

Engage360 Episode 5: Ministry in the Hispanic Community with Wilmer Ramirez

Introduction: Welcome to Engage360, Denver Seminary's Podcast. Join us as we explore the redemptive power of the gospel and the life-changing truth of Scripture at work in our culture today.

Dr. Don Payne: Hi, I'm Don Payne. Glad to be your host for Engage360. You know, perhaps the greatest or one of the greatest disproportions in this country between cultural presence and cultural representation is found in the Hispanic community and our topic this week is going to be about ministry within and ministry among the Hispanic community. Lots of us know people who make up for mediocre talent with incredible work ethic, and then others who have an uncanny level of ability, but they rest on that and they never really maximize it because they've never really had to work hard. Our guest today has the unusual combination of being incredibly smart with multiple gift sets and he can outwork just about anybody I know. He's my friend and colleague, Professor Wilmer Ramirez. He is the Associate Dean for Programming with Ethnic Communities and director of Hispanic Initiatives here at Denver Seminary. Wilmer joined our faculty in 2013 as an instructor in Hispanic studies. Since 2008 he's been the director of the Hispanic Initiative here at Denver Seminary, he has a BA in Theology, an MA and a THM from the Central American Theological Seminary, known as SETECA, in Guatemala city. And he's currently completing his PhD at Viola University. I'm going to have him tell you a little bit more about that later. Wilmer has taught at the Central American Theological Seminary, as well as in the Pan American Neo Pentecostal Theological Seminary in Guatemala. He founded and is director of Edifices. Did I pronounce that correctly or close?

2:17 Wilmer Ramirez: Close enough.

Dr. Don Payne: Edifices Ministries in Guatemala where he published Bible study materials for underserved churches in Central America. So, I want to welcome my colleague and friend Wilmer Ramirez.

Wilmer Ramirez: Thank you. Thank you for the introduction.

Dr. Don Payne: Glad you could be with us. Wilmer, first, would you tell us just a little bit about your own, your own background, your own journey, your family, and then we'll get into the heart of other matters. Okay. Yeah, I'll just get to know you.

2:30 Wilmer Ramirez: Thank you for having me. It's a pleasure and a privilege to be with you here. And let me tell you about me. Okay. I was born in Honduras, Central America, and spend my most of my childhood and teenage years serving in a ministry with youth groups. I was part of what it's called [inaudible] program, that, International Program for Youth, that mirrors in a way, the Scouts. So this is kind of a Christian Scouts. So my life during those years were mostly campaigns and a

lot of activities, and during that time I sensed a discern to the call of ministry, and went to Guatemala to study at the Central American Theological Seminary in the year 1990. And that's when my journey with ministry started then. Yeah, I met my wife there at Central American. We were classmates. We were sitting, side by side.

Dr. Don Payne: Oh, one of those academic romances.

Wilmer Ramirez: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. Intensive one.

Dr. Don Payne: An intensive academic romance, sounds like a novel.

Wilmer Ramirez: Correct. You spend a lot of time with your partner.

Dr. Don Payne: It's a wonder, you graduated.

Wilmer Ramirez: Yeah. And it was a really nice experience in Guatemala and after graduating from my BA in Theology, I started my master's degree in Guatemala also. And by that time I was invited to help teach at the Seminary on the ministerial programs that they have in Guatemala. So I started teaching since 2005 and started working with them. And it was amazing. Amazing. I think that you always learn more when you teach them than when you are in the classroom. And that for me was a formational experience during that time. We got married in 93, I mean, and started having family. Our first son, Wilmer Junior, was born in Guatemala, so my, daughter Krista was also born there and we, we stayed there teaching at the Seminary while studying, both of us, until 2005 when we moved to Boston. So yeah, it's a little.

Dr. Don Payne: What brought you to Boston?

