LOS PRIMEROS PASOS DE MARCHA
A Presentation to the MARCHA Fortieth Anniversary Convocation
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The MARCHA story is much longer than the forty years of journey, struggle, and sacrifice that we remember and honor this week. MARCHA was the heir and became the steward of many dreams and hopes of preceding generations. The prophet had prophesied and Peter had reminded the church at Pentecost that: “your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions . . . .” (Joel 2:28). Hispanic/Latino Methodists and Hispanic/Latino Evangelical United Brethren of all ages had been filled by the Spirit and inspired into mission long before the meetings in San Antonio in 1970 and the Founding Consultation in 1971 in this very place. Our identity as a caucus within The United Methodist Church was and is rooted in our conviction that the visions and dreams of our ancestors would bless and orient the future mission of The United Methodist Church. We offered our heritage as a gift to be shared so the witness of the Church might experience new Pentecosts in the language and the accents of our foremothers and forefathers.

The Council on Hispanic American Ministries of the National Council of Churches met in San Antonio, February 25-29, 1970, at the Wesley Community Center on Fitch Street. COHAM included regional and national representation from several Protestant denominations, including The United Methodist Church. It was probably the most representative ecumenical Hispanic/Latino Protestant group in the United States at the time. Prior to the meeting in San Antonio, United Methodist Hispanic leaders in different regions of the United States and Puerto Rico had been in other gatherings and conversations where the concern for the ministry of the Church with Hispanic/Latino communities was shared. These conversations were taking place during denominational and ecumenical meetings where Hispanic/Latinos joined in informal groups, in the hallways, at meals to share mutual concerns. The United Methodist Hispanic/Latino participation in church-wide meetings, councils, and agencies was minimal. There were only a handful of leaders who participated in General Conference as delegates, for instance. In the EUB denomination, there was no Hispanic representation at the General Conference either. There were no general agency staff who were Hispanic.¹

¹ Hector M. Navas, correspondence with the author (July, 2011).
It was clear that the Hispanic/Latino voice in The United Methodist Church was not being heard or heeded by many who were charged with the decision-making authority and responsibility. This was true church-wide but also was the case in the annual conferences and the jurisdictional conferences. The only regular representations of Hispanic/Latinos in those arenas were the Rio Grande and Puerto Rico delegations.

At the same time, the ministry of many Hispanic/Latino congregations had been flourishing and growing despite limited resources, institutional neglect, discrimination, and the drive for “integration” of all ethnic churches and denominational units into the geographic Conferences dominated by the white constituency. Beginning in the 1960s, a significant growth in the number of seminary educated clergy gave rise to more frustration, anger, and impatience with the unequal opportunities, salaries, and benefits that still characterized the vast majority of Hispanic appointments. At the beginning of the 1960s there was not a single Hispanic/Latino staff person serving in the General Agencies of the church. There were no District Superintendents nor Annual Conference staff except in the Rio Grande and Puerto Rico Conferences. There were very few laity or clergy serving on Boards and committees of Annual Conferences, again with the exception of Puerto Rico and Rio Grande. In short, the United Methodist Church did not reflect the gifts, diversity, and history in mission of Hispanic/Latino peoples in the Conferences, Agencies, and its common life. The first Hispanic Bishop was to be elected more than two decades later. Hispanics/Latinos did not see themselves “in the picture” when United Methodism gathered for the “family photo.” So, while vital mission and ministry was being offered and capable leaders were responding to the call to serve, our denominational leadership, clergy and lay, was not inclusive or representative of the voice and aspirations of the people with whom the United Methodist Church and predecessor denominations had been in mission for over a century.

In the 1960s, Hispanic/Latinos (Puerto Ricans, Mexican-Americans, Chicanos, Boricuas, Cubanos, Dominicanos, and others) were asserting their right to determine their own future within The United Methodist Church. At the very time that the Methodist Church was uniting with the Evangelical United Brethren and completing the effort to eliminate the segregated Central Jurisdiction at the 1968 General Conference in Dallas, Hispanic/Latinos were actively seeking their own pathways in the new denomination. The following were some of the significant steps toward greater participation:

- In 1967, the Rio Grande Conference voted overwhelmingly to remain as a distinct Annual Conference as its pathway to the future. The action followed an extensive self-study led by a Committee chaired by the Rev. Roy D. Barton. It included hearings within the Conference and invited comment and input from neighboring Conferences.

