of relationships within the *comadrazgo* network go deeper than collegiality and friendships; a *comay* and a *madrina* are family. In my life, even though I do not call anyone *comay* and no one calls me *comay*, I have a tribe of *comays*, who are a phone call away, especially when I need an ear to listen to my rants, a voice of wisdom when I am experiencing adversity, a partner who unconditionally steps in when I need someone to have my back, and an authentic sounding board who listens and hold me accountable.

Moreover, I, too, serve as a *comay* and *madrina* to many women in my network who can count on me unconditionally. These are indeed relationships of interdependency that provide solutions and the accompaniment of solidarity in the everyday struggle. However, these *comadrazgo* networks can provide more if we intentionally organize

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<sup>119</sup> Comas-Diaz, "Madrinas, Comadres, and Luminarias," 163.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

ourselves in ways that can foster the leadership development of young Latinas/x and soften the path towards a preferred future where Latinas/x have options to accomplish the purpose of their call to ministry. Therefore, I suggest that *comadrazgo* leadership and networks and all its values take seriously the task of building each other up, supporting, guiding, discerning, and holding each other accountable, that these groups are better suited to identify Latinas/x leaders, recruit them for the work of ministry, journey with them as they develop their capacities and strengths, and endorsing their work on behalf of the UMC and PC(USA) denomination. This would require both denominations to amend their polity guidelines, which currently provide for committees composed of strangers to do the work detailed above.

I see relationships of *comadrazgo* all over the biblical texts. Undeniably, Ruth, Orpah, and Naomi shared this type of relationship.<sup>122</sup> Together they shared an unbreakable bond that sustained them through their season of loss. Their friendship informed their strategy for survival and ultimately secured their socio-political standing and economic well-being. Similarly, Mary, the mother of Jesus, and her cousin Elizabeth shared a relationship that transcended their connection through bloodlines. When Mary received the message of her pregnancy, an event that could have risked her life as a woman who was engaged to be married, the narrative tells us that she "set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country."<sup>123</sup> to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who was also expecting a child. Elizabeth felt her unborn child leap into her womb, which led her to affirm the ministry Mary was setting out to lead by rearing and raising the Son of God.

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<sup>122</sup> Ruth 1:6-22 (NRSV).

<sup>123</sup> Luke 1:39-56 (NRSV).

Elizabeth declared, "And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."<sup>124</sup> The intimate exchange between the two described in Luke 1:39-56 best describes a relationship of solidarity and sisterhood. Elizabeth was to Mary both a *comadre* and a *madrina*. Both share a similar experience in which they were with a child in the aftermath of a supernatural proclamation by an angel, with the promise of what their son's purpose in life would be—sharing that vision of what God would do through them and with them. Elizabeth, most likely older than Mary, serves as a *madrina*. I imagine her counseling and advising Mary. We do not know why Mary chose Elizabeth to visit and stay with, but we can surmise that, at minimum, Mary trusted Elizabeth and looked up to her as someone who could offer sound counsel and support.

Throughout this body of work, we have seen that Latinas/x share similar challenges and obstacles as we follow our call to ministry and set out with haste to develop our leadership in the religious landscape within the UMC and the PUSA in the United States. We have highlighted the capacities and strengths that the struggle engenders in us, the dynamics in the types of relationships we must learn to navigate, and the areas in which we can generate positive change for the church and our communities. One common thread has been opportunities for Latinas/x to coalesce around initiatives that move our cause forward, closer to what Isasi-Diaz defined as the "*proyecto histórico*" or preferred future. Latinas/x design this preferred future at the helm in partnership with allies for Latinas/x and the communities we serve. In this sense, I argue that *comadrazgo* networks and their crucial solidarity feature have something to offer to

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<sup>124</sup> Luke 1:45 (NRSV)

this work and can serve as a framework that other contexts can replicate to ensure that Latinas/x have spaces and resources to enact our leadership within and outside of the church.

### **THE FIRST NETWORK: THE LOCAL CHURCH**

When I found Christ's Hispanic Methodist Church in Orlando, FL, I did not only find a worship community, but I also found a family that welcomed us, cared for us, trusted us, needed us, challenged us, and believed in me and my call to ministry. There are no questions about it; the local church emerges in the leadership journeys of all interview participants as the context where they develop their signature leadership and identity. For better or worse, the local church, with all its idiosyncrasies, is the laboratory where Latinas/x test their gifts, talents, and leadership skills. The local church is the inspiration for service. We want to serve our local church because it is there where we feel that sense of belonging, that we are a family, and that we are cared for and nurtured with expectations for growth. The church is the body with whom we converse about the issues that matter the most to us. It is where we nurture the call and are deployed to serve the world. In the United States, the local church still can be a "third" place, after home and work, where Latinas/x of all generations can find a community that affirms and supports their leadership development.

