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Religion and Community: Mexican Americans in South Omaha (1900-1980) - OLLAS Report No. 4

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Introduction

Currently, there are more than 39 million Latinos in the U.S. Of these, an estimated 70 percent identify as Catholics. Mexicans and their descendants make up the majority of Latino Catholics. During the past three decades Latinos have turned in increased numbers to Protestantism, but Catholic affiliation still prevails. Latinos constitute 40 percent of U.S. Catholics and are by far the largest source of growth (71 percent) of the religion's membership.

Mexican-born, and their American-born children, predominate among Latinos in Nebraska. They constitute around 75 percent of the local Latino population. According to the Omaha Archdiocese, 74 percent of the Mexicans and their American-born children is Catholic (USCCB, 2003). The growing number of parishioners forced the Catholic hierarchy to expand its coverage and enhance services.

Today, visible to all, Mexicans and Latinos overflow Omaha parishes, Holy Week is commemorated in the streets of South Omaha, the festival of the Virgin of Guadalupe is celebrated merrily, and altars of the Day of the Dead are built in schools, businesses, and museums. Many, if not practically all, events in the Catholic religious calendar are observed in Omaha and throughout Nebraska as festive displays in public and private spaces. Most of these celebrations are variegated religious commemorations stemming from five centuries of Mexican popular Catholicism. Despite Catholic predominance, or more precisely because of it, Protestant Spanish- speaking missionaries, such as Jehovah Witnesses, Evangelicals, Seventh Day Adventists, and Latter Day Saints knock on doors of South Omaha neighborhoods to deliver their message and recruit new members. Undeterred by signs pasted on doors that announce, Este hogar es Católico (This is a Catholic household), Protestant missionaries constantly walk through South Omaha and other Nebraska cities following their call.

Mexicans, like all other ethnic groups that created the U.S. as a nation of immigrants, were adamant in establishing churches of their own. Ethnic religious affiliations were essentially of Judeo-Christian origin and accommodated under the tolerance of worship mandated by the Constitution. Freedom of religious choice was a tenet known, demanded, and exercised by all immigrants. This was the usual case, despite nativist surges during the nineteen-hundreds. For Mexicans and other ethnic communities alike, religious belief and centers of worship were the very heart of their community and bonds of identity. It was their source of strength and motivation to persevere in a new society where multiple nationalities, cultures, languages, and ethnicities converged.

This report gives a historical account of two Christian churches in South Omaha: The Virgin of Guadalupe Catholic Church, and the Gethsemane Lutheran Church. Chronologically, the congregations were organized between 1918 and 1945. Initially, these churches were small community gatherings in family sitting rooms and rented shops. Both of them were, and still are, located in South Omaha. They share their origins because they were established

by the Mexican community. Today these churches serve all those who reside in the area or visit to attend ceremonies and rituals: long time residents and new Latinos. They also have transcended their ethnic origin to include several generations of different ethnicities: Czech, Hungarian, Italian, Polish, Russian, Irish, and Lithuanians, and recently, refugee communities from Sudan.

Our Lady of Guadalupe and Gethsemane developed their congregations and services over time, and strengthened their memberships with the successive waves of Latino immigrants. These institutions, as grass-roots organizations, created permanent places for community meetings and developed support organizations. Foremost, they were consecrated as centers of religious worship and havens for immigrants.

Working premises

The present study argues that the formation of Mexican religious organizations personified the struggle of the community to assert its presence in Omaha and Nebraska. More meaningful, the work, resources, and commitment invested in the organization of the churches gave Mexicans a much needed cement to solidify their ethnic identity. By taking charge in the creation of their own religious centers, Mexicans confronted years of willful neglect by the unsympathetic hierarchy of the American Catholic Church (McWilliams, 1990; Dolan and Deck, 1994; Daniels, 2002; Martinez, 2005).

In the process of church building, Mexicans empowered themselves and nurtured their own community life. This study asserts that the religious ministries served the Mexicans not solely as solace to their spiritual needs but as a means to acknowledge and confront marginality, destitution, and discrimination. Mexicans wanted to hear homilies, hold conversations, and confess to their parish priest in their own language. They wanted to pray in Spanish, be baptized, married, buried, and grieved in accordance with centuries old traditions. Moreover, this study considers that the churches were created as public spaces to share in Mexican ancestral beliefs, provide support, commemorate, and partake with a congregation of their peers, and, finally, offer self-protection, reassurance, and mutual aide. The history of these congregations is as well the narrative of how the Mexican community took action to organize, find creative solutions to their alienation, break into the public space, and become a presence impossible to ignore.

In addition, this study examines the ways by which the constant migratory influx from Mexico and other Latin American countries influenced the religious behavior of the community by keeping rituals alive, renovating existent ones, and incorporating new commemorations or ways to celebrate religion and community. In this respect, the analysis involves a revision of the policies held by the American Catholic and the Lutheran churches that, eventually, were forced to change their attitude and behavior toward Latinos.

Mexican Catholicism

Catholicism has been integral part of Mexican culture since the Conquest and it became a prime foundational element of national identity. Mexican Catholicism emerged during the first part of the sixteenth century. It was the result of a unique blend of Mesoamerican religious tradition, Spanish Medieval Christianity, and African religious mores. Franciscan, Jesuit, Benedictine, and Dominican missionaries, by force or sheer persuasion, catechized the Amerindian societies with their unique version of Catholicism. In turn, the indigenous population imprinted on the Catholic creed their own renditions of doctrine, and then added their ancestral beliefs and practices. With the arrival of African slaves, Catholicism already linked with the Amerindian religious practices, received its second major transformation. The African deities, Orishas, were incorporated into the Christian pantheon when their sacred beings were concealed by the iconic representations of the European pantheon of saints.

Spanish missionaries, accustomed to negotiating with their own understanding of Christianity with skills honed through seven centuries of the Reconquista, accommodated and often assisted in customizing native religious representations, celebrations, and rituals. In 1531, ten years after the Spanish military conquest of Tenochtitlán, Mexican identity began to galvanize around the effigy of the Virgin of Guadalupe. La Virgen Morena, as the virgin is habitually addressed, emerged as the most visible representation of Mexican national identity. La Guadalupe became the emblem of nationalism. She was the Virgin Mary's Mexican avatar, and devotion to her spread and deepened with religious fervor. She alone was the central figure in the development, strength, and fate of the Mexican Catholic Church.

Three centuries later, the lower rungs of the national clergy provided leadership to the independence movement, and inevitably turned to the effigy of La Guadalupe. In 1810, under the banner of the Virgin, priests Jose Maria Morelos y Pavon and Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla led the populace to massive insurrections against Spanish rule. The uprisings, after ten years of internecine wars and executions of the rebel priests, culminated in Mexican political sovereignty. The Catholic Church, always flexible and adaptable, emerged from the wars of independence as a major political force and leading actor in the process of nation building. During most of the nineteenth century, the Catholic hierarchy sided with the civilian conservative elements and was resistant to all attempts of modernization and secularization of the state. The Church's reluctance to change made her wage war against a liberal state by forging alliances with France's imperial aspirations. During the power struggles between Conservatives and Liberals, the Church was defeated but not vanquished. The Mexican Catholic Church was not willing to step aside and play second fiddle.

Paradoxically, the Catholic Church was behind the nationalistic sentiments of the majority of the Mexican population. Likewise, it continuously played the multiple roles of a church for the poor, one for the rich, and one for all. For more than five hundred years, the Mexican Catholic Church has been a powerful cultural and social force with which to contend, and one that can never be dismissed.