- In 1968, the Puerto Rico Provisional Annual Conference achieved the status of a full Annual Conference at a special session on June 26th. This represented new rights and responsibilities for the Annual Conference to determine its mission and ministry in its context.
• In March of 1968, Hispanic leaders in the Southern California-Arizona Annual Conference organized LAMAG (Latin American Action Group) within the Conference. According to Bishop Elias G. Galván, who was its first president, “I was surprised that the Hispanic pastors I admired and respected would express such a sense of powerlessness and avoid participation in the life of the Annual Conference. It was in those early conversations that I suggested the creation of an organization that could speak as a group to the Annual Conference and not be seen as the opinion of individual pastors that could be easily overlooked.”

Choosing to unite their voices, leaders of LAMAG chose a new pathway.

• In 1969, La Junta Hispana-Americana was organized in the Northern Illinois Conference at a meeting in Chicago. Rev. Fines Flores and Rev. José Velázquez were key leaders in the effort. It gave voice, direction, and provided resources to ministries with Hispanic/Latinos in the Annual Conference and later reached out to Hispanics in the North Central Jurisdiction.

• In the same time period, the Florida Conference established an Office of Hispanic Ministry that provided leadership for training, leadership retreats, youth events, and women’s gatherings. The Rev. Lloyd Knox, a former missionary to Cuba and Argentina, was the Director. This began in 1965 and continued until 1973 when a Conference Task Force was organized. The Cuban immigration of the early 1960s required a response from The United Methodist Church especially in Florida where the majority of immigrants settled. But the contribution and leadership of Cuban-American laity and clergy was offered widely in The United Methodist Church, especially in the Northeast, North Central and South Central Jurisdictions.

It is important to recognize that Hispanic/Latino congregations, lay and clergy leaders, and organized United Methodist groups and Conferences were beginning to advocate for the right to represent themselves, to claim their rightful place, and to determine their way forward in a time of radical change in their communities and the wider society. For instance, the language of inclusiveness often excluded Hispanic/Latino people from the conversation. Racial Justice issues were usually framed in black and white terms. Hispanic/Latinos wanted to expand the conversation, re-define diversity, and insist that all institutions, including the Church, responded to their unique history of oppression and exclusion.

With all of the above as backdrop and context, MARCHA emerged in 1970 as a movement for change that sought to incorporate, for the first time, a national or church wide constituency of Hispanic/Latinos. This would be more difficult than first imagined but more critically necessary to bring The United Methodist Church to a renewed commitment to the mission with the

2 Interview of Elias G. Galvan by the author (June, 2011).
Hispanic/Latino people in the coming decades.

There were several inter-related events that brought the group of Hispanic/Latino leaders to San Antonio in February of 1970. First, the 1968 General Conference had made two decisions that opened up new possibilities for the Hispanic/Latino church. The establishment of the General Commission on Religion and Race had provided for the participation of several Hispanic/Latino leaders as Commission members. These were Rev. Elías G. Galván from California, Rev. Hector M. Navas from Florida, and Rev. Josué Gonzales from Texas. They were advocates for Hispanic/Latino concerns and shared information with the constituency about the GCORR’S work. The 1968 General Conference also created the Fund for Reconciliation. This fund was to be granted to churches, projects, and communities working on racial and economic justice programs. This opened up the possibility of new financial resources for use by Hispanic/Latinos to address the needs of their people. Rev. Leo D. Nieto, staff person with the National Division of GBGM, and Rev. Hector Navas, and later the Rev. Isabel Gomez, who began serving as a Hispanic staff with the GCORR in 1970, along with others guided the response of the Fund for Reconciliation to projects and programs within H/L communities.

