

**Rev. J. Pablo Obregon  
Narrator**

**Ruth Trevino  
Interviewer**

**Willmar, Minnesota  
July 14, 2009**

**Pablo Obregon - PO  
Ruth Trevino – RT**

**RT:** Meeting with Pablo Obregon on Tuesday, July 14, 2009. We are interviewing at Pablo's work, Bethesda Heritage, where he is Chaplain. Let's go ahead and have you introduce yourself.

**PO:** My name is Pablo Obregon. My first name is Jose, but our family tradition is to go by middle names. I am the fifth Jose in the family and I am originally from Peru, born in Lima. I came to the United States in 1986 via Los Angeles, California, as a student to bible college in California.

**RT:** Five Joses. Your father is Jose, and you have three brothers who are Jose?

**PO:** No, actually my great grandfather, my grandfather, my dad, myself and my son. We all are Jose. We happen to be this way. We are only one male in each of the generations.

**RT:** Really.

**PO:** We are the unique Jose in our generation in our family.

**RT:** So you all have different middle names?

**PO:** All of us have different middle names. We are called by the middle name.

**RT:** What is your son's middle name?

**PO:** Manuel.

**RT:** So he goes by Manuel?

**PO:** Yes.

**RT:** No nicknames?

**PO:** Not yet.

**RT:** How old is he?

**PO:** He is ten.

**RT:** You were born in Lima? Can you tell me a little about growing up in Lima?

**PO:** Sure. The city of Lima is a large city. It has always been in Peru. Now the size is about ten million, eleven million.

**RT:** How big was it when you were growing up? Was it ten million?

**PO:** It was close to that. It has always been big.

**RT:** Okay.

**PO:** Same phenomena as other large cities around the world. There is a large migration from the rural areas to the cities where people thought they could find jobs. That is the story of my grandparents. They migrated to the city. As my dad grew up, after he was twelve years old, they moved to the city and he grew up there. I grew up in a pastor's home, a Christian Protestant home. My dad was a pastor of a church. He was also a carpenter, he owned his own business. I saw my dad as a carpenter and I saw my dad as a pastor. He ran me all over to help him in both places, in both roles. It was fun to be there. I am the only boy in our family. I have five sisters. Luckily I have tons of male cousins. We always hang out together. Our families are very close. In Peru almost every weekend was a family reunion.

**RT:** Is Peru a protestant country?

**PO:** No. It is actually Roman Catholic like most Latin America. That by itself made me part of the minority. Being the only boy in the family, I was a minority and then being protestant in our neighborhood, definitely was a minority. Always I was taught to show respect to others even though we were different. People really treated us very respectfully.

**RT:** Did you feel different? Was it a big issue growing up with your friends that you were not Catholic? You were not raised Catholic?

**PO:** I guess that when I was growing up, the tension between the Catholic Church and the Protestant Church in Peru was already diminishing quite a bit. I understand from my grandparents that it was very intense separation of Protestants and Roman Catholics, but by the time I was growing up, I didn't feel like there was much tension or discrimination, or I was being treated differently. I have always been curious about other religions or other denominations. I remember going to my friends' Catholic Churches for Mass and sitting in the back and sneaking out before Mass was over. I just wanted to know what

they were attending since that wasn't my experience. I would say 95 percent of my friends grew up Roman Catholic.

**RT:** What was friendship like with them? Did they show the same curiosity toward the Protestant faith that you had toward the Catholic faith?

**PO:** I think they were a little less curious. Maybe their parents were giving them instructions not to participate in some of the things that our church offered the neighborhood. They didn't show too much curiosity. Any time there was a sport activity organized by our church, the whole neighborhood and friends would show up. That was kind of the way to relate to the community and for my friends to experience a little bit of what we did. Once everybody was, let's say, on a soccer field, right before the game, we would pause for a word of prayer. After the game, there were some refreshments or food that was brought there by some of the families in our congregation and again, we would pause for prayer or a little bible verse and so forth. They got to experience a little bit of what it was like to be at home, because that is what we did at home.

**RT:** What was the neighborhood like? You mention that the neighborhood spiritually speaking was mostly Catholic, but what was your neighborhood like in terms of what it looked like?

**PO:** I think for U.S. standards, I would describe it as an inner city neighborhood. Very busy, with a lot of business traffic, and a lot of good neighborhoods, middle class neighborhoods, and poor areas. We happened to live in a middle class neighborhood. A lot of business was around us, and a high school in front of the block where we lived. There was a lot of traffic during school hours. Many businesses were surrounding also the greater neighborhood. The fun thing I remember about that is that in the evenings a lot of the households, by their door, would have a table and a little stand of food or groceries or whatever they were trying to sell. That was a second income for them. Any free time after you were done with homework, kids would hang out in the street and visit. They knew I play guitar, so many times on weekends, they would wait for me to be done with church and after everybody left, we started playing guitar and singing. It was a lot of fun.

**RT:** Inner city with houses or apartments? Or a good combination of both?

**PO:** Most of the places, living areas, were houses. There were a few apartment complexes, but none right where we were.

**RT:** What was the size of the neighborhood? Willmar is Willmar, but how big was the neighborhood in an inner city?

**PO:** We considered neighborhoods to be the size of, maybe, the city close by here, Pennock. About two thousand people. About a ten block area would be considered the same neighborhood. If you lived across a certain avenue, then you lived in another neighborhood.

**RT:** In the neighborhood, how many people? Two thousand people?

**PO:** Probably, in the ten blocks, maybe more than two thousand, because we had large families, most of us. A lot of people lived in small homes, but sometimes you have cousins and aunts and uncles and grandparents included. I can't really come up with a number, but it was larger than two thousand.

**RT:** Was there a lot of interaction between neighborhoods? Grocery stores, where there were small market places, small stores? Was there ever a need to leave the neighborhood to get something?

**PO:** Most of the things you can find in your own neighborhood. Many people, if you wanted to prove your business, instead of having a stand or a table outside of your house, you will blow out part of your living room and you will start a business in your own living room. You could find people that sold food everyday, fresh produce, as well as people that were good at fixing electronics. They would just come up with their own shop to fix things in the neighborhood. We hardly left our neighborhood. On Saturday mornings we had a street market that was only Saturday mornings. A lot of people from outside would come into our neighborhood with their produce and everybody in the neighborhood would buy for the rest of the week. That was the routine.

**RT:** Was there always produce available year round? What is the weather like in Lima?

**PO:** Lima has very nice weather. It is almost Seattle area or southern California weather. There was not intense cold or not too terrible hot during the summer. It was pretty nice – temperatures in the seventies throughout the year on any given day. It was easy to grow a lot of things in the outskirts of Lima.

**RT:** I can't remember, is it a landlocked country?

**PO:** No, that is Bolivia. We have the Pacific Ocean.

**RT:** Did you ever vacation to the beach?

**PO:** Lima is right on the coast. Our house is about ten or twelve blocks from the ocean. I call it our big sand box. Growing up so close, we would often just go to the beach and spend a lot of time.

**RT:** What are some things to do at the beach?

**PO:** Play soccer. Be in the water, hang out, go for walks, exercise.

**RT:** Surfing?

**PO:** There were some people that were interested in surfing. I was never interested. If you drove a little bit south of where we were, a little higher class people would be there. They were the ones that did most of the surfing, like the California people. There are areas where on a certain part of the beach you have the surfers, and other ones are more family oriented and so forth.

**RT:** Fishing?

**PO:** Some. We didn't have too much of a business there, but again, if you drive a little bit further, in this case north, you find a lot of people that had their business as fisherman. They had their small boats and would bring fresh fish everyday. We got to buy it cheap, so we grew up eating fish two or three times per week.

**RT:** Typical diet for people in Lima included a lot of fish?

**PO:** A lot of fish, seafood, fresh produce. Peru is very good at growing corn. We had a lot of things based with corn. Part of our basic and daily food, because of some influence from China, we eat a lot of rice every day. Two times a day.