Faith, family, and community are but three of the salient characteristics of Mexican ethnic identity or Mexican-ness, --mexicanidad. This identity has been extremely impervious to the pressure of change. Mexicans, at home and across the border, are bearers of remarkably symbolic and complex ways of being Mexican. Mexicans are attached to a mythological historical grandeur. They maintain resilient community bonds, and are profound nationalists. Mexicans are exceedingly patriotic, fervently religious people, unyielding Guadalupanos, and their Spanish language persists against all odds (Monsivais, 1997; Ramos, 1975; Paz, 1961; Gamio, 2002). It is precisely this ethnic composite that has maintained the Mexican community in the U.S. in cultural citadels in colonias and barrios. At the same time, the strength of mexicanidad has allowed Mexicans to cope with dislocation, discrimination, and isolation. Through their sense of communal identity, Mexicans have bolstered their presence in the U.S. Their firm belief as possessors of a unique cultural identity is finely woven into their sense of community. The conviction of an inimitable Mexican-ness was forged by centuries of community-building strategies around a religious core, solidification of familial bonds, and communal reciprocal obligations.

Grassroots Christianity, as it developed in Mexico, through centuries of continued concelebrating, commemoration, and ritual, has meant communion, solidarity, and reciprocity. Mexican identity is tied to these basic Christian Trinitarian elements and cannot be explained separately (Espín, 1997).

Midwest: Nebraska

Latino presence in the Midwest, basically defined as Spanish speakers and Catholic, can be dated to the Spanish explorations of the central plains during the second half of the sixteenth century. The Spanish forays did not leave permanent settlements, but bestowed Spanish names to the geographical landscape.

The general trek of foreign born immigrants and their descendents into Nebraska came after the passing of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, which opened territories west of the Missouri for settlement. Eight years later, the Pacific Railroad Act of 1862 made Omaha the eastern terminus of the transcontinental railroad. Omaha arose as an outfitting center and magnetic pole for immigrants. Official incorporation of the city of Omaha by the State legislature in May, 1858, developed the area into a gateway to the west.

The early history of the Latinos in Nebraska is Mexican and Mexican-American in origin. It is a history shrouded by inconsistent chronicles that limit mention to brief notes. No hard evidence or descriptive narratives from government and private records portrays a comprehensive history. Documentation is sparse and centered on a perspective that favors the undertakings, hardships, and successes of Northern Europeans, east coast North Americans, and

Southeastern Europeans, in their order of arrival. Mexicans are negligible mentions. Early censuses report few Mexicans, and existing statistics are ambiguous. Mostly, Mexicans were accounted as "floaters," shifting jobs between meat packing plants, section hands on the railroads, and agricultural laborers, mainly in the sugar beet industry in the western part of Nebraska, Colorado, and Minnesota (Sullenger, 1924 & 1937).

Today, the Mexican community's presence is visible, accountable, and strong. However, its history is episodic and little known. Methodical and sizable research of Latino community formation, immigration, and ethnic identities in the U.S. dates to the 1960s. Until then, and despite Mexican struggles, organization, and political activity in the South West, they remained relatively unnoticed by social scientists and omitted from historical literature (Pedraza, 2000). In the Midwest states, recent research has made considerable progress in its attempt to elicit explanations to the historical grounding of the Mexican population in the region. This work has unearthed unknown facets of the history of a people that, through its resolve, has made an indelible imprint in Omaha and Nebraska (Grajeda, 1976; López, 2000; Garcia, 1996; Rochin & Siles, 1996; Nixon, 1979).

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The Omaha Mexican Community

Around 1900, Omaha official population accounts inform of five Mexican-born residents and twenty-nine in 1910. Other records show there were close to one hundred hombres solos that lived in boarding houses in and near South Omaha. In the same neighborhood there were other Mexican families who had established themselves earlier next to the side of the railroad station called Gibson, located between Hascall and 1st streets. Further west, near 72nd Street and Q, there were other families living in box cars alongside the rails of the Union Pacific-Santa Fe station. More Mexican families lived among Italian, Polish, Hungarian, and Czech immigrants (Nixon, pp. 6-9). Accordingly, there were more Mexicans than the census reported. How many? The number is difficult to assess.

In 1910, the federal census stated that Mexican born residents in Nebraska had increased to a population of 3,611. There are no reliable figures relating the generations born in Omaha or greater Nebraska to these or earlier Mexican settlers. After1890, Mexican and U.S. accounts from the borderlands inform of the constant and increasing multitude of Mexicans crossing into the U.S. In fact, 1900 is the beginning of the first large wave of Mexicans crossing the border into the U.S. Settlement remained circumscribed by the border states of California, New Mexico, Arizona, and Texas (McWilliams, 1990). The inducement presented by job opportunities in agriculture, mining, and railroads in the economically thriving southwest attracted thousands of laborers. American ranchers, farmers, miners, and railroad companies set up shop in El Paso, San Diego, and Laredo to recruit and move the available work force in all directions of the northern compass.

On the Mexican side, Porfirio Diaz' dictatorship (1876-1910), with its myopic economic policies to end the ejido and foster the hacienda system, resulted in an increased number of rural poor and urban paupers that looked to the north as a way out of dislocation. The Mexican exodus was but one answer to years of ruthless economic exploitation (Loyo, 1935; Gamio, 1931; Molina Enriquez, 1964).

The political turmoil to end the Porfirian regime ignited the revolutionary movement of 1910. The violent outbreak, which lasted more than a decade, sent even larger numbers of Mexicans across the border. Mexicans steadily marched north in search of safe haven and work. The tide of migrants did not ebb until the 1930s when the Great Depression sent many Mexicans back home. The repatriation surge was short-lived. Thousands of refugees had created permanent settlements in many corners of the U.S. These colonies exerted an added pull on relatives and friends in Mexican hometowns of origin. In Nebraska, Mexicans who fled the revolution converged with the first pioneers, and united their efforts to build the basis of their nascent communities.

The Catholic Church in Nebraska

The history of the Catholic Church in Nebraska is but a part of the history of Catholicism in the U.S. In a strict sense, until the 1920s there was no American Catholic Church (Dolan, 2002). The U.S. was primarily a quilt of Catholic ethnic churches. The propagation of Catholicism was primarily undertaken by immigrant Catholics, who had brought with them their priests and their cultural ways of worship to build their churches. This reality buried the attempts to revive efforts by Catholic leaders of the republican era to endorse the creation of an American Catholicism, democratic and enlightened (p.45). The immigrant massive influx was extraordinarily diverse and it coupled with a Catholic Church hierarchy that chose tradition over innovation in a democratic society. These two factors were too mighty a force to resist at the time. European Catholics were minority pioneers in a Catholic missionary territory that was mainly Protestant.

In Nebraska, Catholicism's early roots were entrusted by Rome to Jean Baptiste Miege, Vicar Apostolic of the Indian Territory, and Bishop James Myles O'Gorman, first Vicar Apostolic of Nebraska (Casper, 1960). James Myles O'Gorman, an Irish Trappist monk, directed efforts, from 1859 to 1874, to establish an organized Catholic Church in the state. The Bishop depended on priests of European origin to administer services to the parishioners. O'Gorman's successors, Bishops James O'Connor (1876-1890) and Richard Scannell (189-1916), also relied on European born priests, to attend to Catholic immigrants. Early bishops recognized the need for European priests not only because they knew the languages of their ethnic parishioners, but because they were adept with their folk ways of Catholic worship (Casper, 1960).

During its early days, the Catholic Church depended on European funding associations such as the French based Honorable Society of the Propagation of the Faith. Equally, the laity from the eastern seaboard, mainly immigrant mutual aide societies, became important economic backers. Without this financial assistance the Nebraska Vicariate could not have afforded the construction and transformation of a missionary state into an archdiocese. After the 1880s, but more prominent during the first decade of the nineteenth century, local Catholic railroad entrepreneurs, land speculators, and merchants of Jobbers Canyon, who had amassed considerable fortunes, were the main economic patrons of the institution.

