

**Rev. Ray Rivera**  
**Latino Pastoral Action Center**  
**Address to the Lived Theology and Power Workgroup**  
**Saturday, April 20, 2002 Bronx, New York**

On Saturday afternoon, the Power workgroup visited Pastor Ray Rivera at his ministry center in the Bronx, the Latino Pastoral Action Center (LPAC).

Pastor Rivera began his talk by giving his personal journey, a combination of testimony and reflection upon many years in ministry. He was born and raised in East Harlem, which was the cultural center of Puerto Rican life in New York. His conversion came at age of 15 in a store-front Pentecostal Church, a process which began when entered a dance hall because he heard the music. He thought it might be a social club, but actually it was a Pentecostal service. Within the week, as he said, "I gave my life to the Lord". After that he began a rapid move into ministry. He soon attended a Bible institute, and by the age of nineteen he had his first pastorate. As he put it, "in indigenous Pentecostalism, one doesn't need lots of education, the idea was to give you the toughest pastorate, and if you made it you were called!" His first church went from 9 to 300 in about 6 years.

As with many Pentecostal pastors, Rivera was self-supported. His early ministry coincided with the war on poverty. He took a job organizing welfare folks, and got caught up in the 60's social movement. His life came to evidence a strange duality; he was organizing during the day, but at night telling his people to suffer now because heaven was coming. Of course it was difficult to explain to his congregation what he was doing when he got arrested.

Rivera characterized this period as a search for wholeness: "How do I get a theology that responds to both personal and structural transformation?" Through his ministry Rivera had seen the Lord change the lives of gang members and drug addicts. But he also needed to respond to a system that was robbing people of dignity.

So Rivera went to the New York Theological Center and ask to study with Bill Webber. The problem was that he needed a bachelor's degree to study, which he did not have. Rivera was able to convince him to let him study because, as he put it, "our churches are full and yours are empty." Webber essentially said "if you find me forty people like you, then I'll get Lilly to fund an undergraduate program." Rivera came back with sixty Pentecostals. The program was set up and Rivera received his first exposure to the liberal theological spectrum.

During his studies Rivera developed a reputation for knowing something about church growth and evangelism. As a result, a Reformed Church in America (RCA) consistory called him to serve as a consultant, and then asked him to be pastor of a dying Bronx church. In time he formed a Hispanic Council for the RCA. Within a few years, he was serving at the denominational office on the 18th floor of 475 Riverside Drive. For Rivera this was a new experience in the church, he didn't know denominations worked this way. To him it looked like a Fortune 500 company. As he described it "It was my submersion

into white America.” He ended up raising money and preaching in such different places as Sioux City, IA and Holland, MI. While he was received well, he could not help noticing cultural differences. Through this work he came face to face with the wider church and mainstream America.

This work did not blunt Rivera’s concern to combine Pentecostal piety with a social gospel. His ministry was a combination of evangelizing, altar calls, and raising issues of social justice at the same time. In communicating his concern for social justice, Rivera stated, “If these are people of the Word, have to use the Word -- not the language of Marxist analysis or revolution.” Militating against Rivera’s message was his encounter with American civil religion in the guise of Christianity, with America as the New Israel. Rivera describes this different gospel, “If you’re doing well, if you are part of the mainstream, then you’re okay, you are part of the covenant. But if you are poor, you are sinful. That I think is the dominant paradigm for how the dominant culture relates to the poor – and it works in both the liberal and fundamentalist ways of treating us as objects of mission.” It was illuminating for Rivera to meet folk who were still solidly evangelical, who believed in justification by faith, and yet held these views. He learned that people can be connected to God, and yet still be a racist; that ethics do not always cross over. As Rivera stated, “That is still the challenge of the church -- how to preach a gospel that personally transforms but also confronts the structures.”

After 10 years with the RCA, a personal crisis lead to his withdrawal from active ministry. He continued to work training people and organizing on educational reform. He also preached occasionally, and increasingly felt he should do more.

