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# ***¿Sí Se Puede?* Immigrant-Led Political Activism in Charlotte, North Carolina: One Community Organizer's Perspective**

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My experience in working with the developing Latino community in North Carolina dates back to the early 1990s when I was a student at Guilford College in Greensboro. After having the opportunity to study abroad in Guadalajara, Mexico during my junior year of school, I returned to North Carolina with a new lens through which I viewed my state.

I no longer saw my surroundings in only black and white, but now in shades of brown. The Latino community was growing, and the major influx was by Mexican nationals who came to work in agriculture and decided to stay after the season ended. In Greensboro, I began to tutor a young elementary school student named Saúl from Veracruz upon my return.

Later, after moving to Durham, N.C. and beginning to work for a local non-profit organization, El Centro Hispano, I began to realize that individuals – primarily men – and increasingly families were settling in the major metropolitan areas of the state. My appetite for serving this community – out of being enamored with the people, the language and the culture from my time in Guadalajara – began to grow. It grew, however, in a way that I did not anticipate. I began to see firsthand the injustices that impacted my new neighbors; everything from inadequate housing to lack of communication at the public schools to discrimination at the social service agencies. I began to turn my professional interest to organizing as a means of working with others to create change around these social and economic pressures.

Currently, I am a professional organizer with the Industrial Areas Foundation (I.A.F.) and work with the I.A.F. affiliate in Charlotte, N.C. called Helping Empower Local People (H.E.L.P.). When I moved to Charlotte in the summer of 2005, I entered an organization that was historically biracial – White/Anglo and Black/African-American. This dichotomy resembled what I will call the “old Charlotte.” The “new Charlotte” looks much different, and because of my experiences – social, educational, and professional – with the Latino community, and because I am bilingual, I sought to expand the reach of our work.

It is important to understand the organizing philosophy of H.E.L.P. and the I.A.F., as well as the context of Charlotte, before describing the opportunities and challenges of organizing Latinos in this city and region.

H.E.L.P. brings together, trains, and organizes the communities of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County across all religious, racial, ethnic, class, and neighborhood lines, for the public good. We are the only organization in Charlotte-Mecklenburg that practices congregation-based community organizing.

In 1993, H.E.L.P. was formed by local Presbyterian clergy and the Presbytery of Charlotte, working with their brothers and sisters throughout the Charlotte faith community. These religious leaders created H.E.L.P. to be a vehicle to strengthen congregations and organizations, develop local leadership, and organize power to act on behalf of justice and the common good. We are known for holding public and private power holders accountable for their public responsibilities, as well as to initiating actions and programs of our own to solve community and economic problems. Since 1993, we have addressed environmental health and infrastructure of neighborhoods, youth employment, effective job training programs, affordable prescription medicines for senior citizens, democratic participation during election years, equality and equity in public schools, public safety, and issues impacting the quality of housing stock, vacant and substandard housing.

We are a multi-issue organization, with the issues coming from within our institutions, from the concerns of the people. We cross neighborhood, city, racial, religious, and class lines to find common ground and act on our faith and democratic values.

We organize power through hundreds of one-on-one relational meetings and ‘house meetings’, as well as through leadership development training sessions. We do not organize in an area or around an issue without having people who are affected by the issue in the leadership effort of that campaign.

H.E.L.P. represents approximately 110,000 people living in Charlotte and Mecklenburg County. By and large, they are segregated by race and ethnicity, as well as socio-economic status. This pattern of segregation extends across neighborhoods and segments in Charlotte, for example the West side is predominantly African-American with larger numbers of lower middle class to poor people; the East side is growing immigrant with pockets of African-American and Anglo people and is segregated by socio-economic status according to sub-division/neighborhood; the South side is largely upper middle class to upper class, predominantly Anglo with pockets of African-Americans; and the North side is racially and economically mixed.

The fact is that many people do not live, work, worship, send their kids to schools, or play with people who are very different than themselves. There are also a number of political divisions by race and ethnicity, where each group has their own advocacy organization, without anyone bringing people together for the common good.