**RT:** Really? Breakfast and lunch? Lunch and dinner?

**PO:** No, not breakfast. Lunch and dinner.

**RT:** There is a lot of Chinese influence?

**PO:** A lot of Chinese influence. When China was in the war, a lot of them migrated to Latin America. A bunch of them came to Lima. They started businesses and one of the things they grew was rice, because along the coast the soil was very good for rice. They started to introduce rice to Peruvians. We love it.

**RT:** Good! What was your house like? You said it was a small house?

**PO:** Our house was actually small for eight people. We had a living room, a dining room, a kitchen and a bathroom on the main floor. Then a couple of small bedrooms that my dad made upstairs. One for my mom and dad, and the other bedroom was for us six kids. It was two bunk beds and one queen bed that two of my sisters shared there. I had a bed and everybody on the bunk bed had their own bed, but my younger sister and my older sister shared the queen bed for awhile. She got married of course, sooner than anybody else, so she was out of the house and we ended up with a bed for everyone for about six years. Then more of my sisters started to get married. The room was getting bigger. When I was sixteen I started to sleep downstairs. I just picked up my things every morning and I would sleep on the couch. I had a better deal because I had a TV in my bedroom.

**RT:** School was across the street, you said that was the high school? Elementary school, did you have to walk very far?

**PO:** The high school yes. Yes, again, because growing up in a Protestant home, Elementary school for me was just a little further than just our neighborhood school that I could have gone.

**RT:** The neighborhood school was Catholic?

**PO:** No, it was a public school. I went to Protestant school for the elementary years. I took the bus, since I was seven years old. I went on the bus all by myself and went to the center of Lima, downtown Lima.

**RT:** Was it a school bus or was it the city buses?

**PO:** City bus. That was routine. As a matter of fact, my first year, the Peru educational system was morning and afternoon classes. I had to be to school by 8 and we were done by 11:30. We had an hour and a half break for lunch. Then at 1:00, from 1:00 to 4:00 we had afternoon classes. Many times I would do that trip because it was about a fifteen or twenty minute ride on the bus. I would come right after school in the morning, get something to eat, go back right away and went to class again.

**RT:** Was your mom home?

**PO:** No, she was a teacher. She was a teacher at another school. All my sisters had started to go to different schools also, just for girls. I didn't get to go to school too much with them.

**RT:** Was the school that you went to just for boys?

**PO:** No, it was both. It was boys and girls.

**RT:** What were some of the traditions that your family held? What are some Peruvian traditions?

**PO:** Sure. Of course we had Holy Days. Especially the church Holy Days. We kept practicing the tradition that my grandparents learned from missionaries. Christmas and Easter were big. In terms of national Holy days, there would be Independence Day, July 28. Usually we just stayed home. We didn't go to the military parade; there was every year a military parade. We didn't go because it was too crowded. It was a good day for all of us to be home and just enjoy.

**RT:** Independence from who?

**PO:** From the Spanish Army. That was July 28. On July 29 traditionally was another Holy day. There are two days, instead of celebrating one day, we have two days there. The first day was the parade day and the second day was the parade for everyone. It was another opportunity to just keep having family time. That is what we would do. Many

times our church held baptisms on July 29 because everybody was free. We all could go to the river to have an excursion out in the countryside. We would have that event out in the rural area, outside of Lima.

**RT:** What river was it?

**PO:** It is called Rimca Rimac. It is a local city river that goes through downtown into the Pacific Ocean in Lima.

**RT:** National Holiday, does Peru have as many national and federal holidays as the U.S.?

**PO:** No. We do have another government holiday. We didn't have school, we call it the day of the flag. Dia La Da Vondera. Those two, and then there was a church holiday, Roman Catholic, but everybody got to stay home because it was a very busy day in the streets. The procession was Señor de los Milagros. There is a big procession that is throughout a whole month. During the month of October, they take him in a procession throughout the city and there are hundreds of thousands that come for that.

**RT:** People come in from the rural areas into Lima?

**PO:** Yes. They just want to be part of that. Pay their tributes and want to be part of that celebration. That is why I say, even if you are not Catholic, you get to stay home because it is impossible to go from one place to the next. The only holiday we celebrate a lot, because it marked the beginning of summer, was New Years Day. In Lima, that is the beginning of summer for us.

**RT:** New Years as in January 1?

**PO:** Right.

**RT:** That is the beginning of summer?

**PO:** Yes. That tradition in our neighborhood, for all of us, especially young people, we wore white gloves. All of us dressed in white.

**RT:** Just for that one day?

**PO:** Just for one day. Brand new. The worst part was that as part of our New Years Celebration, like in many countries, there is a lot of fireworks. So with all the smoke and we burn tires, things like that, all the dark smoke, by the end of the day we are just so dirty.

**RT:** That is why it has to be new clothes every year.

**PO:** That is right. It was a lot of fun New Years. I think that was, as I was growing up, my favorite holiday.

**RT:** Because of the firecrackers?

**PO:** Yes, and you got to stay up late. Neighborhoods are so tight in Lima and I am sure in other countries too. I don't see here in the states the same thing. But you just go from house to house in the neighborhood wishing everybody a happy New Year. In every house you go, they offer you food and people are dancing and eating. It was just, you can call it a neighborhood party, but it was the neighborhood home. Everybody had the doors open and it was a lot of fun.

**RT:** Tell me a little about your hobbies. You played guitar. Did you take guitar lessons?

**PO:** I just picked that up from some of the youth leaders in church when I was growing up. My mom and dad are good musicians. My dad plays violin and piano. My mom plays piano. They both sing really good. It was easy to pick up. Being a pastor's child, in our house, anytime there was a special event at church, all of us performed a special song or two. Even if we didn't want to, we were up there. We were always in the spotlight for special music.

**RT:** Can you remember one specific occasion where you had to perform something and you were just like "ah, I don't want to do this?"

**PO:** I think for Mothers Day, one year, I was given a poem to memorize. I kept saying, "I don't want to learn it. I don't want to do it. I am always doing it." My dad knew that I didn't learn the poem and he still called me.

**RT:** Oh no.

**PO:** He said afterwards, he apologized, but he said you also need to learn that it is not that we are putting you on the spot, it is because you have a special talent and we want you to use it. I didn't know that being in public was a special talent. Now that I have grown up, I love being in public. I speak to audiences and so forth. It was a good training.

**RT:** What about your friends? Were your friends the friends from school or was it from the neighborhood? Did you have different sets of friends?

**PO:** Most of my friends were from the neighborhood because, as I said, my elementary school was a little further away. All of us drove or took the bus from different neighborhoods and we met in the school. The only time we spent was in the school. Our free time wasn't spent with one another. Most of my friends were neighborhood friends. A bunch of them, I will say four or five of them became really close friends. Every time I go back to visit Peru, those are the four or five that still get together and share stories.

**RT:** Did you eventually go to the high school that was across the street? Because you said elementary school was over there. Did they have junior high and then senior high?

**PO:** It was just the two levels. Elementary and then high school. We call it primary or the first elementary school. One through sixth grade. Seven through twelve was high school. My high school years, I ended up in three different high schools. It was not that I was a bad boy, they kicked me out. It was my first year in high school, there was a large national teachers strike. So my first year, I didn't learn anything. By the end of the year, I still received good grades. My dad picked up on that. That wasn't the school across the street, it was a different high school that I was sent to. It was suppose to be one of the top public high schools in Lima. My dad picked that up and he said, no, you aren't going to go there. Again, he didn't want to send me to my local school in my neighborhood, so he sent me to another one. Again, it wasn't a good year with the strike continuing. Actually, I didn't learn anything again my second year. Finally, on grade number 9, in ninth grade, my dad put me in enrollment in the school across the street. The strike stopped and I had my better years, my last three years in the school across the street. It was great because I only had to cross the street literally and I was there. That was also a disadvantage for my parents because anytime that I wanted to get out, the schools doors were open, so I could just go back and forth. I would bring my friends over, nobody was in the house. A few times I got in trouble for doing that, but it was fun.

