

CYBERJOURNAL FOR PENTECOSTAL-CHARISMATIC RESEARCH

Hispanic Pentecostals: Azusa Street and Beyond

Carmelo Alvarez

Hispanic Pentecostals in the US

The Hispanic presence in the history and life of the United States is a complex one. While we all share a common Hispanic culture, as part of the colonial heritage and mixture of our races and traditions, there are many differences. These differences are, with all its colonial and neocolonial influences, a blessing and a promise. They are affirmations of rich diversity. The interconnection between race and culture as a process of MESTIZAJE (a mixture) is a key to understand who the Hispanics are as people. A people in the DIASPORA, defending our identities, reclaiming our dignity and our right, as pilgrims in a strange land or reclaiming acceptance as people of the land, first class citizens. The USA is the new LOCUS of our theologizing, transforming our cultural and religious experience, and providing new realities with new components, such as language and education, in our searching/affirming process as a people.

Hispanic Pentecostals are those who witnessed the revivalistic/charismatic/pentecostal movement which started in Topeka, Kansas and Los Angeles, California, at the beginning of the century. They express, live and sustain their religious experience through the transforming and guiding presence of the Holy Spirit. We could summarize it by saying that,

Hispanic indigenous Pentecostalism in a formal and substantive way has been influenced theologically by classical Pentecostalism, as the case has been with most of Pentecostalism worldwide, albeit filtered through the interpretative nuances of Hispanic culture and history. [\[1\]](#)

Azusa Street and Beyond

When the revival started in Topeka, Kansas, in 1901, Agnes Ozman did realize that her experience was the first of many experiences of poor, simple women like her all over the world. Romanita Carbajal, a Mexican immigrant was one of those exile people who received the blessing too. She came to Los Angeles escaping from the turmoil and instability created by the Mexican Revolution.

William J. Seymour, an African American preacher received the blessing in Azusa Street, Los Angeles, in 1906. He was the pioneer of a movement that had global dimensions: The modern Pentecostal missionary movement was on its way to be the "Third Force" in the 20th. century Christianity. From Topeka and Azusa the modern Pentecostal movement spread to Europe, Latin America, Asia and Africa. Many believers from traditional churches made the trip to Los Angeles to know, first hand, of this "explosion of the Spirit."

The Azusa Street meetings quickly became known throughout the world as the focal point of the outpouring of God's Spirit that began to sweep multitudes into the experience of baptism in the Holy Ghost. [\[2\]](#)

Many were baptized with the Holy Spirit and went back to proclaim and share this "charismatic experience" to others.

Pentecostalism was depicted by the press in those days as a crazy, fanatic movement of "holy rollers" and became an international missionary movement:

Azusa Street became a veritable Pentecostal Mecca to which pilgrims from all over the world came and from which the news of supernatural signs and wonders was broadcast.^[3]

As the revival was covering the North American scenario and experiences were erupting in other parts of the world, one important issue became a central focus of attention and concern: The missionary character and the missiological implications of this new "explosion of the Spirit." "The Azusa Street revival resulted in a literal world dissemination of the Pentecostal message.^[4] It was like an urgent calling to proclaim and share the good news of this unique outpouring of the Holy Ghost, at the beginning of the 20th. century.

One needs to remember that the so-called "Great Century" of the modern missionary movement (1814-1915) made an impact on this Pentecostal movement and provided the necessary conditions for the expansion and growth of this movement in other parts of the world. Out of the revivalistic experiences of the Great Awakenings in the USA and the revivals in England, came a holiness movement that was the precursor of the Pentecostal revival of the 20th. century. Very often this fact is forgotten in the history of modern missions: The Pentecostal movement is probably the climax of the modern missionary movement. The movement created expectations and many negative reactions among other churches, some of them even challenging the authenticity of the movement itself.

In North America the Pentecostal movement expanded with healing, later rain and revival movements in every state, and also in Canada. From local preachers to renown national evangelists the Pentecostal experience covered the whole territory.

The movement tried to accomplish a gigantic task: To proclaim the good news of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and emphasize the urgent call to missionize because the end-time was approaching. The eschatological impulse was definitively there.

