

**REMEMBERING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MY HOME CHURCH,
LA TRINIDAD IGLESIA METODISTA, SEGUIN:
PERSONAL MEMORIES AND REFLECTIONS**

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My earliest memory of going to church was walking across town, led by my grandmother, Isabel Gallardo Molina. She lived next door to us on Guadalupe Street on the West side of Seguin. She and her husband, Norberto Molina were leaders of La Trinidad Iglesia Metodista and she made sure that we, her grandchildren were in church every Sunday. We all sat with her in church until we were old enough to sit with our Sunday school class. That church became the center of our family's spiritual and social life and helped shaped me and provide moral foundations for my life, and eventually guided me on my personal and professional journey.

The church was located at 306 E. Gonzalez Street in Seguin, Texas. I remember it as a white wooden building with the main entrance at the front of the building facing the street. La Trinidad was established in 1905 under the pastoral leadership of Basilio R. Soto, Sr., who played an important role in the early days of the Maldonados at the church. As you entered the church, you would be entering from the back of the sitting congregation with the pulpit up front. I recall the squeaky floors, open windows, and large fans circulating the air from above. Sabas Guevarra, Jr., was the pastor when I was born in 1943 and Rev. Pedro Sanchez baptized me on May 27, 1945. The pastors while I was in Seguin that I remember were Eugenio Vidaurri and Jose Salas.

My Methodist roots go back to my great grandfather, Luis Gallardo, who was already a member of the Mexican Methodist Church when he immigrated to the United States from Mexico in the 1800s. He married Amada Gonzalez, who joined La Trinidad church in 1914. Likewise, my paternal great grandparents Jasper Suttles and Petra Ramirez were married by a Methodist minister, Elias Robertson, in San Antonio in 1886. However, my family's official relationship with La Trinidad in Seguin started in 1907 when Rev. Soto married my grandparents, Samuel and Emma Maldonado. That started the Maldonado family's Methodist journey. At the time, both sides of my family lived in the outskirts of Seguin in Guadalupe County. They were tenant farmers and came into town for Sunday worship and midweek services. The Maldonados dutifully baptized their children at La Trinidad Methodist Church. For over a century La Trinidad has been our family church, the roots and foundation of our spiritual life and moral groundings.

As I reflect on La Trinidad, I am drawn to think about how it was that

my ancestors came to be loyal members of La Trinidad Methodist Church, and the significance it had for our family and the other Mexican American congregants. Seguin was a segregated community in which the Mexican American population paid the social, economic, and political price that came with ethnic and racial segregation. My ancestors were children of immigrants and poor Mexican American tenant farmers. Certainly they, as well as most of the congregation at La Trinidad, were not middle class or among the elite. Their social reality was one of racial segregation and social/economic inequality. Their educational attainment levels were at the lowest among the population. Survival was a major endeavor.

My ancestors additionally lived among a population that was historically and culturally Catholic. The Mexican-American culture was heavily Mexican and its social and community life was shaped by the Catholic Church. Many social relationships were functions of the church. Needless to say, its religious life, activities, symbols were purely Catholic. The social and religious reality was that Mexican Americans were Catholic and Anglos were Protestants. Thus, for Mexican Americans to become Protestant was a major break with social and religious Hispanic realities, as well as a courageous step to join the ranks of the Protestants who were Anglos and perceived as the bosses of the oppressive economic and racial structures of the times. For many in the Hispanic community, to become Protestant was to abandon family and Hispanic community roots. Many converts to Protestantism were shunned and ostracized because of their conversion. Certainly, the Catholic Church led efforts to criticize these converts. Thus, La Trinidad members were Protestants within a historically Catholic population and they were Mexican American within a primarily Anglo, Protestant denomination. What was it like and what challenges did they face? Clearly, to take such a step to become Protestant was courageous within that historical and social context. In essence, to join La Trinidad Iglesia Metodista was to become a Protestant within a Mexican American Catholic community and a Mexican within the Anglo Protestant community.

Given the social and racial structures and dynamics of the times it is not surprising that in Seguin there were three Methodist churches. The First Methodist Church was the Anglo church. Wesley Chapel was where the Black population worshiped, and La Trinidad was the church for the Mexican Americans. At the times, we all thought that such separation was normal, even among Christians who shared the same beliefs and might call each other "brother or sister" in special circumstances. But that was the way it was then and how I first got to know and experience the Methodist Church.

Yet I give thanks to God for La Trinidad and all that it meant for my family and the other families of the congregation. La Trinidad played a very crucial role in the survival of its members in that historical context. As an ethnic minority church, La Trinidad made it possible for Mexican Americans to overcome many social and spiritual barriers that stood between them and the cruel realities of their social context. Below are several ways that La Trinidad, like many other ethnic minority churches, served marginal popu-

lations to gain their dignity, provide them meaning and purpose, and affirm their personhood and cultures.

At the core of the Methodist Christian message was that we were all children of God made in the Divine image. At a time when we were defined as “Mexicans” with features that did not reflect the normative Anglo model of blue eyes and blond hair, we were told that we were made in God’s image. Can you imagine that for those who were told that they were ugly or “less than” in their social context, La Trinidad taught them that they were created in God’s image? We were not ugly or undesirable! How could we be ugly when we are in God’s image? Every child was beautiful; every person was beautiful. Mexican Americans were created in God’s image!