In conversation with Rebecca, it struck me as interesting that what prompted her to seek theological education was her interest in what the church had to say about the topics that concerned her the most. Although she had completed a bachelor's degree in science and she shared with enthusiasm that it was not a call to be a pastor that sent her to seminary, "I had a moment where I said, "I wonder what the church is saying about

environmental ecology or the environment or the theology of the earth...." Her search for answers, which started at her local church, brought her to formal theological education. Later, she became the first Latina ordained in the Presbyterian Church in the United States. She shares this recognition with Rev. Blanqui Otaño, ordained in the Presbyterian Church in Puerto Rico before it merged with the PC(USA). Rebecca's journey may very well be that of many Latinas/x who engage in theological conversation at the local church that feeds into our curiosity and informs how we engage with the world in ministry and service. Ideally, the local church is the breeding ground for probing questions that enrich our faith and practice of our faith and serves as a launch pad that propels us forward in our leadership development journey.

The practices of worship, prayer, and Bible study teach the requirement of service in ministry outside the four walls of the church building: to be on a mission with our community and the world. Nora, a deacon with the UMC, expressed it this way, "I did not want to be within the confines of the church because I wanted to be in the community." The local church is also where what happens "inside the four walls" is insufficient and propels us to look outside the community. We discern in the community how God is calling us to serve church and community. Nora adds, "And we discern how God is already acting there, how God is already bringing about transformation through people in the community."<sup>125</sup>

The local church is embedded in the life journey of our families. Where our ancestors have been part of a long lineage of leaders who have made significant contributions to the life of the local church and the community, this is undoubtedly the

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<sup>125</sup> Nora Colmenares, email message to author, April 23, 2023.

case for Vilmarie, a third-generation Presbyterian who said with pride, "I am Presbyterian by birth." LVR, who is a second-generation Presbyterian, says, "I bring this call [to serve the church] from my mother's womb." There is this sense that the local church is a birthplace and that you are born into a community that expects, wants, loves, and looks forward to helping you grow.

However, not all local churches are safe places. Moreover, they can be tricky spaces and environments for children of pastors, also known as PKs, short for pastor's kids. Some interview participants are PKs, which adds another layer to the concept of being born in the local church. Both Latinas/x, who were PKs, spoke of the challenges of being part of the fishbowl and always being under scrutiny. Loli, who is now a Presbyterian Minister of the Word and Sacrament, recalls her father bringing the whole family to the move to go to seminary, "So, I have kind of been in the church all my life."<sup>126</sup> Her experience was generally positive, but she remembers it was challenging as a teenager. During that season, she recalls rolling her eyes whenever they had to read the morning devotional prior to going to school. Family rituals that today she is thankful for but resisted when she was younger.

On the other hand, Ivelisse, a pastor's kid and now a local pastor in the UMC, recalls her parent's commitment to ministry as a source of her personal trauma. In their zeal for ministry, Ivelisse observed her parents make many mistakes that put her at risk. Often church ministry was prioritized, and she grew up feeling neglected as she was left with caretakers related to their ministry, who abused their power and inflicted harm. Not all congregations are safe communities for young people.

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<sup>126</sup> Loli, interview.

For Maya, thoughts about the local church generate nostalgia as the setting of her earliest in which the bonds with her father formed at a very young age. "My first memory is of going to church with my father, who did not have any formal education, was an immigrant from Mexico, and he felt less than the other church members." However, her father figured out he could do manual work, which was his way of contributing to the local church. As I listened to her story, I thought of the families who come to worship at Beth-El and how the local church ministry can provide a space for disenfranchised persons to activate their agency and develop their leadership skills. I have observed in my ministry setting a reticence from ministers to do everything for the parishioners concerned that they already work too hard in their daily lives and that church ought to be a place of rest. However, they miss the opportunity that the local church's work provides for those who experience oppression to exert decision-making power and implement their ideas with purpose, chances that they do not get otherwise. In accompanying her father, Maya saw in her father a role model of service, and it was while he completed tasks at church Maya felt a strong sense of call and developed a desire to "live in the house of God."

For these Protestant Christian leaders, the church was not always the Protestant church in its early years of formation. Many started their journey in the Roman Catholic church, the faith of their ancestors, and would navigate the sacramental life of the church: Baptism, First Communion, and Confirmation. As a pre-teen, Blanqui recalls walking early in the morning to mass, which was a little away from her house. She recalls that it was after Vatican 2, because the mass was no longer in Latin, that the priest engaged in a diatribe against evangelicals and freemasons. It was then in her discontent that Blanqui

decided and no longer wanted to go to the Roman Catholic Church. As we grow, the local church is for us, where our values, worldviews, and essential principles are clarified and cemented.