Wilmer Ramirez: Well, Boston was a kind of a, a rapture, I can say that we're doing our ministry in Guatemala, when our daughter Krista got sick, truly sick. She was diagnosed with cancer and that changed our lives in many ways. And we came to Boston looking for an alternative treatment for her cancer and we, we managed to have her treated in Boston. So she went into remission. Then a long process of recovery. So we lived in Boston for two years, and that's when we heard about Denver Seminary. Our professor, Danny Carroll was here. He was also our professor during, a long time there and he invited us to come to Denver and help with the Hispanic Initiatives. At that time it was not called Hispanic Initiative, it was basically a group of three churches that wanted to have something in Spanish for them. And Danny Carroll was helping them. That was a process, by the end of the year he thought that that was it, that well, I, I've done my part with the Hispanic community, but there was a second group coming in wanting to have more theological formation. So that's when he said, wow, I'm full time here and also doing this on the side, so it's a lot. And that's when we got the invitation to come to Denver and help him with the Hispanic Initiatives at that time.

Dr. Don Payne: Tell us more about that – what is now EDL, what has that grown into?

Wilmer Ramirez: Well, EDL is one of our programs, was the first program that we initiated when Dr. Carroll was here. EDL is the Institute for the Development of Leadership and training of leadership. So it started as a small Bible Institute with a participation of around maybe four or five churches, at that point around maybe 20 something students coming in for courses that were another of view in theology. Another view in ministry, was a very limited at that moment. But we started working, and started developing the program into what's now the EDL program that has two basically two levels, the basic plan that we call it, and then the ministerial plan. It's a two-year program for the development of the lay leaders in the church and Hispanic church. From that we grew into other programs that we felt that there was a huge need among the community. We started a program for marriage mentoring. There's a lot of need in that area, a youth program, youth leaders program also came into place, and then we also saw the need for an academic program. That's when we partnered with SETECA, to bring an extension site. So it's a very interesting model because we are doing these model of extension sites backwards in the sense, it's usually, North American Seminary going to third world countries and establishing sites there or extension sites in those places. But here is a Latin American Seminary establishing an extension site in a true partnership with North American seminary. So that was innovative.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. That, that is as far as I know, rather unprecedented.

Wilmer Ramirez: Yeah. I think that we are the only ones doing this.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. That is cool stuff. Yeah. So when I introduced you, I mentioned that there may be the greatest disproportion between, presence and cultural core representation in the Hispanic community. I've not proven that, but that's, it seems to be true with some of the figures, pulled some recent from the Pew Research Center. The overall Hispanic population in the US is right under 60 million. In state of Colorado, 1.136 million.

Wilmer Ramirez: Correct.

Dr. Don Payne: Any other stats there that would help us kind of get a, get a sense of where the Hispanic community plays a role and what kind of role the Hispanic community plays in both the state of Colorado and in other States? I mean, we've, we're ministering as a Seminary in other locations as well, so help us get a sense of that.

Wilmer Ramirez: Well, overall, as you mentioned, the presence of the Hispanic communities, is huge. It's growing a lot. And at the same time, the representation in several arenas, it's very limited. When we think about, theological formation, for instance, Hispanics only represent about a 3 to 5% of the student population in seminaries and in many other institutions are like [inaudible] schools or things

like that. In terms of the church, the churches, one of the churches that basically growing. And when you think about other ethnic groups I think the Hispanic community has the fastest and highest rate of growth among the Christian community. So it's growing a lot. And that's the main, the core of the issue that we have. It's a growing, a fast growing church with a representation of only 3 to 5% in theological schools, which means that there's a lot of churches that have a leadership that has not received any at all, training in theological formation or for ministry. And that becomes one of the biggest challenges that we have in the community. There is, also, a lot of issues that comes with being a minority in this country. In terms of nutritional aspects, financial aspects of the community. The immigrant life is hard and then we have the complications of the, all the undocumented immigration that we all know about and we hear in the news and all those factors are really challenges that that community has to face.

Dr. Don Payne: I would imagine that the, all of the issues around the undocumented community make life difficult in many ways for the resident community, correct?