**RT:** So the three different schools were not the result of your own actions. It was mostly due to the teachers' strikes going on.

**PO:** Yes. A lot of striking. Being a person that always believed in causes and justice, I helped the teachers in their strikes. That is what my dad picked up. That I was on the streets yelling with the teachers. He said, that is not good. I said, they are right. The Government in those days was not being fair to the teachers. They still are not. That woke up my interest in social issues and fairness.

**RT:** Pretty much you grew up from birth to eighteen. Did you go to University in Lima?

**PO:** I started going for a year at the University of San Martin, which is a private university. It was one of those universities that you had to take a test in order to be part of that. I studied the summer after I finished high school. Out of forty thousand only four thousand get accepted. I passed the test, so I started. By the end of the second semester, in the university in Lima, I started to realize that civil engineering, which is what I was studying for, really wasn't what I wanted to do. I didn't tell my parents anything.

**RT:** The end of the second semester you knew that civil engineering was not what you wanted to do?

**PO:** Right. As a matter of fact, I was very sure that I wanted to start studying for ministry. That was going to be a big shock for my parents because since I was about fifteen years old, I was opposing some of the church activities. But talking to one of my friends, at the university, who knew my dad was a pastor, I started to defend his job and faith, the Protestant faith. One day I realized, wow, I really enjoy this, talking about God. It was a day and night experience. I woke up thinking, God, I have heard your call and I want to do this.

**RT:** You think the call started with that friend who was asking questions?

**PO:** He was interested and wanted to know what our church was like. How was it like for me, his friend, to grow up in a pastor's house? Then he was putting it down a little bit, that it is just a minority and the Catholic Church is the main church here and you should consider joining us. I was trying to say, I respect what you are saying, but I am starting to believe more of what my dad was saying. As a matter of fact, I told him, I said, "you know this conversation is just helping me realize how important growing up in that environment has been for me and how it has shaped me." That was a good experience.

**RT:** Was this a friend from high school or was this a friend from the university in the civil engineering?

**PO:** We were acquaintances in high school. He was not from our neighborhood, but he came to our high school. We were not close friends, but living across the street, everybody saw me going into my house. I am hanging out with my friends in the neighborhood right by our door. We lived just next door to the church. That is how people made the connections that Pablo lived almost in the church. We lived in the parsonage.

**RT:** So, these conversations that you were having with your friend, what was his name? Juan. So these conversations that you were having with Juan, were they over the course of first and second semester?

**PO:** It was more towards the end of the first semester. Again, we went to a university that was about forty-five minutes away from where we lived, and we met in the bus. We were taking the same general courses. We sat together and talked. We became really close friends during the first and second semester. He was actually sad when I told him I was going to drop the school and start going to a bible school. He said that he was learning a lot about the church. He called it Evangelicals through our conversations.

**RT:** Did you tell him before you told your parents?

**PO:** Yes. Actually, it was interesting. It was a breakfast morning at the end of the second semester. Again, I had good grades but it was also a high cost university. It was expensive. I sat down with my mom and dad. I said I want to talk to you guys. They were totally surprised when I asked them and wanted to talk to them. I said, you guys are paying a lot of money for me to go to the university. I just don't feel that this is fair for you guys. Of course, they are trying to say oh don't worry about the money. God will provide. I know God will provide, but actually, I don't feel like I want to be an engineer. Again they said, anything you want to be, it will be find with us. They had no clue that I was already applying to different bible schools throughout Latin America. I said, you know, I want to become a pastor. They just dropped their mouths. They were so surprised. They were shocked in a good way. They just said, we will support you and encourage you. I think it was sad for them to hear that I wasn't considering any of the

local bible schools. I checked into a couple of schools in Lima, but they didn't appeal to me. There was one in Argentina, one in Brazil and one in Los Angeles. By that time, I already had requested information. In the next few months, during that summer, I was accepted to the three of them. Now it was time to decide where do I want to go? If I go to Brazil I have to learn Portuguese. If I come to Los Angeles, I have to learn English. Or do I go to Argentina and would be fine in Spanish. By that time I had a sister living in southern California. My parents really pushed me to go to the Los Angeles school. It was a school called the Lutheran Bible Institute. That is where I decided to come. That was the beginning of my journey here.

**RT:** What was your sister's name that lived in Los Angeles?

**PO:** Maria. She was the oldest of all of us.

**RT:** When you came to Los Angeles, did you live with her right away or did you stay on campus?

**PO:** I lived with her right away, the first month, which was the month of August. Of course in September the classes began and then I moved to housing on campus at the school. I shared an apartment with three other guys who requested that they wanted to live with someone from another country. It was great. It was hard of course to learn English. I had no knowledge of English whatsoever.

**RT:** Basically you started seminary classes in English without actually knowing English?

**PO:** It wasn't seminary yet. It was regular university. My first year I came to learn English. I didn't take any Bible courses or any regular courses during my first year. I just woke up and got ready and went to English classes. The second hour was English classes and the rest of the day was English classes. There were four students in my class. Our homework was great. Our homework was to watch PBS and watch Sesame Street. Then in the evenings we had to watch Wheel of Fortune. There was another show. I think it was "Jeopardy" - no, it was "The Price is Right". Those three shows, we actually were tested once a week about different things on those programs because the teacher kept thinking, you have to learn how to listen and to understand. Not when you just see people face to face, but rather, from the TV and learn a little of the slang and the idioms. The excitement when people talk and so forth.

**RT:** Because when people get excited, they talk faster. Learning to keep up with the native speakers.

**PO:** I thought it was great. I still tell people who are teaching languages to encourage watching some shows that are the local ones.

**RT:** Sesame Street...

**PO:** The Price is Right, and Wheel of Fortune.

**RT:** Do you still enjoy watching those?

**PO:** Not too much. What is funny in my working setting in this facility. At seven o'clock which I think is Wheel of Fortune, you can look on any activity during that time because everyone is watching Wheel of Fortune. The same thing with the Price is Right in the morning. I have Bible study at ten in the morning and many of the residents don't show up because they are watching the Price is Right. It is a full circle.

**RT:** Who knew that is what would impact you.

**PO:** It is amazing. My kids love it. I really don't care for it. I grew out of it.

**RT:** You grew out of it. There is a possibility you will grow back into them.

**PO:** I am sure.

**RT:** Okay, for the first year you were here learning English. Then the second year you started taking seminary classes? How long were you in seminary classes?

**PO:** I was in this school three more years besides the first year of English. Finished up with it, it grew into a BA. It wasn't a BA that the university will transfer here, but the seminary would take that because there are a lot of Bible courses, and Greek and Hebrew.

**RT:** Arabic?

**PO:** No, I didn't take Arabic, but we took those two. A lot of psychology courses for counseling. After finishing that school in California, I kept thinking I was going back to Peru. That was my goal - to go back to Peru. The more I stayed in the States, I noticed the need for Latino ministers also in this country. My last year was hard because I was wrestling on going back or staying here. I was involved in a couple of churches in downtown Los Angeles while I was going to school. Finally, I made my decision to go to seminary here in the States. I just came to Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota.

**RT:** Was it surprising for you—the need for Spanish speaking ministers in the U.S.? Was that something you had foreseen?

**PO:** It really wasn't. Coming to the United States really wasn't a place where I would get a lot of interaction with Latinos because I was going to a traditional school, not necessarily a place where you were going to be speaking Spanish or in a Spanish neighborhood. Once I got here, one of the teachers invited me to go to this church in downtown Los Angeles. They were almost closing the doors because all of their English speaking people were moving out of the inner city, of downtown. The pastor they had there was very passionate about reaching out to the neighbors. In the neighborhood of that church, ninety percent of the people in the neighborhood came from El Salvador. They were refugees that moved from El Salvador. He started to have Spanish services.