Charlotte and Mecklenburg County is a rapidly changing area that is attracting native-born people and immigrants because of the relatively strong financial sector and the growing service sector. In the May 2007 edition of *Black Enterprise* magazine, Charlotte is the 7<sup>th</sup> most popular city in the country for African-Americans to live. In 2006, over 80,000 moved to Charlotte-Mecklenburg, specifically for employment or retirement reasons, and mostly from places like New York and Florida. Added to this is the growing influx of immigrants, with the highest concentration being immigrants from Latin America. In a very short period of time, roughly 15 years, Charlotte-Mecklenburg has gone from an Anglo/African-American community to a multi-racial and multi-ethnic community, where immigrants now make up approximately 17% of the total county population.

The story of Charlotte is one that reflects two cities. On one hand, it is a city of tremendous wealth, power, corporate influence, access to decision-making tables, and charitable giving. On the other hand, it is a city with a growing population of first generation, working-poor immigrants, in addition to an increasing population of native-born poor and working-poor people who are invisible to the extended community; a city where working families struggle to make ends meet; a city where middle-class households wrestle with paying their mortgage on time.

In 2005, roughly 2,900 households in Charlotte reported at least \$2 million each in liquid assets, while Mecklenburg County reported the highest rate of home foreclosures in our state (35 for every 1,000 filers). Yet, in this “World Class City,” there are an estimated 8,000 homeless people, including 2,500 school-aged children. While the “creative class” entrepreneurs launch new businesses, restaurants, and boutiques that are supported and encouraged by elected officials and corporate leaders alike, and built by hard-working immigrants, our Mayor, Patrick McCrory, spews xenophobic comments like, “While the city is willing to accept the labor of undocumented workers, it is reluctant to bear the accompanying social costs.”

Before I moved to Charlotte, I heard of the area being referred to as “The Great State of Mecklenburg.” Why? Charlotte is an interesting place to organize. It is the largest city in our state, in a county that flip-flops with Wake County as the largest county in our state. Over 610,000 people live in Charlotte, with estimates of 1 million by 2025. Yet, in other cities and towns around the state, you do not hear much about this metropolis.

Throughout its history Charlotte’s population has largely been African-American and White/Anglo; however, in the last 15 years the heavy influx of Latino immigrants has shifted the demographics. An estimated 100,000 Latinos, mostly from countries like Mexico, El Salvador and Colombia, live in Mecklenburg County; the 2000 census documents only about 60,000. There is also a growing Asian community (some 25,000 people), representing India, China, and Vietnam, among others.

Charlotte is the home of Bank of America and now Wells Fargo/Wachovia, two powerhouses that consistently rank in the top five banks in the world, in spite of the recession. Earlier in the year, Bank of America surpassed Citigroup as the number one bank in the world in terms of market value, and remains competitive with Citigroup for the top spot in terms of total assets. Within the next three years, Bank of America will permanently position itself as the largest bank in assets and market value. Charlotte has become the second most important financial center in the United States, behind New York, and will become even more important, both in terms of banking growth and the quality of life for financial service professionals – New York continues to be outrageously expensive to live and raise a family. As the recession settles, and the economy eventually starts to grow, I believe more financial service professionals will be tempted to move to Charlotte as they recognize that their families will have a high quality of life for less.

Because of the large financial services sector here, there is a more visible chasm between wealthy and poor people in Charlotte. For example, two local businessmen made the *Forbes* list of “World’s Billionaires,” which shifted from a list of millionaires in 2006 as Americans become more wealthy: C.D. Spangler (construction/development) and Bruton Smith (motor sports). Ken

Thompson (former CEO, Wachovia) and Ken Lewis (CEO, Bank of America) rank amongst the top 200 wealthiest CEO's in the country.

