

***SITE VISIT WITH REVERAND SUSANA RIVER-LEON  
PASTOR OF THE SANCTUARY CHURCH BRONX, NEW YORK***

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## ***Introduction***

The Bible tells us that we are ambassadors for Christ, a people who plead with others on His behalf. Everything we say and do as followers of Him will always impact how others see Christianity.

I recently had the privilege to interview Reverend Susana Rivera-Leon of “The Sanctuary Church” located at 14 West 170<sup>th</sup> Street, Bronx, N.Y. 10452, where she has served as senior pastor for the last three years. The conversation took place on Good Friday, April 7, 2023, and we spent some time discussing the urban theology of The Sanctuary Church.

Pastor Rivera-Leon comes from a rich heritage of faith in Jesus Christ (Proverbs 22:6). Her Father Bishop. Raymond Rivera has served as a pastor, preacher, community activist, community builder, organizational founder, and in a denominational leadership capacity for over fifty years. In 1992 he founded the Latino Pastoral Action Center (LPAC)<sup>1</sup>, a Christ-centered faith-based, not-for-profit organization. The Sanctuary Church was birthed from the fruitful LPAC impacts and aims to educate, equip, and empower individuals and the community.<sup>2</sup> He is also the author of the book “*Liberty to the Captives: Our Call to Minister in a Captive World.*”

Like her father, Pastor Susana Rivera-Leon is a trailblazer. She is a lover of Jesus and His people. God uses her to declare the truth of His “Word” and call people to repentance (Luke 24:47). She has pioneered and directed a wide spectrum of ministries. She serves as a preacher, pastor, mentor, community activist, counselor, advocates for social justice, and prophetic voice for the voiceless (Ephesians 6:10-11).

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<sup>1</sup> “Vision and Mission,” 1.

<sup>2</sup> “Vision and Mission,” 1.

The Sanctuary Church creates a safe nurturing environment where individuals and families can thrive. This is regardless of their cultural, religious, or socioeconomic background. Pastor Rivera-Leon says that at The Sanctuary Church, *“we strive to empower and equip individuals to live meaningful and purposeful lives that honor God, themselves, and their community. We seek to bridge divides, build relationships, and encourage collaboration between individuals and organizations to achieve social and economic transformation.”*

As followers of Christ, “The organization strengthens the four pillars of community life: families, schools, community-based organizations, and churches. They see these institutions as a collective “foundation of a healthy community.”<sup>3</sup> The Sanctuary Church believes that we cannot only bind up the wounds of the people we encounter who have been beaten up by life, but we must make the road safer (Luke 10:25-37). This involves bringing the Kingdom of God into some of the darkest and most neglected areas of the city.

They equip individuals to become self-sustaining, empowering them to become leaders in their community. To be a beacon of hope and light in the darkness of poverty, crime, and despair. They seek to be agents of change in the city and bring glory to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (Romans 12:2). They strive to show Jesus' love through their words, actions, and being a living epistle of His love, grace, and mercy. The Sanctuary Church defines its urban ministry using four holistic principles: healing, community, liberation, and transformation.<sup>4</sup> These principles are crucial for the church to develop strong, independent cadres with articulate servant leadership to represent communities while remaining highly accountable legitimately.

The Sanctuary Church embraces two essential commands: The Great Commandment and The Great Commission. They believe that as Christians we are to love God and love our

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<sup>3</sup> “Vision and Mission,” 1.

<sup>4</sup> “Vision and Mission,” 1.

neighbors as ourselves (Matthew 22:37-39), and we are to go and make disciples of others who will do the same (Matthew 28:19-20). Living out the Great Commandment in ways depicted in Matthew 22 catalyzes the Great Commission because when people experience the love of God through our deeds, it prepares them to hear the message of Christ through our words.

### ***Urban Social Analysis***

Churches in urban cities like The Sanctuary Church are constantly facing significant challenges, with questions like "Does she (The Church) have an answer to the problems that our urban communities are going through?" The Sanctuary Church recognize that people require continuous reassurance that the Church understands its challenges and is addressing them by using biblically-based solutions. There is significant emphasis on the needs of the poor. God commands us to give generously to the less fortunate and to speak up on their behalf.

