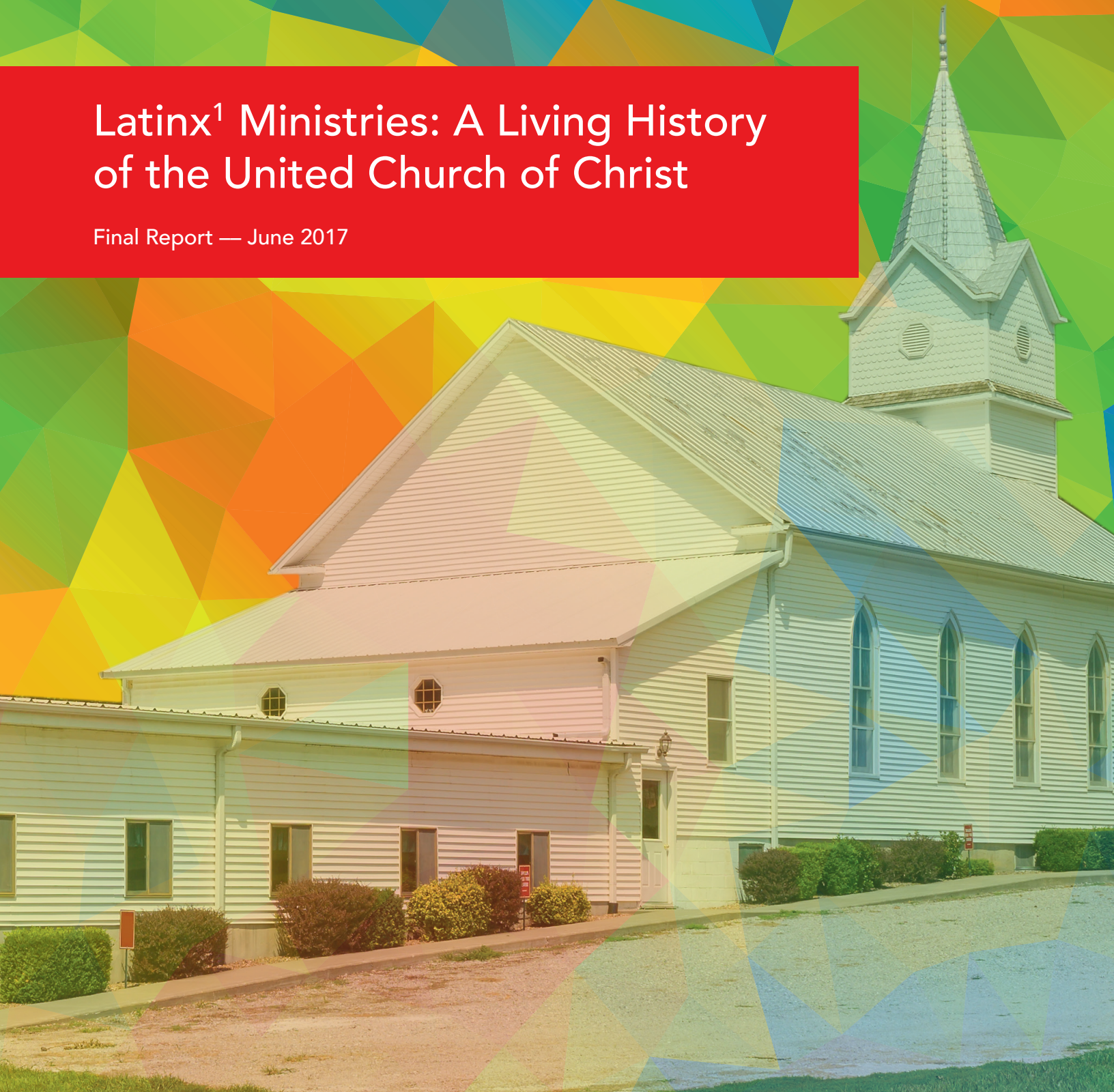


Latinx¹ Ministries: A Living History of the United Church of Christ

Final Report — June 2017



¹ Latinx (Lat-eeen-ex) is a gender neutral alternative to Latino, Latina, and/or Latin@. It is being used by a growing number of activists, journalists, scholars, and is rapidly gaining popularity among the general public. It is part of a linguistic revolution that aims to move beyond binaries and is inclusive of intersecting identities of Latin American descendants.