The corporate community has shaped and will continue to shape the course of city and county government decisions. From the 1960s and stretching into the 1990s, "the Group" that consisted of Hugh McColl (NCNB/Nations Bank/Bank of America), Ed Crutchfield (Wachovia), Rolfe Neill (Charlotte Observer), and others crafted their master plan for the city. Uptown Charlotte, with its high rise commercial and residential buildings, was created over dozens of breakfast meetings at Anderson's Restaurant and other eateries by "the Group." What I would call "the Charlotte way" of politics involved then – and to a degree still does involve – a small group of people with power (then, mostly White men; now, a mixture of race and gender), who met behind closed doors to decide the fate of our city and county. At one point 50 years ago, the entire City Council attended Myers Park Presbyterian Church. Now, with members of "the Group" either deceased or retired, we do not have an equivalent body. Our once locally-based and focused financial institutions are interested in the global market. The middle managers who have access to the CEO have become more important.

Our political leaders shape the landscape based on consent from the corporate leadership, rather than their imagination of what Charlotte can become. Democrats – historically perceived to be a party of reform – outnumber Republicans on the City Council, the Mecklenburg County Commission and the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education, but both parties maintain the status quo. Our city is led by a seven-term Republican mayor (Pat McCrory), who seems to be best known for his ability to land professional sports in the city and the stadiums/arenas to house them, as well as the NASCAR Hall of Fame.

Our public education system is the 23<sup>rd</sup> largest in the country, with more than 121,000 students currently, and another 53,000 expected to enroll by 2015. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) is best known for the landmark court case *Swann v. Board of Education* that set a precedent for school desegregation across the country, when federal District Court Judge McMillan ordered CMS to use all known ways of desegregating, including busing. More than 30 years after the *Swann* ruling, a new law suit was filed to challenge the ruling, and in 1999 federal District Court Judge Potter overturned the original ruling, citing that CMS had achieved a unitary status and did not need to bus students to achieve integration. This ruling set in motion a seven-year period of frustration in CMS, a growing push for neighborhood schools (resulting in a greater economic and racial divide by neighborhood), a series of student choice plans that attempt to cater to all households yet result in declining trust and participation in CMS by parents, and a decline in voter participation to elect school board officials.

In 2005-2006, the Foundation for the Carolinas spent \$500,000 to convene a group of 16 civic figures, mostly individuals with ties to the corporate community, to study CMS and make public recommendations to improve its future. Instead of a small group of corporate leaders meeting behind closed doors to make decisions on CMS, a 16-person body used a half-a-million dollars over 18 months to make some recommendations that other public entities had already discussed. This process added to the public's skepticism of CMS and the corporate community.

While organizing in Charlotte-Mecklenburg with immigrants to build power, I have focused my conversations within religious congregations, community-based associations, and social service agencies that serve the Latino community, speaking with religious executives, pastors and congregational staff, and lay leaders, as well as association and agency directors, leadership, and members. In order to organize power in the immigrant community of Charlotte-Mecklenburg, an emphasis should be placed on several key institutions, primarily the Roman Catholic Church, with secondary foci on mainline Protestant denominations (specifically the United Methodist and Presbyterian Churches), Pentecostal congregations, and tertiary foci on non-profit organizations, agencies, and community-based associations. This base faces many challenges and needs to be cultivated and supported in order to build power to tackle the changes that people express to me that they want, but are apprehensive to provide substantive leadership to create (i.e. addressing the increasingly abusive use of the 287 (g) law enforcement program by the sheriff's department, lack of communication between public schools and immigrant households, etc.).

Within religious congregations, the challenges revolve around staffing and personnel, institutional culture and member development/organization, and denominational and clergy leadership.

In terms of numbers of people to organize locally and regionally in the western half of North Carolina, the Roman Catholic Diocese of Charlotte is the largest population, compared to the other religious communities. They are the "sleeping giant." The diocesan boundaries stretch from the Greensboro/Winston-Salem area of the central Piedmont to the mountainous border with Tennessee. There are 46 counties within that area and over 400,000 Catholics that are registered with the diocese, with roughly 50 percent being immigrants. The growth and potential of this diocese lies directly within the immigrant population, as well as from those new parishioners who are moving to North Carolina from other once-heavily populated Catholic areas like Boston, New York and Chicago.

