

Penny Sisson
St. Peter's Episcopal Church, Hispanic Ministry – Oxford, MS
* * *

Date: April 2016

Location: St. Peter's Episcopal Church – Oxford, MS

Interviewer: Katherine Aberle

Transcription: Margaret Gaffney

Length: Thirty-four minutes

Project: Latino Memphis & Oxford

START OF INTERVIEW

[Transcript begins at 00:00:13]

[00:00:13]

Katherine Aberle: What is your full name?

[00:00:14]

Penny Sisson: My name is Penny Sisson.

[00:00:19]

KA: What is your occupation?

[00:00:23]

PS: I am a retired Spanish instructor at Ole Miss, and I'm a vocational deacon in the Episcopal Church.

[00:00:37]

KA: What is your educational background?

[00:00:41]

PS: I attended Ole Miss as an undergraduate and with a double major in Spanish and Math. And then I attended graduate school at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill and the University of Mississippi.

[00:00:58]

KA: When did you start getting involved in the Episcopal Church in Oxford?

[00:01:05]

PS: Well, I was born into the Episcopal Church. And then my husband and I moved here, to Oxford, in 1979. And I've been active in this particular parish ever since.

[00:01:23]

KA: Where did you grow up?

[00:01:25]

PS: I grew up in Grenada. Just fifty miles down the road.

[00:01:34]

KA: When did you learn Spanish?

[00:01:39]

PS: I took Latin in High School, and when I came to Ole Miss, I needed to have a language, because I was in Liberal Arts. And I chose Spanish, because I knew that my future husband was going to work in Latin America, and so I decided Spanish would be the language. And I enjoyed it so much, I decided to have a major in that.

[00:02:07]

KA: Do you remember, growing up, what you thought about Latin America?

[00:02:19]

PS: Probably not much. I doubt that I really knew very much about Latin America other than what we studied in Geography. I had never traveled very much... I'd been to Texas (*laughs*). But not to Latin America. So, I really didn't know very much about it.

[00:02:47]

KA: When was the first time you traveled to Latin America?

[00:02:52]

PS: Well after I married, I stayed in Grenada, and taught. I was teaching when I got married in December and so I finished the year, and I flew to Mérida in the Yucatán in Mexico, to meet my husband. And then we lived in the ruins at Palenque for the rest of the summer before going to North Carolina to graduate school. So that was my first introduction to Mexico

and Latin America.

[00:03:26]

KA: Were you fluent by that point? When you first went?

[00:03:30]

PS: Not really. I knew my grammar, and I knew some vocabulary, but being the good student that I was, I was worried about making a mistake, rather than communicating. And so, I didn't communicate very much with anyone in the beginning. But as the years went by and I went back to Mexico, I think that's when I learned a lot my communicative skills.

[00:04:04]

KA: When do you first recall seeing a visible community of Hispanics in Mississippi?

[00:04:23]

PS: Well, there weren't any [Hispanics] in Mississippi when I was growing up. Or very few, so that they probably were invisible. The first time I noticed a growing population was probably in the early 90's. I was teaching English as a Second Language over for the public school district, and none of my students were Spanish speakers. They were all Arabic and Chinese speakers. So, I was a little disappointed, I wanted to use some of my Spanish with the students.

And then probably in the late 80's or early 90's, I began to notice a large influx of Hispanics. And that's when I started thinking about Hispanic ministry. Trying to reach out to this growing population, and with the idea of helping them become incorporated into the community. I really believe that problems arise in areas when people feel isolated and not part of a community. So, I'd go to people and some priests and some other people and say, "Oh, I think we need to start a Hispanic ministry." And they would say, "Oh no, we don't. We don't

have enough people.” And, *finally*, eighteen years ago, I went to the priest, the local priest, and his wife joined me, because by then she was the new ESL teacher in the public schools. And so, we convinced him that we needed to begin a ministry here.

[00:06:09]

KA: What year did you first begin [the Hispanic ministry in Oxford]?

[00:06:13]

PS: This is our eighteenth year that we’ve had a ministry. We started with a worship service, and an English class. I often tell people if you want to start something like this, start with an English class. Or start with a worship service, if you can. We were just very fortunate here, that we were able to start both at the same time, but that would be a little bit unusual. And because it's a university town, we had more resources than a lot of towns around.