**RT:** Did he speak Spanish?

**PO:** He spoke very little. That is why he was so happy that I was attending the bible school as well as attending his congregation. Again, growing up in a pastor's home, you get trained. It is not formal training, but it was easy for me to stand up and be the leader and lead worship and sometimes even preach. It just happened so naturally. I realized that there is such a big need for Spanish speaking ministers.

A little funny, but a spiritual moment for me was, when I went to get my visa in Peru to come to the States. I remember the morning. Most of the people in front of me standing in line to get their visa were coming with tears in their eyes. They were just denying everybody that morning. When I got my turn, I stood in front of the counselor and he asked the question, why are you going to the States? After he read my letter of invitation from the school I said, I want to become a pastor. He just looked at me and with the biggest smile on his face, he said, we need more pastors. He is an American telling that to me. I go back to that story over, and think did he mean Peru or did he mean the United States, because there is definitely a large need for Spanish speaking pastors here.

Throughout the years though, since I became a Spanish speaking pastor, I have also felt the call that my voice doesn't have to be limited to Spanish speaking congregations. I am very happy that I can be in a reverent setting as a Latino pastor, but not necessarily in Latino ministries. I think it is a good educational moment for those surrounding my callings and my residents. Eventually, later in our congregations, the migrant stories will come. I will compare the immigration stories of the residents here and the stories I hear from them as well as my own immigration story and the people I have worked with here in Willmar. It is almost the same story. It is kind of fun to compare both and find common denominators as well as some different issues. Hopes and the dreams are pretty much the same.

**RT:** As you were finishing up your bible school...it was bible school right?

**PO:** Yes.

**RT:** Education in California, the name of the school in California was what again?

**PO:** Lutheran Bible Institute.

**RT:** Lutheran Bible Institute. And you were accepted to what school here in ...

**PO:** Lutheran Seminary.

**RT:** Lutheran Seminary. You moved from California to St. Paul.

**PO:** In 1991. I arrived in September, so I got to experience the Halloween storm.

**RT:** The Halloween snowstorm of 1991.

**PO:** That was my introduction to the winters in Minnesota.

**RT:** How did that go for you?

**PO:** It was actually a fun experience, because it was a first experience in my life with the snow. I remember during supper time eating in the cafeteria with all my friends. At the end of the meal, they all said, we have to take our food trays with us. I said why? They said just bring yours. Before we went back in the dorms, we lived right by a cliff on Como Avenue, not a cliff, but a nice little slope. We all went downhill sledding on our food trays. [Laughing] That was a lot of fun.

**RT:** Fond and happy memories.

**PO:** The next day though, I tried to move my car and it was an awful experience. I got it stuck three times during the first two hours of driving around the city because of so much snow, and the plows were not out in so many small streets. The church I worked with while I was at Seminary was in a very small neighborhood. I got stuck. It wasn't fun at all.

**RT:** So you experienced the good and the bad right away.

**PO:** That storm taught me a lot. I look back to that storm all the time, whenever I talk about winters.

**RT:** You lived on campus housing at Luther Seminary? Who were your roommates?

**PO:** That was an interesting experience, Ruth. We all lived in separate dorms. We had our own rooms in the dorms. I was the only Latino my first two years at seminary. It was challenging. Great roommates, people passionate for God and deliverance in faith. I don't know if they really knew how to deal with a person from a different culture.

**RT:** So the experiences there were completely different from the experiences at the bible college because the bible college, the roommates specifically requested someone from another country and here that wasn't the same case.

**PO:** Exactly. Just by being in Southern California, at the school there, diversity was a daily experience. I think for many people at school, at Luther, they came from all areas of the country. Especially the Midwest. I am sure many of them never had an experience with a person of a different race. It was an interesting experience. So I had to become the expert, just so that you know how people label you. I was Latino. They always thought that I grew up Roman Catholic. Whenever there was an issue about the Roman Catholic Church in our classes, they all looked at me saying, Pablo, you tell us what you think. What do the Roman Catholics think? As you are hearing in my story, I never grew up Roman Catholic. I knew very little about the Roman Catholic Doctrine. So, I had to learn

a lot about that. The professors at Seminary, when they learned I was from Peru, besides making the assumption that I was Roman Catholic, they also made the assumption that I was very familiar a movement called Liberation Theology, which is a theology that is socialist theology - very oriented on peace and justice issues. Many times, I was again, put on the spot to say, what does Liberation Theology think about this? I had no clue. [laughing] I like to always have some answers, the best answers I can. Informed answers. Anytime I had the opportunity to write or to work on an assignment, I would try to bring those issues up so that I could learn. It was a great experience personally to learn, to process all of those different stereotypes that I was given. Now that I look back, I think that I worked extra hard. I think that is always the story of the minority person. You have to make the extra point, the extra credit, the extra effort, the extra hours, the extra suffering. That happened on a seminary level, too.

**RT:** Would it be safe to say that you felt very stereotyped at that particular university setting? More so than in other settings?

**PO:** I think so. There were seminaries in California and in Texas and in Chicago. If I had chosen to go to any of those, probably I would have been less stereotyped. I believe that it was meant to be that way, and I am happy I went there because, as I said, I was challenged a little bit extra.

**RT:** What drew you to Luther Seminary in St. Paul?

**PO:** When I was a young boy, I met a lot of missionaries. Many of them were wearing the Twins or Vikings sweatshirts. It is true. [laughing] That was really one of the reasons I ended up saying, I want to go to Minnesota. That is number one. A more serious reason is that by that time I was affiliated already with the Lutheran Church, and the Midwest. Luther Seminary had a very high prestige on educating Lutheran pastors. It is the largest Lutheran Seminary in the States. I thought it was a good place for me to learn more about the Lutheran tradition.

**RT:** You have made a distinction between saying you grew up Protestant and then you went to a Lutheran educational system once you got out of high school. What denomination did you grow up in?

**PO:** It was non-denominational.

**RT:** It was just not Catholic?

**PO:** Right. Long time ago, it was when our church was run by the Methodist church. During the depression years, in the 1930s and 1940s, I think it was, the missionaries were asked to return to the United States. In the 1960s they started to go back. By that time, the national pastors started to say, you can come back, but we are the leaders now. The missionaries were saying, what do you mean? They had a little bit of a disagreement. The missionaries started the Methodist Church of Peru and our church was left with no Methodist [affiliation] whatever.

**RT:** No denomination.

**PO:** Right, so my grandparents decided, if that is going to be the case, we will just continue to be the church who we are and you can be the denomination. We will be happy to continue to interact, but we will grow out of what we already have established and continue with that and you can start something else. Both churches have grown. We continue to be independent non-denominational church. The Methodist Church has grown quite a bit.

**RT:** How long were you at Luther Seminary?

**PO:** I was there for two years in full courses. The third year I was assigned to an internship site.

**RT:** Where was that?

**PO:** It was supposed to be in Miami, Florida. I ended up here in Willmar, Minnesota.

**RT:** How did that happen, because Willmar, Minnesota is a long way away from Miami.

**PO:** Well, what happened was that two weeks before my second year at seminary, which I already had the approval of going to Miami, the pastor in Miami called one of the supervisors at seminary and said Pablo cannot come to Miami because we are having some internal issues in the church. It would be a rough year for him to be here, we would rather prevent some lament. When I was told that, I just said, give me some other names. They gave me a church in Colorado, which had about twenty people and another church somewhere in Texas. Again, a very small church. I looked at the portfolio of those congregations and it really didn't appeal to me. Then one of the professors was visiting with my supervisor and said, I think I know a place where he can go. He mentioned the word Willmar, and he just smiled and didn't say anything. I said, where is Willmar? Here in Minnesota, somebody said. After that, it was strange how things happened. I am glad I did say Willmar.

