



Faith for the Journey

by Barbara A. Chaapel

When she was 18, Amparo (Amy) Mendez traveled north from her birthplace in Guatemala, across the Mexican border to begin school at Los Angeles City College. She traveled alone, and she spoke no English. Two months later she was living in Beverly Hills with a Jewish host family and learning to eat matzos instead of tortillas.

That was 1975. Today she is the pastor of Ft. Washington Heights Presbyterian Church in New York City and still remembers her mother's words when she left Guatemala: "You have to have faith."

Faith in Jesus Christ has sustained Mendez across cultures, countries, and career changes. "I still feel like a stranger here," she says, vividly recalling the time she waited with her nephews in a line at the border and one of them, looking up at the sign above, asked: "Auntie Amy, are we aliens?" Life as an immigrant in the U.S. for a Central American woman of color is difficult.

But in the face of difficulties, Mendez's daily confession is "God is faithful."

Faithful when she joined a Pentecostal church and its pastor recognized her leadership gifts and sent her to Bible school. Faithful when she began ministries with youth and Hispanic women, started an evangelism program, and served 500 meals to the homeless every Sunday. Even faithful when that church split and the new pastor did not believe in women's leadership—her pain at being told to be submissive so great she had to leave.

And faithful when she found the Presbyterian Church. "I often walked along Hollywood Boulevard and saw the towers of Hollywood Presbyterian Church," she says. "One day I went in. It was Thanksgiving and Lloyd Ogilvie was preaching about being thankful in the midst of trouble. I began worshipping there from that day on."

Mendez quickly connected with other young adults, began a Bible study, worked in a food program and with runaway kids. She was a charter member of Fuente de Vita (Fountain of Life), a new Hispanic congregation that nested in the mostly Anglo Hollywood church.

When Fuente de Vita became an organized congregation, Mendez was one of its youngest elders.

Downsized out of her job at a children's hospital, she was hired as associate executive for Hispanic ministries for the Synod of Southern California and Hawaii, the first Hispanic woman and the first layperson to be associate executive in the synod.

"It was a big job, and I loved it," she says. "Soon people started saying 'Why don't you go to seminary?'"

She dipped her toe in the waters of theological education with a few courses at San Francisco Theological Seminary (SFTS); when her job was cut to 10 hours a week, she couldn't ignore the call to full-time study.

But, like Moses, she gave God plenty of reasons why she couldn't go: "I didn't have enough money; SFTS was too liberal; Fuller Seminary was too conservative; I couldn't imagine leaving California to move east."

But she visited Princeton and liked it immediately. "It was beautiful, had a Hispanic collection in the library, had John Mackay's commitment to Latin America in its history, and was a place where I knew I would be challenged," she says. "And they gave me a scholarship!"

Mendez sold everything and drove across the country with "peace in my heart."

PTS was a challenge. She was lonely as one of only two Hispanics on campus. But she joined a study group ("We are all still good friends"), started a Hispanic association, and talked with President Gillespie about the need for Hispanic faculty and staff. "I started making waves, and he listened," says Mendez. "Today PTS has Victor Aloyo [director of vocations] and Luis Rivera-Pagán [professor of mission], hosts the Hispanic Theological Initiative, and has a Hispanic alumni/ae group."

After graduation in 1997 and an internship at West End Presbyterian Church in New York City ("God provided an Anglo congregation that was struggling to really be the church") that turned into a four-year call as associate pastor, she knew it was time to seek a call as pastor. Ft. Washington Heights wanted her very much, but only had the funds for a part-time pastor. Mendez said no.

They responded with a proposal to redevelop the church, envisioning a new mission and pledging a full-time call. This time she accepted. With the session, she cleared the rolls from 200 to 61, and with faith and hope moved forward. "God has a plan for us," she insists. "We started an evangelism program, we have a beautiful sanctuary that seats 800, and we're starting a ministry teaching music to community children."

In her first six months, Mendez performed her first marriage, took in three new members, and celebrated two baptisms. "I love being a solo pastor," she says. "I love the unpredictables, like negotiating with our councilman to bring arts, music, and dance to the community. We're the only Hispanic congregation in New York City Presbytery with a full-time pastor, and we want to keep our church strong."

You have a feeling this petite, fiery woman and her congregation will make it. "It hasn't been a magic carpet ride," she says. "Many times ministry is painful and lonely. But I keep hearing my mother's voice saying, 'You have to have faith.'" ■



Amy Mendez (right) with former study group members and still friends Chris Berwanger (far left) and Betsy Haynes (center).

Photo: Krystin Gramberg