[00:06:51]

KA: How did you get the word out that you offered this?

[00:06:55]

PS: We made circulars. And we took them to laundry mats. We took them to service stations. In those days you could put circulars up on the window at Kroger, the grocery stores, and at Wal-Mart. I don't think you can do so much of that any more. But that's what we did. We started with laundry mats because we had seen a lot of people going in and out of laundry mats. And so that's where we put our things up. And then the priest's wife, who was the English teacher let all the parents know. All of her students knew and so they came. We offered it and we came, they came, and the St. Andrew's Methodist Church helped us, and First Presbyterian Church helped us, and OU Methodist helped us. And we started the worship service. We had English class, and a coffee hour, dessert hour, after the service. And the Methodist Church, St.

Andrew's Methodist Church, bought the songbooks that we have. And that was a big help. And then one of the women over there started organizing people for refreshments after the service. And the refreshments have grown into dinner. This year, this Spring, has been the first time that we are doing the refreshments on our own. For the first time. Because other churches have gone to some other ministries.

[00:08:49]

KA: Beyond this service, would you say that the Latino community is a part of the Oxford community, which I think most people probably see as on the Square, campus...?

[00:09:13]

PS: Not on the Square. You don't see many Latinos on the Square, other than students and faculty. You would see that group of people, but some of the other folks, you would not see on the Square. I think we've tried to introduce people to the community so they know how to access services, like the WIC program, the ER. I discovered that some people will go to that underground parking lot at the hospital when there's a tornado warning. *I had never even thought of doing that...* which is kind of interesting, I learned that from the Latino community.

They do participate in the soccer league. There is a soccer team and I certainly didn't help anybody do that, because I don't know anything much about soccer, so...they're being incorporated into a variety of things here, a lot of it is with the help of others.

We've run legal workshops here with the help of Tommy Rosser, who is a lawyer in town, who is completely bilingual and his specialty is Immigration Law. There's some other lawyers in town who have stepped up and wanted to help the Latino community, which we really appreciate.

A lot of the women have gotten jobs in homes, helping folks. And I know there are certain people in the town who have been very helpful - word of mouth and finding people jobs.

We've run some bilingual family literacy programs, funded by the Mississippi Humanities Council and the Mississippi Arts Commission. Here and at the library. Those have been very successful. We started a program called Luciérnagas, based on a little book about fireflies. And that program has gone all around the state. A lot of communities are doing that program that we started here. So that has been a way to incorporate people into the library system, because in most towns that program is held at the public library. So that's a good resource for the community and everybody knows about it. People have library cards. They know that they can go and use computers at the library. So, that's been very successful.

There's a physician in town who was, who *is* a member of this parish, and he began a monthly medical service here. And did that for a long time, he was working at the ER at the time and said he wanted to have some family history available to him, because when people came to the ER, he wanted to know something about them. So, he did that for a number of years and then he established a clinic in town. Dr. Fowlkes. And that clinic serves people without asking for insurance, without asking for citizenship status. And that's been very helpful to the Latino community.

[00:13:10]

KA: The immigrant and Latino population throughout the country is disproportionately lower-income earners. I'm sure you have programs to help the less monetarily fortunate in Lafayette County.

[00:13:42]

PS: Right.

[00:13:43]

KA: I'm wondering if you've seen much of that economic struggle among the Hispanic community here and participation in those programs

[00:13:55]

PS: Early on we introduced everyone to the places where clothing is available at a lower price. We did that intentionally, we went shopping together. For one of the early things, somebody was having a Quinceañera, and we wanted to help the family find some clothing. And so, we knew that there are some places here that sell clothes that are gently used, or not used at all. Sometimes you'll go in these places and the tags will still be on the dresses that students bought and then didn't use. But then sold them to these places for money. So, we introduce people to that resource and we outfitted the whole family for the Quinceañera there. That was in the early days. We also, a lot of people bring me clothing to give to other people. And so, I would let that group of people go through the clothing, or just take it to sell at a flea market or something.

Recently, you know, there's been the influx in Memphis and so a lot of people in Oxford access the ministries in Memphis, and that's been a helpful turn of events.