At the national level, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has endorsed a strategy called "Justice for Immigrants," in which they support a practical pathway toward citizenship for immigrants and comprehensive immigration reform. Locally, Bishop Peter Jugis expressed his support for this strategy through the appointment of a "local" coordinator (i.e. within the diocesan boundaries) – yet there has not been a ground-swell of support from the pews, mainly because there appears to be extremely limited interaction between parishes in Charlotte-Mecklenburg and the coordinator, who is based in the mountain region of the state.

Additionally, there is not a visible advancement of this strategy within the 10 geographic clusters of parishes, or vicariates, which form the diocese. In the Charlotte vicariate – the largest in the diocese – there is tremendous potential for the strategy to gain momentum because of the size and sheer numbers of parishes here that serve immigrants and their allies compared to other vicariates, the size of the immigrant population in this metropolitan area compared to other metro and rural areas in the diocese, and the physical presence of the diocesan leadership, offices, departments, and ministries. Yet, nothing appears to be happening. There is not a ground game strategy.

Furthermore, while Bishop Jugis signed a pastoral letter in support of comprehensive immigration reform with Bishop Michael Burbidge of Diocese of Raleigh (NC), the Bishop of South Carolina, and the Archbishop of Atlanta, the document is symbolic at best. The letter is clear on purpose, with the Bishops stating their urgency for parishioners to continue “working for comprehensive reform of immigration law through civil dialogue,” with “the Senate and the House of Representatives [collaborating] to produce a fair and just resolution to the situations that threaten to tear apart our communities.” The Bishops continue by stating that “enforcement-only measures do not realistically address the substantive issues facing our country.” This letter is a bold move, yet Catholics in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, regardless of race or ethnicity, are neither reading nor reflecting on this document, nor acting on it or using it as a practical tool for membership/discipleship development or evangelization. Without Bishop Jugis taking a more public and substantive leadership role with this strategy, the individual involvement and investment by the parishes in the “Justice for Immigrants” campaign is left to the discretion of the priest.

Overall, within Charlotte, the parishes are growing rapidly, but there is a deficit of priests to accommodate the growth. For example, at Our Lady of Guadalupe parish, there are three priests to serve a congregation of roughly 5,000 members, with one of the assisting priests traveling on a regular basis, in order to fulfill missionary requirements of his order.

To that end, with the discretion of participation resting in the hands of the priest, a majority of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg parishes serve a range of populations that span economic, geographic, and education levels, in addition to race and ethnicity. There is clearly a delineation of power within parishes with significant multi-ethnic/racial and immigrant membership, which in general appears to manifest itself in higher numbers of Anglos and/or African-Americans serving on governing councils and bodies for the parishes, creating in effect multiple congregations under one roof. For example, St. Vincent de Paul in South Charlotte is a mix of primarily upper-class, upper-middle-class and middle-class Anglos who are monolingual, with more middle-class and lower-middle-class Latinos who are largely monolingual, with a handful that are bilingual. The control in that parish appears to be with the dominant Anglo leadership, yet the parish celebrates multiple masses. Our Lady of Guadalupe parish, on the other hand, is an anomaly. It is one of the largest immigrant congregations in Charlotte – serving roughly 5,000 Latino parishioners each weekend, with their masses celebrated in Spanish. In December 2008, the priests began to offer mass in English for the first time in many years, yet the turnout was sparse and the service was cancelled.

While the Latino Catholic population is expanding rapidly in the Charlotte Diocese, increasing the potential to organize thousands of people, the mainline Protestant denominations with a presence in Charlotte-Mecklenburg are initiating Latino ministries in their respective geographic districts. In contrast to the Catholic community, the organizing potential for Presbyterians and United Methodist, for example, is in the dozens if not hundreds because of several factors. At the Presbytery of Charlotte, the fourth largest Presbytery in the United States, which serves 39,923 members in 133 churches in 7 North Carolina counties, the Rev. Dr. César Carhuachín serves as their Latino Coordinator. He has spent almost three years creating the infrastructure for this ministry, including the organizing of two congregations outside of Mecklenburg County in the Union and Cabarrus County areas. His recruitment strategies incorporate engaging potential

members around their language and other social and economic needs, in addition to their spiritual development. Dr. Carhuachín's patient and steady approach is establishing an important foundation for Presbyterian growth within the Latino, and potentially broader, immigrant community.