According to L. Grant McClung Jr:

The early records of the revival speak of a close and abiding association between the baptism in the Holy Spirit as evidenced by speaking in tongues for an enduement of power in Christian witness, a fervent belief in the premillennial return of Christ and His command to evangelize to the uttermost parts of the world... The History of Pentecostalism cannot be properly understood apart from its missionary vision. [\[5\]](#)

Pentecostalism started as a volunteer missionary movement of called and committed Christian developed in more organized and institutionalized effort. Bible institutes became the educational places to train missionaries.

As the Pentecostal Movement matured, more attention was placed on preparation for the foreign fields, sound financial support, and the necessity of an overall strategy to fulfill the Great Commission. [\[6\]](#)

The missionary impulse grew and many more missiological, strategic issues confronted the churches. The initial impulse needed a careful development of a "theology of mission," from a Pentecostal perspective.

McClung suggests that four key elements are needed to develop and understand a theology of mission from a Pentecostal perspective: 1)"An incarnational truth available and experienced by faith." 2) relate Word and Spirit as primary sources for the People of God. 3) An eschatological dimension and tension 4) a sense of been called and empowered for a mission. [\[7\]](#)

When the Azusa movement started to grow and call the attention of church leaders in the USA and other parts of the world, the Hispanics in the city of Los Angeles joined the revival. They were primarily Mexican-Americans that lived in the city and Mexicans that escaped from the War in Mexico.

Abundio and Rosa López, Brigidio Pérez José de Jesús Váldez and his wife Susie was among those who participated in the “Azusa movement”.^[8]

Eldín Villafañe tells us that:

Hispanics have been part and parcel of the Pentecostal movement since its inception. The Azusa Street revival drew a significant number of Hispanics living in the Los Angeles area.^[9]

Many of the immigrants discriminated and displaced in a "gringo culture and language," but manage to start their own churches in California. Luis López and Juan Navarro were the two first preachers that, accepting the Pentecostal faith, preached among the Hispanics in the city and planted churches in other parts of the US.

From that initial event Hispanic Pentecostals joined in the effort to spread the news. The names of Francisco Olazábal, a vibrant preacher himself, who joined the Assemblies of God, but after a few years started his own movement because of differences with the leadership of the Assemblies of God. He founded the Latin American Council of Christian Churches, preached among African-Americans in New York City and organized evangelistic campaigns in the Caribbean. To this day Olazabal is remembered in places like Puerto Rico for his impact and success as a preacher and evangelist. Other names need to be mentioned: Leoncia Rosado, "Mama Leo," who founded the "Iglesia Cristiana Damascus" and envisioned a ministry among drug-addicts that for years has been an integral attempt to do the mission. That's why she established the "Damascus Youth Crusade." Many addicts

were transformed by the ministry and pastoral care of "Mama Leo".^[10]

Another important name was Rev. Ricardo Tañón, a charismatic organizer and founder of "Iglesia Cristiana Juan 3:16", in the South Bronx and today, after many decades of work have established churches in the Northeast, Puerto Rico and Dominican Republic. For many years, until his official retirement in 1977, Pastor Tañón was a spiritual and moral voice, not only among Hispanic Pentecostals in the City of New York, but also between other churches and civic organizations in the City. He was an extraordinary preacher, mentor and visionary pastor.^[11]

Juan L. Lugo: Pentecostal Apostle to Puerto Rico

When the Azusa movement ignited the fire of evangelism and enthusiastic missionaries went to many parts of the world Hawaii was no exception.

In transit from California to the Orient a group of Pentecostal missionaries stopped on the way the Hawaiian island of Oahu. In 1912 already in the island there was a significant number of Puerto Rican immigrants working on a government experimental station. It was there that the young Juan L. Lugo was converted and received the baptism in the Holy Spirit under the ministry of Francisco Ortíz, Sr. He thus began a long and fruitful ministry as the 'Pentecostal Apostle to Puerto Rico', to which we need to add New York City and, in a small way, California.^[12]

Juan L. Lugo converted and received the baptism of the Holy Spirit upon the insistence of his mother who was the first one to be touched by the message of the missionaries, while living in Hawaii as part of the migrant workers who left from Puerto Rico to those Pacific Islands, looking for better economic opportunities. On June 13, 1913, Lugo made a definite decision for Christ and started a journey in faith and ministry that lasted for more than fifty years. From Hawaii he moves to California and starts preaching the Gospel among Hispanics in the city of San

