

A new way of doing Latino ministry...it's in a box!
By The Rev. Jon Musser

The TryTank team has just wrapped up another successful experiment, which offers some exciting possibilities for the future of congregational outreach and church planting among Latino communities across the Episcopal Church.

Called *Latino Ministry in a Box*, the experiment used multi-site technologies to launch Spanish-speaking services within congregations where such ministries have not previously existed. For many well-meaning mono-lingual English-speaking congregations who want to reach out to Latino communities in their context, the only option currently available in most cases is to hire a part or full time Latino missionary at an annual cost of anywhere from \$20,000 to \$50,000. By relying on a mostly lay-led structure, however, a full *Latino Ministry in a Box* kit will hopefully run around \$500 a year.

The kit, developed by the TryTank team, includes four component pieces for each week of the liturgical year: a video sermon specific to the week's lectionary readings, a leader's guide, a participants' guide, and a children's guide. By taking small systematic steps the aim of the kit is to launch and develop a sustainable Latino ministry initiative from the ground up.

For the experimental phase of the project, 8 congregations in 6 states agreed to participate, and 7 of the congregations followed the process through to its completion. The experiment began on March 13, 2019 – corresponding to closely to the beginning of Lent – and culminated on Easter Sunday April 21, 2019. Each site held six weekly bible studies on Wednesday and then organized a Sunday worship experience on Easter. In total, the 8 congregations engaged 246 participants, and 100% of the congregations reported that they are “extremely likely to recommend” the program to others.

“Everybody told me that people would never show up on a weeknight, only Sunday. I was prepared for 3 people max. We had 13 people!” reported the Reverend Nancy Frausto, Associate Rector at Saint Luke's Episcopal Church in Long Beach, California.

“They were newer people, and they formed a new community of newer members. They themselves told others in the congregation about the sermons and what they were learning. They were really paying attention. Of the 13-15, 11 have not missed a Sunday. And now they are becoming LEMs and invested in the Sunday liturgy. This was a great success for my community,” she continued.

Mother Frausto's observations tracked with the TryTank team's developmental process for this kind of ministry. The process is organized into a four phase trajectory of growth and development.

In Phase 1 the emphasis is on *Building Community*. For this phase the congregation appoints a bi-lingual lay leader to lead the initial effort and development process. This person is provided with advertising materials (flyers, Facebook and other emarketing tools) to promote a weekly Bible study to be held at the church. All members of the congregation are also encouraged to help get the word out as well.

In Phase 2 the emphasis shifts to launching and running the *Weekly Bible Study*. Each week the lay leader, using the leader's guide, facilitates a group reflection on the assigned reading (the following Sunday's Gospel reading) using handouts and a video message (or homily) provided by the TryTank team. The Bible studies last about an hour.

In Phase 3 the new community shifts to *Becoming a Sacramental Community*. Hopefully by this point the initial group has become a small community of 15 or 20 people (though the actual number will always depend on local circumstance and the discretion of the local congregation). At this stage the weekly Bible study can move to a Sunday time and become a worshipping community. The resources that the kit provides at this stage include worship bulletins formatted for a mostly lay-led service, the homily (using the same videos which had been used in the Bible study), and a phonetic Spanish guide for a local priest to use in saying the Eucharistic Prayer.

In the final Phase 4 the emphasis becomes one of maintenance and growth and becoming an *Ongoing Community*. At this point the new worshipping community continues to use the provided

resources to function. They can then, when they are ready, begin to offer additional ministries, like a new Bible study, during the week and continue to grow in the Spirit.

The Reverend Rock Higgins, Rector of Saint James the Less Episcopal Church in Ashland, Virginia reported success in his community and identified ways in which his new congregation is already looking towards growing edges in Phase 4 development:

“We loved the bible studies; the speakers were fantastic. That could be a Sunday sermon. They were very impressed with the high quality and production value... Moving forward what we heard was the felt need from the folks we connected with was ESL classes. We would try to couple this with that ministry as an entry into the church and then have this as a tag on. Maybe do a community dinner to practice English and right after inviting them to a bible study. We need to find that felt need to get people in the door.”

Ms. Sandra Martinez, a lay leader at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Pomona, California also reported success with the experiment in her parish. “I thought people were going to be more on guard because it was on a screen. Only one person mentioned that it would have been better if the person was there live,” she said. Looking towards the future, she is optimistic that if the experiment were to continue, “people would still receive it well. Even the new people who came and were first timers liked the video. With more time it would totally just become a normal part of the service. It doesn’t replace the rector (we still need somebody there) but for what it does (to help start or to help an English-speaking priest) it’s awesome.”

The experiment was not without its challenges. Some site coordinators reported cross-cultural difficulties like navigating cultural standards around timeliness, while others noted difficulties in facilitating bilingual communication and the challenge of being geographically isolated from the Latino community to which the outreach effort was directed. “Not that it surprised me but connecting with new people in the community who are not already connected to the congregation [was a particular challenge],” reported the Reverend Denise Muller, Assistant Rector at St. Luke’s Episcopal Church in Prescott, Arizona. “[We] went to local places where the Latino people go and gave out flyers and advertised on Facebook,” but in the end the program exclusively drew in people already connected to the parish. Overall, however, the participating congregations and leaders reported that not only was the experiment a success for the participants themselves, but it was often a positive growing edge for the congregations and leaders too.

Looking forward, TryTank’s task now is to determine how best to hand off the program so that it will continue to thrive and develop. The key conclusion from the findings is that the concept of a *Latino Ministry in a Box* is successful and repeatable in a variety of locations and contexts across the Episcopal Church. The experiment specifically showed that this ministry initiative can work both in large urban congregations that want to reach their Latino communities in a systematic way and smaller rural congregations that might not have the financial resources to do something on their own.

The key metrics for success going forward will be to sustain a large number of subscribing churches and a growing number of weekly participants. The number of subscribing churches will determine the overhead costs of production for the component pieces of the kit. A greater number of subscriptions translates to a more affordable resource. The TryTank estimates that 30 congregations each paying \$10 per week for the service would cover the overall cost of producing the materials. The number of participants will help to monitor and gage the continued success, quality, and relevance of the materials being produced. In the end result, the experiment was a by all counts a fantastic success and the possibilities for future development and implementation are numerous and exciting.