Fund-raising extended its reach to railroad gangs and persistent solicitations from the pulpit. Donations by parishioners were scarce and often not enough to sustain the church or the priests (Szmrecsanyi, 1983). During the depression that hit the state during the late 1880s and continued through all 1890s, the Catholic Church of Omaha maintained a conservative financial policy. However, during the 1890s, the concerns of the Catholic hierarchy of Nebraska were not merely economic. The stature, credibility, and influence of the church in the state and the nation were seriously challenged by the American Protective Association (APA), who established headquarters in Omaha in 1887. This association called for the destruction of Catholic churches, the closing of Catholic schools, and the end to Irish and

South Eastern European immigration. Despite the anti-immigrant, nativist, and inflammatory APA campaign, the Catholic Church managed to hold on to its parishes and increase the size of its membership. Moreover, economic prosperity returned slowly to Omaha and tensions between locals and immigrants subsided (ibid).

By 1912, the modest beginnings and penury that characterized the 1859 establishment of the Catholic Vicariate Apostolic of Nebraska were but a memory. In 1885 the jurisdiction was elevated to Diocese and the demarcation precisely defined by the creation of the border Dioceses of Lincoln, Kearney, and Cheyenne. The Catholic brethren of the Diocese had grown to 90,000 people who were distributed among 124 parishes served by 148 priests. Omaha had 21 parishes with a congregation of 14,000 people and 27 priests. Omaha churches were sturdy buildings made of brick. This architectural spirit peaked with the gothic style Cathedral of St. Cecilia's ground breaking ceremony that took place in 1905.
The newly elevated Diocese of Omaha in 1912 constitutes the historic backdrop for the emergence of Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish. The history of the Our Lady of Guadalupe informs us of the efforts of Mexicans wanting to be served in their language, have a worship of their own, and obtain recognition for their devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe as their major symbol of Mexican faith and identity.

The Parish of the Virgin of Guadalupe (OLG) of South Omaha

Prior to the 1900s, there was not a single church where Mexican residents, prior to the 1900s, attended religious services. After that date, parish records from the Catholic churches of St. Philomena (Omaha's first Cathedral), Holy Ghost, Assumption, and St. Agnes provide evidence that Mexican-American children were baptized here. Their parents were members of the congregation, were married by the parish priests, and went to mass with other immigrants. The majority of churches were incorporated by the ethnic communities of Germans, Irish, Czechs, Hungarians, Serbs, Poles, Italians, Lithuanians, Russians, and Croatians.

In 1918 a few Mexicans living in South Omaha organized a committee to petition Bishop Jeremiah J. Harty to provide services by Spanish speaking priests. The committee expressed their concerns and demands to the Bishop. First, they wanted his approval, and second, they asked for economic support from the Diocese. The Omaha Diocese considered the enterprise onerous and unnecessary for such a small community. After all, American bishops had from the early 1900s discouraged ethnic Catholic enclaves by devising an "Americanization" campaign of Catholic immigrants (McWilliams, 1990; Dolan, 2002; Daniels, 2002; Martinez, 2005). The acculturation drive was aimed particularly at Mexicans who were perceived as too superstitious, colorful, rambunctious, and aloof to the American style of Catholicism. Mexican displays of public processions, devotionals to the Virgin of Guadalupe, chanting, and dancing were unacceptable to the temperance and solemnity of the American Catholic Church.
The Catholic hierarchy, in unison with the rise of widespread nationalistic sentiment dur-

ing the Red Scare and World War I, sought full assimilation of Catholic immigrants. This was to be accomplished by banning national distinctions, erasing cultural differences, and prohibitions of public displays of religious customs, rituals, and worship. In this climate of forceful assimilation, the Nebraska Bishopric See refused to aid the fund-raising effort to build a church. However, it agreed to request Spanish speaking priests from the Order of the Augustinian Recollect (OAR) to administer the demanded services.

At that time, two priests from the Augustinian order, Gabriel Salinas and Manuel Fernandez lived in Omaha and attended selectively to requests from the Mexican Catholics. These priests were in charge of the parish of the Holy Ghost in South Omaha. These priests were very familiar with Spanish and Latin American Catholicism because the Order was originally a Spanish and Portuguese inception. Augustinians had ministered in Mexico for centuries. Furthermore, in 1914 the Augustinians had created a Virgin of Guadalupe Church in Topeka, Kansas, to serve the Mexicans in that city and its environs.

For Bishop Harty, the community was already assisted by the Holy Ghost parish and, therefore, there was no need for a separate Mexican parish or for a Lady of Guadalupe Church. Moreover, the American Catholic Church, as stated before, was committed to "Americanize" Catholic immigrants, particularly Mexicans. The community did not take Archbishop Harty's compromise easily. Thus, they challenged the refusal, and went forward with their plans to have a parish and a Guadalupe Church of their own in Omaha. For the Mexicans it was a matter of time and perseverance.

The real and fundamental problem for the Mexicans was to collect money to support the enterprise. The Catholic community of South Omaha was not only small but it was poor. Income of workers was meager and they barely eked out a living with their limited wages. Many workers shifted jobs between the sugar beet industry, railroad construction, and meat packing industries. "For sure, there were no millionaires in South Omaha" (Ramirez, 2005). The majority of the Mexicans worked in the packing houses and railroad yards of South Omaha earning from $0.50 to $3.00 for 12 hour work days and 56 hour weeks (Archdiocese of Omaha, 1976).

The Mexican community appeared more determined than ever and organized a permanent committee for the creation of The Guadalupe Parish of Omaha. The members of the finance team took their charge to heart, and started going from door to door pleading for cooperation and donations. Their favorite solicitation times, and more fruitful ones, were pay days in the packing houses and other businesses in the area. On these days the committee members called on the packing houses and stockyards (if they were not already workers at the plant), and visited other places to request contributions. Parallel fund-raising activities were cooking tamales or mole, and baking pasteles or pan dulce. The goods were sold to neighbors and the proceeds were added to the church's treasury chest. On weekends, usually Sundays, neighbors took turns to cook and sell menudo. They organized dances, auctions, rummage sales, and raffles. All proceeds were added to the fund. At the same time, a statue of the Virgin of

Guadalupe circulated among Mexican families of South Omaha. The Lady was accompanied by a cardboard box. The family who agreed to host her for a day or more contributed their pennies to the enterprise. Then the Lady moved on to the next family and the box collected more coins. This effort went on for years despite economic bonanzas and downturns. It was a labor of patience and time. The enterprise was gargantuan considering the income of the majority of Mexicans.

Lacking economic support from the Diocese, the Mexicans engaged themselves in moving forth through grassroots work that, in the end, proved fruitful. The efforts of the community convinced the Bishopric into acceptance of a Guadalupe Parish Church.