Francisco. Salomón Feliciano and his wife Dionisia were among the first converts and supported Lugo's ministry over the years. But Lugo wanted to reach the Puerto Ricans in the island. He felt that God's calling to proclaim the Gospel among his people was very clear. On August 17, 1916, Juan L. Lugo departed from California to Puerto Rico. Once in Puerto Rico, his hometown, accompanied by the Felicianos who later on went to Dominican Republic, the first Pentecostal congregation was established in Ponce, Puerto Rico on November 3, 1916. It became the headquarters for the Iglesia de Dios Pentecostal de Puerto Rico, associated for some time with the Assemblies of God in the USA and then a national independent Pentecostal Church, one of the strongest to this day in Puerto Rico. [\[13\]](#)

There is an important historical fact that needs to be stressed: Lugo was persecuted by both Catholics and Protestants:

Lugo notes in the section of his book 'Empieza la Persecución' (the Persecution Begins) the opposition received at the hands of both civic and ecclesiastical bodies. With great tenacity he labored under the most hostile circumstances-persecutions by Catholics and Protestants alike. The 'new' Pentecostal message and worship service scandalized the 'southern' and 'sophisticated' Ponce ecclesiastical hierarchy. While persecution from the Catholics was to be expected, Lugo was taken aback by the response of the Protestant church. The existing 'comity agreement', the turf carving in Puerto Rico by mainline Protestantism, aggravated this situation. [\[14\]](#)

It is important to underline that Ponce was a stronghold for the Catholic Church, with a prestigious elite and bourgeoisie as members and economic supporters. On the other hand, the so-called mainline churches has had a history of "persecution" to charismatic manifestations in different denominations in Puerto Rico, among others the Disciples of Christ, Presbyterians and Baptists. Many missionaries opposed any expression or revival that was connected or related to the Pentecostal movement and experience. Lugo was also rejected because he was of "humble origins" and a laborer transformed to become a self-taught pastor and leader. [\[15\]](#)

Lugo after 15 years, and around 40 congregations established in Puerto Rico, was called to a new adventure in faith: New York City. There he made a tremendous impact, along with Francisco Olazabal, giving a new impetus to the Hispanic Pentecostal presence in the Northeast. Many Puerto Ricans immigrated to New York City during the 40's and 50'. The socioeconomic conditions in the island were desperate. But Lugo confronted the situation with integrity and determination:

Juan L. Lugo confronted in the city an increasing structural racism that was being put in place by the powers-that-be against the also increasing numbers of Puerto Ricans coming from the Island. Notwithstanding the limited resources at hand, and the Anglo Protestant church's lack of response to the new immigrants. He nevertheless struggled and succeeded to build an indigenous base of support and leadership. [\[16\]](#)

In conversations with Arcelio Valentín, the then Director of Missions of the Iglesia de Dios Pentecostal M.I., in 1986, I was told that Lugo was an "all around" leader, a multifaceted, skillful person, with natural intelligence and acute wit and wisdom. Two examples of this assertion will probe it: The founding of the Instituto Mizpa in 1930, a bible institute to train pastors, missionaries and evangelists and the pioneering work in developing new congregations in California, New York City, Puerto Rico and other places:

The spirit of Juan L. Lugo speaks to us of total commitment and sacrificial service in church planting. He met head-on every opposition whether by other Hispanics of different religious persuasion or of Anglo racism and insensitivity in the cold metropolis. [\[17\]](#)

Romanita Carbajal: A Prophetess in Mexico

The story of Romanita Carbajal is a fascinating narrative of a tenacious woman, chosen for a unique task. She emigrated to Los Angeles because of the socioeconomic and political situations in Mexico. She joined a Mexican Pentecostal congregation in Los Angeles and had a "vision" to go back to her people in Mexico. In 1914 she arrived at Villa Aldama, Chihuahua. The first reactions were very negative. Her own relatives rejected this "new convert to a fanatic religion." But Miguel García, her nephew, was touched by the Holy Spirit and accepted the "new faith." That same day eleven persons received "the blessing" and were baptized with the Holy Spirit.^[18]