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INTRODUCTION

**As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea -- for they were fishermen. And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."
-- Matthew 4:18-19 (NRSV)**

Latinx is the general term used throughout this report; however, specific identity terms are still referenced because they originate from historical records. Because the terms Latina and Latino are still most commonly used, the referenced online survey used these terms. While various terms in this report may confuse the reader, please keep in mind that self-identity is a choice we each are entitled to make for ourselves.

Most recent United States Census data figures from 2014 indicate that Hispanics make up 17% of the total U.S. population (53 million people). They further indicate that there has been a growth of over 6 million Hispanic persons between 2010 and 2015. That growth is nearly equivalent to the growth in African American and Asian populations combined in the same time frame.² Predictions that the Hispanic population would be the largest minority community in the United States by 2050 have already come to pass.

The United Church of Christ is also changing. Statistical data from 2015 indicates that UCC membership was 88.1% white in 2005; that number dropped to 84.9% in 2015. The percentage of congregations identified as Hispanic/Latino also dropped from 1.4% in 2005 to 0.4% 2015. The percentage of Bi-Racial/Multi-Racial and Other congregations increased from 1.2% in 2005 to 4.0% in 2015 in this same time period.³


Results from an electronic survey of Latinx, which will be described below, indicate that many members of our communities attend racially and culturally diverse congregations. Data on the actual number of Hispanic, Latinos, Latinas, Latinx members in congregations is not submitted on a consistent basis; however, data gathered from the 2015 Faith Communities Today survey of UCC congregations found that 2.1% of all participants in congregational life identify as Latinx.⁴ This translates to roughly 19,200 Latinx out of the UCC's total membership of 914,871.

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² <http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/index.xhtml>

³ <http://www.uccfiles.com/pdf/Fall-2016-UCC-Statistical-Profile.pdf>

⁴ <http://uccfiles.com/pdf/UCC-FACT-2015-Webinar.pdf>



Regional focus groups intended to encourage dialogue, share stories, and discern the way forward were held in strategic locations around the country. Gatherings will continue to be scheduled in additional locations to expand and strengthen connections among Latinx leaders in the United Church of Christ.

Regional gatherings were held from October 2016 through May 2017 in Buffalo, NY; Chicago, IL; Dallas, TX; Denver, CO; Jamaica Plain, MA; Manchester, CT; Oakland, CA; Portland, OR.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Council for Hispanic Ministries of the United Church of Christ (CHM), on the occasion of its 21st Anniversary, published a report describing its rich history and presence in the life of the church. The report was prepared for the Office of the President by Vilma M. Machin, then serving as the Executive Associate to the President of the United Church of Christ. The following excerpt in that report continues to be true today.

God, in Jesus Christ, binds us all to believe that there is a promised land where people of all races, cultures, and orientations will become one new humanity in Jesus Christ ...

— Council for Hispanic Ministries

Latinos and Latinas in the United States are not a homogeneous group of people. We comprise twenty different cultures bound by a common language that, when spoken, sounds different to the ears of the listener. Our various cultures are bound by the pain of having to leave our homelands to come to a land where our dreams and hopes are oftentimes suppressed because of racial and cultural discrimination. Our cultures came, connected by a strong faith in God. God, in Jesus Christ, binds us all to believe that there is a promised land where people of all races, cultures, and orientations will become one new humanity in Jesus Christ . . .

Latino churches are very diverse and pluralistic. There are congregations whose membership represents more than twelve different Hispanic cultures. Some of these local churches are multicultural/multiracial with a variety of cultures, races, and orientations represented in their membership.