Nationally, the Presbyterian Church (USA) has a long tradition of cultivating ministries within the Latino immigrant and Hispanic-American communities. According to their website, the population is the third largest ethnic group in the denomination, and is represented by 330 congregations and missions in the United States, with more than 40,000 members.

The denomination has spoken out in favor of immigrants, immigration and refugee issues since World War II, and more recently in 2006 affirmed the need in this country for a comprehensive reform of immigration policy. Locally, the Presbytery of Charlotte took a courageous step forward by initiating Latino ministries, possibly in an attempt to lay the foundation for expansion as newcomers arrive to the area. From the outside looking in, there appears to be support for Latino ministries within the denominational office and within selected congregations, however the challenge remains that Presbyterianism is not the religious tradition of the new immigrants to Charlotte-Mecklenburg, and unlike the Southwest United States where multiple generations of Hispanic-American Presbyterians shape the church, North Carolina Latinos are still first generation. Additionally, in a similar way to the Catholic "Justice for Immigrants" campaign, there is not an apparent plan by the Presbytery of Charlotte to move the provocative and valuable information in support of immigrants and immigration issues that was adopted by the denomination into the pews at the local level.

The effort that Dr. Carhuachín has been charged with building is still in a development phase, with smaller numbers of people participating in activities. The moral support and financial support, at least in terms of his position and some operating funds for the ministry, remain. Time will tell how this ministry will take shape. As the Latino immigrant population grows, will the Presbytery of Charlotte increase its staff and programming to respond to the growth? Will national denomination leaders invest more time and resources to local ministry? Will non-immigrant Presbyterians, especially African-Americans, embrace increased support for this ministry?

Within the United Methodist Church, there appears to be a fluctuating position on the desire to nurture and develop Latino ministries, specifically within the North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church (Western NC, from Charlotte going west). While the conference serves 293,772 people within 1,126 congregations from Greensboro, NC west toward the Tennessee border with North Carolina, it is unclear how many members are Latinos. According to the Western NC Conference website, 10 out of 14 districts, or geographic clusters of churches throughout the conference boundaries, are active in some ministry to the growing Latino community (i.e. English as a Second Language classes, music, worship, etc.).

At a meeting I convened with eight pastors from six congregations, they told me that the issues most impacting the community are: (1) Comprehensive Immigration Reform, (2) English language and Spanish language training, (3) Citizenship preparation, and (4) Voter Registration. While they clearly identified the needs, the pastors have not put substantive leadership toward



addressing the concerns, with exception to English language preparation that is coordinated in Mecklenburg County through the Hispanic Ministries program that is lay leader driven and operates within multiple Methodist congregations in Mecklenburg. Given the small size of their congregations, they do have enough people power to weigh in with authority at denominational assemblies and meetings. With the arrival of a new executive in 2008, Bishop Larry Goodpaster, there is tremendous potential to position Hispanic Ministries on his priority list and expand the ministry with his support.

Within the three denominations – Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, and United Methodist – there are a couple of common themes emerging that relate to the support of immigrants. First, religious executives, clergy, and lay leaders who are interested in supporting immigrant parishioners and the broader immigrant community must invest more in community organizing strategies to assist immigrants in building relational power to achieve solutions to their concerns, not simply creating and managing programs and services. In my conversations, it is clear that a growing number of people want to support immigrants, but because of their daily responsibilities and the complexity of issues facing immigrants, they do not have strategies in place to pragmatically and prophetically do this. Community organizing offers these leaders the chance to identify and cultivate the talent, both immigrant and non-immigrant, that will learn the principles of community organizing, therefore building a sustainable set of relationships and in turn a viable and vibrant ministry to address a broad range of issues.