As part of Archbishop Harty's agreement with the Mexican community, Augustinian Father Leonardo Azcona was called to Omaha from California. He took charge of administering the religious needs of the congregation at St. Agnes school hall. However, this was not what the Mexicans had envisioned. They did not consider themselves second class Catholics to be ministered to according to schedules established by school activities and the Diocese. This arrangement was considered unacceptable, and they stepped up their fund raising efforts. In October of 1919 the community obtained a first victory. They have managed to accumulate enough funds to rent, for $14.00 a month, the empty building of an old bakery shop at 21st and "Q" streets. A store was not what they had anticipated, but it was nonetheless a place of their own. The artifacts for Mass celebration and rituals were obtained as loans from local churches and convents. An oil painting of the Virgin of Guadalupe that was purchased for $40 was hung on the back wall and, thus, began services at the first Virgin of Guadalupe Church presided by Father Azcona. The most significant ceremony held in the improvised Church was the commemoration of the day of the Virgin of Guadalupe on November 12, 1919. The first Guadalupe Church had a short life. The dogged good will of the community faltered under economic duress. In 1923, the improvised little church was closed and Father Azcona was recalled to California by the Augustinian priory. Five more years of fund raising efforts by the community, and lobbying with the Bishopric, led to the reorganization of the Guadalupe Parish. In 1928, Father Francisco M. Alba, with the support of the community, headed the restructuring of the Church, and it opened its second house at a rented store-front located at 5027 south and 24th Street to minister a community calculated at two thousand parishioners.

The hope of the Mexican community for a permanent and dignified house for the Guadalupe Church did not disappear despite the onslaught of the Depression and the Texas Emigration Agent Law of 1929 that caused a radical drop in community membership to barely above nine hundred Mexicans (Archdiocese of Omaha, 1990). World War II and the "Bracero Program" brought relocated Mexican Nebraskans back to the state and attracted immigrant workers to its fields, packing houses, and construction jobs.

The Mexican community was now larger, more aware of its strength in numbers, and enjoyed better financial conditions. It was then that the fund-raising for the Guadalupe was reinstated

and community action refurbished on her behalf. Finally, in 1944 the community stepped up its financial goals and the archdiocese consented to support the building of a Guadalupe Parish. The funds were enough to purchase a lot of land located on the southwest corner of 23rd and N Streets for $300,000. More money requirements were met by the community, and in 1950 a ground breaking fanfare ceremony took place with the attendance of church, community leaders, parishioners, and city authorities. The Guadalupe was dedicated officially as a parish church in 1951. Thereafter, the church has expanded its facilities to the southeast corner and to lots adjacent to the original building.

Since its creation in 1919, the Guadalupe Church provided its Mexican parishioners encouragement, a sense of community, and a helping hand through a variety of services. The Guadalupe was [is] the center of community activity. Decades later, the church has kept its community commitment by extending its assistance to newer Mexican and Latin American arrivals.

The Protestants

This following is the history of the first Mexican Lutheran Church in Omaha, Nebraska. The ministry began in 1945 with Pastor Carlos V. Guzman, a seminarian at Midland College of the American Lutheran Church, who searched for, and found, his brethren in South Omaha. The creation of Gethsemane Lutheran Congregation in 1945 and years later, the Gethsemane Church at 19th Street and Castelar, provides a different insight into Mexican- American religious diversity and community grassroots organizations. The chronicle of the Mexican Lutherans of Omaha is significant for three main reasons. First, it underscores the role of religion and its institutions in the settlement, protection, organization, and development of Latino immigrant communities. Second, it questions the long held popular and homogenizing perception that all Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, and Latinos are Catholics, and that Protestantism among Latinos is a fairly recent phenomenon. Third, the account demonstrates how a small community can be organized to create a space to share beliefs and promote solidarity amongst its members. From their experience at Gethsemane, Mexican and Mexican-American Lutherans joined forces with Catholics and South Omaha community activists to create service institutions that later will crystallize as the Indian Chicano Health Clinic (today transformed into One World Health Clinic), the Lutheran Pantry, the Nebraska Mexican-American Commission, and the Chicano Awareness Center.

The present narrative was made possible through oral histories and documents held by founders of the Gethsemane congregation and their friends. All of them were either South Omaha Mexican-American community pioneers or their children. Al Rodriguez, Mary Perez, Gabino, Jr. "Jay" Velez, Joe Ramirez, and Crispin Perez contributed their memories of their individual and common experiences to this history. Most of all, what they really wanted was to share their memories and work at Gethsemane Lutheran Church with other members of the Mexican community of Omaha.

The Foundation

December 15, 1945 began as a wintry mix for Omaha and a snow day for Gabino Jr., "Jay," Velez. The blizzard started mid-afternoon the day before, and raged through the night. Early morning streets were impassable and schools were closed. Jay, who was seven years old, was happy to stay home with his mother and his numerous siblings. The family home was a small wood structure located at 15th Street and Dorcas in south central Omaha. The neighborhood culture was a collage of ethnicities and foreign languages. Immigrants, mainly second and third generation, dominated this working class quarter of Omaha. Union Pacific, Burlington Northern, and the Omaha stockyards were the major employers in the area.

Jay was born in 1938 in Omaha to a Mexican family who originally came from the city of Pátzcuaro in Michoacán, a central and traditional migrant-sending state. He was the tenth child of 14 children. His father came to Nebraska as a migrant rural laborer in the early 1930s. The Velez family came to the Midwest, as did most Mexicans immigrants to the area: by working themselves up north. Their first stop was Grand Valley, Texas to work la pizca in the cotton fields. From there they moved to Minnesota to work in vegetables and then sugar beets. The family wintered in Nebraska, and from spring to fall worked in the fields of Minnesota. As most migrant families, the Velezes went to work as a family unit on the farms. After several years, Gabino, Sr. obtained a job as a section hand with the Union Pacific and the family permanently established themselves in Omaha.

The first Velez home was located at 6th Street and Pierce, where Italians, Mexicans, and Poles shared the neighborhood. The ethnic assortment did not change much when the Velez moved to Dorcas street. A few more Italians and African-Americans were added to the mix, but this did not alter the ethnic character of the neighborhood.

Ethnic diversity and foreign languages seemed to disappear at Comenius, the elementary school attended by most of the neighborhood children. The Velez children, as most of the other Mexican second generation, grew up bilingual, but never spoke Spanish at school. The Velez family was Catholic and had been baptized in the faith. They considered themselves religious but seldom went to church. The parents did not speak fluent English, and the sermons and admonitions of American Catholicism were beyond their grasp. The gravity of the rituals and the austerity of the services were far from the pageantry of the Mexican folk Catholicism in which they had been raised. Spanish speaking priests were rare, and the Guadalupe Church was only a nascent project for the long time resident Mexican Catholic community of Omaha.

Catholic services and celebrations for the parishioners were held in neighboring churches (St. Patrick, St. Frances Cabrini, St. Bridget, and St. Ann) but the Velez parents did not consider themselves welcome. Services to the community were in English, Polish, or Italian, and they felt alienated. They had made their church visits scarce, and attended only on special occasions such as Christmas and Easter. However, they had at home a shrine with the Virgin of

Guadalupe, and they often called on for help and protection.

It was to this family's home that on one December day Carlos Guzman came knocking at the door. It was unusual for anyone who was not a family friend to come to their house. Jay's mother invited Guzman in and gave him a cup of coffee. Guzman introduced himself as a religious man with a mission assigned by God. He told her that the visit was the beginning of his apostolate. Despite the weather, Guzman had taken to the streets to go from door to door and preach with Bible in hand. It happened that the Velezes were the ones to ask him in. What Guzman had in mind was the creation of a Spanish language-ministered church in the Mexican community. A long conversation ensued, and after work, Gabino Sr. joined his wife and Guzman. During their first conversation Guzman and the Velez family found out that they were paisanos from Michoacán.

Guzman asked the Velez parents to call on their Mexican friends, neighbors, and acquaintances to hold a meeting the following week. The reunions became weekly events because this pastor was persuasive and determined. He had convinced them that Mexicans had to pray together, remain united as families, and, as compatriots, help each other as a community. Furthermore, Guzman predicated that if the spiritual needs of the Mexicans had to be met, their physical requirements had to be considered and attended to at the same time. The Mexican community was bewildered. They never heard this from a Catholic priest and no pastor had ever come to visit. Centuries of religious practice in Mexico meant going to church on religious holidays and Sundays. Priests visited parishioners rarely, unless the pastor had been summoned to dispense the last rites.