Romanita was a housewife with no formal education, full of enthusiasm and rejoiced with this "new experience." She was a very charismatic person, gifted with a persuasive and persistent personality. Romanita, wanting to go back to Los Angeles decides to contact a young pastor, Rubén Ortega. He was initially with the Congregational Church, but the "Comity agreement" granted the congregation later on to the Methodists. Pastor Ortega was unable to provide leadership to the new group and a Baptist pastor, Miguel García, was in charge of the group, preaching and baptizing in the Northern part of Mexico and establishing what was known later on as the Iglesia Apostólica de la Fe en Cristo Jesús.^[19]

Felipe Agredano Lozano makes the following statement in an article that raises some controversial issues concerning gender and the role of women in a ministry among Pentecostals and particularly among the "Apostolic Movement":

After establishing and securing a pastoral and doctrinal foundation for the Apostolic movement in Mexico, Carbajal de Valenzuela returned to her husband's side in Los Angeles, and, like so many women evangelists of yesteryear, passed on into temporary anonymity, to be honored posthumously decades later as the founding matriarch of the IGLESIA APOSTOLICA DE LA FE EN CRISTO JESUS in Mexico. (Her foundational work also spawned at least two other significant Mexican Oneness Pentecostal churches: CONSEJO ESPIRITUAL MEXICANO and LA LUZ DEL MUNDO.^[20]

In December 1990 I taught an intensive course on Ecumenism to a group of pastors of the Apostolic Church in Mexico City. Many regional bishops were present and just one woman took the course! I was intrigued by this whole matter and started to ask many questions, during that whole week. Many informal conversations and indirect allusions uncover part of the story, in a way hidden, of Romanita Carbajal. I discovered that she was not really recognized as the legitimate founder of the movement. After long periods of silence and neglect the true story surfaces: She was by all accounts the legitimate founder of the initial group that became known as the Apostolic Church in Mexico. More recent books and articles keep shading light to this narrative and provide definite facts, confirming her role as a charismatic leader, but more importantly: her place in the history of pentecostalism in Mexico. [\[21\]](#)

In a more recent discussion with lay leaders (male and female!) and younger pastors of the Apostolic Movement in Mexico and the Apostolic Assembly of Los Angeles, in the context of the Annual meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies, the issue was raised: It is true that women are not ordained in these two "Apostolic Churches," but their ministry at different levels is there and a recognition of their capacity to be fully accredited as ordained pastors is long overdue! An educational process is needed to move ahead, specially among older pastors and lay leaders.

Romanita Carbajal is an excellent example of what went on in early history of the modern Pentecostal movement: These women provided a unique and important leadership as missionaries, evangelists, divine healers and teachers, but in many places their names were forgotten or ignored. Many local histories just mention the fact that women "open their houses" for worship and nothing else. A more accurate and honest account demonstrates that they really deserve to be counted and recognized. [\[22\]](#)

Concluding remarks

Juan L. Lugo and Romanita Carbajal are two good examples of what happened among Hispanics Pentecostals in the USA. In the first place, they both were immigrants in search of better opportunities. It is clear that Lugo was a migrant worker and Romanita a housewife fleeing from political instability in her country, which means that they belong to the marginalized and poor sectors in society. Juan Lugo and Romanita Carbajal confronted personal crises in the context of socio-political crises. They both returned to their people in the midst of economic depression and political instability with a message of hope and a transforming experience of conversion and conveyed in any way possible the good news they discovered. In a contradictory way, they both were rejected by some sectors: Their stories at times hidden or neglected, products of prejudice and envy.

Juan Lugo and Romanita Carbajal suffered because of racial prejudice, in the first case, and from misogyny in the second. The kind of prejudice that "outcasts" and "excluded" people suffer in affluent, dominant cultures like the US.

These two leaders confronted some of the same situations and issues that our Hispanic Pentecostals leaders are facing in big cities all over the USA, at a different juncture in the history of the USA. Nonetheless, these pressing concerns provide an opportunity to reclaim the authentic leadership they provided and identify the issues confronting the Hispanic Pentecostals churches in the existing conditions of today.

One of the issues confronting the churches today is growth. Many theories and strategies are discussed and suggested for that purpose. At the same time, a very spontaneous and dynamic growth takes place in many churches. In any case a sustainable growth and the need for a process of integration for new converts, as well as a call to discipleship, are of a tremendous importance for the life and real vitality of Hispanic Pentecostal churches.