And not only did La Trinidad preach that we were made in God’s image, but we learned that God loved us. Can you image such a message to those who were shunned and despised in their own communities? Instead of rejection and distance, we were told that God embraced and loved us. The message that God so loved the world, even for me and my Mexican American community, including my family and barrio, and that Jesus Christ gave his life for us was a powerful message of affirmation. We, the Mexican Americans, lowly in the Seguin social structures, were loved by God who gave his son for us. No other message was so powerful, uplifting, and affirming.

An important aspect of God’s love was God’s forgiveness. No matter my sin or wrongdoing, God was a gracious and forgiving God. Those in our community who had led difficult and problematic lives were offered forgiveness. The drunk, the gambler, the abuser, could all find cleansing in our church. La Trinidad represented a new beginning.

La Trinidad Iglesia Metodista was our world and the center of our social activities. When society told us that we were not acceptable and that we did not belong, La Trinidad offered a welcoming message. Rejection in the outside world where we had to learn to walk on the right side of the street, La Trinidad offered a place where we felt that we belonged. In the outside world we were denied service, but at La Trinidad we were served at the Lord’s communion table. La Trinidad was the center of our social world. We did not belong to country clubs, garden clubs, or other social groupings for other people with the right ethnic background. La Trinidad offered us a place where we were welcomed. At La Trinidad, we had the Methodist Youth Fellowship (MYF), “los Hombres Metodistas, Las Mujeres Metodistas.” The outside world told us that we did not belong, but La Trinidad told us that we belonged. To be able to say “I belong to La Trinidad” was empowering. La Trinidad offered a sense of belonging.

La Trinidad was our church. While the outside world told us that it was not ours, La Trinidad told us that it was our church. La Trinidad offered a sense of ownership. We could proudly say “La Trinidad is my church.” The church was where we celebrated key events such as weddings, baptisms, and funerals. But it was also where we celebrated community at church meals, youth events, and women’s gatherings. As our church, La Trinidad

was the center of our social life—especially since we were not part of the Anglo community and were shunned by the Mexican American community because we were Protestants. The sense of ownership was crucial for those with very little or had nothing at all.

An important role of La Trinidad was in building dignity among our ancestors. Most of our men worked as tenet farmers, digging ditches, and other manual labor, while our women cleaned other people's houses, took in laundry, or cared for Anglo children. In other words, we were the blue-collar laborers of the town, working with bent backs, straw hats, and rough hands. However, on Sunday mornings our women were Sunday School teachers and choir singers in beautiful robes. Our men changed from dirty work clothes to coats and ties and were the lay leaders, lay preachers, and officials of the church. La Trinidad offered dignified roles for our women and men. They became our role models. To the socially lowly, La Trinidad provided a sense of dignity and avenues for leadership.

La Trinidad offered our youth a place for socialization, leadership, and fellowship. Catholic parents would not allow their children to date Protestants in Seguin. Thus, Protestant youth had few places to socialize and play. La Trinidad offered the MYF, which became the social center of our lives. Friday night recreation was the most fun and extremely popular; many of these events served as opportunities where we could invite MYFs from neighboring towns to have a large social group. The MYF was where our Protestant youth could laugh and play, and even flirt without fear of shunning or criticism. The MYF organization which met every Sunday evening also provided our youth leadership development opportunities. The MYF taught our youth about business meetings, budgets, plans, and organization. Where else could a Mexican-American teenager experience being “president, secretary or treasurer,” or learn how to conduct a business meeting?

La Trinidad Methodist Church served another important role. It affirmed our Hispanic culture. While in the public schools speaking Spanish was prohibited, at La Trinidad we conversed, sang, prayed, and read the Bible in Spanish. The Word was proclaimed in Spanish. It hit me one day that God understood Spanish. In fact, God was multilingual! Spanish was not something to avoid, deny, or be embarrassed about. Spanish was a divine language through which we could speak with God and God could speak to us. In fact, it was at La Trinidad that I learned to read Spanish by following the hymnal as we sang, and followed the Bible reading in Spanish. To affirm our language and culture was a liberating and affirming message that instilled pride and joy in who were as Mexican Americans. And La Trinidad served as a place where this could be done, surrounded by family and friends.

La Trinidad was a church that read. We read the Bible in Spanish and its Sunday School classes all had study books in English. Church taught us that it was important for us to read. The pastor had a personal library with many books! Not surprisingly, I witnessed the first generations to complete High School and then the next generations go on to college. As I look back, many in my generation went on to college and became professionals. Many

of us were the first in our families to go to college. For example, La Trinidad produced several Methodist ministers such as Joel Martinez, Jose Salas, and me. In fact, Bishop Joel Martinez and others led the way to college and set excellent examples.

As I reflect on the significance of La Trinidad Iglesia Metodista in my life and the lives of my family, community, and ancestors, the more I am grateful that I had an opportunity to experience that small Mexican American church. Fortunately, La Trinidad is still an ongoing presence in the life of Seguin and many of its Mexican American residents. Unfortunately, La Trinidad is more of an exception today as many small towns have witnessed the closing of their Hispanic Methodist churches, especially in Texas and New Mexico. Whether due to financial or demographic changes, their closing is a loss for our Hispanic communities who in many cases are still in need for the message, welcoming, and affirmation that La Trinidad provided me and many others.

Gracias a Dios por la Iglesia Metodista La Trinidad de Seguin.