In 1857 and 1917, the Mexican government enacted several laws aimed at curbing Church power. The legislation ordered the secularization of Church property, the end to its monopoly of education, and its control over cemeteries, births, and marriages. It ended the money lending practices, closed monasteries and nunneries, and ended the collection of tithes. Despite the law, the Church continued to charge for services and the administration of the sacraments. Donations were collected for maintenance or building renovations, funding for fiestas of the patron saint, and often to reward the priest with gifts in kind or in cash.

The Mexicans listening to Guzman were bewildered because the Catholic Church they knew received alms but did not distribute them as extensively as it was expected. The faith they had been taught cared for the soul and its afterlife, but not for the body or its temporal well-being on earth. Catholic preaching had imbued in them the acceptance of their station in life and their submission to authority, whether ecclesiastical or civilian. Paradoxically, it was from Catholicism that they learned that community organization was permeated by fraternal religious practices with the cargo system, reverence for patron saints, mutual aid, and commemorations of corporate unity that solidified communal ties. Mexican Catholics knew and appreciated that often local curas protected them from rapacious caciques, and taught them how to recite their prayers through catechism instruction. Priests blessed parishioners' houses, animals, work implements, and held high mass to urge the Divine for good crops, sufficient and

timely rain, and protection from droughts, hail, epidemics, and earthquakes.

The Mexicans, to whom Guzman preached in Omaha, had no fond memories of their past religious experience in Mexico. The Velez parents had told their children that the priests they had known in Mexico were not likable individuals and they had found them deceitful. Consequentially, the Velez children were not schooled comprehensively in the tenets of the Catholic Church nor had they been exposed to the grass-root religiosity of the home state of their parents.

What Guzman was expressing to the Mexicans assembled at the Velez house was that through religious practice they could improve their lives. He was not preaching Catholicism, but the Christianity advocated by Lutheranism. This meant congregating the community around prayer, Sunday school, direct reading of scripture, self-help, and aid for the needy. These actions would provide the cement for the group of people to break their isolation and create their public space. Moreover, the Mexicans did not need to be English speakers because Spanish would be used as the common language. Sermons, assistance, instruction, and conversations would be provided in Spanish. Besides, Sunday school for the parents and their children would improve their basic reading and writing skills.

After several weeks of meetings, the Velez living room was insufficient for the number of people gathered around Guzman. Often, the meetings rotated to other family homes, such as the Perez family who lived on a farm outside Bellevue. To solve the crowding problem, Gabino Sr. offered the cottage he had in his backyard as the house of worship. They met on weekends when Guzman came to Omaha from the seminary at Fremont. Regular reading of scripture, discussion of their teachings and meaning, and plans to organize the congregation were the items on the meetings' agendas.

Reading of scripture was unusual, because the Catholic Church, before the major reforms of the Ecumenical Council of Vatican II (1962-1966), did not encourage the parishioner's direct reading of the Bible. Besides, illiteracy was high and Bibles were expensive. Instead, in Mexico, Catholicism was instilled through catechisms, memorized prayers, peregrinations, songs, and religious festival calendar. In the Velez backyard cottage the Spanish version of the Bible, prepared by the American Bible Society in 1893, was the book for the meetings. In this way were laid the foundations of first Mexican Lutheran Church in Omaha, the Gethsemane Lutheran Church.

Carlos V. Guzmán, first pastor and founder of Gethsemane

Guzman's childhood and early youth in Mexico are shrouded in mystery. What is known is a complex web of stories told by his family, parishioners, and friends. The exact date of his arrival to the U.S. is unknown. Sometime in the early 1940s he was living in Houston and

working for the railroads. There he met Lutheran minister Rev. Paul DeFreese from Nebraska, who asked him to come to the state. The pastor told Guzman that the Mexican community needed a minister and that he would be a certain fit. In order to become the pastor of the Mexican community, Guzman had to enroll in Fremont's Lutheran seminary. The Lutheran Synod of Nebraska would sponsor his religious education. Once duly trained in the doctrine and liturgy he could minister. He followed this advice and arrived in Nebraska in 1944.
The life story of Carlos V. Guzman prior to his encounter with DeFreese is that he was born in Zamora, Michoacán in 1912. He was a Purepecha (Tarascan) and spoke fluent Spanish, English, Greek, and Purepecha. He graduated from the University of Mexico in 1933, and later served as a Lutheran pastor from Central Seminary of the United Lutheran Church in Fremont, Nebraska in 1948. Guzman obtained his doctorate in divinity from Covington Theological Seminary in Georgia in May of 1982, a few months before his death. He told friends and family that this doctorate was his utmost life achievement.

The obituary published by the quarterly newsletter of the Division for Service and Mission in America (DSMA) of the American Lutheran Church (ALC) that appeared on the winter-spring issue of 1983 published the following biographical sketch:

> *ALC's First Hispanic Pastor Dies: The Reverend Carlos Guzman, credited with starting the Lutheran Hispanic Ministry in Omaha and being the first Hispanic pastor to enter the ALC (1952), died on December 1 in Alabama at the age of 70.*
> [...]
> *Fluent in four languages, Pastor Guzman conducted services for 20 years at Gethsemane Lutheran Church in Omaha in both English and Spanish. His leadership and support helped make possible a number of ministries located in Omaha: The Indian/Chicano Health Center, the Chicano Awareness Center, the Omaha Lutheran Pantry, and the Nebraska/Mexican American Commission.*
> *He was also instrumental in organizing the Mexican Lutheran Church, serving as a fund raiser and translator of Christian education materials. His final ministry began in Nogales, Arizona, on the Mexican border, after his retirement from Immanuel Lutheran Church in Cushing, Oklahoma. We thank God for his 34 years of ordained ministry in our midst (DSMA, 1983)*

Guzman rarely talked about his family in Mexico or about his life in his native Zamora. Congregation members do recall a few details. Accounts tell that he was the son of a Baptist minister in Michoacán. On one day of worship, during the late 1930s, when his father was addressing his parishioners, a man walked in the church and shot him in cold blood. After the tragic incident, Guzman fled to San Antonio, Texas.

To understand the senseless murder of Guzman's father and Guzman's flight across the northern border, reference must be made to the historical background of religious and politi-

cal conflict in Mexico. This explanation serves to illustrate the cultural and political context in which Guzman grew up, and attempts to illustrate the cultural environment that shaped the rationale that guided his venture.

The Religious conflict in Mexico

During three hundred years of colonial rule, the civilian and ecclesiastical authorities held a tight Catholic monopoly over the population of the Viceroyalty of New Spain. The Catholicism that developed during these centuries was a popular form of the faith, which was communal, unorthodox, and celebratory. Unique forms of practices that combined the secular and the sacred were incorporated into the liturgy and were no obstacle for the Catholic hierarchy to reign over its vast brethren. Few challenges from non-Catholic adherents went unnoticed, or failed to be hastily extricated.

The Mexican Catholic Church reflected in its hierarchical organization similar patterns to those shown by society as a whole: deep class divisions, discrimination, severe economic inequalities, and regional cleavages. The lower clergy attended the peasantry in rural communities, while well positioned clerics served the elite in the main cities. Parish priests in rural communities were too familiar with the destitution, isolation, and ignorance of living conditions common to the overwhelming majority of the Mexican population. Not surprisingly, several of the leaders of the Independence movement came from the lower rungs of the Church. The political break with Spain did not entail religious diversity and toleration. Quite to the contrary, Catholicism remained the official religion until Liberals in 1833 attempted major reforms geared at divesting the Church from its many privileges and unrivaled wealth. Compromises were difficult to achieve, and Catholics and Liberals dealt with their irreconcilable discrepancies on the battlefields.