Eventually he founded LPAC in 1993. The goal was to help Latino and other congregations develop holistic ministries. He characterizes their work as Christ-centered and evangelical, but also involved in social and economic issues. A major part of LPAC is to provide technical assistance to pastors and thus to develop Latino leadership. Funding for LPAC came from the Pew Charitable Trust. The original proposal was to train 120 people in 3 years, and 10% of them would start holistic ministries. In the end 20% did so. Examples of such ministries are group homes and after school centers. In this way LPAC has spawned other organizations. Many others who went through LPAC training returned to their congregations and began to shift their ministries to be more holistic.

Pastor Rivera described the basic philosophy of LPAC: the local congregation, as “the body of Christ, is the instrument of change. This is so because the only things we ‘own’ are the indigenous churches. The board and personnel of LPAC is totally Latino. Again, this is a matter of trying to build around the infrastructure that was available.” At the same time, LPAC recognizes that individual congregations cannot do everything, so it sponsors various institutes and programs. Among these programs and institutes are:

***LPAC Individual Servant Training Program (IST)***

LPAC provides technical assistance to Latino and other urban churches or faith-based programs in the areas of strategic planning, nonprofit management issues and community

development. This program is called the Individual Servant Training Program because as a faith-based organization dealing with other faith-based institutions, what LPAC does comes from the biblical perspective of being a servant in God's kingdom. The LPAC IST program has three components:

- One-on-one site visits and consulting
- Custom Designed On-Site Training
- Telephone Consulting

***Association of Church-based Community Ministries (ACCM)***

ACCM is a network of over 55 organizations who have received technical assistance from LPAC or want to network with other church-based community ministry leaders. Membership is \$25. Members are invited to specifically designed workshops and an annual conference on parachurch or church-based community ministry issues.

***Center for Emerging Female Leadership (CEFL)***

LPAC believes in the equality of women. Due to this belief, LPAC began CEFL in 1996. It has now become its own independent organization, but it has an affinity with its parent organization.

***Pastoral Care and Counseling Program***

This program is a partnership between LPAC and the Blanton-Peale Institute of Religion and Mental Health, which provides an interdisciplinary holistic approach to the ministry of counseling for laypeople and clergy in the inner city. The program covers such topics as urban ethics and practices, psychology, sociology, theology and the educational ministry of the church. In addition, participants are supervised by practicing mental health counselors and professors and they attend peer group sessions to discuss current cases. The program is offered in both Spanish and English.

***Family Life Academy Charter School***

A charter school envisioned by LPAC has become a reality through a partnership with the Board of Education. Children from grades K-5 learn about character, family, and social justice issues in addition to a regular academic curriculum.

***Greater Heights Program***

This program helps young adults with college and career decisions as well as provides a late night alternative to the streets. It meets Monday through Thursday in the Urban Ministry Complex and offers seminars on college readiness, resume writing as well as recreational activities such as martial arts, dance and the arts. The recreational activities available to participants are as follows: dance, song writing (rap format), bodybuilding, game room (board games, pool table, etc.) and True Souls Cafe, a Friday night alternative to clubs. The target populations are youth and young adults aged 15-21. The purpose of this program is to educate youth on the various options available to them in college and career.

### ***New Hope After-School Academy***

This program is designed to give "new hope" to the residents of our community by helping them realize that they can achieve anything they want by doing their work, learning to read and so forth. It meets Monday through Friday after school and meals are provided. The program provides tutoring, help with reading (literacy), instills spiritual values to help them attain social responsibility, and allows for recreational events such as dance, choral, art, karate and a basketball clinic "after" all homework is done.

### ***Gang Intervention Project***

This special program works with youth gangs and high-risk young adults (those who have had one contact with law enforcement officials, are active in a gang, or are on the fringes of gang activity) by involving them in activities that keep them off the street. First time offenders are referred to us by the court system for community service.