Allan Figueroa Deck, a Hispanic Jesuit makes a poignant observation on this issue of church growth:

Protestant proselytism of Hispanics began a sustained period of growth only at the end of the last century,

when pentecostalism was born and when evangelical Protestantism under pressure from modernist trends ceased being the principal, mainline form of American Protestantism. [\[23\]](#)

Figueroa Deck sees that Hispanic Pentecostals do not make a radical rupture from the popular religiosity and the catholic culture that undergird their religious experience, so they find in this new environment a personal reassurance (lost, in many cases, in the traditional massive liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church) and meaningful expressions of their faith and life: Church life and daily religious experiences become relevant and pertinent, part of their reality! [\[24\]](#)

In order to attain the goals of having solid, theologically sound communities, good leadership is needed. One of the successes of the Pentecostal movement at the very beginning was the commitment, passion, endurance and the capacity of the leaders to be compassionate agents in times of desperation and crisis. To reclaim the good tradition of people like Juan Lugo and Romanita Carbajal as agents of the Spirit could be some keys for the renewal of Hispanic Pentecostal ministry today.

The vision also requires an adequate and balanced relationship of Mission and Evangelism. For that purpose a theology of mission is desperately needed. A theology of mission that is evangelical in content, ecumenical in scope and contextual in its commitment. Hispanic Pentecostals can look up to Romanita Carbajal and Juan L. Lugo for that inspiration.

When many Hispanic Pentecostals are looking for new ways to integrate a deep spirituality with a social concern, we are reminded of the context in which Azusa flourished as the cry of many races and cultures searching for liberation and justice. These new leaders can learn from the struggles and commitments of Juan Lugo and Romanita Carvajal and the other leaders: They need to make a relevant witness of their Pentecostal heritage and witness in the existing conditions of today.

Carmelo E. Alvarez

Christian Theological Seminary

[1] Eldin Villafañe, *Liberating Spirit* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerd 1993), 122.

[2] Richard Riss, *A Survey of 20th. Century Revival Movements in North America* (Peabody: Hendrikson Publishers, 1988), 47.

[3] John Nichol, *Pentecostalism* (New York: Harper&Row, 1966), 34.

[4] Villafañe, 90.

[5] L. Grant McClung, Jr, *Azusa Street and Beyond* (South Plainfield: Bridge Publishing, Inc., 1986), 33.

[6] Ibid., 36.

[7] Ibid., 47-54.

[8] Cecil M. Robeck, "Evangelization or Proselytism of Hispanics?: A Pentecostal Perspective," (Unedited manuscript, used by permission, 1995), 1-7.

[9] Villafañe, 89.

[10] Ibid., 94-96.

[11] Ibid., 97-98.

[12] Ibid., 90.

[13] David Ramos Torres, *Historia de la Iglesia de Dios Pentecostal. M.I. Una Iglesia Ungida para Hacer Misión* (Río Piedras: Editorial Pentecostal, 1993), 24-34.

[14] Villafañe, 92.

[15]

Villafañe, 92-93; Ramos, 32-35.

[16] Villafañe, 94.

[17] Idem.,

[18] Manuel Gaxiola, "Inicios del Pentecostalismo en México: Datos para la historia," in Spiritus I (1985): 25-47.

[19] Maclovio Gaxiola, *Historia de la Iglesia Apostólica de la Fe en Cristo Jesús de México* (México: Ed. Iglesia Apostólica de la fe en Cristo Jesús, 1964), 15-26; Eliseo López, *Pentecostalismo y Milenarismo* (México: UAM, 1990), 39-42.

[20] Felipe Agredano, "The Apostolic Assembly at the Crossroads: The Politics of Gender," in Affirming Diversity, SPS, 1994, 6.

[21] Manuel Gaxiola, *La Serpiente y la Paloma* (Mexico: Libros Pyros, 1994), 141-156.

[22] Richard Riss, "Role of Women," in Stanley M. Burgess and Gary B. McGee (eds.), *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatics Movements* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 893-899.

[23] Allan Figueroa Deck, "The Challenge of Evangelical/Pentecostal Christianity to Hispanic Catholicism," in Jay P. Dolan and Allan Figueroa Deck (eds.), *Hispanic Catholic Culture in the U.S. Issues and Concerns* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 411.

[24] Ibid., 424-433.