Panera contacted and for the last year, at the end of the day, they give away food that is left, that they have. On Saturday nights, they give the bread to St. Peter's for the Latino community. My husband and I went the first night, to get it. After that, though I asked if there was a family who would do that. And there was, and so they get the bread on Saturday nights, they distribute to people they know in the community and then they bring it here and distribute it

on Sunday night. So, everybody takes bread home. And that's a big help when you're shopping for meals.

I already mentioned the clinic. Dr. Fowlkes' clinic helps with medical care. But in the early years that, I spent a lot of hours at the health department, waiting for a doctor to see people. And introduce people to the WIC program. So the health care has been helped. Interfaith. Everybody knows about Interfaith now, and if a Hispanic person comes in to Interfaith, a lot of times Lena Wiley will call me, and ask for help with rent. Or electric bills. Or doctor's bills. Things like that. And I know that she calls some other people in the community when she needs help because she knows who is interested in helping this group of people in our community.

I don't think a lot of people use the Pantry. I don't get the feeling that a lot of people do. Back when we had that program where you could get the boxes of food, and then you paid for it up front and another church was distributing it. They used that service, but I don't think we have that in Oxford any more. As far as I know, we don't. But we do have More Than a Meal that operates during school and a lot of Latinos go to that. The people who come here on Sunday nights have a free meal. We don't look at it that way, we look at it, at it as a fellowship hour, but it is a meal if someone needed one. And then we almost always have leftovers and we don't throw those away. People carry the food home with them.

[00:18:34]

KA: How do you run the Spanish service? How does it work?

[00:18:39]

PS: Oh, OK. We have the service every week. We've cancelled the service once or twice when my husband and I were going to be out of town, or the priest couldn't come. Or all

three of us were going to be out of town at the same time. We used to have another person who helped, who was bilingual. But he died, and so he's not available. My husband and I can do a service. We wouldn't do Communion, we would do Evening Prayer. We have another priest here who can speak Spanish who does either. And the college service. And the other ones do *not* speak Spanish. Though sometimes they have been willing to help and we've actually done services where the priest spoke English and we responded in Spanish. And surprisingly it worked. Though...it was kind of interesting to see that happen. Then, I play the piano, but I have two other people that if I can't play the piano, I call them, and they are happy to do it. So, we have that help too. We meet every week at six o'clock, we used to meet at seven, but when the college student back to, service, backed up to 4:30, we backed up to six o'clock and that's been very nice to get out a little bit earlier. And that's the only service we offer on a regular basis.

We've had a number of Quinceañeras, we've had some weddings, we've had funerals, we've had many baptisms. A couple of Confirmations and receptions. So those are special services and, and as you can imagine, attendance really goes up high when we have a special service. We have a service for the Virgin of Guadalupe Day, December the 12th. Sometimes, if it falls on a weekday we change it to Sunday. We'll observe it on Sunday.

The last two years, we found a group of young people in Pontotoc who were learning traditional dance and they wear traditional garb. And we've invited them to be a part of that celebration. They do one little presentation of a dance in the church proper, and then after the service, we go down to the parish hall and they dance for us. And I think that's real important because someone in Pontotoc saw the need to teach them something about their tradition. And

so, we applaud her work and we like to have them come up. It's delightful to see them.

[00:21:36]

KA: Do you know if most or any of the Latinos that come are Catholic? Are they traditionally Episcopalian?

[00:22:00]

PS: They're not traditionally Episcopalian or Anglican. They are probably culturally Roman Catholic. But probably not practicing. Or they would have found their way to the Roman church when they got here. And they didn't. So, the interesting thing is I know that one family, who started coming here early on, were Methodist in Mexico. They're the only family that I know was. It's changed a lot. Some of the people in Oxford and Lafayette County have gone to the Roman Catholic Church when they had a Spanish service. A lot of people on the campus, of course, who are completely bilingual go to the Roman Catholic Church to the English service. Then some people went up to North Oxford Baptist Church for a while, and there was a service there.

I helped start a service over in Batesville for the Baptist church because I thought it was important. They were the group of people who wanted to do this, and so I was involved in beginning that ministry over there. So, some people from Oxford drove over to Batesville to the Baptist church for a while.

