

Culture and Religion Are Integral to Healing Approaches and Practices

by Adelita M. Medina, Former Director, Alianza

For nearly 10 years, the National Latino Alliance for the Elimination of Domestic Violence (Alianza) has created important inroads and made significant contributions that are changing how gender-based violence is addressed, not only in Latino communities, but in the domestic violence field in general. We are developing our own research, programs, training materials, and healing approaches.

From the beginning, we have recognized that in order to be effective in ending violence and creating families and relationships that are safe, healthy, and nurturing, we have to develop “truly transforming structured methods and models that reflect who we are, and that are respectful of our traditions, our cultures, and our diversity.”

Alianza is a continually growing “network” of Latina and Latino advocates, community activists, practitioners, researchers, and survivors of domestic violence, all working together to fulfill our mission which is *“to promote understanding, sustain dialogue, and generate solutions that will move toward the elimination of domestic violence in Latino communities—with an understanding of the sacredness of all relationships and communities.”*

Because of the magnitude of the problem and its far-reaching effects on our families and communities, we recognize the need to involve multiple sectors of our population in our efforts to fulfill this mission. Everyone from family and friends, to basic service providers, schools, courts, hospitals and religious institutions, has a necessary role to play.

Over the years, we have looked to identify both the negative and positive elements of our culture, our traditions and our beliefs and the impact these have had on either helping or hindering the work of service providers and on the healing of women, men, and children affected by violence. We have found that Latino cultures, as do other cultures, contain values, beliefs, and expectations that can be used to justify, excuse, and even encourage domestic violence. At the same time, we have identified Latino cultural traditions and values that support and celebrate respectful and healthy relationships and that can be integrated into asset-based prevention and intervention efforts.

From our very first national forum, the *National Symposium on La Violencia Domestica: An Emerging Dialogue Among Latinos*, which took place in 1997, participants recognized the important role that spiritual or religious beliefs play in the lives of many Latinas/os. Participants at succeeding Alianza forums have reaffirmed the primacy of spirituality in their lives and its

importance in healing practitioners, survivors, and batterers. They have cautioned about the negative influence that some religious leaders have had on perpetuating abusive relationships, but also cited examples of the wonderful healing work that some clergy have carried out in their communities and parishes.

Just as key events in the life cycles of families—birth, graduations, marriage, death—are celebrated by religious/spiritual rites or ceremonies, so too are Alianza's gatherings. From its Board of Director meetings to its national conferences, Alianza's gatherings include ceremonies which help create a sacred and safe working space where participants can openly share their feelings, thoughts, and experiences. We set up an altar and set aside time to remember our loved ones, ancestors, and people we work with, and to ask for guidance and strength to continue our efforts.

Several of Alianza's founders and Board Members also work in organizations that incorporate aspects of spirituality and traditional healing practices in their programming and services for both survivors and batterers.

Regardless of the religious or spiritual persuasions of the survivors they work with, Alianza believes that service providers need to take their faith into consideration when trying to help them. Often under trying and desperate circumstances, faith serves as an important anchor.

Domestic violence advocates can also look to build alliances with local religious/spiritual leaders who can provide resources and solace to people of faith. They can offer to provide trainings that will help religious leaders and others in their congregations to recognize signs of abuse and to provide safe haven, resources and other types of support.

In recent months, Alianza has received requests from women who want to start support groups for survivors within their congregations or learn how to provide other types of support. We hope that in the near future we can address these requests.

Alianza looks forward to exploring ways that we can work with FaithTrust Institute to even more effectively respond to the needs of our communities drawing on the strengths and resources of our faith traditions.