

Hispanic Women worship despite economy

Conference offers workshops on sustainability, racism and time to 'cry freely.'



Laurie Oswald Robinson

Juanita Diaz, a participant at the Hispanic Women's Conference, worships at the gathering.

The way the Holy Spirit poured upon women during worship at the June 25-28 biennial gathering of Hispanic Mennonite Women in North Newton, Kan., showed that God's riches are not threatened by the recent economic downturn. Even before a sermon could be given during the morning worship at the conference at Bethel College, North Newton, women flooded up to the altar at Bethel College Mennonite Church. They prostrated themselves in prayer as they responded to God's presence at the conference, "Serving a Faithful God."

"Women were lying down on their faces, crying out to God, and God ministered in powerful ways," said Madeline Maldonado, Fort Myers, Fla., outgoing president of Hispanic Mennonite Women. "I am still not sure what all happened, but I do know that a lot of women are going through tough times right now, especially because of the economic situation."

The lean economy kept registration lower than normal, she said. Generally, about 200 women from across the United States attend the gatherings, held regularly since the organization began in 1974.

This year, about 90 women attended, and those were able to fund the trip in part because of Bethel College's generosity; the college gave women with multiple children a flat rate of \$40 for lodging.

Other participants proved that Maldonado's description of women tackling tough times is accurate. For example, participant Nena Bennett said the women in her church, Iglesia Menonita de Cordero, in Brownsville, Texas, held many events

to fund their trip. They then put the money in a travel pool and divided it among the five women who came. In years past, their group had as many as a dozen women attend the gathering.

"We sacrificed a lot of our time and effort to be able to come to the conference this year," said Bennett, an elder in her congregation and president of the women's group. "But we were willing to do whatever we had to do, because we knew from experience how wonderful the fellowship and worship is at this conference."

The gathering's main speaker was Rebecca Overstreet of Kissimmee, Fla., pastor and head of a Bible school there. María Magdalena De León of Mathis, Texas, led a workshop, "Discovering Your Identity."

She told her story of how she had been known by the name of Maggie for many years. It was a name given her in kindergarten by a well-loved white teacher. This teacher refused to call her Magdalena, her original Spanish name.

After weeks of arguing with her teacher about calling her by her Spanish name, she finally settled into accepting his name for her. But a couple of years ago, she attended a seminar that evoked memories of her childhood. She cried for hours and realized the racism that was inherent in the naming incident. And now she has reclaimed her original name, Magdalena, as a way to reclaim her Latina identity.

Another workshop, "The Modest Woman" by Nancy Morales of Puerto Rico, focused on God's faithfulness and provision for her and her family as well as tips for better managing finances.

Marisa Alemán-Cantú of Rock Island, Ill., gave the workshop "The Innovative Woman: Renew, Reuse, Recycle." She provided ways to creatively reuse items: for example, using egg cartons to organize panty hose and knee-highs in a drawer.

"Besides the tough economic times, I noticed a lot of women have things going on at home they needed to get away from in order to pray and talk with other women," Maldonado said. "Some have issues with children, issues with husbands, some are going through abuse. Some just wanted to be away from their church home and cry freely without anyone watching them or questioning them."

"When Latina women gather at these conferences," she said, "we feel so free to worship the Lord—to jump around and dance, to release all that is in our hearts to God. It's this worship and this fellowship that makes all the sacrifice worth it."—Laurie Oswald Robinson for Mennonite Church USA