In spite of the odds against us, the Latinas and Latinos in our beloved United Church of Christ grow strong and faithful, with our hearts and minds rooted in Jesus Christ, hoping that our tomorrow will be a time of rejoicing and real unity in the midst of diversity.⁵

CURRENT CONTEXT



The elected officers of the UCC Council for Hispanic Ministries took the following action in September 2015:

The Executive Committee voted unanimously to terminate the governing structure of the Council for Hispanic Ministries and replace it with a UCC Latin@/Hispanic Transition Team empowered to recruit UCC Hispanic/Latin@ clergy and lay leaders to consider next steps around structure, finances, and decision making.⁶

⁵ The United Church of Christ Council for Hispanic Ministries, PAST PRESENT AND FUTURE The Struggle Continues — La Lucha Continua, 1977-1998.

⁶ UCC Council Hispanic Ministries Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, September 27, 2015.

They moved quickly to appoint the UCC a Latin@/Hispanic Transition Team (Transition Team) who was assigned the task of designing and implementing a process for gathering opinions, insights, and wisdom focused on the future of Latinx ministries and leadership in the UCC.

An online survey in Spanish and English sought direct and confidential feedback specifically from Latinas and Latinos in the United Church of Christ. It was conducted between March 1 and April 15, 2016 with 108 people participating. Survey results are anonymous, meaning that specific responses are in no way attached to individuals. We were advised by the Director of the UCC Center for Analytics, Research and Data that the response rate is a good initial sample leading into the next step of focus group engagement. Ninety-nine respondents submitted their contact information for communication follow-up.

The survey was widely publicized through the following communications channels:

- a) Direct communication to all Latinos and Latinas with **authorized ministerial standing** in the UCC;
- b) Direct communication to leadership in Latina and Latino congregations listed in the **UCC Yearbook**;
- c) Contact lists held by numerous leaders including current and former **CHM members**;
- d) The UCC national **website including news portals**.
- e) Direct communication was sent to all 38 conference offices and conference ministers; there was a varying degree of response from conferences.

Correspondence to the above lists also encouraged recipients to extend the invitation to the wider Latinx community.

The response rate across the church does not necessarily compare to the numbers of members that are estimated to be in our congregations. However, respondents are members of 50 different congregations located in 46 communities in 20 states, plus one from Puerto Rico.

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SIGNIFICANT ONLINE SURVEY FINDINGS

“How can we increase representation in the people of their 20s?”

As previously noted, because the terms Latina and Latino are still most commonly used, the online survey used the same terms. However, in order to acknowledge our diversity and demonstrate mutual respect, the survey did include a question giving participants the opportunity to self-identify.

The first essential piece of information was to determine the demographic characteristics of respondents in order to inform the general description of Latinas and Latinos in the United Church of Christ.

Proving that we are very diverse community, our members claim origins in numerous countries, ethnicities, and racial identities. The majority of responses show that 48% identify as Hispanic⁷ and 51% as Latino/as.⁸ Regarding country of origin, the most frequent responses are Mexican and Puerto Rican; however there was a long list of countries named. Some people also claim their American heritage in association of their country of origin (i.e. Mexican-American, Cuban-American).

Fifty-six percent (56%) of respondents are female and 42.3% are male. The largest majority identify at heterosexual (63%) with 31% identifying as LGBTQ and 1% as transgender.

The age of respondents is evenly distributed among the ages above 60 years old; however, the age group between 30-39 is slightly higher.

AGE GROUP	RESPONSES	%
18-20	1	1%
21-29	7	7%
30-39	25	26%
40-49	22	23%
50-59	20	21%
60 or older	21	22%
TOTAL	96	100%

“How can we increase representation in the people of their 20s?”

The largest majority of those responding are equally fluent in English and Spanish, followed by English only, then Spanish only. These findings are important because perceptions may be that language barriers exist; however, it can also indicate that Latinx people maintain their identity regardless of the language they speak. Another inference can be made that Latinx persons adapt and integrate well within English speaking communities.