Wilmer Ramirez: Correct. Yeah, it is very difficult. It's a life of fear. I can say that. And it depends on the, on how the political rhetoric is it's work out, that the community will feel safe or not. And that triggers a lot of anxiety, a lot of fear. And even thinking about geological formation for a group like this, it depends on that, on how well or how comfortable we feel that we are investing the resources that could be used in case of an emergency. So they are not that willing, when there's a lot of pressure, they're not willing to invest in maintains and geological formations part of that. But when things are favorable for the group, then they open up, they see them, they truly understand that they need geological formation. But, it's until the circumstances around them are good that they are willing to go out and seek for that geological formation. So.

Dr. Don Payne: You know, it was, it was probably eight to 10 years ago that I was ministering for a very brief time in Ecuador, in Quito, Ecuador, and had a really fascinating experience. After the better part of a week ministering there, my host, took me down to a more centralized part of Quito, for a Saturday, an outing. And we went to what was a very, very large, like a flea market and indoor flea market. Inside the flea market they had a big platform where they would bring entertainment. And on this particular Saturday they had a Mexican mariachi band, down in Quito for the entertainment. And we walked around for a while, the band took a break for lunch and I saw one of the mariachi band members carrying a stack of Pizza Hut boxes back to his team members for lunch. And my host mentioned this is globalization at work right here, Mexican mariachi band eating Pizza Hut in Quito, Ecuador. And that's, it was just an unusual and interesting experience, but it did, it did indicate or I think it represented one feature that is often, that non-Hispanics often maybe blind to, and that is the diversity, the ethnic and cultural diversity within the Hispanic community. Because when non-Hispanics think of the Hispanic community, it's easy to see that as rather homogeneous. But I think that's far from the case. Is it not?

Wilmer Ramirez: It is far from the case.

Dr. Don Payne: What kind of challenges and issues does that raise within administrative, well administering within the Humana Hispanic community?

Wilmer Ramirez: Correct. Yeah. You know, where we think about the Hispanic community, we think, oh, basically about Mexico. And that's one of the biggest challenges that many have in terms of ministering this community. They think that all Hispanics are Mexicans basically. And then it's a lack of understanding that the Hispanic community is composed by 22 different countries and very, very proud of their national origin. And whenever you say to someone, Oh, what part of Mexico are you from? Assuming that person is from Mexico, then you get this harsh reaction, I'm not Mexican, just to start with, and they get confused geographically where a challenge. But the, but that, I mean that people in the US think that for instance, Guatemala is part of Mexico, things like that, they have their own standard then diversity that we have, but it's not only national diversity, it's also racial diversity. We do have a mix of races, within the Hispanic community. We have what we call the Latinos that are basically a mix of Spaniards and locals, in a time of a conquest. But then we have the pure indigenous groups that are part of the, our ancestry. And then we have all these [inaudible] of African slaves that came to many parts of the, of the Americas. And part of Latin America. So we have many of them in the Caribbean's and many of them in all those Central American and South America. So we are a mix of races also and educationally in the US we are so diverse, we have people that are hardly finished their degrees, even their high school diploma. And we have with them people that have bachelor's degree, we have PhD, we have all those mixing one single church. And can you imagine how difficult it is to minister this wide variety of different educational levels. At the same time, the fluency varies, the levels of acculturation varies and we have first, second, and third generation and in between the first and second are 1.5's That are truly a bridge between generation. So, and I could keep talking about the diversity that we own as a Hispanic community, and of course it's really challenging. That's why you can see churches that are grouped around a specific nationality where the preferences that there's a lot of people from El Salvador, then that church becomes almost El Salvadorian church or a Caribbean church or something around that.

Dr. Don Payne: You mentioned something that I'd wanted to ask you about anyway. That is the first generation 1.5, second generation, what kinds of unique challenges and maybe resources that you've found to be helpful in ministering across those generational lines within the Hispanic community?