**RT:** How did things happen?

**PO:** I didn't want to say no to Willmar.

**RT:** Because?

**PO:** I didn't want to be impolite. They invited me to come, and the other two churches, the one in Colorado and Texas, of course it was too far to go and visit. I could come to Willmar. I said, I will go, and after that I will say no. I came and I met with Kathy Houge. She was a principal at Lincoln School in those days. I met with Mr. Roberto Trevino, a pastor and a Baptist pastor as well as a counselor at the college. It wasn't

Ridgewater College in those days; I think it was Willmar Community College. I met with the director or the chief of police and the CEO, a Mr. Earl Olson, that afternoon.

**RT:** Earl B. Olson who...

**PO:** Who owned Jennie-O Turkey Company. All that was set up by the three pastors of the congregations in Willmar who wanted to have an intern here. In those days...

**RT:** Do you remember who the director, the Willmar Police Chief was?

**PO:** I can't remember his name. It may come in a few minutes as I keep telling more of the story. No, I don't remember right now.

**RT:** Earl B. Olson was the owner at the time?

**PO:** Right.

**RT:** The owner of the Jennie-O Turkey Foods Store. Kathy Houge, Willmar Police Chief and a local Spanish speaking pastor.

**PO:** Also, in that little tour I had, it was Dick Hogle, who was the mayor - Richard Hogle. Now, I was hosted by these three pastors, Pastor Ron Burke from Calvary, Glen Tievold from Vinje and Tom Carlson from Bethel. They welcomed me into town and said I want you to just sit in the back of the car and we will drive you around Willmar. Then we want you to meet with these people I already listed. I arrived in town and I got in the back of the car and they drove me around Willmar. Very soon, they started to say, now we are going to drive you to places where a lot of the immigrants live. They took me to Mollen Estates, that was the name then, Elm Lane, and I think they took me out to the one that is on County Road 5, Parkwood Estates.

**RT:** Parkwood Estates.

**PO:** It was called Parkwood, right? They said, this is where all the new immigrants are coming and they are moving into these places. They told me that there was a Baptist pastor doing some outreach work. They also mentioned the name of David Chavria who was a local pastor here working with the Assembly's of God. They also mention that the Catholic Church was doing some type of work through pastors and fathers. I believe it was Father Tony. He was just starting because later when I met him, later in the fall, he told me that was his second year trying to do Latino ministries. He was just going to go to school in Mexico to learn Spanish. Anyway, at the end of the visit with the tour and the visit with those local leaders of the community...

**RT:** How long was the tour and the visit?

**PO:** I arrived here about eleven and I was done here around four o'clock. I was on my way back.

**RT:** That was a quick tour.

**PO:** Yes it was. It was short and again, it was fine with me because I came to just go around.

**RT:** To be polite.

**PO:** To be polite and to drive back. I drove back on Highway 12. I remember driving with my Dotson 1979 on Highway 12. I felt like I was driving in the clouds that day because I was saying, I can't believe I am coming back to Willmar. I already knew. It was one of those moments where I knew that Willmar was the place for me to be. I don't remember what happened the rest of the summer, to tell you the truth, until I packed up my car and I came back through on highway 12 and looked for my supervisor at the end of August. Gary Mickelson, a pastor at Calvary, was designated as my supervisor. I got into Calvary church on Saturday afternoon. Of course, the church was empty and Gary wasn't there.

**RT:** What year was this?

**PO:** This was in 1992. It was late August, like the 30<sup>th</sup> of August. I am trying to look for Gary, and pastor Pablo in those days had long hair, so I was wearing a pony tail that day. I was in my shorts and sweaty from all the packing and bringing everything in the car. I remember the janitor at Calvary got a little suspicious. Why is this guy looking around the different offices in our church? So, he asked me from far away, what do you want? I said, I am looking for Pastor Gary. He just shouted back to me, he is not here, come back tomorrow. He had no clue who I was. I smiled a little bit and I kept walking towards him. I could tell he was getting a little uncomfortable. I said, what is your name? I made him more uncomfortable, I think. He finally said, my name is John. What do you want? I said, well, I am suppose to be an intern here this year. My supervisor is Pastor Gary.

Again, I don't think John understood internship or supervisor and all of that. Then I heard a door and it was Pastor Gary coming in. We already knew each other. He welcomed me and introduced me to John. After that, that was just the beginning of what I was going to experience my first few months in Willmar. Everybody was wondering, who is this guy? Whenever I went to a place, everybody looked at me, especially church events. Who is this guy? I will come in on a Sunday worship in one of the local churches here helping, because that was part of my educational experience. They would all turn because they never saw a Latino men dressed in white with long hair going through the middle aisle going into church to lead worship for them. It was an interesting year. I think John forewarned me. This is the way it is going to be for awhile.

**RT:** Did you know that as you were experiencing your first experience with John, or did it seem to be a random experience?

**PO:** No, I knew it. I didn't mention this, but in my visit with the five or six different people, I remember one phrase that Kathy Houge mentioned. She said, "Pablo, just think about it. We have about three large ELCA [Evangelical Lutheran Church in America] congregations, with about 2,000 members each. That means about six thousand and there are some three or four other Lutheran churches in town that don't belong to the ELCA. That makes about ten thousand Lutherans, over fifty percent. You know what kind of articles are written about Willmar, that we are racist, that we discriminate. That makes Lutherans racist and people who discriminate. I hope you come back here to help us deal with that." I knew there were already some racial tensions in the community.

**RT:** Did you learn about these racial tensions during that meeting with those five people, or was this something that you had come into Willmar already knowing? Did you do any research about Willmar?

**PO:** I really didn't do much of research. I was more coming to help the church welcome the Latinos. I really wasn't too aware of discrimination. Seminary was a good experience for me to be put on the spot several times, but there wasn't racism that I experienced. When I came to Willmar, many of the things that I picked up that day in the packet of information were also articles from the West Central Tribune on what kind of things were going on with immigrant community and the tensions that were happening in the schools. In those days, they were called problems rather than opportunities.

**RT:** What was one thing that really stood out to you as you were given this information?

**PO:** I think, again, in the back of my mind was that line from Kathy Houge. Please help us, we need to figure out ways to welcome everyone, even in our Lutheran Church. As I was reading the different information, one thing that stuck out was all of the negativity that was being put in the paper. Court records, police records, pictures of what the community would call the trouble makers, and most of them were Latino men. In the back of my mind I was saying, there are so many good things I am sure in this immigrant community, and I don't see any of that in the paper from five different events. They wanted me to see the negative part of it. As I went through the papers, there was nothing good. I was already thinking, the stereotype is happening and it will be good for me to help the church open up the doors to the new immigrants. Again, I wasn't ready.

**RT:** No?

**PO:** No, I wasn't ready to see all the stares. As I said, people literally looked around to see who was the one coming. Many people wouldn't shake my hand after the service. Cruise by me. That wasn't the tradition. The tradition in the churches is that you shake the hand of the pastor, but many people feel uncomfortable.

**RT:** Was it a generational thing? Was it the older generation just walked right by you? Could you tell at what age people started to shake your hand?

**PO:** I think that is a good observation. A lot of the people who reacted in a negative way, or an 'I don't want to deal with this,' were older. Especially male. Older males who really didn't know how to behave with a person from a different race. I don't think they had bad intentions or their intention was to offend me. Of course, I stretch my hand and they just go by. I was like, okay. That changed. Then I knew not to put my hand out. Rather, I would grab their shoulder and they would slow down and then put my hand out to shake it. I learned how to cope with that in a body language manner.

**RT:** You obviously felt very stereotyped, because you are Peruvian. More often than not, you were probably called Mexican, you were called...how did those educational opportunities happen? How did you handle that?