Second, in the fall of 1969, Black Methodists for Church Renewal (BMCR) confronted the General Board of Global Ministries in New York City. Leaders of BMCR presented urgent demands to the Board and staged a sit-in at the Board’s headquarters in New York for several days. The Board’s response included substantial new funding for mission programs with the black community and other communities. In addition, a special fund to enable the Hispanic and American Indian constituencies to organize a response for their communities was established. It would be from this latter fund that the MARCHA Steering committee would secure funding for its meetings, conduct consultations in each region, and help fund the Founding Consultation in El Paso in 1971.

Third, a number of Hispanic/Latino leaders from the U.S. attended a meeting in Colombia in 1969 which was sponsored by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. Among those attending were Rev. Elías Galván and Rev. Rubén Sáenz from California, Rev. Josué González from Texas and the Rev. Roberto Escamilla, who was serving on the staff of the General Board of Evangelism. Bishop Galván recalls discussions about the “idea of a national gathering to organize a nationwide organization.” These discussions confirmed the need and the urgency to bring together a wider of group of leadership to explore the building of a church-wide organization to provide a vehicle for through which Hispanic/Latino could speak and act for themselves. The upcoming Council on Hispanic American Ministries meeting in San Antonio in February of the following year provided an opportune moment for such a gathering.

In the meantime, the National Division of the General Board of Global Ministries...
Ministries had taken action to release funding approved earlier for Hispanic/Latino leaders to gather. This happened in January of 1970 at the Executive Committee Meeting of the National Division. The Rev. Leo D. Nieto, who was on the staff, had responsibility to work with Hispanic/Latino leaders on the implementation. He consulted with persons from different areas, including Rev. Galván, Rev. Roy Barton, Rev. Navas, Rev. Josafat Curti from Colorado and Rev. Escamilla of the Board of Discipleship. In addition, Mr. Romeo Escobar, a lay person from Rio Grande Conference, who served as a member of the GBGM participated in the decision-making that led to the release of the funding.

It was out of these consultations that a number of persons were invited to participate in the meetings during the COHAM conference that met from Feb. 25-29, 1970, in San Antonio. Some of meetings were at the Wesley Community Center but most of the sessions were hosted by the Rev. Simon Nieto, pastor of the nearby Pollard Memorial United Methodist Church of the Rio Grande Conference. The sessions were in the evenings after the COHAM business was concluded.

Although not a part of the formal agenda listed in the minutes, the group spent significant time in sharing about their personal and ministry journeys with each other. Some of the most poignant moments were when some of the older leaders shared experiences of discrimination and sacrifice. At the same time, they were the most excited and the most eloquent in seeing this new beginning. It was, in many ways, their long harbored dreams which were coming to reality. Some of the key matters of concern, as reflected in the minutes included: representation of Hispanics/Latinos in the Conferences and General Agencies; development of Hispanic/Latino leadership; funding for Hispanic/Latino priorities; comprehensive, national planning for ministry; speaking with one voice to the denomination; and the convening of a National Consultation for bring Hispanic/Latinos together for organizing and mobilizing mission and ministry with our people. After four evenings of prayer, very energetic and sometimes exhausting discussions, punctuated by many personal stories and much laughter, the group decided on several courses of action: first, to convene a National Consultation in the spring of 1971 to include participation from throughout the U.S. and Puerto Rico. Second, to initiate a series of consultation events in each region to seek information, determine priority concerns, and identify participants for the National Consultation. Third, to seek the necessary funding from various general agencies to support the regional consultation process and the National Consultation in 1971. Fourth, to organize a steering committee to implement the plans, secure the funding, and communicate with the wider constituency of the Hispanic/Latino church as well as denominational leaders and groups. The formation of the Steering Committee was as follows: “That Steering Committee be made up of 4-3-2-2-2, and that they be selected by the fields they represent: 4 Rio Grande Conf., California, 2 New York, 2 Florida, 2 Midwest, and that General Board Staff serve only as consultants when re-
quested.” Each area was to select its representation. The Committee was organized and included Elías Galván, President; Ornán Iglesias, Vice-President; Roy Barton, Secretary; and Josafat Curti, Treasurer. The other members were Oscar F. Garza, Josué Rosado, Rubén R. Sáenz, Joel N. Martínez, Fidel Mendiola, Noé E. Gonzales, Hector M. Navas, Finees Flores, and Alfredo Cotto-Thorner.