Wilmer Ramirez: You know, that's a puzzle. I don't know if we have found a key to minister along the different generation. It's really hard. When you think about first generation, they're transferring their ways to the church from Latin America to the US so it's...

Dr. Don Payne: And, probably trying to preserve as much of it as possible.

Wilmer Ramirez: Correct, and preserving not only the denominational visions of the church, but also the Spanish. So some churches, a first generation churches feel that their mission is not only to communicate the gospel, but also to preserve culture and preserve also the language. So that brings a lot of tension in between anyone else who is no longer that fluent in Spanish. So that's when you find the 1.5's, that are right in the middle that they were born basically abroad. They were brought here very young and they were raised in the US, they entered the educational system very early. So there they learn, they speak the, they understand the culture, but at the same time they live with a first generation parents, which means tension.

Dr. Don Payne: You know, from my interactions with other underrepresented ethnic communities. The 1.5's seem to me to be in the most difficult places.

Wilmer Ramirez: Yes, yes they are. They are. They don't feel comfortable in their awareness of Church, I'd say or either parents church because even the first generation teases them, you're no longer a pure Hispanic because you are not, you cannot even speak or understand Spanish. But then at the same time when they go to an Anglo church, they, they feel that they are not part of that church. And they also miss some of the ethos of the, of the Hispanic church. The community, the sense, of community's lacking there. So it's apparently difficult. They truly live in the hyphen. And by that I mean.

Dr. Don Payne: Live in a hyphen. Yeah, that's a great phrase.

Wilmer Ramirez: Mexican hyphen American, Guatemalan hyphen American. And they truly live in the middle. And sometimes that's an identity issue that they have to deal with. Then when you think about the second and third generation, there are more, there's a process of acculturation that's more, for them to identify with the Anglo community. So they think like an Anglo, they live their lives more like, third generation, fourth generation. I joke about that, they still think that Taco Bell is from Mexico and things like that, but that's the reality. So, there is a book that talks about the different identities that we have and it's amazing how complicated it is, truly.

Dr. Don Payne: Do you know the title of that off the top of your head?

Wilmer Ramirez: Yeah, it's by Juan Francisco Martinez is the name of the author of that book and it's called Hispanic Churches, Oh man, I, I, I forgot the title of the book, but, yeah, I think we can put a link or something in the Podcast directing to, that book. Juan Francisco Martinez, is the author of that, he was a professor from Fuller that wrote that book. So it's amazing. And how different we are. And that, of course it's a challenge. And when any church wants to minister the Hispanic church, then there's a huge decision to make. What section, what part of the Hispanic community are we reaching? Are we reaching to the English speaking Hispanics? Are we reaching to the Spanish speaking Hispanics? Are we reaching to a specific group that we want to serve like an indigenous group? And there are places in, for instance, Georgia or even, South Carolina, North Carolina

where full communities, complete communities are indigenous. They go from their native language. There could be [inaudible] or any other language directly to English without learning Spanish. So it is a challenge to know that that's the first decision that anyone who wants to minister to the Hispanic community needs to do, what section. Because I don't think, ah, haven't seen a ministry that really has the resources to really gather everything that we are. It's very difficult.

Dr. Don Payne: So that would be a responsibility to get to know what is the Hispanic community, what's the nature of the Hispanic community in anyone's immediate locale?

Wilmer Ramirez: Correct. Correct. Yeah.

Dr. Don Payne: It's not just one thing.

Wilmer Ramirez: Yeah, understanding the percentages of first, second, and third generation, understanding the national diversity that's in that specific location. Understand that the levels of acculturation, things like that. So for instance, in populations like Los Angeles, or cities in Texas like Houston or San Antonio where we can count fifth generation Hispanics understanding that history behind it is crucial, compared to, for instance, Denver where we have first, second, and third generation well established, very, very small number of fourth and fifth generation Hispanics here. But understanding that piece is crucial for a successful ministry among Hispanics.