Then, in recent years, in the last, oh, I'd say five years, the Evangelical movement has been very popular. And, it started off with one group, and I think there may be three now. Spanish speaking Evangelical groups in Oxford. And, of course, they are growing by leaps and bounds in Latin America. And seem to fulfill a need for the community. So, I know

that that's happening.

[00:23:07]

KA: Do you think there's steps that need to be taken [to better serve/include the Hispanic community]? Obviously, there's a lot of rhetoric right now that's not so friendly towards immigrants in particular?

[00:24:42]

PS: There is a feeling in this town. I know some people who are strongly opposed to this group of people being in town. The interesting thing that I always point out, if you gathered everybody up and sent them away from Oxford, our restaurants would probably close. Nobody would be able to take good care of their lawns, because many lawn services use Hispanic people. And construction would come to a halt. And so, I think we, whether we want to admit it or not, I think we have become dependent on Hispanics in the workforce. Whether we want to admit it or not, we have. And so that's an interesting phenomenon, that people want to get rid of a group of people, but at the same time, they're dependent on that group of people for services.

[00:26:17]

KA: What do you hope for the future, for the ministry and the community as a whole?

[00:26:25]

PS: For the church...as long as there's a need for worship experience in Spanish, I hope that people will feel welcome here to worship. When that need is no longer there, then I hope I have the grace to say that it [laughs], that it's not needed anymore. Interestingly, the young people are growing up speaking English. And some of the college-age kids that grew up here in the Spanish service, when they're in town, will come to the English service. And so that generation is not necessarily going to need a worship experience in Spanish, if they can operate

on a daily basis in English. Their parents will still need a worship experience in Spanish, because I'm convinced you pray in your first language. You may know another language, and you may be good at it but you still, when you sit down to pray, you pray in your first language. Now somebody might tell me I'm wrong, but I bet I'm not. So, the future of Latinos for example in the Episcopal Church will mean that they will become ultimately incorporated into the life of the church without having a separate worship service, unless they just *want* a separate worship service in Spanish. And around the country in some places, that is true that people who grew up in the US, that've lived here all their lives, but they're still worshipping in a service where everything is in Spanish. And in our church, you know, we have a prayer book in English and a prayer book in Spanish. We have a hymnal in English. We have a hymnal that, with all the hymns in Spanish, but in this parish we don't use that one. We've bought one that is published by the Oregon Catholic Press, because it had the songs that I knew, and the songs that the communicants knew. And so, we met there. They didn't know the hymns in our English hymnal. So, we went with the other songbook. So that answers the worship service.

I would hope that people are accepted. You know, I'm always quoting Matthew 25. Where Jesus said 'welcome the stranger.' When you welcome your strange, the stranger in your midst, you are welcoming Jesus. So, I think...that's what he had said, and that's what we're doing. And I hope that the community itself will do that. And I suspect that Oxford is different, because it is a university community so we *are* a diverse community...we just *are*, because of the University. And so, as you go along, and you see people who are just like you, but maybe grew up somewhere else, or were born somewhere else...we're all still God's children. And we still have the same feelings and desires and hopes for our families. The young people have grown up here in the US, they are just as American as the next fella. Most of them... their

English is (*laughs*) better than their Spanish, unless the family is keeping Spanish going in their home, which a lot of them aren't. So their English is great, I'm so proud of so many of the kids that have grown up in this church, who are going to college, and this would be across the board, I think not only in Oxford, but in other places. This generation is the first generation to go to college in many cases, not all cases. But in many cases, they are, and they are bright, they're getting good jobs when they come out of college, and so, I think they, by that fact they will be incorporated into the society. It's been harder this year, because of the rhetoric surrounding immigrants. And so I hope that will change. You have to get to know each other, you know? It's when you *don't* know somebody that you begin to be a little bit afraid of them or suspicious of them. But as you get to know each other, then the acceptance comes. And I often say that this ministry that we started to help someone, has become a ministry of friendship. We've gotten to know each other. It's just like last night where one of the Anglo women, who helps with this ministry, was in Memphis in the hospital and everybody was calling me to find out how she's doing. And so, there's this genuine, genuine concern for her, and for her welfare. And that comes with becoming friends and getting to know each other. So, there's a small scale life here, but I think that represents the hope... for the community and for the country.