⁷ Origins are from a country where the primary language is Spanish (i.e. Spain); does not include Brazil or Caribbean Islands where Portuguese and/or French are dominant languages.

⁸ Origins are from a country in Latin America (excluding Spain).

Language	Responses	%
Equally fluent English/Spanish	43	45%
English	33	34%
Spanish	18	19%
Other	2	2%
Total	96	100%

“The culture of the UCC, in many places, is very open but remains lacking in diversity even while it is open and committed to racial equality.”

Latinos and Latinas are authorized clergy and lay persons who serve primarily in the local church setting. The majority (59%) attend Euro-American or Multiracial churches, where English is spoken as a primary language. Seventy-five persons identified the name of their local church, representing 50 different UCC congregations in 46 cities in 20 states, plus one in Puerto Rico.

Types of Churches Attending	Responses	%
Euro-American/White	30	39%
Hispanic/Latina/o	21	28%
Multiracial	15	20%
Other	10	13%
Total	76	100%

The vast majority of respondents (78%) indicate that the local church is the place where they have the strongest sense of being welcomed; however, 44% feel welcomed in wider

church settings. Latinos and Latinas shared that they attend activities at their local church at least weekly, but often more than once a week.

Ministry Title	Responses	%
Authorized Minister	50	49%
Layperson	42	41%
Member in Discernment	7	7%
Clergyperson, non UCC	3	3%
Total	102	100%
Ministry Context	Responses	%
Local Church/Pastor	39	56%
Specialized Minister	17	24%
Retired	5	7%
Inactive	5	7%
Assn/Conf/National	4	6%
Total	70	100%

UCC Latinos and Latinas are not actively involved, nor do they have strong connections to the wider church. When asked if Latinas and Latinos are represented in wider church boards or committees, 69% indicated that we are not adequately represented at association or conference

settings, with 61% sharing the similar opinion about representation in the national setting. In comparison, 35% of respondents indicate that they now serve on a committee of the local church, and that figure drops to 12% when asked about committee or board involvement in the wider church.

“The culture of the UCC, in many places, is very open but remains lacking in diversity even while it is open and committed to racial equality.”

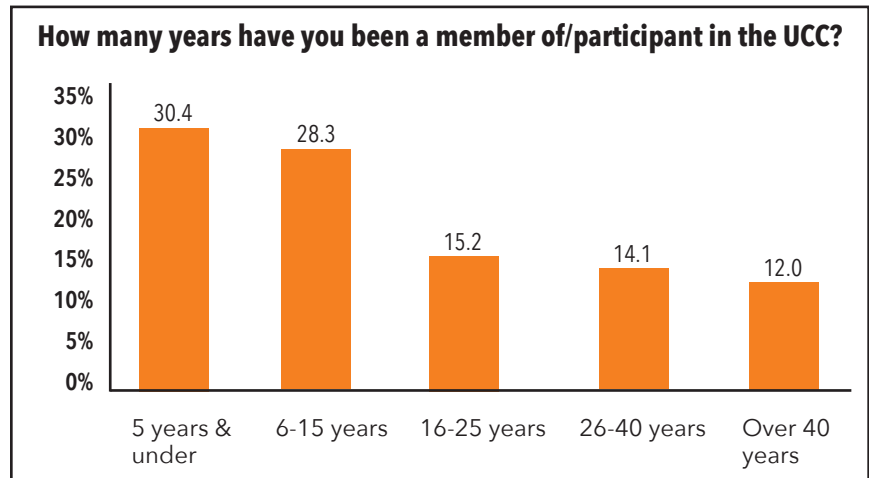
“The feeling of connection in different levels of the UCC has often been bittersweet because I have the sensation that a welcome is being extended to me only because I was the only Latina in the room and I could be used as a token, someone that made them feel that they are being diverse and multicultural.”