Dr. Don Payne: What would you say? I'm going to ask you to broad brush here for a moment. What would you say if you could identify one thing as the most significant challenge that the Hispanic community or the Hispanic churches face, what would that be?

Wilmer Ramirez: Well, there's different things in that question. The needs of the Hispanic community are very different from the needs of the Hispanic church. When I think about the Hispanic church, I would say that leadership development is the crucial piece there. And by that, people need to understand that most of the pastors in the Hispanic church are, working full time jobs in anything, from a low pay grade jobs to professional jobs. And at the same time investing their weekends or nights to minister the church. So when you think about that, investing 40 hours, 50 hours in their jobs and then having to spend, 10, 15, 20 hours ministering in the church, there's not time for leadership development in that scenario. And you think about a pastor that, we have a sense that maybe in between 80% to 90% of their time and their effort goes to preparing the sermon and the service for that particular weekend. And then things like, yeah, discipleship, things like, leadership development there are put back into the list of things to do because they don't have the time to do it. So that means that we have growing churches without the profit to sustain the growth. And then when that happens, we see a pattern that represented the church, growing phases, and then division and going down in numbers to go up again. And that's the

pattern that we see over the years because of that issue. So that's the main issue for the church, for the community. That's a different set of issues the community. I think one of the biggest challenges is education. Education can bring a lot to the community, but the system is not prepared for the Hispanic community. We're still developing a curriculum that was built for Anglo suburban white kids, with populations in schools that are 75% Hispanics. And it's amazing how the impact of that, turns out in terms of attrition from high school to community colleges, universities, everything. It's a challenge. The challenge is go from very early when they are enrolled in first grade for instance, then they come from a Spanish speaking family, they have estimated that they have 3000 words less than any regular Anglo kid. And that is interpreted by the system as a lack, as something that the system needs to fix. And by trying to fix that, it comes to the point where the students, the more years they are in the system, the more behind the they are in their educational.

Dr. Don Payne: Self-reinforcing problem. Turn this around if you would. What does the Hispanic church have to teach the non-Hispanic church? What does the rest of the church need to learn from the Hispanic churches?

Wilmer Ramirez: Yeah. I always hear about complaints from churches about how difficult it is to be Christian and you don't know the half of it. When you think about how difficult it is to be a Hispanic Christian? It's, it's really tough in many ways. So with less resources, with less leadership, with less of everything they do a lot. One of the things that I can think of that any church can learn from the Hispanic is, the way that they have preserved the, their want and their need to evangelize, to go out to preach the gospel. That's one of the strengths of the church. And I think that's why one of the reasons that one of the churches that are growing, because they, they do a bunch of evangelism they go out. A second thing that I would say that any church can learn from the Hispanic is to hear more the voice of the spirit. You know, the Hispanic church is mostly Pentecostal, it's truly amazing how the spirit moves within the Hispanic church.

Dr. Don Payne: Holy Spirit's not just a truth on a page.

Wilmer Ramirez: No, it's not a doctrine, it's a person and it's, and you pray and you expect his presence in the service and you can truly see his presence in those services. And that's amazing. And I think that's something that many churches need to hear more to hear more about the ways of the Spirit and how the Spirit guides the lives of Christian and, and the ways of the church. So it's amazing. I think that's one of the biggest strengths.

Dr. Don Payne: Hey, tell us a little bit about your doctoral research, which you're currently bringing that to a close?

