

I am an immigrant.

When I came to this country from Germany at age 5 I didn't speak a word of English. Yet, when I arrived, I was welcomed with open arms. Ok, so there was that one boy Frank Marshall in my fourth grade class, who used to go around calling me a Nazi. I pretended that didn't bother me, but it hurt. I guess it hurt because I couldn't understand how somebody could be so ignorant about my culture, and could care so little.

I guess I wonder if that's how the little Hispanic kid in my son's elementary school class feels today when people refer to his parents as "wetbacks." Or if that's how the little Pakistani boy feels when people call him a "camel jockey" (even though there aren't any camels in the village where he grew up).

You see, for the most part, I had a pretty easy adjustment to life in America. But I have always wondered how welcome I would have felt if my skin was brown.

I have a confession to make. When Randy first came to one of our staff meetings a few months ago to tell us that he had been approached by our District Superintendent about bringing in a part time Hispanic/Latino minister to start here in July, I said "No." Truth be told, I said, "No."

Now, mind you, I didn't say no because I think reaching out to our Hispanic brothers and sisters is a bad idea. I didn't say no

because I don't want to be involved in such a ministry. I didn't say no because I have issues with the language or culture. I said no because I wasn't ready, and because I feared our church wasn't ready.

See, we've been doing all kinds of things as a congregation to grow in mission and outreach. Our mission trip efforts have expanded and multiplied over the past several years. We have engaged in local outreach and mission to our community with backpack buddies, handing out water bottles on the bike trail, and many other projects. We've done a whole lot of things to move in the direction of becoming a giving, serving, and caring congregation.

So why would I say we aren't ready? Because this is different. To foster an effective Latino/Hispanic ministry we need to think differently. We need to have some deep and honest conversations in our hearts about who we are, who we want to be, and what it means to love my neighbor as myself.

See, this Hispanic/Latino ministry isn't about giving hand-outs to the poor. We are good at that. This isn't really about giving at all. This isn't really even about missions at all. This is about partnership. This is about brotherhood and sisterhood. This is about equality with all of God's children. This is about breaking down the barriers of the most racially and culturally segregated hour of the week in our country. Are we really ready?

I have to say I've been dismayed about some of the hallway conversations I've heard these last months. And mind you, this Hispanic/Latino ministry is not about immigration policy. I fully recognize and understand the need for a country to have rules and order about immigration, and I fully support the enforcement of all just immigration laws. That's the place and role of our government, and we are called to be bound by the laws of the land.

That's not what this ministry is about. This ministry is about Jesus Christ. I don't care if you are German or American or Guatemalan, or if you're being deported tomorrow or if you're being executed on Thursday. The love of Christ is available to me and to you and to all people.

Jesus reminds us that "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked." Why is it then that we who have been given so much live as though we deserve more, and those who are struggling to survive in a new culture are dirt to be trampled on. Friends, that doesn't come from God. We are all foreigners in a strange land, waiting to go home to our Father.

This is about people. This is about looking in the mirror and being able to honestly say, "I'm no better than this other person. We are both children of God. We are both created, sustained, and redeemed by the same God. We both go but by

the grace of God. There is no difference between us.” You see, until we can see each other as equals, our Hispanic/Latino ministry will be a miserable failure. Are we ready?

When Randy approached the staff about starting this ministry, I said to him, “I think we need another year.” I responded out of fear. You see, if I was Peter, and Jesus had asked me to get out of the boat I would have said to him, “Sure Jesus, I’ll do that. Just let me wait until winter when the water’s frozen, and I’ll be right there with you.” That’s not faith. That’s fear.

You see, if God had wanted us to start a Hispanic/Latino ministry a year from now, he would have sent the District Superintendent to us a year from now. But he didn’t. I don’t know or understand God’s timing, but I do know this. He doesn’t like complacency. Whenever I get too comfortable with my life or my ministry, God says, “Get out of the boat!”

“But God, I like my plan better. We take a year, we get our congregation ready to step out, we educate everyone on what a Latino ministry would look like, we do small group discussions... “

“STOP! GET OUT OF THE BOAT!”

Now, our new Hispanic ministry, while a meaningful part of who we might become, is but a small piece of who we already are, and what God has planned for us in the future. I’m quite

certain God has a number of “get out of the boat” moments in store for us just around the next corner.

But Jesus didn’t just call the church to get out of the boat, he called each of us to do it. And there’s never a shortage of opportunity. Stepping out of the boat means leaving my comfort zone, and stepping into the unknown in faith.

For some that might mean teaching Sunday school, volunteering for Vacation Bible School, or joining visiting shepherds ministry to visit homebound or hospitalized members. For some stepping out of the boat might mean leading a Bible study, or an English as a second language program. For some it might mean joining a mission team, or maybe finally starting to attend those AA meetings.

If you are comfortable, you are not growing. Let me repeat that. If you are comfortable, you are not growing. If the pew you’re sitting in is comfortable because the imprint of your backside is molded into the cushion from years of sitting in the same spot, maybe it’s time for a new perspective. Maybe it’s time to get up.

If we don’t step out of the boat and let God lead us as individuals, I can guarantee it won’t happen for us as a church. But if we do, then watch out world, SUMC is full of God’s people, and they are on fire!