Karla, who is in the process of discernment as a candidate for ordination with the UMC, recalls the local church where she first participated in a role of leadership as a youth in Mexico. In comparing the role of youth in Mexico to how it is in the United States, she shared that:

rather than having an adult leader, the youth are part of the cabinet.... So, you are experiencing positions of leadership [with] your peers and also in the broader.... church You go to church council meetings, district committees, [and] conference committees. You experience leadership and what the church looks like beyond the local church.<sup>127</sup>

In this way, the local church serves as a connector to the broader Church community, providing immeasurable opportunities for youth to explore what leadership looks like at all levels. Currently, the youth group model in local churches in the United States includes an adult hired by the church, a youth pastor, a director of children and youth, or an adult volunteer who coordinates activities with parents. The activities include a short devotional provided by an adult minister, and the rest are primarily fun activities designed to promote a sense of belonging and fun engagement. Youth ministries can be powerful for discipleship and leadership development, especially among Latinas/x. The energy and resources spent creating gimmicky activities to invite and engage youth, with little to no discipleship and leadership development outcomes, can easily be replaced by surrendering the visioning, planning, and implementation of youth church programs to the youth themselves. As children and youth get little to no

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<sup>127</sup> Karla, interview.

opportunities to make their own decisions and employ their skills and capacities in service to others, youth ministries can also serve as a laboratory where they can explore their leadership skills, collaborate with their peers, learn from each other, and grow. If Latinas/x youth have access to these leadership experiences early on in their journey at the local church, they can develop their confidence in knowing how broad their impact is through the church in the world. These opportunities with the local church expand young Latinas/x's worldview and make it possible for them to imagine there is a place for their service at all levels of the church.

While the local church may provide these enriching experiences to Latinas/x, the local church ministry ought to be mindful of what we are teaching youth about systems of oppression in society and how local church systems might perpetuate injustice. Latinas/x in these interviews shared stories that reflected their first encounters with the -isms happening at church. After all, the local church has the potential to be the first community outside of the home where we foster relationships of mentorship. It is in the complexity of those relationships and our interpretations of Scripture where Latinas/x, as they grow up, experience their first encounters with the "-isms," particularly sexism.

Karina, a UMC elder, shared that after a meeting, she came home to share with her partner an exchange with a male who spoke to her condescendingly. Her partner said, "The thing is that you are short and speak soft, and people look at you, and you do not look that part,"<sup>128</sup> meaning the figure of the male pastor with a strong voice. Karina thought her partner was being mean, but they explained the idiosyncrasy of males in the church in that context; it surprised her. She underestimated the significant impact her

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<sup>128</sup> Karina, interview.

body, tone of voice, and accent would have on whether local church communities would take her leadership seriously.

In that sense, before the local church can become a safe context where young Latinas/x can develop their leadership, a ministry of accountability is necessary to create change in the church to innovate and become relevant to younger generations. This means that as younger generations' sensitivities become more sophisticated in recognizing how traditional and theological views of "bodies as bad" have a direct impact on their personhood and the ways we experience the world, local churches need to address those practices head on and eradicate them from the local church culture.

## **WOMEN'S NETWORKS**

In the Summer and Fall of 2022, respectively, I attended two Women's ministry conferences as part of my work at Beth-El and research for this project. First, I attended the Cumberland Presbyterian Women's Ministry Convention in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in June. In October, the National Encuentro X (10th Encounter) of the Hispanic/Latina Presbyterian Women of the PC(USA), in Orlando, Florida. I experienced the synergy generated from both conferences among a large group of women without the male presence. Once again, I recalled the principle I learned from the Girl Scouts.

One of the critical ingredients to accelerate the leadership in girls and women is the absence of the male gaze, where we are less concerned about perception, we can genuinely express ourselves, and we are less concerned about catering to and serving the males in the room or take on the role of helping them navigate and understand what is happening. Without males, girls and women are more prone to try new things and speak their minds. I also experienced this with my fellow sisters in the Women in Religious Leadership cohort in this Doctor in Ministry program at Drew Theological School. We are the first and perhaps only doctoral cohort of its kind. Women are studying women's leadership in religious spaces, reading feminist, womanist, and Mujerista thinkers and theologians in their majority female. We all attested to the difference we experienced in our cohort classes compared to our general classes with the co-ed Courageous Leadership cohort, where males often dominated the conversation. When we spoke, it was often to hold people accountable for their expressions that perpetuated sexist narratives. Our conversations were more profound and authentic in our cohort with our teachers. In my years of higher education, I never have learned as much from the material, the professors, and my peers as I have from "my queens" (this is what we call each other). Throughout

this experience, we have been *comadres* and *madrinas*, helping each other usher a body of work that is bound to change how the Protestant Church thinks about women's leadership.

