



Listening to Immigrant Voices

Immigrant and Lutheran: “Nobody is a Prophet in His/Her Own Land”

Ismael Calderón

*Master of Divinity Student
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago*

At birth nobody decided to be born in a family of immigrants, much less to experience the difficulty of being one. Whatever the circumstance, being an immigrant is usually classified or perceived as an act of criminality against the laws currently established.

I was born in 1987 and raised in Caracas, Venezuela, where I completed part of my elementary school. My family is comprised of Colombian immigrants who arrived in Venezuela during the oil and economic boom. When I was 5 years old, my mom made the hard decision to move to the United States to find work, leaving us with my grandmother. Each month, my mother would send money for food and clothing to support her children. When I was almost 10, my mother and my grandmother decided to take us permanently to Cartagena, Colombia, the city in which I lived most of my teenage years and where I studied in a military and conservative school.

In August 2007, I decided to take the risk to move alone to Bogotá for better education opportunities, even though I would have to face hard moments and situations. At the end of 2012, I obtained my bachelor's degree in International Relations at Jorge Tadeo Lozano University, and then began to work with a Colombian Government Agency as an intern and professional. Before I started that position, however, I lived in Turkey for one year.

In 2015, after nearly seventeen years of being separated from my mother, I got the chance to come to the U.S. to share special moments with her in Mundelein and Waukegan, Illinois. In 2016, I was proudly serving and working as an AmeriCorps VISTA in United Way of Lake County enabling low-income kindergarten children to obtain better skills to succeed in Waukegan, North Chicago, and Zion public schools through the SB6 Program. It was my first work experience in the U.S. marketplace. In 2017, having known about the needs of the community, I decided to start serving as an Immigration Case Manager, and then I was promoted to an Outreach and Citizenship Education Coordinator in a nonprofit that supports and educates immigrants throughout the path to citizenship related to American Values. It was a beautiful experience to recognize myself as a new immigrant, but I also learned a lot from the poverty of the communities, their

I could not have had better mentors than those families struggling day by day to give their children a better future. ...In this period, I noticed how immigrant families, including those with a legal status like mine, start experiencing high levels of fear and uncertainty.

fear and challenges. I could not have had better mentors than those families struggling day by day to give their children a better future. It reminded me of my mother's sacrifice that allowed me to be what I am now.

In this period, I noticed how immigrant families, including those with a legal status like mine, start experiencing high levels of fear and uncertainty. The fears affected participants from all backgrounds and places, with particularly pronounced effects for Latinos and Muslims. Undocumented parents fear being deported and separated from their children, while many with legal status are unsure of their status and fear losing it or losing their permission to remain in the U.S. These feelings of uncertainty intensified after the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program was revoked in September 2017. Parents said that although they try to protect their children from these problems, many children hear about them at school and they fear losing their parents because of deportation or having to leave the U.S., which for many of them is the only home they know.

Because of this situation, part of my strategy as an Outreach and Citizenship Education Coordinator was to focus on other immigrant populations at risk. One of the greatest places to start advocacy was at the Parroquia Luterana Sagrado Corazón (Trinity Lutheran Church) in Waukegan. I contacted my pastor, and

we met the same day. From the first moment, the Pastor opened the doors of the church to let me participate in many events that allowed me to give better help and information to those at the church who need it most, what for me was part of work routine. My relationship with the Parroquia Luterana Sagrado Corazón let me join as a member. During that time, I met another pastor and I started getting involved actively with the church and community activities.

At the beginning of February 2018, I returned from Colombia. I felt energized and very happy to see my grandmother's recovery. That moment was a perfect time to start looking for a job and follow my new professional goals. Since my return, I have been talking with pastors Espinoza and Carrasquillo every week about the internal process with which I am living. They advised me, gave me a lot of understanding of what the process means, and helped me to face it. They shared books, readings, and their own testimonies about their faith and the rostered ministries process in the Lutheran church. Now I am doing the Children's Sermon; I am part of the Bible Study Group, and am the president of the new Parroquia Luterana Sagrado Corazón Congregation Council.

The connection I had between pastors and the congregation was so strong that I returned to the activities of the church quickly. I enjoyed that time while looking for new job opportunities doing social work and meeting people, especially the Men's Group Ministry. It was interesting for me to feel like I enjoyed those moments in the church; I felt like I had returned home again. I felt that I was doing what I like to do, helping and taking care of people, but this time something was very different; I started to feel joy and inner peace, not only serving people, but also growing and living in the faith with others. We prayed and invited them to participate in the Bible studies that took place every Wednesday. In addition, we created the Immigration Ministry to serve our community mostly connecting with Central and South America.

I decided to enroll in seminary because of the call process I have been experiencing for the last two years. I am a student at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (LSTC) and I now feel that my whole life should not be separated from my vocation of service. I am currently a Master of Divinity student at LSTC, a Public Church Fellowship member serving at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) HIV & AIDS Office, serving on the Generosity Project—ELCA Stewardship Initiative, International Student Association Vice-President at LSTC, and teaching Spanish to international and domestic students at the seminary.

I am an immigrant and a Lutheran with new resources to serve others from a different perspective—from God's perspective. I am only a servant of God thirsting for God's grace and peace. But I am also critical of my new personal and community challenges as a Christian. It is hard to recognize the pain that racism generates in my daily life, even by people who are labeled “Christians.” But I want to turn fear into healing and learning for all.

It is the challenge that Christian denominations, including the ELCA and its seminaries, must implement before it is too late. Any person who professes hate and racism should not think of himself/

A policy against racism is not enough
in the current scenario in the U.S.
It requires strategies and pragmatic
scenarios that open spaces for honest
dialogue with those who suffer racism
as well as those who, out of fear and
ignorance, unwittingly violate others.

herself as God's servant, hurting those vulnerable communities. It is unacceptable and shows a lack of respect for those Christians, who are working hard on social justice with real actions to spread the word. No act of injustice should be classified as Christian.

Seminaries should be integrated into the new changes from a more critical and constructive view and not evade reality. A policy against racism is not enough in the current scenario in the U.S. It requires strategies and pragmatic scenarios that open spaces for honest dialogue with those who suffer racism as well as those who, out of fear and ignorance, unwittingly violate others. We must understand that “no one is a prophet in their own land;” even our beloved Jesus experienced this. Immigrants can offer a prophetic voice in the U.S. context that U.S.-born citizens cannot offer in the same way. Intentional steps to pay attention to the voices of immigrants can highlight difficult realities, generate healing dialogue, and embody the grace-filled faith that Lutherans hold dear to their identity.

Beyond the colors of skin or cultural aspects, Christians are called to honor the presence of God in the lives of our siblings in Christ and all our human siblings. “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Matt 25:35).

We are called to love our neighbors as ourselves! In order to love our neighbors, we must not only provide for basic needs. We must also get to know our neighbors, open ourselves to learn from them, and celebrate them in Christ's presence.