As I look back over the last 6 years of ministry here at SUMC, I see a whole lot of places where God has pushed us out of the boat. The result has been explosive new energy and vitality in our church, an empowered laity, and a flurry of activity in mission and ministry. But God's not done with us yet. I look ahead and I see amazing possibilities for our 'church on the hill' to be a beacon to the world. And my vision ALWAYS pales compared to God's plans.

Over the past several years our church leadership has been engaged in a visioning process about who we are and who we might become. All sorts of exciting ideas have sprung forth from that process, and we've already begun to see the fruits of these ideas blossoming. Consider the ministries that have grown up around here in the past few years - WoRM Sunday school, overflowing VBS programs, mission trips, Wednesday Summer Worship services, musical productions, prayer quilt ministries, visiting shepherds, Crosswalk Wednesday Fellowship, and on and on. Our fall ministry fair is bursting at the seams each Rally Day as we kick off the new program year. Why, because the spirit of Christ is in our midst, and we are doing God's work.

But God is not about programs. God is about changing hearts. Our programs and ministries are but tools God uses to draw His children to Himself. Let us never forget that. We exist as a

church for one purpose - To help people experience the love of Christ. The church is God's people, living, loving, serving and caring together.

Our programs are but tools. And so are our finances, and so are our facilities, and to some extent, so is our staff. But that doesn't mean our tools don't matter. You don't cut down a tree with a butter knife. If we wear out our staff, if we fail to maintain our facilities, or if we squander our finances, we dishonor God. We are called by God to be good stewards of what he has entrusted us with, so that we make the best use of our tool chest to bring glory to His name. That is what our church leadership is charged with – to prioritize needs, wants, desires, goals, dreams and possibilities. And sometimes they need to step out of the boat. Believe me, I've sat through committee meetings over the years where our boat would have had to sink before we got out of it. But I'm pleased to say that is no longer the norm around here.

Now we're at a new crossroads. The old part of our building is close to 30 years old. The new part of our building is closing in on 20 years old. The facility has served us incredibly well, and SO MUCH ministry has happened here, so many lives have been transformed. But with growth comes change. What the builders of this facility envisioned could not predict where we are now, and where we are heading in the next 30 years. And,

praise God, we're alive and growing. You've probably noticed a lot of sprucing up around here with new ceiling tiles, new lighting, new tile floors in the classrooms, a renovated youth room, an expanded nursery, and the like. But we also need to plan for future growth. The other day I tried to schedule Gallihugh Hall for a Saturday morning in the fall. Did you know there were only 3 open Saturday mornings in the months of September, October, November, and December combined? Praise God! We've had to turn away building use requests because of space availability. As our ministries grow, our staff is deeply stretched, and needs to grow. Storage space is running low. Even the number of toilet stalls in our bathrooms is inadequate. Praise God!

Our challenge is to grow - not for the sake of having pretty bathrooms, but for the sake of meeting present and future ministry needs - so we can reach the next generation of people with the love of Christ.

So why build at all? Pragmatism. The reality is the first question a visitor asks isn't, "How do I find Jesus?" No, they ask, "How do I find the bathroom?" And if the answer is "Just down the hall, follow your nose." then the more important question may never come.

In the coming months you will hear about an upcoming capital campaign which is intended to address some of our present

and future facility and ministry needs. As we move forward with that campaign our leaders and our congregation must forge a plan (and then support it) that has the singular purpose of making our ministries, our facilities, our finances, and our human resources best positioned to bring the love of Christ to our world. Anything short of addressing all four of these areas and keeping the focus squarely on Christ will constitute a failure (even if the bathrooms are pretty and smell like fresh spring pears). After talking with each of our church leaders, and knowing their hearts, I know we are in for a splendid journey. You see, I know that our church and its ministries are directed by many men and women of God.

And our capital campaign must not occur in a vacuum. Vital and vibrant ministries are growing here. Dive in! Support them. Pray for them. Lift up our ministry leaders. Right now we're seeing tremendous energy in our evangelism ministries as we begin to move outside our doors. Our men's group is reaching out to some of our local elementary schools. Our fellowship committee is developing an extensive plan for member care and assimilation so that no one should fall through the cracks. Our Discipleship committee is celebrating the completion of the nursery, and is moving forward with WoRM curriculum development and room design. Our worship committee is offering us new experiences and opportunities in worship, and our missions committee is

bursting with ideas and opportunities. All of these ministry areas need folks who are willing to step out of the boat.

So what about you. Is that pew getting uncomfortable? I hope so. Are there too many white faces and not enough brown ones in this place? Are there still empty seats beside you? Does the church benefit from your earnest financial support? Does the staff receive your prayers and you energies, or do you just make demands on them without understanding their burdens? Do you come to church workdays? Do you volunteer to be in ministry?

Here at home and around the globe, we grow when we stretch. God does not want lukewarm complacent Christians. God does not want comfortable Christians. God wants radical faith, God desires for us to tell him our hearts and to come expectantly before him, knowing that he will grant all dreams made in His name. And maybe, just maybe, when you know you're doing God's will it will feel like you're walking on water.

Amen.