For over two years I have had the privilege of serving as the region's Hispanic Community Liaison, supporting and consulting with the Hispanic congregations in our region. There are many similarities between most ABC congregations and the Hispanic congregations: they take offerings, sing some traditional hymns, collect mission offerings, and celebrate communion. In other ways these congregations face issues that most others do not. One of the issues they face is the fact that the Hispanic population in the US is much more diverse than most of us realize. While they all speak Spanish, they come from very different countries. Mexican Baptists are immigrants who arrive here in many different ways, usually seeking to gain US citizenship. Puerto Rican Baptists come not as immigrants, but as citizens with full rights.

There are great cultural differences between people from the different Latin American countries. They eat different foods, have varied histories, and speak with very different accents. These differences are very obvious to everyone who attends these congregations, but most others wouldn't know it. So each of their worship services is a multi-cultural experience. Leading such diverse congregations is a real challenge for our Hispanic pastors. They must serve all the people, despite the fact that they also come from a particular Latin American background. They must be sensitive to all these differences and honor the many cultures represented in their congregations. One practice these congregations have implemented to bridge these differences is to hold an annual anniversary service for each congregation, but unlike many other ABC churches, that celebration is joined by members from all the Hispanic churches in the region. In other words, they come together once a year to support one another in the experience of being in a very different place from their country of origin. This common experience helps them feel a sense of unity in their experience of displacement. Every time I'm with these Hispanic Baptists I'm reminded of the commandments God gave to Moses regarding immigrants. The Israelites were prevented by law from mistreating or discriminating against people in their land who come from a different place. God reminds them that their ancestors were a displaced people too. The Old Testament prophets frequently called the Israelites to account because the practice of isolating those considered “foreigners” was always taking place in Israelite society.

Today we have an opportunity to renew the practice of welcoming those we consider foreigners as full brothers and sisters. My experience has taught me that they are our full equals in every way. They deal with most of the same problems that everyone else has to deal with as they look for God's guidance for the future. They play an important role in our region. They remind us that God created, loves, and affirms differences. Those differences are not a problem to be solved but an opportunity to experience humanity in forms that surprise and amaze us. I hope we will continue to make these congregations feel like full partners in our region’s life—for that is what they are.