At the Cumberland Presbyterian Women's Ministry Convention, it became apparent quickly, as a stranger looking in, that these women love each other. They traveled far, yes, to conduct the business of the church, and they were eager to reconnect with each other. It struck me that it was predominantly a group of white women, but as one of the few women of color, I never felt out of place, like I did not belong. They demonstrated great hospitality, inviting me to share an Airbnb with them. They signed me up and paid for all the outings and trips outside the convention center. I never ate a meal by myself, and while eating with them, we talked about family, ministry, and the world. I was impressed that, in a short period, I developed deep connections with women I had never met before. The meetings' ambiance was celebratory and fun, even when conducting business. They addressed issues and topics that concerned the ministry of women in the church while staying abreast of the discussions happening in the plenary next door, where the General Assembly of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church was taking place simultaneously. The environment in that room stood in stark contrast; somber and formal, a cloud of tension overshadowed the gathering as they discussed proposals related to same-sex marriage, human sexuality, and the ordination of clergy who are LGBTQIA+. While the Women's convention intentionally carved out time for building relationships and rest, the delegates of the General Assembly had bathroom breaks and meals to step away from work. When several proposals for the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ persons in ministry failed during the vote, the women walked inside the

plenary to support those who were defeated and took to the floor to comfort and embrace those who were mourning. Long after that demonstration of solidarity, in word and action, they voted in the new executive committee of the CPWM. As they called the names of the new leadership, I was struck with emotion, crying, as I witnessed a room full of women celebrating and affirming each other in such an authentic way. They were incredibly attentive to the young adults in the room, who, throughout the convention, had played an essential role in organizing and leading sessions. Their voice and work were as crucial as all the seasoned adults in the room. These young women were thrilled to be there; not only did they make the convention fun and accessible, but they were having a blast. One of the key moments that stand out for me from those days we spent together was when musicians and singers coordinated a flash mob performance of the theme hymn of the convention Revive Us Again. The hotel and convention center had several floors in the form of a circle, and at the center was a food court and green space that you could look down to from any floor. A violinist and pianist settled in the center court below with a singer. The rest of us, who were now part of the choir, took the elevator to position ourselves on all floors overseeing the court. When the first notes struck, we all started to sing in unison,

"We praise Thee, O God!

For the Son of Thy love,

For Jesus, who died,

And is now gone above.

Hallelujah! Thine the glory.

Hallelujah! Amen.

Hallelujah! Thine the glory.

Revive us again."<sup>129</sup>

Our voices echoed melodiously throughout the whole building. Guests came out of the rooms, and people halted their walk and stood by to listen. The CPWM gifted this moment of serenity to the whole of the community. It took little effort to plan and execute. They did not need to. They journeyed together for a long time and trusted each other and the culture they had built that it was second nature for all to follow suit and create this moment of sacred synchronicity. Scientists found that when people sing together in a choir, the rhythm of their hearts synchronizes at some point, showing that we are more interrelated and interdependent than we are aware of. I felt blessed to be part of that community in that moment and space. I was glad that I had them to help me navigate that experience. The CPWM is a gift to the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, serving as a *comadrazgo* network, where *comadres*, *madrinas*, and goddaughters converge every year after months of working together remotely. They exemplify the values of unity, welfare, honor, healing (solutions), wisdom, mentorship, nurturing, culture, spirituality, and accountability, elements necessary to participate in an environment of interdependence and growth. If only we could replicate this for Latinas/x in ministry in the UMC!

In the PC(USA), small groups of Hispanic/Latina Presbyterian Women have been organizing since the 1930s.<sup>130</sup> However, it was not until 1990 that the organization was

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<sup>129</sup> McKay, W. P. 1863/67. "Revive Us Again." Hymnary, April 1, 2023. [https://hymnary.org/text/we\\_praise\\_thee\\_o\\_god\\_for\\_the\\_son\\_of](https://hymnary.org/text/we_praise_thee_o_god_for_the_son_of).

<sup>130</sup> Mujeres Hispanas Latinas Presbiterianas. "¿Quienes Somos?" Accessed April 23, 2023. <https://www.mujereshispanaslatinaspresbiterianas.org/somos>

formally recognized under the umbrella of Presbyterian Women. According to Yolanda S. Hernandez, there is a chapter on the Hispanic/Latin Presbyterian Women in nearly all Hispanic congregations in the PC(USA).<sup>131</sup> She writes:

The women's organization in congregations allows newcomers to be welcomed, accepted, and loved. Women can continue to speak their language, appreciate their culture, and have their needs recognized by the organization. This is very important considering that they often are not recognized and accepted in the larger societal context.<sup>132</sup>

When our mission's pastor and I were invited to participate in the Encuentro X in Orlando, we did not know what to expect. For one, we need help finding publicly posted detailed information about the event. Second, I was looking for a detailed agenda to orient myself and organize our time, a common feature of the dominant culture. Third, we arrived before registration started, and many women were already at the hotel. They arrived before the conference to coordinate and spend time with each other. Like my experience at the CPWM, I felt welcomed and like we always belonged. The women were eager to meet us and learn more about us and our ministry. The first night we gathered at a local church hosting a dinner. They served delicious Latin American food, and the schedule of events was fluid; heartfelt speeches of welcome and gratitude were delivered, and the guests cheered between bites and lively conversation. I sat at a table with the leaders of a mission like ours that operates at the USA and Mexico border. We laughed, shared stories of battles and triumphs, sang, and prayed together in Spanish.

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<sup>131</sup> Hernandez, "Hispanic/Latin Presbyterian," 49.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 50.

