

First-generation immigrants build bridges

Symposium participants balance cultural and Mennonite Church USA identity.

During a symposium April 24-25 at Pasadena (Calif.) Mennonite Church, table groups drew images symbolizing participants' current and desired relationship with the denomination.

"At my table, we drew two half circles to symbolize the two different worlds of the first-generation immigrants and the people who have been in the denomination for a long time," said Madeline Maldonado, a symposium facilitator and co-pastor of Iglesia Evangélica Menonita Arca de Salvación in Fort Myers, Fla. "And then we drew a bridge between these two half circles to show how we desire to have a mutual exchange between these two groups. It symbolized how the flow of ideas needs to go in both directions."

"For example," she said, "first-generation immigrant congregations have many gifts, such as evangelizing and church-planting and establishing Bible institutes—not only here in the States but also in our homelands. But there is often no avenue for us to share these gifts or receive the strengths from longtime congregations."

Even more powerful than the images was the symposium's intent to make these desires reality by sponsoring this first-time gathering for first-generation immigrants. About 55 participants came from Pacific Southwest Mennonite Conference, Southeast Conference and Western District Conference—all of which include first-generation immigrant congregations.

"We wanted to provide a safe place to share their stories and to talk about what they are doing locally and globally with their many church-planting efforts," said Iris de León-Hartshorn, director of Intercultural Relations for Mennonite Church USA Executive Leadership and a planner/facilitator of the event. "At the same time, we wanted to provide a place where agency staff could hear their stories face-to-face and to brainstorm ways to resource the entire church."

The planners also wanted to provide a forum for immigrants to help each other, she said. All the workshops were led by first-generation immigrants, whose gifts are often overlooked as resources for larger churchwide gatherings.

The personal storytelling component captured the hearts of many of the participants, including Virgo Hondojo, pastor of Indonesian Christian Fellowship in Pasadena area and a planner.

"One of the most positive aspects of the symposium for me and many others was the freedom to share our stories and our feelings about our experience here in the States," he said. "In many ways,

we as first-generation immigrants struggle to build community with Mennonite Church USA, because we often feel like aliens and outsiders. ... We want to be uniquely Indonesian but also be closely related to Mennonite Church USA," he said.

The personal stories are the building blocks that now must be shaped into a more congregational identity within Mennonite Church USA, said Gilberto Flores, associate conference minister for Western District Conference.

"Without enough engagement with the whole church, local congregations from other cultures tend to be isolated from what is going on in the general picture and become individualistic," he said. "Our challenge now is to provide more conduits for having a mutual exchange of understandings and meanings—such as some of the excellent resources increasingly being offered to people of color at our colleges and seminaries. This will take more than a generation to happen on a wide scale, and Anglos have to learn how to be patient with the way other cultures see the same things."

—*Laurie Oswald Robinson for Mennonite Church USA*

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