We must note the absence of laity and women from the membership of the Steering Committee. Only one lay person, Ms. Ramonita Hernández from the New York area, was in attendance at the sessions in San Antonio. During the Founding Consultation in El Paso, additional members were added to the Steering Committee that included laity, women, and youth. This pattern of exclusive male clergy leadership in MARCHA would be changed by the make-up of the National Consultation participants in 1971 but also by the election of both laity and women to the MARCHA Governing Board that was lead MARCHA after the El Paso meeting.

One of the urgent, last-minute tasks of the Steering Committee was to release a statement to The United Methodist Church press as well as to the Hispanic/Latino United Methodist constituency. What were we to call ourselves, how would we identify our group and its purpose? That last morning in San Antonio a number of suggested names were offered. It was important to have a name that reflected our ethnic community and our denomination but that also would convey something about our purpose and mission. Some felt strongly that it needed to be in Spanish. Others argued that it needed to be in English in order to communicate to the larger Church and society. Finally, a name was offered by Rev. Joel N. Martínez that could be communicated in both languages. The acronym would also capture the sense of movement and action that was at the heart of our efforts. There is one word in our title that bears further comment: cause or “causa.”

At the meeting in San Antonio, we were all aware of the wide use of this word by movements, groups, and organizations that were at work in our communities and in the broader society. What was “la causa” as we considered including it in our name? There were several layers of meaning in the context of the time. It was a word that summarized the struggle for justice by Hispanic/Latino people who had been oppressed, excluded, disrespected, and silenced by the dominant powers in society and within the Church. It was about the redressing of the exploitation of generations of ancestors. “La Causa” was really a transcendent word whose meaning went beyond church or institution. It came from the language and usage of those who were at the forefront of the justice struggle for basic human rights. So in choosing to include this word, MARCHA was identifying itself with a much wider vision than that of a church organization. It was, and is, a sign that our Christian

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5 MARCHA, Minutes of the Steering Committee, (February 25-29, 1970), 5, in the possession of the author.
calling and our United Methodist heritage is to work alongside all who seek justice and work for shalom. Our work was just beginning when we left San Antonio. In our spoken prayers and in our silent moments, we were strengthened by the collective memory of the mothers and fathers in the faith who had sacrificed much for our generation and whose dreams and hopes were our inspiration.

One month after the San Antonio meeting, the Steering Committee met in Dallas at Perkins School of Theology on March 31-April 1, 1970. The main agenda items were planning for the National Consultation, planning for an upcoming meeting of the GBGM, and making plans to attend the General Conference session in St. Louis later in April. This special session of the General Conference was to consider certain unfinished business from the 1968 session in Dallas. Progress reports on the plans for the Consultation were made along with suggested plans for the fall GBGM meeting in Los Angeles that was scheduled for October. The decision to attend the General Conference was an important step in building visibility and strengthening relationships with key leaders in the denomination as well as with other racial caucuses.

The meetings of the Committee in St. Louis during the General Conference included follow-up planning but the major amount of our time was given over to dialogue with key leaders, observing legislative committee work, and providing support and encouragement to Hispanic/Latino delegates who were in attendance. The Steering Committee was able to meet with Dr. Tracey Jones, General Secretary of GBGM as well as with Dr. Woodie White, the chief executive of the General Commission on Religion and Race. In addition, for the first time, delegates from Puerto Rico participated in the Committee’s work. The two people were Rev. Rafael Boissen and Rev. Marcos Plaud. It was at this General Conference that the Minority Self-Determination Fund was established to be administered by the General Commission on Religion and Race. It would be this fund that would provide the major support for the Racial/Ethnic Caucuses in the denomination for the next three decades.

Another important historic moment occurred when MARCHA addressed the General Conference on the evening of April 21, 1970. The presiding Bishop that evening was Bishop James S. Thomas of the Iowa area, who was African-American. It was the evening to recognize delegates from “lands outside the United States.” Tomás Stevens of Chile led the Conference in prayer. Then Mr. Leo Baker of the North Texas Conference made a motion of privilege to amend the evening’s agenda to permit Rev. Elias Galván to address the Conference. The agenda was amended. The statement was received with expression of appreciation by the presiding officer and applause. Immediately thereafter, the ever enthusiastic Josafat Curti, with zarape in hand, led our Steering Committee and the whole General Conference in a recurring refrain of “¡Viva MARCHA!” Sarcely two months after the San

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Antonio meeting, the Steering Committee had gone public in the most representative gathering of United Methodists in the world.