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The survey showed that 81% of respondents want to be more connected with other Latinos and Latinas in the UCC, but only 34% currently feel a strong sense of that connection.

“It is easier to be accepted as a gay man than as a Latino.”

“I am the type of liberal who tries to create a pathway for conservatives to consider a new (and more liberal) point of view. As opposed to the type of liberal that tends to deliver a theological punch in the nose to conservatives.”



Regarding the number of years that persons have been members of the UCC, the results indicate a relatively equal number from less than five years to more than 31 years.

When asked their prior religious affiliation, 47% of respondents indicate that they come from a Catholic background. Others (39%) come from Pentecostal, non-denominational evangelical, or other protestant traditions, and only five respondents claim no prior religious affiliation. Also important to note is that respondents identify with more than one religious background.

Eighty-two percent (82%) of the Latinx community identify themselves as liberal or very liberal theologically. Only 3% claim to be conservative. This is particularly interesting because it contradicts a generally held perception that UCC Latinos and Latinas are more theologically conservative.

“I am the type of liberal who tries to create a pathway for conservatives to consider a new (and more liberal) point of view. As opposed to the type of liberal that tends to deliver a theological punch in the nose to conservatives.”

While many who responded want to connect socially with other Latinos, the most important reasons cited for connecting were to share ministry joys and challenges for mutual support and to organize around social justice passions. The social justice issues most frequently cited are racial justice, immigration reform, and the rights of women and LGBTQ persons. Latinos and Latinas

are actively involved in justice actions or advocacy, ranging from public witness in prayer and protest to training on issues.

Seeking Connection with other Latina/os in the UCC	%
<i>I want to connect ...</i>	
With others who share similar social just passions for the purpose of organizing.	80.72
With others around ministry joys and challenges for the purpose of mutual support.	77.11
Socially with others.	60.24
For other interests.	19.27

“For me, it’s not about how the UCC can help Latinxs, but what gifts Latinxs can give the UCC.”

“I like the idea of being able to share my stories of faith and struggle with folks who can relate to my life experiences, because as sympathetic as they are, my home church folks can’t relate to my stories.”

Many valuable comments were received from those participating in this survey. They will be taken very seriously as final recommendations for missional direction and future ministries central to the Latinx community and essential to the United Church of Christ.

“For me, it’s not about how the UCC can help Latinxs, but what gifts Latinxs can give the UCC.”

SUMMARY OF REGIONAL GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Standard focus group questions were designed to solicit participant opinions about local church involvement, leadership potential, connections with wider church settings, and personal experiences with the church in general. The session formats varied out of respect for the context and cultural practices of those in attendance.

While the *encuentro* (engaged encounter) was different from setting to setting, a common thread of all gatherings was the generous telling of stories.



The majority of those participating in a regional gathering had not completed the online survey; however, there are many similarities in the responses. The following is a summary of the face-to-face discussions with members of the various Latinx congregational members.

Participants, most of whom attend a Latinx church, shared that their strongest connection to the UCC is in their local church. They indicated that the local church is where their community flourishes. Their sense of safety and belonging was a common theme in the conversations. They described the

“We are UCC centered, with ecumenical and interfaith hearts.”

love and unity that is embodied there, with a genuine admiration and respect for the pastor. Authentic relationships are possible because each person is honored and respected for who and where they are on their spiritual journey. Culturally relevant worship is at the center of their connection to the local church, especially because their primary language and familiar music is the foundation of the liturgy. Rather than look for the ways that the local church can learn from the UCC, members suggest that the wider church be open to learn from them.

There seems to be the impression that open and affirming is the most challenging topic; however, that is not always the case. One group shared that the biggest hurdle they faced was when they wanted to add Spanish to the worship.

“It goes against our church culture to add languages, we are an English-speaking congregation.”

There is fear of losing the cultural grounding, integrity and intimacy if the core group of Latinos/Latinas expands, especially if a congregation grows. In contrast to concerns raised about expansion, others were energetically interested in opening the community to other Latinx people so that they might know how a church can be.