It was precisely during those years that the Mexican Catholic Church faced the other major challenge to its hegemony. This time it was the crusading efforts of British and North American Protestant missionaries (Atkins, 1932). The dissemination of Protestantism began with the introduction of Bibles into Mexico brought by James Thompson of the British Bible Society in a visit between 1827 and 1830. In the latter year, the American Bible Society called for the unity of Protestants against Catholic influence in the U.S. and the American continent. Members of Protestant organizations believed that they had to undertake the diffusion of Christianity in Mexico. They opposed Catholicism because they considered it retrograde, superstitious, and incompatible with democratic freedoms. In this way, adherents to Catholicism could be enlightened by introducing them to the Bible, and thus brought under the fold of Protestantism and republicanism.

> *Catholics, it was widely believed, had not developed a habit of independent thought. They were still chained to a religion that accepted the Pope, a foreign power, as their authority, rather than their individual consciences. It was believed that not only were Catholics unable to think for themselves in matters of faith or morals, they were equally incapable of being part of a democratic system. Thus, by the early 1800s the Catholic religion was seen at best as retrograde and, at worst, inimical to a democratic republic (Bauer, 1974).*

The Mexican War of 1847-1848, in which Mexico lost half of its territory, was a war driven by American expansionism and the Calvinistic ethos embodied in the idea of "Manifest Destiny." The belief that the U.S. had God's given right, or destinies, to expand the country's borders, occupy and convert Catholics to Protestants was a powerful religious inspiration. The conflict was an opportunity for the American Bible Society to distribute seven thousand Bibles among the military to carry with them during the campaign. Soldiers had an intense prejudice against Mexican Catholicism, which they wanted to help dispel with their presence in Mexico.

> *The majority of American soldiers were products of a militantly Protestant culture that still viewed Catholicism as a misdirected and misbegotten religion. Although the regulars included a significant number of Catholic enlisted men, the volunteers did not. This strengthened the tendency to ignore the rights and privileges of the Church in a Catholic country as well as increase the harassing of that Church. Some of the volunteers' acts, like the stabling of horses in the Shrine of San Francisco in Monterrey, so upset the Mexicans that they still mention it in modern works (Hogan, 2004).*

The defeat left Mexicans bitter and harboring a deep distrust toward their northern neighbor. Internally, the loss aggravated the conflicts among political factions struggling to control and redirect the nation. The divide between the Liberals and the Conservatives was wider. Neither the Conservatives and the Church, nor their liberal foes, were willing to compromise. Open war between the Church and the state finally erupted during the War of Reform (1857-1861). During this conflict, Liberals fought fiercely against Catholic hegemony and its attempts to retain the status quo.

The Liberal triumph from the civil war did not avert the French Intervention (1862-1867) that briefly established a monarchical regime that was expected to be primarily Catholic. To the disillusionment of the Conservative faction and the Church, Maximilian, the European prince at the head of the Second Mexican Empire, was a liberal that believed in religious freedom and refused to reestablish Catholic supremacy.

It is thought that Maximilian's religious tolerance facilitated the way to Rev. James Hickey of the American Bible Society to become the first Protestant pastor in Mexico. He came in 1862 to sell Bibles in Nuevo Leon and Tamaulipas. However, this claim was also alleged by Melinda Rankin, who a decade earlier established her Presbyterian mission in Brownsville, Texas just across the border from Matamoros, Tamaulipas. Rankin established a school for Mexican girls. From her mission, she distributed Bibles and preached her faith.

The arrival of American Protestant missionaries was accompanied by self-generated religious reformation attempts. In effect, in 1865, a religious movement led by Mexican clergy seceded from the Catholic Church and organized the Mexican National Church. However, they were not able to accomplish much before the Liberal triumph of 1867. In effect, for five years the Liberals fought vehemently to evict the French invaders and struggled to keep the country together. After Liberals returned to power in 1867, they forced the Catholic Church into submission. The once powerful institution was obliged to accept its separation from the state and its dissociation from secular affairs. However, to the beaten Catholic Church the fight was not over.

Given the subdued state of the Catholic hierarchy, the leaders of the Mexican Catholic Church attempted to consolidate their organization as a non-Roman directed Mexican Church. The disaffiliated Catholic priests who were the organizers sought and obtained the acquiescence of Benito Juarez, then president of the country. The organization searched for guidance and international sponsorship from the Anglican Church (Episcopalian) in New York. The Mexican break-away group wanted to create in Mexico a replica of the Anglican Church. The New York quarters of the Episcopalians accepted the mission to assist in the establishment of the Mexican Church and provided Spanish language Bibles, documents, and financial support. In 1871, the Mexican Anglicans requested the national government to allow the use of the temple of San Jose de Gracia, and then, the church of San Francisco. Both were obtained and they started to minister their services. Manuel Aguas, a former Catholic priest, was appointed Bishop that same year. In spite of the liberal government, the congregation faced many difficulties and serious persecution, but managed to survive the Catholic offensive. In an 1871 letter to the Anglican Council, Aguas reported:

> *We have opened the church of the former Roman Catholic Convent of San Jose de Gracia to the public, and a large congregation now attends there. We have established a Christian Association, and also classes for young men who want to study for the ministry. In central Mexico we have some fifty Christian congregations, and their numbers are increasing rapidly, even among the smaller towns, where our brethren often suffer the most terrible persecutions by the Roman Catholic curates and fanatics. The Romanists have burned the houses of some of our fellow-Christians, wounding men, women, and children, in their efforts to check the progress of the Gospel in Mexico (Dyer, 1876).*

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The restoration of republicanism in Mexico was not long lasting. After 1876, Porfirio Diaz, a liberal general, came to the presidency by a successful coup d'etat. For the next thirty years, Diaz ruled over the country with ruthless law enforcement and callous policies. Diaz used skillful diplomacy and selective repression to curtail the fighting between regional caciques, cleansed the country of rural bandits, modernized the country through foreign investment, professionalized the armed forces, connected main cities through railroad construction, and created the powerful elite that tyrannized the country. Diaz' regime was not inimical to Protestant missionaries, and allowed them to work freely in the country. In the same way that Diaz and his advisors thought that white European immigration could benefit the country, Protestantism had to be tolerated, for it was the main religious affiliation of the prospective immigrant influx.

The first U.S. missionaries, from the northern stream of the Presbyterian Church arrived in Mexico in 1872. In 1873, the southern Presbyterian Church sent its first missionaries to Mexico. The name 'National Presbyterian Church of Mexico' has its roots in the church's proclamations of 1919. The Mexican organization decided in that year that instead of following the directives of their North American colleagues they would part and follow their own path. The Methodists followed suit by incorporating in early 1885 the Mexican Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. They had been assured religious freedom, but the Catholic Church often harassed converts by demonizing them from the pulpits.

Baptists proclaimed Rev. James Hickey as their first foreign missionary in Mexico. He and Rev. Thomas H. Westrup established the first Baptist Church in Monterrey in 1864. Among the first members of the congregation were several U.S. residents and merchants engaged in business in the region. Westrup became a representative of the American Baptist Home Mission Society (Northern Baptists) in 1870. He worked to establish the congregation according to the Baptist ritual of baptism by immersion. Westrup ministered in Mexico for thirty-eight years. The Southern Baptists began to work in Mexico in 1881. Initially they supported the work of the Northern Baptists but soon thereafter they established their own congregations.