The statement, hurriedly written overnight, reflected the urgency of mission and ministry with the reference to the “impending death of ministry” among Hispanic-Americans. It was intended, by the Committee, to be a wake-up call to the denomination. It also spoke to the absence of leadership of Hispanic/Latinos in the General Boards and Agencies which were administering resources and providing support for mission on behalf of the General Conference. Both priorities continue to be on MARCHA’S agenda to this day.

Finally, it was at this General Conference that the delegates from churches in Latin America and the Caribbean first shared in dialogue and fellowship with the MARCHA representatives. This exchange was the beginning of a continuing celebration of common ministry and strengthening of relationships that MARCHA has hosted at every General Conference since.

One of the early decisions by the Steering Committee was to convene a church wide consultation during the spring of 1971. The preparation for the national Consultation was to include regional gatherings in each Jurisdiction and Puerto Rico to identify the concerns, needs, and priorities from the respective areas. Each region was to select representatives to the national consultation inclusive of laity, women, youth, and clergy. Initially the goal was to invite up to 250 Hispanic/Latinos participants but the financial resources available limited the total to 150 persons. The distribution of representatives was negotiated within the Steering Committee with church membership in each Jurisdiction and Puerto Rico as a key factor. One hundred and twenty five participants were to be determined by ratio and an additional 25 persons to be added by the Steering Committee as “fraternal delegates.”

As was noted earlier, the make-up of the Steering Committee was all male clergy. An early action of the assembly in El Paso was to add laity, women, and youth to the membership of the Committee; the additions were Dr. Noemi Díaz, Norma Vera, Trine Garza, and Adan Nájera. Two youths were to be named by the youth group present. The names of those two youth members do not appear in the minutes of the Consultation. The Consultation opened with worship on April 30, 1971, at 10:00 a.m. in the Chapel at Lydia Patterson Institute. The service was led by Rev. Josafat Curti and Dr. Roberto Escamilla was the preacher. In recent correspondence, Dr. Escamilla reminded me that the theme of his message was: “The Time is Now to Lift Anchors and Sail Forward.” The text was Philippians 3: 13. After worship the president, Rev. Elias Galván led the assembly in an orientation to our tasks for the session. The key items on the agenda included the reports coming from each Jurisdiction on priorities, the determination of overall priorities for MARCHA, the adoption of a Constitution and Bylaws for the organization, the election of a governing body as well as issues of financial support for the budget.

The minutes of the Consultation reflect a lengthy listing of needs and issues arising from working groups at the Consultation. To prioritize such
needs and issues within a large group that was meeting for the first time proved very difficult. Basically, the concerns arising from the regions and from the working groups were referred to the future governing group. It is also clear from the minutes, and from personal recollection, that adopting organizational rules and decisions about membership on the governing body consumed major portions of time. The issue of whether regions would have equal or proportional representation on the governing board generated long and intense discussion both in the halls and in the hallways. The final resolution of this matter was to have equal representation from each region as well as equal representation between laity and clergy.

The governing board was to be formed by four persons each selected by their respective regions. The national assembly would elect the general officers of the organization. The regional representatives were as follows. Norte Central: Finees Flores, Carlos Tapia Ruano, Tito Mercado, José Velásquez. Noroeste: Josué Rosado, Noemí Díaz, Julio Gómez, Edmundo Morgado. Oeste: Adán Nájera, Elías Galván, Clifford Aguilar, Josafat Curti. Sur Central: Roy D. Barton, Mike Aviña, Lydia Sáenz, Joel N. Martínez. Sureste: Ornán Iglesias, Generoso Bringas, Manuel Viera, Hector M. Navas. Puerto Rico: Fernando Vásquez, Fernando L. González, Luis P. Sotomayor, Benjamín Rivera Belardo. The assembly then elected the general officers as follows. President: Josafat Curti. Vice Presidents: Finees Flores, Josué Rosado, Hector Navas. Secretary: Roy D. Barto. Treasurer: Luis Sotomayor.