Youth programs are strong because of intergenerational values. Since family is at the core of Latinx culture, the UCC would benefit from the ways in which we practice intergenerational connections within congregational life. With the rapidly growing populations in many of our neighborhoods, there are few progressive mainline churches functioning there. Where a Latinx congregation is housed in a building with a white congregation, the expressed need is to more intentionally connect between and among the congregations.

“We are UCC centered, with ecumenical and interfaith hearts.”

Latinx clergy leadership development and support continues to be a challenge in the UCC. Without some form of financial support in the preparation of ministers, it is extremely difficult to increase the numbers. There is great potential in our seminaries; however, the lack of faculty and curriculum relative to the Latinx experience is discouraging. If a Latinx student is a member of a white church, it is even more difficult to get the emotional and cultural support needed to succeed.

Members shared that their welcome to the United Church of Christ is not always genuine. The UCC speaks truth to power; but marginalization of Latinx communities is still happening. They really want to be part of the UCC, not as a token, but as legitimate and equal members in leadership. Some felt that

their connections are often stronger with non-church Latinx community organizations than to the church.

Regarding wider church connections, the responses were not unlike the findings in the online survey. A few respondents indicated that they were involved in wider church setting; however, the local church is the setting is where Latinx members are most actively involved. A common response was that people in the pews are not familiar with the denomination and it is especially challenging for a new congregation to make those connections. The impression of some is that the conference acts as the gatekeeper on the issues that they do not find important. Only a few could remember ever meeting a conference or national staff leader.

“We are engaged in the work of the denomination, but wonder where the denomination is in their connection to us.”

The UCC vision video shared by the General Minister and President does not mention the Latinx community at all. The UCC White Privilege



Curriculum is focused on the racial duality of black and white, with no mention of Latinx existence. This is especially troubling because racial discrimination against Latinx communities is rampant. The UCC is losing an incredible opportunity considering that census projections indicate that Latinx populations will double in size within the next generation.

Regarding the Council for Hispanic Ministries, members were not aware that a national transition team still exists. Respondents are energetic and enthusiastic about finding ways to make connections and relate to other Latinos and Latinas in the United Church of Christ. All would be excited to participate in regional gatherings, dialogue and sharing of resources through social media such as sermons, training, and written reflections. Growth potential is great because of the growth in the Latinx population. Help is needed to share the liberating UCC experience with other Latinas and Latinos. Our people are being absorbed into conservative denominations.

In some sessions, allies of other ethnic backgrounds indicated that they were grateful to be invited to the discussion and are anxious to strengthen relationships and offer support. A white pastor shared that his call is to full inclusion where the Latinx community is a partner in ministry rather than the object of mission.

“We are not a mission ... we are members.”

After so many years, it is disheartening because we still must prove that we exist within the church. We need to claim our part of the body and hold each other accountable. Our tension within the institution is old. It is time to create a new tension within our current context to be heard.

“We are not a mission, we are members.”

After so many years, it is disheartening because it seems that the Latinx community must still prove its existence within the church. There is no knowledge of whether there has been a good evaluation done recently that could give a more accurate understanding of the status of Latinx ministries.

The Latinx community of the UCC is anxious to claim its place within the body of Christ and be mutually accountable for the future. What is needed is to discard the old tensions and create a new dynamic tension that is life giving, life changing, and life sustaining.

NEXT STEPS

The UCC Latinx Ministries Transition Team thanks all who participated in the online survey and the regional discussion groups. All this information will be used to inform the future direction for UCC Latinx Ministries, both nationally and regionally.

In addition, the Transition Team is deeply grateful to the United Church of Christ’s Center for Analytics, Research, and Data (CARD) for the technical expertise and support.

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For questions and more information: contact ucclatinxministries@gmail.com.

We ask for prayers from the whole UCC family in this process. We fully trust that the power of the Holy Spirit will be the guiding light along the journey.