### ***Crisis Care Counseling Center***

Trained pastoral care workers provide one-to-one crisis intervention and short-term counseling on the LPAC premises.

A turning point for LPAC came 6 years ago when their present building was donated. Of course, many issues have come with having a physical presence for the ministry, such as issues of maintenance. But it has given LPAC a community presence along with citywide face. On the evolution of LPAC, Rivera stated, "What makes it most exciting for me: we are unapologetically Christian. But people are not coerced – you can still get services if you don't come to the religious functions. But our work is relational. So people know that all we do is in the name of Jesus. LPAC could be seen as a regular community center, but there is a spiritual element. Staff members have to be a committed Christian or a committed activist." For example, most of the organizing around the Dialo case was done at LPAC. "You will find people here fasting and praying, but also protesting and organizing," said Rivera.

Rivera noted that many people ask what informs his work? He then related four principles by which the **LPAC model** is informed:

1. **Liberation.** This entails personal liberating experience in knowing Jesus Christ. But it also includes structural liberation. The Fall means that all structures are fallen, they oppress and dehumanize people. We battle principalities and powers. How do we convince our people? We teach that there is a political dimension to Jesus and the early Church, particularly when you examine the implications of the Church's confession that "Jesus is Lord." The Church couldn't say the Lord is Caesar. Proclaiming that was inevitably political. There are also Biblical examples for confronting power.
2. **Healing.** This is more popular now than when I was converted. I believe in healing, but taken holistically. My reference point is Isaiah 53. All are called to be wounded healers. It keeps you from being arrogant or paternalistic.

3. **Community.** The key here is the idea of *koinonia*. We are called to be the community of God -- authentic, knitted in love. But the purpose of the call is to serve. An example is Abraham. So *koinonia* is always for *diakonia*.
4. **Transformation.** We are called to be transformed into the image of Christ daily. It is a call to perpetual growth. We have to remember that we have never quite arrived at our destination.

Pastor Rivera is hoping to commit this model of ministry to the written word. He has been working on a book which he has entitled: "Doing Ministry in a Situation of Captivity." It would use the above model as a rubric for explaining LPAC's ministry to a community that often appears powerless.

Connected to this model Rivera noted what he terms the **four pillars of community life**. Each of these pillars taken together hold up the whole of community life, but in the community he serves, each pillar has been weakened. These four pillars are:

1. **Schools.**
2. **Family.**
3. **Community-based organizations.**
4. **The Church.**

The mission of LPAC is to strengthen and transform those pillars upholding community life. Only by working on all four fronts can LPAC hope to strengthen the fabric of community life for the people LPAC wants to serve.

In conclusion, Rivera reflected on the various stages of LPAC as a movement: restlessness, the definitive idea, establishing norms, and institutionalization. The greatest challenge to any movement is the last stage. The reality is that as a movement becomes institutionalized, it is the most dangerous stage, but also the most necessary stage. LPAC has also forced Rivera to reflect on the resources his own tradition brings to the challenges LPAC is confronting. As he put it, "Eventually I changed my mind about the Pentecostal tradition not having resources for structural change." There are ways in which it empowers his community to confront structural oppression. One of these ways is the way Rivera develops narratives taken from his reflections on Scripture to provide inspiration and a compass to his ministry. He compared his community and the work of LPAC to Daniel and the Israelites in Babylonia. Daniel and his community were in captivity. But Daniel was given a privileged position; he learned the ways and wisdom of the Babylonians in order to function in captivity. Yet he did so without renouncing his own community. The example of this was Daniel's stand with food and eating at the King's table. Rivera explained this as taking the tools of the empire, but not the food -- the sources of indigenous nurturing. The other incident that showed Daniel's allegiance was that of the statue of King Darius and the command to worship it. For Rivera this story reveals the truth that in the end, there is a price to be paid for access to the empire, whether or not to bow down to the idol. The goal is to maintain access for the good of your people without bowing down to false idols.