



Mi Gente... Presente?

Where are *mi gente*, my people? I had always wondered. Are they present? Are they making a difference in their *comunidades*? Or are the only ones on the frontlines of community activism and social transformation *los gringos* and black Americans? These questions plagued me for most of my college years.

When I was growing up, the mindset in my family's highly traditional and legalistic Latino church was geared for the most part toward "receiving the gifts of the Spirit," "becoming Holy," and "climbing the church ladder." The real world was outside the doors of the church, and, as far as I knew, good Christians—especially good Christian women—never ventured to do anything out there other than "save souls." All other activities were considered "out of order." Not many dared speak from the pulpit about the Latino condition; even fewer ever spoke about confronting systems. The church addressed the symptoms, never the root cause. That was not the church's job and most definitely not a woman's.

Then, years later, I made a discovery. Working in a popular Latino faith-based nonprofit, I met key Latina women in New York City who worked diligently from within their communities ravaged by despair, disease, death, and destruction. All were fueled by their common belief that God had a mandate for them specifically and an interpretation of the gospel that simultaneously called for the familiar vertical focus on being more like Jesus and a horizontal focus that sought to demonstrate Jesus' ministry as described in Luke 4:18-19—to preach good news to the poor, proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, release the oppressed, and proclaim

the year of the Lord's favor.

Contrary to what I had come to believe, *mi gente* were very much *presente*. I was particularly pleased to find that women were at the forefront of a number of contemporary models of social transformation in New York. I believe that these legendary women should be honored not someday but today. Like Oprah, who recently hosted a Legend's Ball in high style, I, too, would like to host a ball for these Latina women warriors, for their ministry of presence. More than recognition, these Latina legends deserve a thank you accompanied by donations, volunteerism, or, at the very least, a place on your Wall of Fame (if you don't have one, make one).

With limited resources, I use the means granted to me through this column to host a Latina Legend's Ball on paper. Here's my shortlist:

Rev. Leoncia Rosado Rousseau, known as Mama Leo, for coming to New York City in 1935 simply because she heard a "voice" while on a mountain in Toa Alta, Puerto Rico. Mama Leo birthed the Damascus Christian Churches movement and had a ministry to drug addicts that eventually brought some of today's greatest men and women of God into the kingdom, including Nicky Cruz, who went on to establish TRUCE, a worldwide evangelistic ministry, and Jim Jimenez, pastor of the Rock Church. Mama Leo found support from neither women nor her male counterparts, yet continued to minister until poor health subdued her.

Rev. Aimee Cortese, who, now 76, is pastor emeritus and founder of Crossroads Tabernacle in the Bronx and who withstood denominational baggage and male dominance to fulfill her call to meet the needs of her community no matter the cost. Today, with her son at the helm of the church she started, the community can enjoy the Boden Center for the Performing Arts, which features concerts, plays, and classes in dance, music,

and drama for neighborhood kids. Cortese remained a woman of character even when her own denomination asked her to leave (and eventually return).

Rev. Julie Ramirez, a fully bilingual, single female pastor who to this day is left out of most oral histories because she made her life outside of New York. Founder of Templo Fe in Hartford, Conn., she at one time had the largest AG congregation in the region, with no unemployed church members, due to her established relationship with Pratt & Whitney, a respected local enterprise. Ramirez founded her church with the help of a reformed prostitute in a refurbished Catholic convent. She once ran for a denominational position and lost (due to her gender), but continued without bitterness to serve her denomination and community.

"What good does it do to convert a million people if at the same time the devil unconverts 10 million through hunger, disease, and military dictatorship?" Manoel de Mello once asked. This question is at the crux of why these Latina women warriors became progressive Pentecostals. I am proud to say that these are *mi gente* and to acknowledge the fact that, no, Anglos and Blacks were never, and are not now, the only ones at the forefront of social transformation. My people have been involved in healing their community since long before I was born, and this generation will fight not just with the sword of the Spirit but also with the strength of their minds and the courage built up in them by the faith of Latina women warriors like those mentioned here, women who managed to be (and stay) *presente* even when no one wanted them to be. ■

Elizabeth D. Rios is co-pastor of Wounded Healer Fellowship in Pembroke Pines, Fla., academic advisor and adjunct professor at Trinity International University, founder of the Center for Emerging Female Leadership (www.cefl.org), and a doctoral student in organizational leadership.