That night was a confluence of culture, religion, spirituality, and sisterhood. This same Spirit of hospitality, authenticity, and celebration permeated the conference.

The women designed corporate worship experiences thoughtfully, the music was powerful, and the messages delivered by one of the clergywomen from Puerto Rico were inspiring. One thing that caught my attention was the myriad of ways these women used their talents to carry the work of the Encuentro X. They performed a drama written and performed by the women. Among the Presbyterian clergy and elders are gifted writers who have developed original liturgy and translated resources for the Hispanic/Latino Presbyterian community. We were included in all the meals and were never left alone to fend for ourselves. One peculiarity is that, unlike other Methodist and Presbyterian gatherings with a sea of white heads, this group of over 300 women was visibly younger. They seem to be able to connect with women of all ages and engage them in the work of the women's ministry and the church. They had trespassed the threshold from colleagues to first-class *comadres*. Sharing in ministry but also sharing in the life of struggle and resistance.

In the case of the Presbyterian Latinas/x, some noted their formal participation in Hispanic/Latin Presbyterian Women. On the other hand, among the United Methodist Latinas/x, no one referred to United Women of Faith (formerly United Methodist Women) as their network. The PC(USA) has been at the forefront of modeling what it looks like to carve out spaces for Latinas/x to thrive. On the other hand, the UMC has space for growth in this matter. It is important to note here that the formation of the Hispanic/Latin Presbyterian Women was fraught with significant opposition, predominantly from Hispanic/Latin male clergy who felt that forming another

Hispanic/Latino organization within the denomination would further divide the constituency, debilitating the agenda for Hispanic/Latino ministries.

The influence of the Presbyterian women on the General Assembly has been legendary, Blanqui recalls her time with the Presbyterian Women,

At this time when I worked between 1975 and 1979, I dare say that they were the ones who gave the agenda to the General Assembly.... When I started working in the New York office, I realized that the new themes that the church was approving, the Presbyterian women, had been doing for a while. In other words, the movement in the sense of giving the Church an agenda was much stronger at that time than it is today. These were in terms of the question of poverty, homosexuality, and inclusivity. These items had been on the Presbyterian women agenda for a long time, and they were just beginning, as they say, to be discussed in the General Assembly.<sup>133</sup>

In that sense, Hispanic/Latina Presbyterian Women have also set forth the agenda on behalf of the ministry of women within the church. Advocating for equality of terms and actively resisting the urge to assimilate into the dominant culture by retaining their identity as women from Latin American countries who face a particular experience in the United States and in their countries. In an article by Yolanda S. Hernandez titled, "Hispanic/Latina Presbyterian Women: A Message to the Presbyterian Church (USA) What Role do Hispanic/Latina Presbyterian women play in the church? Could Things be different?" she writes,

Women tend to understand better how women learn, think, and feel; thus, we can do pastoral care of women more efficiently than men.... Although the ministry of any kind by Hispanic/Latina women would not be limited to serving women, history and statistical trends point to the fact that there will probably be more women coming to Christ in the future than men. There is a need for Hispanic/Latina women as ministers of Word and Sacrament, administrative staff,

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<sup>133</sup> Blanqui, interview.

social workers, therapists, educators, community workers, lawyers, and politicians- all professions.<sup>134</sup>

She wrote this in 2000. Today 57 % of adherents in the United Methodist Church are and 54% of the PC(USA) respectively are women. Currently, churches are struggling to connect with younger generations. Moreover, as younger generations develop more fluid understandings of gender and identity, it is also important to note that churches must advance in our understanding of roles and the importance of diverse representation, not as the tokenism that we currently practice, but the type of genuine diversity of backgrounds, thought, experience, and capacities. These capacities include the ability to serve as bridges between cultures, mentors who are more than colleagues, but true *madrinas* and *comadres*, the power of emotional intelligence as a tool to regulate the ways we show up to engage in the existing systems, and how we show up for each other in a relationship. Latinas/x in religious leadership already demonstrate our ability in all these areas necessary to move the church's work forward. Latinas/x can lead the charge of helping faith communities connect with the larger community in partnership relationships. In return, denominations, such as the UMC and PC(USA), must turn to carve spaces where Latinas/x can organize, explore, and execute their leadership on their terms. Local churches who believe that Latinas/x's exploitation is an evil that we must eradicate should commit to role modeling what it looks like to pay Latinas/x equitably for their contributions to the church and their communities. Within a church culture that expects Latinas/x to lead and serve in the Spirit of volunteerism, what would it mean to Latinas/x and the world watching if churches committed to paying Latinas the remaining 43%

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<sup>134</sup> Hernandez, "Hispanic/Latina Presbyterian Women," 39.