> *At the turn of the twentieth century, Baptist work in Mexico had reached encouraging proportions. In 1901 Northern Baptists reported 43 churches and missions with a total of 721 members. Southern Baptists reported 37 churches, 21 missions, and 1189 members. There were a number of Baptist day schools and a Baptist periodical, but denominational organizations were limited to three associations. Simultaneously, in 1901, two missionaries and a pastor were convinced the time had come to form a Baptist convention of churches. Thus, on September 13, 1903 forty-two messengers and some twenty Baptists without credentials of 13 churches and one association met at the First Baptist Church of Mexico City to organize a national convention [CNBM, Convención Nacional Bautista de México] (Mendez, 2006).*

Baptists and other Protestant organizations ministering in Mexico benefited from the tolerant policies of Porfirio Diaz (1876-1910). Under his administration, Protestant affiliation grew, and by 1885 they claimed a membership of 35,000 souls. According to historical record, the first Baptist ministry established in Michoacán was inaugurated in 1898 in the town of San Juan de las Huertas (Baldwin, 1983).

Diaz' regime fell to the Revolutionary outbreak of 1910-1920. The revolution's costs were more than a million lives, massive dislocation, serious destruction of the economic base of the country, and emigration of thousands across the northern border. The revolutionary leaders who won the final battles over the nation in 1920 were radical anti-clericals and sympathizers of Protestants.

Once the vestiges of thirty years of dictatorship were cleansed, a new Constitution was reissued in 1917. It was based on the liberal charter of 1857. The articles that referred to the status of the Catholic Church were strict. Their intent was to keep the Catholic Church fully restricted under the supervision of civil authorities. The Church had to serve its brethren using property they did not own, were forbidden to engage in any type of economic enterprise, and thus, had no means to accumulate wealth. Priests could not vote, engage in politics, assemble or demonstrate, wear their vestments in public, or deliver political speeches disguised as sermons.

Relative stability came to Mexico during the post-revolutionary era inaugurated in 1920. However, after the assassination of President Alvaro Obregon in 1928 at the hand of Catholic fanatics, religious tensions rose to new heights. His successor Plutarco E. Calles (1924-1928) decided to press on the enforcement of the constitutional articles limiting even more Catholic activities. In retaliation against government actions, the Catholic hierarchy suspended services and closed the churches. In turn, the government expatriated priests and bishops, ended diplomatic relations with the Vatican, and attempted to create a schismatic Mexican church. The war of words turned into open conflict and a mass rebellion unraveled in the center of Mexico. The states of Michoacán, Queretaro, Jalisco, Aguascalientes, and Guanajuato became the battleground for the new religious war. The Cristero Rebellion, as the confrontation came to be known, raged for the next four years. The end results were thousands of people killed in the onslaught, dislocation, disruption of economic activities, and massive emigration north.

The Catholic clergy not only battled directly the government's anticlericalism but unleashed its armed followers against Protestants. These were blamed for instigating anti-Catholic sentiment, divisiveness, and eroding the communal loyalties toward the Catholic faith. The Church was alarmed by the steady growth of Protestant affiliations in the country. The hierarchy was resentful of the sympathetic welcome that Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians had received first from Porfirio Diaz and then, by the open arms approach of the revolutionaries. These not only have welcomed Protestants but protected them during raging battles. Moreover, the Catholic Church was indignant because several of the revolutionary leaders were either Protestant or outstanding supporters like Venustiano Carranza.

Catholics feared that the new direction undertaken by the revolutionary government would severely undermine their leadership because well known Protestants had been given important offices in the new administration. More worrisome for the Church were the appointments of Protestants to organize and lead education programs. Among them were educators like Andrés Osuna, Director de Elementary Education (1916-1918) during the government of Carranza, and Moisés Sáenz, one of the founders of indigenismo policies and Under-Secretary of Education (1924-1928) during the administrations of Alvaro Obregon and Plutarco E. Calles (Baldwin, 1983).

After the radical years of the revolution that ended in 1940, Protestant denominations increased their work. Baptist evangelization in Mexico intensified after this year when the Mexican government relaxed restrictions concerning religious practices.
Given the above described context, it is possible to consider Pastor Carlos V. Guzman, his father, and many thousands of others as victims of the Cristero Rebellion and Mexican religious intolerance.

Gethsemane

The first Lutheran Hispanic ministry church, Gethsemane opened its doors to the Mexican American community at 19th Street and Castelar in 1948. The building was occupied earlier by another Lutheran church, but when this one moved, ALC sold it to the Mexican congregation. The funds for the purchase were provided by a lady from the older church congregation. Because the donation was anonymous nobody knows the identity of either the benefactor or the amount of the transaction

The Mexican Lutheran congregation was small in size; at its peak it gathered some 85 members. However, it was proportional to the number of Mexicans residing in Douglas County, which in 1950 was 450 (Wheeler, 1975). The Census Bureau partially enumerated Latinos for the first time in 1930, when the census had a separate racial category for Mexicans. This census included estimates of the Mexican population in this country for 1910 and 1920 based on place of birth data. In an attempt to record more Latinos than just Mexicans, the 1940 census eliminated the Mexican category but enumerated the White population with Spanish as a mother tongue. This approach, of course, produced too low an estimate of the Hispanic population as many second and third generation US Latinos would have considered English as their mother tongue. Oddly, the1950 and 1960 censuses did not make an effort to document the Latino population.

Efforts at collaborative fund-raising managed to secure the building at 19th Street and Castelar. With the help of Kountze Memorial Lutheran Church of Omaha (the oldest Lutheran church in Nebraska, for it was incorporated in 1858). Gethsemane was able to serve, both physically and spiritually, the needs of its Mexican-American community. Spanish services

were deeply appreciated because the Mexican adults could understand the pastor and read their Spanish language Bibles.

In 1948, Guzman was appointed American Lutheran Church (ALC) as the resident pastor of Gethsemane. His salary was only $100 a month. The congregation could not afford more, and he never demanded an increase. He worked as a translator and often worked with the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Guzman also translated documents and tracts for this congregation. In 1949, Guzman married a first generation Japanese American, Laura Setsuko, who he met at a Lutheran conference in Denver, Colorado. Laura, who was born in California, had been confined to a San Diego internment camp, one of the several infamous centers created by the U.S. government to hold Japanese immigrants and their children during World War II. She was a dental assistant and worked full time to support the family and the ministry. The Guzman had two children, Debra and Andrew. The Guzman family lived in a house on 20th Street and Castelar, just one block from Gethsemane.

Guzman's church was supported by congregational offerings and it was never subsidized by ALC. He was very active not only among the Mexican and South Omaha communities, but he extended his reach throughout the city and the state. Guzman called on governors, city commissioners, and business people to obtain donations for the parsonage. As requested by the donors, he kept their names off the records but registered the amounts in the books. All funds were used for the upkeep of the Church and its outreach programs, like distributing food and clothing to new immigrant arrivals, the unemployed, and the sick. Politically, Guzman was a Democrat and encouraged his brethren to be active citizens but he never forced his affiliation on anyone.

For 28 years Guzman was at the helm of Gethsemane taking care of the congregation. Guzman ended his Omaha ministry in 1968 and moved to attend the congregation of Immanuel Lutheran Church in Cushing, Oklahoma. When he retired in 1981, Guzman and his wife moved close to Nogales, Arizona, across the Mexican border city by the same name in Sonora. There he "[...] worked at the Seminary of the Reformation, translating and continuing his ministry in Mexican churches" Guzman died in Alabama in 1989. He left a solid base at Gethsemane as his heritage. The Mexican Lutherans were faithful to the congregation and were heavily involved in community action.

