

BAPTIST PEACEMAKER

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The light from heaven is about to break upon us...to give light to those who sit in darkness, and to guide us to the path of peace.

—Luke 1:79



Witnessing to God's peace rooted in justice - working together until it comes.
Testificando sobre la paz de Dios enraizada en justicia - Trabajando hasta que llegue.

2016 Hispanic Summer Program Teaches Students about Peace

by *Mayra Picos Lee*

The Hispanic Summer Program (HSP) is formed by a consortium of theological schools and seminaries in the US and Puerto Rico that are committed to promote the presence, scholarship and perspectives of Latinx students in theological education and church ministry. This program supplements and enriches theological perspectives offered at seminaries and universities.

The consortium is currently formed by 36 schools that are very diverse in theological perspectives and curricula and represent different regions in the US. The 2016 HSP took place in San Antonio, TX, at Oblate School of Theology in June and July. Approximately 50 HSP students represented a wide variety of Latinx communities as well as participants from non-Latinx backgrounds who wanted to learn from Latinx history, theology and ministry.

The HSP is one of the few programs that currently provides the academic structure for such an engagement. It has created a space in which Latinx and non-Latinx students can come together and wrestle with each other in ways that promote greater inclusivity, justice and representation of voices in theological education and church life.

This experience is not a perfect struggle and is not without challenges. Yet, it is a crucial step toward greater peace and justice work within churches, seminaries, theological institutions and the culture at large. The HSP contributes through theological engagement and experiential learning. This occurs as students, faculty and staff study and work together over a period of two weeks.

The 2016 HSP offered seven courses that provided academic skills to prepare students to lessen the climate of violence, exclusion and polarization that is so prevalent in our current culture, and to contribute to peace and justice in more positive ways. This year's program was particularly characterized by the diversity of the student body and theological discussions around such issues as gender, sexuality, inclusivity of theological perspectives and denominations, migration experiences and educational backgrounds.

The discussions in and outside of the classroom between students, faculty and staff expressed the commitment of participants to understand what it means to live in a multicultural world in a manner that affirms diversity and difference. Although the experiences were challenging and exhausting, they were also enriching for most participants, especially younger students seeking to grow.

It is also important to note that, contrary to what many people in dominant theological education culture may imagine, Latinxs are not a homogenous group. They represent a wide spectrum of perspectives that are rooted in Latin America but have also been influenced by their presence in the US.

As a Latinx theological educator, I have also experienced the limited ability most theological schools, seminaries and universities offer at promoting the internal diversity of Latinxs or other groups within their curriculums and programs. This only serves to stress even further the importance of HSP.

BPFNA ~ *Bautistas por la Paz* is committed to peace rooted in justice. Toward this end, the organization seeks to gather, equip and mobilize peacemakers around the world and especially in North America (Mexico, Puerto Rico, Canada and USA). Supporting and promoting the growth and presence of Latinx students and scholars in academia and church life is a vital step toward peace and justice.

Please see 'Hispanic Summer Program' on page 10.



*Right: Students in the Hispanic Summer Program at Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio, TX, pose with their professor, Mayra Picos Lee (far right).
Photo courtesy of Mayra Picos Lee.*

Stories from the Hispanic Summer Program

by *Mayra Picos Lee*

This year at the 2016 Hispanic Summer Program (HSP) at Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio, TX [see the story on page 9], I taught a class entitled “Breaking the Cycle: Love Your Enemy.” I was as excited about this as I was scared.

On the one hand, the possibility of discussing all sorts of issues related to conflict transformation with receptive theological students was energizing. It deeply resonated with my commitments to peace and justice as a BPFNA ~ Bautistas por la Paz board member.

On the other hand, I did not think I was well prepared to teach this kind of class in light of all the violence, animosity, craziness and polarization we are experiencing in this country and around the world. I thought the class might bring more anxiety and hopelessness than what it might be able to resolve or alleviate.

I also did not want the class discussions to become intellectual exercises, void of any connections to emotions or spirituality—because these are very important dimensions of life for peace and justice. I just did not know what was going to happen.

Once I got there, I found six very vibrant, intelligent and energetic students, who wanted to talk about readings and ideas as much as they wanted to talk about their own lives and experiences of violence. Within the first two hours, students shared their personal experiences of love, violence, abuse and enemies. They described some of these “enemies” as people who were really close to them.

But they also described how some of these “enemies” were living inside of them and how learning to love the “enemies within themselves” was most challenging. Many stories and ideas were shared throughout the two weeks of the program as to how love might lead to conflict transformation in different situations.

I was very grateful for the students’ engagement through these stories, because they made class sessions more alive and real. There was one particular story that stuck to me. It was the response of one of the Latinx students to Walter Wink’s book, *The Powers That Be*, during the second and final week of classes.

This student began by reflecting on her own immigrant community and the struggles they had experienced with abusive power throughout many years. She shared details of some of the very heartbreaking experiences she endured and concluded that being part of this class had helped her to affirm with conviction Wink’s idea that we are all good, we are all bad, and we are all redeemable!

This was the most compelling reflection she could have offered. She was filled with the wisdom, simplicity and humility that characterizes someone who has lived through difficult life lessons—and come to the other side transformed by God’s love and as a more authentic human being.

It was a powerful and affirming moment for me. The affirmation not only came through her well-spoken words but also through the feelings and sense of wholeness she shared. This student’s stubborn determination to keep on loving, hoping and transforming the pain and abuse she had endured was a testament to the power of God’s love within her and within us—as a class and as a community!

Hearing her words calmed my fears of being unsuccessful and inadequate. I was humbled and surprised at the courage I found in her and in all my students in this class, and the determination to live lives in which love is much bigger than their biggest fears. I am praying for them and hope they are praying for me too, that God’s love may grow in us day by day, right where we are!

—*Mayra Picos Lee, a BPFNA board member, is the Coordinator of Latin American Initiatives and the director of the new Online Master of Theological Studies in Latino/Latina Ministries program (Maestrea en Estudios Teológicos en Línea) at Palmer Seminary in St. David’s, PA.*

Hispanic Summer Program continued from page 9

Helping young latinx students grow in their ability to critically engage structures of power and theological discourse in nonviolent and more inclusive ways is very important to the mission of our organization. The BPFNA is able to serve the church and academy in greater ways by supporting the HSP mission to bring together latinx students from Mexican, Puerto Rican and other backgrounds to help them grow theologically and in community.

—*Mayra Picos Lee, a BPFNA board member, was a member of the 2016 HSP faculty. She is the Coordinator of Latin American Initiatives and the director of the new Online Master of Theological Studies in Latino/Latina Ministries program (Maestrea en Estudios Teológicos en Línea) at Palmer Seminary in St. David’s, PA.*