missing from our wages for the work, we give the church? The UMC and the PC(USA), denominations that claim full inclusion of women in the life and ministry of the church, among many others, must invest in training and resources that help bring Latinas/x along in understanding their polity, structure, and theological approach to leadership, so they can also be part of the conversation towards transformation. They must also include in the general education of ministry leaders training that increases finances, economy, and fundraising skills. Latinas/x are known to make things work, and our make-a-do "duct tape" resiliency built from a tradition of oppression in our home countries, the United States, and the church serves as a wisdom that remains untapped. Finally, it is in the church's best interest and the call to ministry for Latina/x to organize in ways that not only generate the type of communities we are prone to build but that we move the needle forward to develop pathways toward endorsing the work of Latinas/x in mainline denominations. Long gone are the times when strangers around a table who know little to nothing about our lived experiences in the United States attempt to judge our fitness for ministry. The UMC and the PC(USA) ought to recognize the power networks like *Mujeres Hispanas Latinas Presbiterianas* and similar networks have in connecting, engaging, developing, supporting, and holding accountable the ministry of Latinas/x in their mix. These networks are enabled to commission, endorse, and ordain the Latinas/x demonstrating fitness for ministry. The preferred future of *mujeristas* is one where all sit at the table and have access to the benefits of a thriving life. However, to see this historical project a reality, Latinas/x join in the lead for the transformation of the church for the transformation of the world.

## CONCLUSION

I started this project by asking what it looks like for Protestant Latinas/x to develop their leadership in the United States. In the process, I had to answer: Why Latinas/x? Why the UMC and the PC(USA)? I am immediately inclined to answer with another question: Why not?

I decided to interview Latinas/x leaders in the UMC and PC(USA) because of my connection, ministry, and understanding of and within both mainline denominations. Furthermore, even though the number of Latinas/x within these two denominations is few, a community of us here is making incredible contributions to transform the ministries of the worldwide church and the world.

However, if there is little to no space for Latinas/x ministers in the Protestant Mainline denominations in the USA, then we must create our own. Intentional networks, formal or informal, in person or online, have the capacity and the wisdom to nurture their members. A well-connected network for Latinas/x to share our stories through the lens of our experiences, to create collective knowledge, galvanize power, and to self-endorse Latinas/x to do ministry as it emerges in their context and aligns with our sociopolitical locations. This is important because as we develop religious leaders to serve the diverse populations in the USA, we must develop capacities to serve as interpreters and translators of doctrine, theology, and culture.

The proposal is this; in the absence of spaces for Latinas/x in religious leadership lets co-create with the company of our *comadres* networks our preferred future or Mundo Zurdo, where all have the chance to thrive. It is a world that goes against the grain of the Westernized approaches to relationships in ministry. Networks that embody the

principles of *comadre* leadership are tethered to the ideals of sisterhood and radical solidarity. *Comadre* leadership recognizes that expressions of ministry are as varied as our authentic selves, talents, and capacities. As in old villages, not everyone could be a baker or a butcher. Communities needed artisans to weave baskets, potters, woodworkers, iron workers, and many other trades and artistry to enable a healthy community.

Similarly, the church needs ministers who develop their leadership through their artistry. At times discover and nurture new talents and others, unearthing the passions we put away as we become adults. If writing was how Anzaldúa created her preferred future, what would it look like for Latinas/x ministers to engage in ministry through their dance, art, baking, resting, farming, and so many others? Each minister looks different; therefore, our commitment is to create pathways that will deliver us to the full fruition of our call.

*Comadre* leaders look for and to each other as a discipline of mutual recognition, knowing that the best solutions for the church and the world are among us, and we can apply them given the right conditions. *Comadre* networks not only serve as incubators of the preferred future, but we are also investors. We pull our resources together and fund each other's ministry enterprises. We take to GoFundMe and donate to our *comadres'* Facebook fundraising campaigns. We show up, sleeves rolled up to work, and we wear our best to celebrate joyfully.

*Comadre* networks are generous with tips, tricks, best practices, truth-telling, and shared knowledge through storytelling and listening. We do not hold back on what we have learned; our goddaughters will need our wisdom and will come to seek and expect it. Our language is rich in expressions of authenticity and vulnerability that allow us to

tap deep into the wisdom of the Divine within us. We leave the crossroad and cross the bridge to find that the full expression of the goodness of God within us is only achievable through our connections of interdependence. Therefore, the arrival of one means a pathway opened for all.

As a Latina, I still hope for the church within the UMC, PC(USA), and all other denominations struggling to find their own identity in a post-pandemic 21st Century USA. However, whatever iteration of the church emerges from these experiences, to be a transformational and life-giving embodiment of Christ, one must commit to rejecting the evils of racism, sexism, and homophobia. Latino Hispanic churches have a long way to go, especially in the last two. The local church ought to be the bridge that communities cross to encounter God and each other in solidarity and love. My encouragement to leaders among these churches is to shake off the dust that has settled on their shoulders, take off the lenses, critique the culture we protect out of our sense of comfort, and open the door to see outside of your lived experience. The lived experiences of Latinas/x in your community are systematically overlooked, undermined, and underestimated. And we have so much to contribute towards the preferred future of the church.