**PO:** That was another thing, as you say Ruth, being from Peru. People thought I was from Mexico and I was called Mexican many times. They would ask me why do you Mexicans eat tortillas? They would include me.

**RT:** You don't eat those, do you?

**PO:** No, I don't - well, now I do. It was one of those things that was again, an educational moment to say, I am not from Mexico. I am from Peru. There is no reason to call me Mexican. I have a name. You do need to call me Pastor Pablo or you can just call me pastor or Pablo or both. Many people were asking me, how shall we call you? It was a great opportunity for learning. Not just for me, but for the community. Especially the Lutheran Community in those days.

**RT:** So you worked primarily with the three ELCA congregations. So you split your time between the three of them?

**PO:** Right. That and also, they wanted to somehow make some contacts to reach out to new immigrants in town. This was in 1992. The immigrant community had been coming here for years. They were not new, but they were still calling them new in 1992.

**RT:** Did you find that difficult, because you came through a different journey as opposed to those that were the new immigrants?

**PO:** I think so. I had to learn about the immigrant culture. That wasn't my experience. I was feeling a little bit rejected or isolated from the Lutheran community as well as from the immigrant community because they didn't relate to me as well as I wished they would. I didn't really know exactly how that worked. Again, feeling the minority within my own group of people that I felt I needed to relate with. The church was a good way for me to start making some friends. The plan was to have ELCA members in key positions in the church, such as social workers and nurses, even police officers and Jennie-O supervisors and so forth, to turn to me...I had a meeting with them and said, I am here to make the ELCA a little more welcoming to the immigrant community and vice versa. I invited them to give me a list of people that they would feel comfortable bringing them to a party, a fiesta so they could introduce the new pastor in town. That is

what they did. They went out and once they felt comfortable with some of the clients, they said, we would like to introduce our new pastor that we have, he speaks Spanish, would you like to meet him? We had a nice gathering, about twenty or thirty people. What is interesting is that most of the people that came were already very involved in the leadership of the Latino Community here. They were already part of a program called, in those days, Building Bridges. That became Amigos at Crystal Day Camp, that year after. It was an effort of not just ELCA congregations, but many of the churches in the area. That was a neat experience, to be able to break barriers of churches and denominations, including the Catholic Church, and we were able to help with that program that was already in place. I just came as a cheerleader and made sure that program kept growing - and it did.

**RT:** You mentioned earlier that you were drawn to social justice issues. Coming strictly from the leadership of the Lutheran Churches here in town, they saw a sincere need to be more welcoming to the newer residents of Kandiyohi County and Willmar, specifically. Did they express that to their congregations, or did the congregations themselves see the need to be more welcoming, or was this something that church leaders decided? Often when someone is told by someone else that this is what needs to happen, the reception isn't very good.

**PO:** Right. I think that is exactly what happened. The pastors were very passionate about reaching out to the new immigrants and the church councils were going along with what the pastor was saying. Members of the congregation were not aware of all of this. Of course, you have your pockets of people who are saying, yes, this is great, but that was just a pocket of people. The rest of the congregation, they were either indifferent or they were opposing, saying, why do our churches need to do anything? I heard it directly as well as indirectly from the body language and behavior of people.

**RT:** That was definitely something that you needed to address.

**PO:** Correct.

**RT:** How did you go about addressing that to the congregation themselves?

**PO:** I wanted to use personal stories of people in the area that I have met. I didn't have them yet, to start with. I took a lot of time before I started to address these issues in a larger audience, let's say, preaching a sermon and bringing up some of these issues or doing an adult forum during Sunday school and talking about this. I was more working in a different way. I was developing relationships with the immigrant community here and working with those who were introducing me to the community. It took a little while to actually start teaching the ELCA congregations a little more about the importance of being welcoming. You have to because I know that I had to do theological work to say, this is what the Bible says. I also had to deal with individuals, and individuals think in a very structured way. A lot of sociology and people interaction. I needed to find the right ways to present all of this, so that what was being presented wasn't just saying, this is

what the Bible says, but this is our behavior. This is what we have been doing. This is what you have been doing. Are you willing to shift that a little bit?

**RT:** Did you ever have any feedback from the congregations as you were teaching?

**PO:** At the end of each sermon that I had to preach, that I had the opportunity to preach, at any of the three large congregations, normally I had great feedback. This is the moment where we shake hands, [and they say], “pastor this was a great sermon.” Then I learned that is what they always say to pastors. [laughing] I think of conversations that had developed after the fact, and they have appreciated the fact that I was starting to point out some issues of the new immigrant community that they never thought about.

For instance, there was always a complaint about kids always running around in the streets. Most of these complaints came from older people. They were already done with parenting. Many of their grandkids live far away. They were not used to children. When they saw the kids running around, and saw them in the stores running and making noises, that was uncomfortable for them. I am sure that it was going to be uncomfortable for them even if they were of their same race, but it happened to be that they were kids of the immigrant community, Latinos, who were doing that, so they used race and difference to complain and to show that this is a dislike for us. I said, well, you know what? I understand some of your concerns about children being noisy and free, running around while the parents are paying the cashier, and I said, Children are children and they are going to behave the same way wherever you go. That is one of the examples I remember talking about. Again, it is one of those areas in my ministry that I always advocated for when I was doing the work that I was called to do in those years - to work with children and youth. I didn't want the elderly to think that us Latinos were not educating our children, because that is not true. I met many of the young parents who just didn't have enough tools or experience in parenting their own children. If you are concerned, would you like to be a role model? Would you be a grandpa? Would you be a grandma to some of those parents that you think are struggling? Maybe they just need a little bit of support. Many people, of course, put their heads down. “No, I don't want to do this.” But some of them would. I started to see some interaction in that role of being grandpa or grandparents for kids. As I was doing all of that, the advocating for interaction and inclusivity, I was still learning about the immigrant community. I take my hat off to the immigrant community, because they have done so much.

**RT:** What was one interesting thing that you learned about the immigrant community?

**PO:** Sure. You know, in the Latino culture, family is very important. They moved - especially in the earlier days of immigration - they moved always in families. People from the same town, most of them were related and they would move from town to town to town and eventually came to Willmar. The ones that were done, they keep going, depending on the weather and where the next place of work was. It was a difficult thing to do. They stick together as a family. Then, the next generation, because you have the elderly people moving as immigrants. Then you have younger generation that were left here or decided to stay here. They had no system. They had no roots. They had no way to

look, or who to look for in terms of role models. I remember Rickie and Laticia, a couple that had three kids. Their parents, they had this immigration circuit throughout the states, so they both grew up in this movement, in this circuit. They taught me that to make a choice like the one they made was to really start from ground zero. Your family kept moving, and now they are all gone. You had nobody.

**RT:** Your support system is gone.

**PO:** Right.

**RT:** You have no babysitter, you have no mentor, you have no grandparents, you have no financial emergency fund.

**PO:** Right, and in most cases, they have been always moving. There has been a constant movement. If they were in Texas, and as you know, many of our Spanish speaking immigrants came from the southern Texas area and valleys. They probably were there for three or four months and then it was time to move again. There was no rooting of tradition. Everything was in a constant movement. For them, for Rickie and Laticia, to use as an example, to settle roots somewhere, they had no idea how to do it. They had no idea how to be part of a community and to set roots.

**RT:** They didn't have any ideas as to what roots actually meant in terms of possibly housing and taking care of their own apartments and houses.

**PO:** The stereotype was, well, many of them were living in mobile homes and trailers. Even then, it was a challenge because many people would come and if they were year round residents, their family would come during the migrant season and you have fifteen people in a trailer. Of course, that is okay. If that was the tradition, that is okay. For the local citizen, that was like what? In a little place? Fifteen people, how do they live? They just couldn't perceive that issue. I remember at home in Peru, this is far from Mexico and parts of the communities where we have our immigrants, the Latinos. I remember at home having grandma and grandpa in my dad's family.