Second, by investing in congregation-based community organizing, religious congregations and denominations increase their role, responsibility, and relationships in shaping in public life. There is an opportunity to work directly with professional organizers and broad-based organizations like H.E.L.P. to expand their range to craft issue campaigns that publicly tackle social and economic pressures that they and their congregants feel daily. These leaders will be able to prioritize their time according to the level of relevancy and priority of the current issue campaign to their self-interest. They can then build a broader base of congregational support to tackle the agreed-upon issue, which takes the responsibility off of individuals and puts it on a collective agenda.

The Latino-led community-based associations and non-profit organizations that I have come to know face a number of challenges. First, they have no true membership base that they can organize. Second, they provide services and spend more time thinking about the continuation of providing services – reacting to the daily, sometimes hourly, needs of the community – than addressing root causes of issues. A major question they face is, can they develop an organizing component of their work, so that they can provide the necessary services to address symptoms while organizing people and institutions to address the causes?

Third, these community-based organizations focus heavily on their programming, which serves to educate the community on a range of issues, but they limit the possibilities by defining the relationships in “client-recipient” framework. For example, on one occasion, the Latin American Coalition organized a workshop at Hickory Grove Baptist Church – a congregation with a large and growing Latino membership – with the Immigrants Legal Assistance Project of Legal Services to talk about immigrants’ rights, with some discussion added about drinking and driving to fulfill a grant obligation. More than 100 people attended. It was a good session, full of shared

information and many questions answered, yet there was nothing to connect participants to public life organizing – the daily exercise of building public relationships with public sector government and private sector industries to create opportunities to act together and shape how decisions are made about their futures – and the participants left.

As an organizer, I would have done something different with this session. First, rather than extend a broad invitation for the program, where I did not know who would attend, I would have instead held a series of one-on-one conversations with members of the Latino community through my established relationships (i.e. churches, soccer league, etc.). I would have asked my contacts what they were most concerned about as it relates to their rights as immigrants, and if they have other friends and family who feel the same. I would have built the educational workshop with the lawyers and community leaders around the direct stories and concerns of the people with whom I spoke, and then I would have crafted the agenda with a group of potential participants and the legal staff, in order to create momentum for the event. Knowing that part of the evening would entail information about drinking and driving, I would have engaged other members of the community who are interested in this issue to attend and bring others they know to attend. Following the educational and “question-and-answer” sessions, I would have broken the group into smaller groups to have conversations on what specifically concerns them about their rights as immigrants and/or drinking and driving. As part of the small group conversation, I would make sure that participants were asked if they were interested in investing their time to publically tackle these issues with other attendees. Finally, I would have set a series of follow-up one-on-one meetings with selected participant leaders (i.e. people with networks who brought those people to the meeting) to ensure future action around those interests. I would create a framework where reflection, action, and evaluation amongst the participants is constantly occurring, leading to a specific systemic change and creating new leadership talent.

Finally, there are many fledgling community-based organizations or associations that are full of organizational development needs, from staff development to board development to fundraising. Their fragility stems from their inability to stop reacting to daily emergencies. The talent exists within the groups, but they need to map a course toward stability – funding, infrastructure, staff, and programs – and make it happen. These groups are similar to what I experienced as a staff member at El Centro Hispano in Durham in the late 1990s, working out of the church basement with a bunch of committed, young staff – a mixture of idealistic *gringos* (me included!) and energetic new-comer immigrants, who worked long hours, tried to be all things to all people and hustled to keep the organization afloat. The difference between El Centro Hispano and the fledgling Charlotte organizations is that we, then, decided to attack the causes of the symptoms we covered with band-aids each day.

Since September 2008, with support from local and outside investors, we were able to hire a full-time Latino organizer, who is bilingual and bicultural, and who has organizing experience from his home country of Honduras. Because of his work, we have started to organize a set of relationships within over 25 congregations, associations, and organizations. Having a Latino organizer has taken the potential for our work to a higher level, one that we might not have achieved if we only had a bilingual, non-immigrant organizer.