The 1960s were changing times for the U.S. and social turmoil had set the country afire with by the rising social mobilization of the Civil Rights movement. The leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr. was able to galvanize large sectors of the American society that rose up to end segregation and governmental apartheid policies. The tide of social upheaval mushroomed with massive demonstrations against the escalating Vietnam War. To top if off, labor unrest was in an upsurge with the organization of the National Farm Workers Association. The movement led by Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta attracted national attention to the plight of the Mexican and Mexican-American rural laborers. The assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963 and the murders of his brother Robert and Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968

aggravated social enervation.

Nebraska was not unresponsive to the national turmoil and experienced the racial unrest sweeping the country. Demands for civil rights demonstrations in Omaha in 1963 led to the creation of the Omaha Human Rights Commission. In 1968 and 1969, race riots exploded in north Omaha and the National Guard was called to quell the protest. A high school student was killed in the fracas outside Creighton University (Graves, 2004).

It was during these years that the Chicano Movement emerged as a significant social actor and political force. Though an offshoot of the Civil Rights Movement, the Chicano Movement had its own history and agenda. Mexican-Americans, finally out of the shadows and social indifference, took a front seat in the political scene by mustering support from several generations of Chicanos. Mexican Americans demanded redress for years of discrimination and second class existence.

Rev. Roberto Navarro was appointed by ALC to replace Guzman at Gethsemane. A native from Puebla, Mexico, Navarro was a graduate from Wartburg Lutheran Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa. Fresh out of seminary, he began his ministry in 1969. Navarro was swayed by the militant effervescence of the 1960s and came to believe that the Mexican Americans in Omaha should move forward with a more proactive role in claiming their identity and place in the community. The congregation at the Church would be an appropriate platform to launch the organization, improve the existing outreach programs, and create other ones. Navarro firmly assumed his Chicano consciousness and encouraged his congregation to follow suit.
Soon after his arrival, he immediately got acquainted with the active members of the Mexican-American community. Navarro called for a meeting to assess the state of affairs. Present at this meeting were Al Rodríguez, Joe Ramírez, Joe García, Gregorio Aguilera, Linda García, Paul Márquez, Stan Porras, and Larry Barrientos (CAC, nd).

In order to measure the population they wanted to serve, the group estimated that the 1970 Latino population of Omaha was around 5000. They considered the figure low because of consuetudinary undercounting by governmental agencies. They had serious misgivings on the reliability of the Census Bureau, which reported for the state 21,067 and for Omaha, 4,057. However, all figures did coincide on the assessment that about two-thirds of the Latino population was of Mexican origin.

The group resorted to use the data of a population survey conducted by the Lutheran Ministries, which estimated that there were 6,490 Latinos in Omaha alone. Once they had figured out the universe of the population with which they wanted to work and serve, they went on to target the major areas of concern. That is, they considered where Latinos had been disregarded. These were health care, education, employment, housing, and discrimination. Navarro concluded,

> *The primary need was to improve our very low self-esteem*
> [...] *We were concerned that our students weren't going from high school to college*
> [...] *That was one problem area. The other was that a lot of Mexican-American parents were concerned that their kids didn't understand their background as something that was positive. We had to do something about this. We had to satisfy our needs.*
> [...] *Our people were not going to the hospital. Health was being neglected (Newgren, p.5).*

The first step was the creation of an organization that could voice and advocate for the Latinos, and they did. They named the organization the Chicano Awareness Center (CAC), which was officially incorporated in 1971. With their own funds they rented a store front at 25th and Q Streets (Harding, 2005). Navarro was elected as its first director and presided over the institution for the next fourteen months on a voluntary basis (CAC, nd.)

Navarro and the organizers of the community did not stop with the CAC. In that same year the CAC established the Indian Chicano Health Center (ICHC) on the property donated by the Gethsemane Lutheran Church. It was the wood house that had been the residence of Rev. Carlos Guzman and his family. They called on doctors and dentists to provide volunteer services. Initial funding was provided by the LAC, the Catholic Archdiocese through its charity agency, United Catholic Social Services, and private donations (Newgren, 1996).

Food drives, collection of staples, and distribution to needy families have been an ongoing outreach program at Gethsemane since the days of Guzman's stewardship. Al Rodriguez was in charge of the South Lutheran Pantry services since its creation. He personally collected from donors, stocked, and distributed the supplies to the families that requested aid at the local churches. With the group of Chicanos the food service expanded to provide supplies to 100 families every month. Donations were provided by grocery stores in the South Omaha neighborhood, supermarkets, producers, and wholesalers from the area. Often, neighbors, Lutheran and Catholic congregations gave money as contributions to further stock the pantry. With the incorporation of the CAC and the ICHC, the pantry activities increased to the point that it took over the basement of the Gethsemane Church.

Navarro ministered at Gethsemane for three years; in the summer of 1972 he was sent by LAC to Woodlands, Texas. There he ministered at a Lutheran Church and worked with the Farmworkers organization of the state.

After Navarro's departure, Rev. Donald Flachmeier took over the ministry of Gethsemane during late fall of 1972. Flachmeier came to a South Omaha community that was by now unmistakably Latino. Latino presence was highly noticeable with a renovated influx of many more living in South Omaha. Several businesses peppered 24th Street between E and Q: grocery stores, restaurants, bakeries, and retail shops. These were opened by Latinos to offer the

community their known and cherished specialty foods. The CAC and ICHC were in the area and more people attended these community agencies. La Guadalupe Church, which inaugurated their parish building at 23rd Street on 1951, was working hard to attend its own flock of old Catholic resident and new immigrant arrivals. In spite of the influx of many more Latinos in South Omaha, the Gethsemane congregation began to decrease.

Several members of Gethsemane abandoned the congregation because they moved to other parts of the city and attended other Lutheran churches. Besides, compelling proselytism by Christian denominations, particularly the Assemblies of God, attracted droves of Latinos to their organizations. But the change that had a significant impact on Gethsemane was that the Mexican Lutherans had turned mainly into an English speaking congregation. The shift was not sudden but it was the result of Sunday school for parents and children, public schools, and constant interaction of the Lutheran community with English as the dominant language. Despite its decreasing membership, Gethsemane kept and even expanded its outreach programs. The Lutheran Pantry obtained the collaboration of Greater Omaha Area Lutherans Food Programs (GOAL) and was able to stock and distribute more food. They did this directly and through Douglas County Social Service Workers. Gethsemane also established a Crisis Aid Fund. Individual, businesses, and Omaha Lutheran organizations furnished the financial support for the fund. This service provided emergency loans to members and non-members of the church. The money was disbursed interest free and payable according to the individual's financial ability (Newsletter, nd). Gethsemane was one the strongest supporter of the ICHC. They congregation volunteered at the Center, and contributed their time and financial support.

Flachmeier ministered at Gethsemane until its closing in 1977, when the congregation dropped to 20 members. Rising operation costs of building maintenance, outreach programs and the small size of its membership forced ALC to close. The last services were held on March 27 of that year. The members of the congregation joined Salem Lutheran Church at 25th and Vinton. With renewed strength the services restarted its bilingual program first with Rev. Donald Stratman and the Rev. Douglas Zike, both from Minnesota, who reopened the Spanish speaking ministry (The Lutheran, 1975). The Latino membership increased but the Spanish speaking congregation reached its height with 66 members in 1990. As it happened before, Salem faced economic problems that forced the congregation out of the Church. This time around the ALC turned the congregation to the newly created Hispanic Redevelopment Ministry of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).

The new wave of Latino immigration to Nebraska in the 1980s saw a major diversification of Christian denominations serving the physical and spiritual needs of the newcomers. The Mexican congregation of Salem continued to attend services and social programs at the new Iglesia Cristo Rey that opened under the auspices of ELCA in Bellevue in 2000.

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