

Latino/a delegates share dream of joining episcopacy

By John W. Coleman (Eastern Pennsylvania Conference)

A group of Latino/a clergy delegates to the United Methodist Northeastern Jurisdictional Conference thanked the body Thursday, June 14, for the opportunity two of them had, as candidates for bishop, "to share our vision for the church."

The Rev. René Perez of New England and the Rev. Irving Cotto of Eastern Pennsylvania, both district superintendents, addressed the conference together after it had elected two African American clergywomen as bishops. The assembly had also earlier passed a "Call to Action" resolution challenging the jurisdiction and its annual conferences to explore and implement remedies to racial discrimination, while making concerted efforts to support and develop black United Methodist churches.

"We celebrate and rejoice as we adopted a resolution that will make our life together more just, particularly for our African American communities which have experienced injustice, violence and discrimination," read Cotto. "As Latinos, who are people of all colors and languages, we stand against any type of racial or gender discrimination.

"Our greatest joy was to witness the election of our two African American sisters as bishops," he continued in a statement written by Perez, along with Cotto and other Latino/a church leaders. "We thank God for the opportunity to be here, and both of us were honored with having been able to be considered for the office of bishop."

The statement recognized Latinos as "the largest ethnic minority in the U.S., totaling more than 55 million across the nation," and as "part of the Methodist movement at least since 1738." But it also mentioned their "struggle" to become leaders across the church. "Unfortunately, we are often forgotten, including when it comes to the episcopacy."

Yet, the group assured the conference that after numerous attempts, their quest to elect the NEJ's first Latino/a bishop would continue, as they continue to offer their gifts to the church. "God, indeed, is not done with us yet," read Cotto, who was also a candidate in 2012.

"So, we long for the day when we will see a Latino/a bishop in this jurisdiction as an active, contributing member of the College of Bishops," he continued. "We believe this is possible. Thank you for opening the space and allowing us to share our vision for the church."

A small group of Latino/a conference leaders stood with Cotto and Perez during the presentation, and one led the assembly in prayer after a standing ovation.