The leadership of these institutions is talented, yet raw. It has tremendous potential and must be nurtured to strengthen their understanding of politics and their political judgment, their understanding and practice of the principles of community organizing to achieve social change, and understanding how to build effective relationships with non-immigrants to tackle common social and economic pressures.

Since we started organizing with the aforementioned institutions, the participants and active institutions have grown with each meeting and/or training session. During our first meeting, which was exploratory to see if representatives of local Latino churches and associations wanted to build a broader network for community action, only seven people attended. My colleagues and I believe the low participation was due to several factors. First, civic engagement and organizing is not a habit of the local immigrant community. Second, there is tremendous fear in the immigrant community to act publicly to discuss and address issues of concern. Finally, there is too much dependence by the broader Latino immigrant community on specific representatives – so-called spokespersons for the community – to address common issues, which decreases collective participation.

Gradually, persistently and patiently, we have increased the interest. At our last large gathering on March 21, 2009, close to 300 representatives from over 20 institutions came to the Pentecostal church Lirio de los Valles, a congregation that has become increasingly invested in our organizing efforts over the last 6 months because of our intentional interest in them and their members, specifically related to their concern for driver's licenses for undocumented immigrants and the "287 (g)" law enforcement program. Based on my own experience, it is rare for Pentecostal churches to become involved in this type of community work for several reasons, most prominently due to the involvement of Catholic parishes. Nevertheless, under the leadership of their pastor, Mariano Guzmán, the members of Lirio de los Valles are continuing to be active participants. Hopefully, their investment in community organizing will grow, sparking further interest and participation from other Pentecostal congregations.

At the March 21 gathering or assembly, a multi-issue action agenda was ratified, focusing on concerns like (1) comprehensive immigration reform, (2) driver's licenses for undocumented immigrants, (3) access to health services, (4) access to education, and (5) the "287 (g)" law enforcement program.

Overall, I observe several challenges for on-going organizing in Charlotte-Mecklenburg:

1. Latino-led, community-based organizations provide a variety of services and programs to a multitude of people, but have no membership base. Active membership needs to be cultivated, equipped, and nurtured through local community training, action, and evaluation.
2. Latino-led, community-based organizations are more focused on impacting immigration policy than on improving policies that impact immigrants (and others). There is tremendous potential through our organizing work with local organizations and congregations to focus on improving a multitude of policies that impact immigrants, while the national political landscape and the Obama administration begin to advance the issue of immigration policy reform.

3. Latino-led, community-based organizations are heavily influenced by the Latino media – the idea of appearing regularly in the media is viewed as the ultimate level of success, especially by fledgling directorships. The relationships with local Spanish-language media need to be built, but in a way that is reciprocal. The Latino newspapers appear to be overly focused on gossip, rather than news reporting.
4. The Catholic Diocese of Charlotte and local Catholic parishes with larger Latino congregations are not focused on increasing immigrant civic participation, compared to their counterparts in the Catholic Diocese of Raleigh – Bishop Michael Burbidge of Raleigh took a proactive stance last year when he organized all of the parishes in the 54-county Diocese to read from the pulpits during worship his pastoral letter supporting comprehensive immigration reform, and then following worship asked parishioners to sign letters of support for the reform while providing them with the phone numbers for our North Carolina Senators and Congressional Representatives. While this was an impressive action, more can be done at the parish level and above. One step that Bishop Burbidge, with Charlotte Bishop Jugis, took was to launch Catholic Voice NC, a website that connects their interest in a variety of important Catholic issues, like immigration, to the legislative process. To that end, both dioceses have hired a full-time lobbyist to keep track of legislation in Raleigh at the State Capitol.
5. The United Methodist and Presbyterian denominations have fledgling Latino ministries that are more focused on developing congregational infrastructure. For H.E.L.P., we have a chance to engage these ministries to understand and practice congregation-based organizing at an early stage in their development, positioning the principles of organizing at the cornerstone of their ministries.
6. There is a tremendous amount of fear in the Latino community now, due to the anti-immigrant climate, the increased activity of the Mecklenburg County Sheriff's Department to work with the local I.C.E. staff through the highly publicized program known as 287 (g).