



a Place at the Table

By *Melissa Salomón*

It was 1992. Nervously, I drove south on the 405 Freeway to San Diego to attend my first Lutheran Woman's Missionary League district convention. It was, in fact, my first experience with any LWML event. And I was a guest speaker...

Ushered into a large hall where several hundred women gathered — more Lutheran women than I had ever seen in one place before — I was worried I wouldn't fit in. Yet when the singing began and the river of voices separated into harmony, I thought, “*This* is what heaven will be like.”

That day fifteen years ago, God gave me a glimpse of the future, and He helped me see that I was part of something bigger than my little Lutheran congregation tucked away in an Hispanic neighborhood of the San Fernando Valley west of Los Angeles.

As an adult convert who came to faith through the outreach efforts of a Spanish-speaking Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod ministry, the only Lutherans I knew were Spanish-speaking Lutherans. I lived in my little world and I didn't know, nor did I particularly care to know, the larger church body I had

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adopted. I worried I might be a strange stepchild, never fully and completely accepted among a church body whose Germanic traditions had very different cultural roots than mine.

So when Sandy Hente, Pacific Southwest LWML district president, personally invited me — two years in advance! — to share at the district convention about our Los Angeles Hispanic ministry, I tried to think of a way to say no.

Over the next several months, Sandy would send me little notes to say she was praying for me. Yet fears continued to nag me. I was worried not only about feeling out of place, but also about being treated as an object of curiosity and display. I didn't know anyone other than Sandy, nor did I think I had anything in common with these women who had a very different life than mine. I even dreamt that a group of blue-haired ladies came up to me, pinched my cheeks and said to each other, "Look at this cute little Mexican girl!"

Right before the convention there were increasingly more reasons not to attend the convention. Los Angeles was smoldering after the Rodney King riots, and police were cautioning people to stay home unless they had pressing reasons to venture out. I had two toddlers at home.

The women at convention would understand if I didn't feel comfortable driving all the way to San Diego, I reasoned.

Although I had no connection to the LWML then, I had a personal connection to Sandy Hente, the young woman who had been praying for me for nearly two years. There was no way I could disappoint her, so I traveled south to San Diego. Once I arrived, my fears melted away when the singing began and I had that vision of the future church. Gone also was the fear that I would be an object of curiosity as women genuinely and warmly welcomed me as if I were a family member that had been away for a time.

Much to my surprise, I discovered the LWML women were women with whom I had *everything* in common. We were mothers and wives, and we were passionate about doing the Lord's work both in our communities and throughout the world.

That weekend marked the turning point when I realized I was part of something much larger than my Spanish-speaking congregation in the San Fernando Valley; I was part of this church body dedicated to making Christ known throughout the world. I belonged.



I discovered that LWML was a powerful instrument for world missions through mites and the work of local societies of women dedicating their time and efforts to supporting missions. I also realized that the LWML could serve as a bridge for ethnic women of our church who, because of the nature of ethnic-specific ministries, feel disconnected from the larger church. As a women's ministry, LWML had unique opportunities for women of diverse cultures to discover and develop their God-given gifts and talents for the glory of God within a relatively protected environment unique to women.

In 2001, I was blessed with the opportunity to serve on the LWML Gospel Outreach Committee with Marilyn McClure. Marilyn had spent sixteen years in the mission field of Guatemala with her husband, Rev. Gary McClure. Together, we envisioned ways to open doors for ethnic women in a very intentional way. **Heart to Heart Sisters** was born. It would be a way to seek out, recognize, and celebrate the

giftedness and leadership of women in ethnic ministries. The result would provide a connection for ethnic women to see their place in the larger church, and for the church and the LWML to benefit from the gifts God has given the ethnic church. These are unique gifts God intends to be used in building the Body of Christ. In the absence of the ethnic church, the Body suffers; it is incomplete and less effective. How exciting for LWML to begin to reflect our church's diverse ministries, which in turn reflect the diversity of heaven.

As we gathered the first group of Heart to Heart Sisters at the LWML national convention in 2003, we heard the women's powerful stories of God's rescue from darkness. We heard about their coming to faith. We heard their passion to reach out to their own people who still needed to know the message of grace and love of Jesus Christ. We saw their tear-stained faces as mission grants were projected on the large screen; sometimes scenes from their home coun-

tries or neighboring countries would appear and the realization would hit that, because of the work of the women of the church, others would take the journey of faith they had taken, a journey that was still fresh in their minds. We saw their eyes light up when they understood how they could participate in the LWML mission — extending God’s Kingdom around the globe.

The Heart to Heart Sisters also shared some of their painful stories. We heard about ethnic women collecting mites but turning them over to their Anglo sisters because they did not realize they themselves could be part of the LWML. We also heard about their disconnectedness, isolation, and even loneliness in ministry. We knew these would be powerful stories for other women to hear.

And so today, we are all hearing these stories because our ethnic sisters are no longer temporary guests but active participants who have a place at the table, a place reserved especially for them in the LWML community.

It has been exciting to introduce some of the amazing ethnic women of our church to the rest of the women of the LWML. I have heard women remark about their talent, their passion, and their zeal for the Lord. I have heard that being around these women has been exciting, contagious, inspiring. Joyfully, the Heart to Heart Sisters have shared their stories dozens and maybe hundreds of times. It has been an affirmation for the Heart to Heart Sisters that their ministries are important, valuable and valued, as they are serving as special missionaries to their own cultural communities. The Heart to Heart Sisters have felt welcomed, uplifted, and strengthened.

Nooria Popal, a missionary to Muslim women and a Heart to Heart Sister at the 2007 LWML Convention, was overjoyed and said, “Four thousand women here, two thousand women hugged me!”

Our ethnic sisters are no longer temporary guests but active participants who have a place at the table, a place reserved especially for them in the LWML community.

As we begin to recognize our connectedness as Sisters of the Heart, we will be enriched, strengthened, uplifted, and propelled to serve the Lord of the Harvest, as together we build the bigger heaven where our experience will be as described in Revelation 7:9: *After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb.*

Yep, it gives me chills...every time.

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