No one who was in El Paso in 1971 could predict where MARCHA’s future journey would lead. Many of those who were here for the first steps are no longer on the pilgrimage with us. Yet, their voice and their vision, their hopes and their dreams have continued to find expression in MARCHA’s leaders to this day. MARCHA has directly and indirectly influenced every major step forward in Hispanic/Latino ministry over the last four decades. These include the establishment of the Ethnic Minority Local Church Missional Priority; the National Plan for Hispanic Ministry; the publication of the United Methodist hymnal, Mil Voces Para Celebrar; the achievement of Affiliated Autonomous Status by the Methodist Church of Puerto Rico; the election of Hispanic/Latino Bishops in the Church; the increase in Hispanic/Latino board and staff presence in the General Agencies; renewed cooperation with CIEMAL; and more recently, the Holistic Strategy with Latin America and the Caribbean.

Permit me now some reflections and commentary as I close: In San Antonio, in El Paso, and ever since, every time we gathered we experienced a homecoming. We have found home in a space where our personal and communal story is understood at a level deeper than words. We have enjoyed singing and praying, discussing and debating in our common language. This has been like home. But, as we can affirm again, it has always been deeper than words. In recent correspondence from Hector Navas, he expresses it most eloquently: “The greatest contribution of MARCHA to the Hispanic community and to the United Methodist Church was the creation of a space that nurtured the tangible yearning of the Latino soul. It provided the space
to express our hopes, hostilities, and dislikes without excuses or guilt of what we were feeling, experiencing in the United States of America.”

MARCHA offered a new future where the shared and often unspoken experience of oppression, and marginality became a source of unified purpose in changing the conditions that created it. The common experience led us to common cause (causa). It was a transformational moment, or it offered the transformational possibilities, if we would seize them. Again, I quote one of the original general agency staff persons who worked with MARCHA, Rev. Isabel Gomez of the General Commission and Religion and Race who characterized the San Antonio meeting this way: “It was a time of change social and cultural. A cry for justice in the schools, the cafeterias, on the buses and in the fields. In the midst of this turmoil, Metodistas wanted to be heard, ‘here we are.’ Leo Nieto, who had many contacts, invited me to the meeting of COHAM. It was like when Paul and Silas were in prison singing and praying—the ground shook, the locks broke, doors opened. We all wanted out. MARCHA was the door.” A future without the chains that bound us to being defined by others. A future without a “conferred” place determined by others. It was the moment to choose self-determination as the pathway to the future. MARCHA would become the school, the laboratory where we would learn, test, and experiment. The way forward would not be predictable but the direction would be self-chosen and not imposed. The door was opened and it was time to move out.

MARCHA also offered an expanded sense of “familia” which most of us had never experienced beyond our nationality or ethnicity or color. The variety and diversity of language usage within Spanish was a revelation, for instance. We became more conscious of how skin color was still an issue we had not faced and a blessing we were not fully embracing. And, as noted earlier, we were having to recognize and welcome the full gifts of the community in the participation of women, laity, and youth throughout the organization. The gift of familia, according to Consuelo Urquiza, the first female General Agency staff, was MARCHA’S most important discovery and legacy as we faced our future challenges.

MARCHA, as understood both within and without the community, was a movement, a caucus, not an official body of the United Methodist Church. This provided a freedom and options that were not available to the officially sanctioned bodies of the denomination. The question before us was whether we would become overly cautious and overtly institutional in our work. Most of the early leaders valued our identity as a movement: to move us from silence to become a prophetic voice, to move from preoccupation with ecclesiastical matters to social justice work in our communities; to move from dependency on institutional direction to self-determination in mission with our communities; to move The United Methodist Church more deeply into the mission with the Hispanic/Latino community as a priority commitment.

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8 Hector M. Navas, correspondence with the author (July, 2011).
9 Isabel Gomez, correspondence with the author (July, 2011).
10 Interview of Consuelo Urquiza by the author (August, 2011).