**RT:** So you had quite a bit of extended family, high twenties, low thirties, people in one house.

**PO:** Right. It wasn't a big deal for us. We actually liked it. We knew we were family and our parents taught us that is what families do. We were happy to help. Many times as I was growing up, I ended up at my uncle's house out in the countryside of Peru. I didn't have to announce myself. I would just show up and be there for two or three weeks, with my mom and dad and sisters. It was okay. To see those kinds of things and experiences, they were common.

**RT:** Then having to educate the larger community that this is a cultural thing, this is not an uneducated thing.

**PO:** That was it, exactly. That is part of who we are, rather than we are so desperate that we are going to do whatever we can to cut corners or to cheat the system. Then, of course the laws say in this country that you cannot overcrowd a house. You need to have a certain standards of living conditions. That is understandable. That is what you were saying earlier. The new immigrant was already wrestling here and learning what are the expectations. If you want to be part of a neighborhood, you had to get some education on that. There were groups that were trying to do that. I remember Heartland Community Action were trying to do some things. That didn't happen until after Elm Lane was closed.

**RT:** Can you tell me a little bit about Elm Lane?

**PO:** Sure. There was according to the police records, a high rate of crime and drugs in that particular place.

**RT:** Elm Lane being a trailer park?

**PO:** Elm Lane being a trailer park. You had the Assemblies of God Spanish Congregation outside of Elm Lane. Myself, I had five or six different families that were already relating to our ministry, and the Catholic Church had one of the sisters in those days who would come there and lead an event. Yes, there were problems there. As any other community, you have a handful of people who create problems. The community kept seeing, the police kept going there to respond to fights, drugs, and so forth. There was even a murder there, I think, a few months before they actually closed Elm Lane. They were trying to see, how can we close this place? In my interpretation, they tried to close it because of the crime. That didn't happen because of that. It actually happened because Elm Lane was owned by someone else, who didn't live in town, who went bankrupt. Eventually, he had to sell the place. The city bought it, or a large business person bought it, and the place closed down. That was hard because about 100 trailers, 100 families, were there.

**RT:** A neighborhood.

**PO:** Right. Where are they going to go? Again, I personally thought that we were getting a handle on how to work with the young people, especially, and educating the kids in the neighborhood. I felt that once Elm Lane was closing, I felt that we were building a tower of cards or dominos. All of a sudden, everything just fell down on the ground. It was a hard day for me, I remember. After some prayer, I was wondering, what are we going to do? I started to see some hope. I think, as the five clergy, including the Catholic priest who was working with the Latinos, we got together to pray. We started to talk about how we are supposed to give them some hope in this situation. We started to say, things will work for good. With the closing of this is an opportunity for 100 people to spread out throughout the community instead of being isolated in one corner or in one small area.

That is what happened. That is really when we started educating intentionally and aggressively. One of the things that they needed to do was to rent a house or buy a house.

They have to make sure that they get a garbage container. Things that they have never done. Where is the switch to turn on your heater? You never had a house and you never lived in Minnesota before, but now you have to deal with winter. You have to cut your grass because otherwise the mosquitos are going to come. It is no good for the kids when they play. There was this list of things that we had to do and it was a little difficult, because if you are going to hook up your electricity, the electrical company expects you to pay not just the first month, but the last month. The cable and garbage...

**RT:** A deposit.

**PO:** Exactly. For people who didn't have much financial resources or savings, it was a challenge. That is when the community started to bend some of the rules. Businesses and organizations, banks especially, started to give a little break. Even if you don't qualify for a loan, we are going to give you a loan. We won't give you the whole loan right away, but on a trial basis, we can give you some money and if you prove that you are making your payments for this smaller amount, in six months we will give you the large amount so that you can start renting to buy or things like that. The community started to see the Latino Community start to spread out around Willmar. It took a couple of years for that transition to happen.

**RT:** Do you still maintain contact with those families that you had mentioned were part of your congregation out of Elm Lane? Or have they moved on?

**PO:** I think they have moved on. I am not sure. I am not a pastor at ..... anymore, I kind of have lost track of some of them.

**RT:** You had the opportunity to speak with those families living in Elm Lane. What was their interpretation of events?

**PO:** They were feeling that they were being discriminated against. They were being kicked out of their neighborhoods. I didn't try to oppose those feelings. Once all of this happened, many of us knew that this was such an opportunity. I respected their grief.

**RT:** Did they ever say or allude to the fact that they were being kicked out of Willmar? If their houses were taken away, their neighborhood was taken away.

**PO:** There are records somewhere, I don't know exactly where they might be, but there was a handful of people that decided, you are kicking us out of here, we are out of here, out of the city, out of town. There were a number of people that did decide to move elsewhere.

**RT:** How far into your time here in Willmar did that happen?

**PO:** I believe it happened the next year. The following year.

**RT:** So it was your second year here in town.

**PO:** Right. I wasn't here full time because I was here for my year of internship. Then I moved back to seminary but I commuted on weekends to keep going with what we had started during my year of internship.

**RT:** While you were here during your year of internship, did you know that this was going to be the place that you ended up? Ultimately you knew you were going to come here for your internship, but while you were here, did you know that this place was going to be your home where you would marry and relocate your family?

**PO:** I was starting to feel that. If I am starting to develop something, most likely I have to come back here. I wasn't saying this will happen for sure, but I was making myself available. The conversations with the pastors and our Bishop in those days was if something happens while I am waiting for a call, I will be available and they will call me to do that. That is what happened. It was kind of a vocal agreement. Once it crystallized, I felt pretty good about coming back here.

**RT:** What were some good things that you saw about the Willmar area?

**PO:** I love the fact that Willmar has a lot of great people. I have developed and made great friendships. People of all ages, young and old. Well intentioned, well monitored things and people of other faiths. I think that is my number one thing - that I can say I am positive that people like that are living here. The other positive thing, then I started to notice the community itself, the structure, the government, and city officials, businesses were starting to realize that this is a great opportunity. Instead of seeing the new immigrants as a problem, they started seeing that this is actually a great opportunity for us to be able to change or to give our services and also learn how to do better services for the community.

**RT:** You are married, right?

**PO:** I am married with two children, two kids.

**RT:** Married with two children. How did you meet your wife?

**PO:** I met my wife during that time of internship. However, she left halfway through my internship to be a missionary in Mexico. We just met for about two months, then she left for Mexico City.

**RT:** She was originally from Willmar?

**PO:** She is from New London, just north of Willmar. Before that, she spent a year in Spain, teaching English. She learned Spanish quite well during her college degree. That was definitely a plus that she knew the language. She was interested in church as well as interested in working with Latinos. When we met, we were just friends. No expectations. She left. When she came back, then we started to see each other. Actually, I was more

friends with her parents than with her at first, because she was gone and I kept visiting them. They are a very international family. They have curiosity and a love for world cultures.

**RT:** You talked a little bit about how you are no longer pastor at.....What is your current employment?

**PO:** I am currently the Pastor Chaplain for this organization, Bethesda Health and Housing, that belongs to the ELCA. I have been assigned to be the Chaplain here. We have a large group of residents - about three hundred between the two facilities, and four hundred staff, and I am the solo pastor for all of them.

**RT:** How is it being a pastor for, actually, a non-native pastor to a generation of people who have in the past maybe not welcomed you with open arms.

**PO:** Definitely, for the new residents, it is always a surprise to see me come into their door and say, Hello, I am Pastor Pablo, I am the Chaplain here. Some people go right in and start talking fine. Some people look at me in silence and shock. It feels like, is this really happening? I don't say anything. The opportunity for education and inclusively at that moment just happens naturally. It happens not only with the resident, it happens with their family, their children and grandkids, when they come and visit. I introduce myself. It is a natural way where you can feel there is a little anxiety and you can say whoa, you know, who is this guy? We have this Hispanic pastor here now. By the time I leave the room and we have visited and shared and prayed together, I don't see that they see me as a Hispanic pastor anymore, just as a Chaplain. It is working out great.

