



The ALTE graduating class of 2011, at the Iglesia De Dios Church in Lakeside, Indiana. PHOTO BY NELSON NOVALES



Grand opening of the Justo L. González Center for Latino/a Ministries, established by AETH at Asbury Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida. COURTESY OF AETH PHOTOGRAPHER CHERYL CARSON

## Expanding Access

### THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION FOR LATINO/A PASTORS

Latino churches represent the fastest-growing segment of American religious institutions. Leaders of these congregations play a critical role in their communities, often going beyond traditional pastoral responsibilities to address housing, employment and legal needs of church members. Yet many of these pastors lack the depth of preparation provided by formal theological study. A large number have attended local, denominationally based bible institutes, which are accessible to students with full-time jobs. While the quality of training provided by these institutes varies greatly, most lack the academic standards of traditional seminaries.

To help bridge this educational gap, and to better equip Latino pastors and church leaders to effectively serve urban and small-town congregations, the Seminary Consortium for Urban Pastoral Education has developed an innovative program. Known as ALTE (Advanced Latino/a Theological Education), the program provides an eight-course curriculum that allows participants to earn academic credit towards a Master of Divinity or Master of Arts in Theology degree, which they can then complete at an accredited theological school.

“This is a pivotal time for the Latino church and pastors must be prepared to help their communities face a number of challenges,” says Reverend Ramon Nieves, ALTE program director. “We saw the need to design a program that was affordable, bilingual and

culturally and contextually relevant, which would provide an alternative pathway to a seminary education.”

With Luce Foundation support, the consortium worked with faith leaders and educators from a range of denominations to shape the multifaceted program that is now available to Latino pastors in Illinois, Indiana and Michigan. The courses, taught by nationally known Latino professors from top theological schools, are held at locations and times that are convenient for clergy who have other jobs, which is the case for most ALTE students. They cover such topics as Immigration in Theological Perspective and Pastoral Care in the Latino/a Church. ALTE also offers continuing-education workshops on practical ministry and administrative issues relevant to Latino communities, and an annual professional-development session for bible institute faculty.

“We are trying to be a bridge between the Latino church community and academia,” says Nieves. “Most of ALTE’s students have been active in ministry for years. They are using what they’re learning from this program to strengthen their pastoral and educational work and it has made a difference.”

To further expand access of Latino church leaders to rigorous theological study, the Foundation supports a complementary effort to create uniform academic standards at bible institutes. Led by the Asociación para la Educación Teológica Hispana (AETH) in partnership with the Association of Theological Schools, the accrediting body for North American seminaries, the project is designing curriculum and a certification process that will make it possible for bible institute graduates who want to continue their education to enroll in seminaries. ■