I know a new day is dawning for Latinas/x ministers. I heard it crisply described in the stories of the 14 women who conversed with me. Life in ministry has ways of turning, leading us to unexpected destinations. I pray that Latinas/x seeking to follow the call to ministry will open themselves to the possibilities. Do not buy the formula; allow Christ to lead you to your version of ministry. Christ is mestiza; therefore, she understands this journey includes struggle in its back sack. But Christ is an adventurer

and is not afraid. Therefore, let go of the ties that bind you to the bridge, cross it over,  
and let us meet our comadres at the crossroad. A new journey is about to start!

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## APPENDIX 1

Table 1. List of Interview Participants, Affiliation, and Ministry Contexts

<b>Date of Interview</b>	<b>Interview Participants</b>	<b>Denom.<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>Status with Denomination</b>	<b>Type of Ministry Context</b>
12/9/2022	Amparito Garay	UMC	Ordained Elder	Retired / Missionary, Evangelist
2/15/2023	Blanca E. (Blanqui) Otaño	PC(USA)	Minister of the Word and Sacrament	Retired / Missionary
1/3/2023	Ivelisse G. Bishop	UMC	Local Pastor	Senior Pastor Anglo Church
1/19/2023	Jeniffer Rodríguez	PC(USA)	Minister of the Word and Sacrament	Senior Pastor Multicultural Church
1/12/2023	Karina Feliz	UMC	Ordained Elder	On Leave
12/21/2022	Karla Michelle Olivares	UMC	Lay Minister / Seminarian	Director of Children's Ministries
1/6/2023	Loli Reiter Ros	PC(USA)	Minister of the Word and Sacrament	Senior Pastor Anglo Church
2/10/2023	Lucia Martínez	UMC	Ordained Elder	Retired / Associate Pastor Latino Church
1/16/2023	LVR <sup>2</sup>	PC(USA)	Ruling Elder	Voluntary Service to Presbytery Ministries
2/8/2023	Maya <sup>3</sup>	UMC	Ordained Elder	On Leave
12/20/2022	Nora Colmenares	UMC	Ordained Deacon	Executive Pastor Multicultural Church
12/15/2022	Rebecca Reyes	PC(USA)	Minister of the Word and Sacrament	Bi-Vocational: Secular Job/Associate Pastor
12/9/2022	Sonia Cancel	UMC	Local Pastor	Senior Pastor Anglo Church
1/24/2023	Vilmarie Cintrón-Olivieri	PC(USA)	Ruling Elder	Regional Liaison to Mission Ministries in the Caribbean

<sup>1</sup> Abbreviation for “denomination”.

<sup>2</sup> Initials used in lieu of full name by mutual agreement.

<sup>3</sup> Name is changed by mutual agreement.

## APPENDIX 2

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Please describe what does following the call to ministry and your religious leadership development journey look like.
2. Who are the role models or mentors that you look up to? What have you learned from them?
3. In your opinion, what does equitable compensation look like for Latina religious leaders?
4. What unexpected obstacles and challenges have you faced, that no one prepared you for? How do you navigate them?
5. If Latina religious leaders bring something unique to leadership, what does it look like? What are the benefits to the ministry of the church?

## APPENDIX 3

### INFORMED CONSENT TEMPLATE

The Leadership Development of Latina Religious Leaders  
in the United States of America  
**Consent Form**

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#### 1. **SUMMARY and KEY INFORMATION**

You are invited to participate in a research study about the leadership journeys of Latina religious leaders in the United States. Your participation is voluntary. You were selected as a possible participant because you identify as Latina, have performed in leadership positions within the United Methodist Church, Presbyterian Church (USAA), and Assemblies of God, and have been the first Latina to serve in any capacity within the church.

The purpose of this study is to explore your ministry journey and invite you to reflect on the mentors that inspired you along the way and the lessons you learned from them, reflect on matters of equitable compensation, and identify and reflect on the obstacles you faced and how you navigated them.

The research will last for 2 months. As part of the study, you will participate in a one-hour interview through Zoom. As part of the study, it is possible that you may experience uneasiness in sharing details about a particular incident from the past. The benefits of participation are that you get to tell your story on your own terms and share wisdom that other Latina religious leaders will find helpful and use. The study is being conducted by Teresita Matos-Post, a Doctor of Ministry student at Drew Theological.

We ask that you read this document and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

#### 2. **BACKGROUND**

The purpose of this study is to explore the ways in which the leadership of Latinas develop within three Protestant denominations in the United States of America, the obstacles we face, the mentors and the lessons we have learned along the way, and solutions to clearing a path for emerging Latina leaders. There is little work done in this area, so I am piecing together from the following disciplines within a Mujerista Theology framework: psychology, sociology, statistics, and Church history.

The research questions include:

- What does it look like for Latinas to follow the call into ministry in the United States?

- What are the types of role models or mentors that we look up to? What do we learn from them?
- What does equitable compensation look like for Latina religious leaders?
- What are the unexpected obstacles and challenges we face? How do we navigate them?
- If Latina religious leaders bring something unique to leadership, what does it look like? What are the benefits to the ministry of the church?