Wilmer Ramirez: Correct. Yeah, well, it came about because of the lack of representation of the Hispanic students in seminaries. So I was wondering if the cultural factors were playing a role in this under representation of Hispanics in theological schools. So I started researching about the role of cultural competence, how well does

faculty manages intercultural relations and how that impacts the attrition and retention of Hispanic students in seminars. So, yeah, I've been working on that for a number of years. Trying to identify what is the impact of the level of cultural competency of the faculty in a predominantly white seminary? And how this contributes or impacts the retention and the attrition of Hispanic students in those secondary institutions? It's been quite an interesting thing. It's amazing how culture plays a huge role, for the Hispanic community and how that helps them to stay in the Seminary, to face the challenge of the Seminary education and go through and in a way then how is also a way where it can discourage a lot? Preliminary findings have shown that we all view the Hispanic community as seminaries. We prefer them to go and teach and minister white suburban churches, but their main goal is to go back to their community and we are not helping them to understand how to do that. They have to transfer that knowledge by their own ways. And I think that that's a lack that sometimes have in terms of really giving them the resources and the training and the tools necessary to go back to their communities. And that was the main reason why they came to the Seminary is to go back.

Dr. Don Payne: One of the reasons I'm so excited you're here with us is that we, and this is selfishly speaking and we're going to get to benefit from your research, but thinking in more kingdom terms. It's going to benefit theological education, I think around the country. I encourage anybody who's listening who maybe is of Hispanic origin in any fashion to think about coming and learning from our brother here.

Wilmer Ramirez: Thank you.

Dr. Don Payne: Here at Denver Seminary. Hey, I want to start to bring us to a close with a couple of maybe less sober questions, I want to know what is the, just the funnest or the funniest thing that has happened to you in ministry?

Wilmer Ramirez: Well, you know.

Dr. Don Payne: I don't remember if I prepared you for this, but I just, I want.

Wilmer Ramirez: Yeah, I think you mentioned something around that.

Dr. Don Payne: What makes you laugh in ministry? What, what's the, where's the fun?

Wilmer Ramirez: Well, there's a couple of instances, I think, at one point when professors in Guatemala, we embraced the ministry of the ridicule.

Dr. Don Payne: This sounds like something that needs to be resurrected.

Wilmer Ramirez: Yeah, I think so. But the thing is that we used to have a group that represented an African community for the purpose of encouraging churches to do missions. And we, I cannot imagine how do we did that? For 12 years, we went traveling

around many churches trying to encourage them to missions, representing an African American and African community. So it was fun. It was truly something unexpected in my ministry time. And it was truly an experience that I remember as one of the funnest things I've ever done.

Dr. Don Payne: Okay. We have to kind of grab onto those and preserve them. Okay. So what is the food from your country? Honduras? The best food from Honduras that most Americans need to know about?

Wilmer Ramirez: Wow.

Dr. Don Payne: And, that very few do know about.

Wilmer Ramirez: Okay. I will say, the snail soup. Snail soup is not the...

Dr. Don Payne: I wish you had told me that.

Wilmer Ramirez: But here's the thing, the snail that we're talking about, it's not the ground snail. It's a sea snail. The sea snail is very particular as white meat and it's truly amazing. It's a coconut base soup.

Dr. Don Payne: Okay. Now I'm interested.

Wilmer Ramirez: Yeah, it's really good. That's for me at least. It's the best food from Honduras. And you can call it by its name. If you go to down to Honduras and ask for snail soup, they will look at you. The name is Sopa de caracol.

Dr. Don Payne: Okay. I'll not try to repeat that. One more time?

Wilmer Ramirez: Sopa de Caracol.

Dr. Don Payne: Got it. Okay. Get some today.

Wilmer Ramirez: That's the best.

Dr. Don Payne: Okay. Can you get that locally or you have to make it?

Wilmer Ramirez: Yeah. There's a small restaurant in Aurora that you can find sopa de caracol.

Dr. Don Payne: I'm going to be thinking about that the rest of the day. Wilmer. Thanks. We've been visiting today with our friend and colleague, Professor Wilmer Ramirez, who directs the Hispanic Initiatives here at Denver Seminary. This is Engage360 from Denver Seminary. Again, I want to encourage you to subscribe to the Podcast. Tell us about it. See the Denver Seminary website, DenverSeminary.edu or information about EDL or any of our other programs. I'm Don Payne on behalf of our whole production team. Thanks for listening and we hope you'll check in next week for another conversation. Take care.