I mentioned earlier about one of the things I celebrate about being a Chaplain here is that so many times when I am visiting with the residents, and when we have the time to do that, I ask about their families and how they got to this area. They start to tell me how their parents migrated as kids. Many times, for my bible study, I have used books that are diaries of Scandinavian Immigrants. I don't use names. I just use dad or mom or son. At the end of reading the journal, I say, who do you think this story is from? Many people will always say, well, maybe they are people that you used to work, with Pastor Pablo. I say, no, actually, this is from 120 years ago. Immigrants that you are related to. They say, oh, wow! Then sometimes I use the stories from the immigrant community, the Latinos, many times they say, I remember my parents and grandparents talking about the same issues. People come here because they are looking for better opportunities. In most of the cases, for their children. That is the common denominator. They didn't want money, better money. That really wasn't what drove them here. It was because they wanted to have a better life for their children. That was the bottom line. Business and money opportunities came because if they were established somewhere else, it would be nice to have a job or land to produce. Down deep, underneath, the decision of moving as an immigrant is because we want a better tomorrow.

**RT:** Right. What are some things that you would like to see happen here in the Willmar area?

**PO:** I would like to continue to have Willmar as a center, a community where everyone is welcome. Not just culturally, but in all areas of what the world gives us. You have younger people, older people that could get along and get to know one another. People from other races. People from other cultures within the culture. A lot of our young people go out for college to bigger cities or other cities. There is no motivation to come back because they know that while they are being shaped in a different culture almost, it will be hard for them to come back with their new self definitions that they have learned and transformations they have had during college years. We need to become more attractive for those that leave for education to be able to come back and know that we will accept people in a diverse way, whatever way that may be.

**RT:** What are some differences that you see in Willmar now, versus when you came?

**PO:** There is definitely a more established community. We don't have as many people on the move. There are now people that have settled roots. The new immigrants, as they were called, have interacted and set roots here. The workforce is greatly represented by people from different cultures. The educational system has improved. Still have room to improve, but it has improved quite a bit since I first arrived and started to learn about the school system. Churches are struggling, but I think they are learning still. If I have to give Willmar a grade, I would give a C. There is still lots to do. One thing that I always remind people, all of this is a long term process. Things cannot happen in five years, or ten years, it takes lots of generations for changes to happen.

**RT:** What would you say are the new immigrants to the area?

**PO:** Two groups. One has to do with race, of course are the Somalians. People that come from that part of Africa. Most of them come with refugee status when they are fleeing violence in their country. Again, the other line is that I don't want my kids to go through that. Let's get out of this harms situation. I would say racially that Somalians are what we would consider the new immigrants. In the greater Willmar area, I also notice that there is a lot of, I am trying to remember the right term, people in their fifties and sixties and seventies.

**RT:** Baby boomers?

**PO:** Baby boomers are starting to come back. At least I have noticed because of the church record. You know, people that have thrived in their jobs outside of here and are saying, we are getting close to retirement, my next job opportunity will be coming back to a smaller community. Many of them are choosing to come back to their old communities. It is kind of fun to see. Again, I don't know if we are ready to interact, all of us together. They come with a large city perspective, high class, economically and there is that phenomenon. I don't think it is a large group, but it is starting to happen because it is happening in other parts of the United States.

**RT:** What are some traditions that you would like to pass on to your own children?

**PO:** Definitely the fact that even though we don't have family close by, we have a community. That community becomes our family. I think that is the case for many of the immigrants in the last forty years. We don't have close family members, but we could see those around us, our friends and neighbors as part of our own family. We make sure that we respect them and we are in touch with them. Our children in the neighborhood, they see more than they see their own cousins. I want my children to know that they are their family.

**RT:** You grew up in Lima, are your parents still in Lima?

**PO:** They are in California.

**RT:** They are in California. In Los Angeles?

**PO:** Yes, in Los Angeles.

**RT:** Is it safe to say that the majority of your family, your siblings and your mom and dad, continued to live in a large city?

**PO:** Yes, actually, all of my siblings are in the Los Angeles area.

**RT:** You are the sole person from your family in Willmar, Minnesota.

**PO:** Right.

**RT:** How do they view Willmar, Minnesota? To your knowledge?

**PO:** They are always trying to convince me and my wife to be in that area where everybody is. They understand that what I am doing is a calling. They respect that. They pray for us. They encourage us. In family conversations, they want us to go over there, but once the conversation becomes a little more in depth, they know that we are here with a calling. This is the place we ought to be.

**RT:** Do they ever come visit?

**PO:** They don't come during winter. They have learned their lesson.

**RT:** Oh. What happened?

**PO:** They just don't take the cold. My ordination was in January of 1995, so my parents and my sisters came. When they were leaving, they said, we are not coming back in winter anymore. It is too cold. They were not prepared. They did not have warm jackets and all the right stuff. It was a rude awakening for them.

**RT:** They asked, you are staying here for the winter?

**PO:** Exactly. You know that I love winters actually. It is a season of the year that I get to do things that I don't get to do during other seasons, such as ice fishing or skiing. It is fun to see the different seasons in this area.

**RT:** What is the one wintertime activity that is your favorite wintertime activity?

**PO:** Definitely ice fishing.

**RT:** Really? What is it about ice fishing that you enjoy so much?

**PO:** You have the fishing house, you are out on the lake, on top of the ice, and you have time for yourself or whoever you are sitting with. If you are not alone, you are getting to know the other person better. If you are alone, you are just getting in touch with yourself and with God, in my case.

**RT:** Are there any generational differences that you would like to comment on about how things are now versus how they were before?

**PO:** You know, as I look at the generations, there is a lot of similarities. The way I grew up in Peru, with the stories and behaviors and values of many of the residents that I talked to, so it is with all the adults in this area. They were very family oriented back in those days. They would spend a lot of time together. They shared their work and they helped one another. Faith was a big one in those days. Nowadays, I think a lot of the people in my culture still have the same values. I feel that we are not behind, we are actually ahead because we haven't lost those values. In this place, in this country, that generation has such great values, but we are losing them. I think the younger generations don't consider a lot of things that I grew up with. That doesn't make them bad, it is just different.

**RT:** Maybe the younger generation has a different set of values. Can you think of any or would you care to comment on any values that you see have continued throughout the generations but are expressed differently?

**PO:** Let me think about that one. The younger adults - that means people that are in college and are developing their first career, are looking for opportunities to be involved in society. That is making them good citizens. I don't see them getting involved in church as much as before. It feels that what I read is that they had a lot of people, even after their school years, that were involved in the church, and they were still returning. They were part of different activities. That is not happening anymore. These are the same age group of kids that are not returning to churches, but are still involved and are trying to do something for society. To me, that is love your neighbor, even though they are not sitting on the pews. That is to make a difference in the world. It is just a different way of serving God, responding to faith.

**RT:** Any other observations you would like to make about your life here in Willmar and your journey as to how you got here?

**PO:** You know, to end off on a positive note, I think that one of the great things that has happened to my life was to live in this community. I have no idea what the future will bring. What I am certain is that I am not the only one that sees Willmar with a lot of hope in the future. I see a lot of people in all generations, from all races that are looking forward to see what our community will be like tomorrow. It will be fun to read some of the stories of others in twenty years, thirty years from now. To have my kids and maybe even grandkids take a look back at what was Willmar like a few years ago, and during these years compared to what is happening thirty years from now or forty years from now. It is a great opportunity to share some things.

**RT:** Wonderful. Thanks for sharing with me today.

**PO:** Thank you Ruth.

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