### **3. DURATION**

As a participant you will be invited to participate in a one (1) hour interview.

### **4. PROCEDURES**

If you agree to be in this study, we will ask you to do the following things:

- To read the questions prior to the interview and reflect on your answers.
- To provide one hour of uninterrupted time to conduct the interview.
- You will be asked to participate in the interview using Zoom.
- You may be asked for consent to record the video, audio, and transcription of the interview.
- You will be asked to answer questions regarding your personal leadership in ministry journey. Not all questions have to be answered.
- You may end your participation at any time without consequence or penalty.

### **5. RISKS/BENEFITS**

This study has the following risks:

- Triggers and Trauma - sharing our story invites us to revisit and relive the experiences good and bad, and in some cases the most painful moments of our lives.
- Internal Conflicts - sharing a story that might put people, communities, and the denominations we love and serve in the wrong light.
- Trust - it is a risk to trust me as the investigator that I will do what I have promised to do.

The benefits of participation are:

- You will get to share your story on your own terms.
- Your insights will help many Latinas seeking to live out their call to ministry.
- In recounting aspects of your story, you will contribute to fighting back at the erasure of Latinas within Church histories.
- Your contribution may also provide solutions for Christian denominations who want to affirm the ministry of Latinas in their midst to do so in equitable ways.
- 

### **6. CONFIDENTIALITY**

To protect anonymity, participants do not know who other participants are. The interviews are conducted separately. Each participant will receive a code name (perhaps in numbers or names of women in the Bible). All data, recordings, will be kept in my personal computer to which no others have access to. If a specific story is pertinent to the

body of work, the investigator will ask for your consent prior to including in it. After the final project is submitted, all recordings and transcriptions will be deleted at the request of the participant.

**7. VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY**

Your decision whether or not to participate in this research will not affect your current or future relations with Drew University. If you decide to participate in this study, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without affecting those relationships and without penalty.

**8. CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS**

The researcher conducting this study is Teresita Matos-Post. You may ask any questions you have right now. If you have questions later, you may contact the researcher at [tmatos@drew.edu](mailto:tmatos@drew.edu) or (908) 963-9714.

If you have questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to speak with someone other than the researcher, you may contact Meredith Hoxie Schol, Director of Doctoral Studies, [mhoxieschol@drew.edu](mailto:mhoxieschol@drew.edu)

**9. STATEMENT OF CONSENT**

Please verify the following: The procedures of this study have been explained to me and my questions have been addressed. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without penalty. If I have any concerns about my experience in this study (e.g., that I was treated unfairly or felt unnecessarily threatened), I may contact the Chair of the Drew Institutional Review Board regarding my concerns.

**Participant**  
**signature** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX 4  
DEBRIEFING FORM

The Leadership Development of Latina Religious Leaders in the United States  
**Debriefing Form**

**1. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The study in which you just participated was designed to reflect on the leadership of Hispanic/Latina's women that emerges within and beyond the church despite the obstacles that aggressively attempt to impede our work. Through the sharing of your experience as someone who has followed a call to ministry and has developed your leadership within the framework of a Mainline Christian Denomination in the United States, I have been able to study, analyze, and synthesize the lessons learned by women just like you. This project seeks to design a pathway with the stories of Latina religious leaders that will encourage and accompany Latinas who are pursuing their religious leadership journey in the United States. These findings and analysis of these interviews will be included in my D.Min. professional paper.

**2. METHODOLOGY**

**In this study you were asked to** participate in a one-hour interview that was recorded and transcribed with your consent. In it you answered the following questions:

**Questions:**

6. Please describe what does following the call to ministry and your religious leadership development journey look like.
7. Who are the role models or mentors that you look up to? What have you learned from them?
8. In your opinion, what does equitable compensation look like for Latina religious leaders?
9. What unexpected obstacles and challenges have you faced, that no one prepared you for? How do you navigate them?
10. If Latina religious leaders bring something unique to leadership, what does it look like? What are the benefits to the ministry of the church?

### 3. ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

There are not many resources specifically written on the topic of this research but here are a few that I used on my research to write my professional paper:

Isasi-Díaz, Ada María. *En La Lucha : In the Struggle: A Hispanic Women's Liberation Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993.

Vargas, Alicia. "Through Mujerista Eyes: Stories of Incarnate Redemption." In *Transformative Lutheran Theologies: Feminist, Womanist, and Mujerista Perspectives*, edited by Mary J. Streufert, 177-190. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010.

Conde-Frazier, Elizabeth. "Latin Evangélicas: A New Voice in Hispanic/Latina Theology." *Journal of Latin American Theology* 10, no. 1 (2015): 63–84.  
<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLAn3961124&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

### 4. CONTACT INFORMATION

If you are interested in learning more about the research being conducted, or the results of the research of which you were a part, please do not hesitate to contact Teresita Matos-Post, [tmatos@drew.edu](mailto:tmatos@drew.edu), 908-963-9714.

**Thank you for your help and participation in this study.**