Most of the issue that the community surrounding The Sanctuary Church face revolve around social, economic, religious, and physicality. On social, the pastor argues that there is a need to educate residents on why loving their neighbors is paramount for personal development. They need help on how to engage in family life and participate (actively) in community affairs.<sup>5</sup> Pastor Rivera-Leon adds that as an urban church, they expect the adults to mentor their peers and younger people. Religiously, Sanctuary Church expects its worshipers and people around it to "love God" with all their heart, soul, mind, and physical strength.<sup>6</sup>

These personal development dimensions of the Sanctuary church make children, youth, and adults become "strong, independent, articulate individuals who legitimately represent and are accountable to their families and communities."<sup>7</sup> On economic issues, some of the surrounding communities are from low-income families. That is why the Church has taken it

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<sup>5</sup> "Holistic Discipleship," 3.

<sup>6</sup> "Holistic Ministry," 3.

<sup>7</sup> "Holistic Ministry," 3.

upon itself to provide “*refuge, renewal, and regeneration in Christ*” experiences.<sup>8</sup> Pastor Rivera-Leon notes that providing shelter addresses the economic issue for community members who lack the finances to rent or pay for their own houses.

### **Urban Theological Reflection and Formation**

The theological consideration that the Sanctuary Church is examining comes from five essential prospects. The first one is the perspective of the Church as the Kingdom of God. In this prospect, the Church should “change its understanding of the Kingdom of God.”<sup>9</sup> Pastor Rivera-Leon opines this urban Church places God's Kingdom in the future (eschatological event) but is also inaugurated in time and space (history) through Jesus Christ. Joy, peace, and righteousness depict the Holy Spirit's powers. As such, the Kingdom of God is now (present).

Thus, the Sanctuary Church focuses on its theological consideration by continuing with the ministry through the inauguration and consummation phases.<sup>10</sup> The role of this phase in fostering theology is to bind strong men who wrestle and struggle with the powers and principalities of the world. As such, they can proclaim Christ's Lordship in their "personal lifestyles and all creation."<sup>11</sup> Thus, the interviewee emphasized that the Church should continue changing its way of understanding God's Kingdom.

The second aspect of theological consideration that the Sanctuary Church examines is “the Church as a Servant.” They believe the Church is "not in this world to be served."<sup>12</sup> Instead, it is supposed to serve others the same way Jesus Christ did. Pastor Rivera-Leon adds that the Sanctuary Church uses Jesus Christ as its primary role model. It is the most crucial reference for

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<sup>8</sup> SC, “Sanctuary,” 2.

<sup>9</sup> “Captivity Theology,” 2.

<sup>10</sup> “Captivity Theology,” 2.

<sup>11</sup> “Captivity Theology,” 2.

<sup>12</sup> “Captivity Theology,” 2.

developing a servanthood theology.<sup>13</sup> The third aspect is “The Church as the Continuation of the Incarnation” which is another essential theological consideration being examined. Pastor Rivera-Leon posits that God’s incarnation was in His Son, Jesus Christ. Christ also has a manifestation in the “*Church-His body*.”<sup>14</sup> Therefore, the Sanctuary church expects its ministry to be incarnated in the communities.

The fourth theological consideration that the Sanctuary Church examines is a new ecclesiology. They believe it is essential that we reject the historical dichotomy that separates clergy from laity and assigns roles that misrepresent the functions of the body of Christ.<sup>15</sup> Each member of the Body of Christ has spiritual gifts that should be used for ministerial, edifying, and building-up purposes.<sup>16</sup> The Church believes all members have gifts and should have a purpose to discover them. Still, on the new ecclesiology theological consideration, Pastor Rivera-Leon urges, churches to “*embrace the priesthood of all believers*.”<sup>17</sup> These self-beliefs increase individual self-worth. The Church should not be locked in a negative mindset. The Church should function to undo systemic conditioning of the internalized attitudes that “*limits believers’ ability and potential*.”<sup>18</sup>

Finally, the other theological consideration that the Sanctuary Church examines entails the Church and the Urban poor. Pastor Rivera-Leon emphasizes that the “*God of the Bible is the God of the poor*.”<sup>19</sup> God’s word teaches that our brother and sister are extensions of ourselves. How we treat others has a transcendent dimension. It coincides with the mercy that God has shown us (Matthew 25:40; Matthew 7:2; Luke 6:36-38). Therefore, we are commanded and

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<sup>13</sup> “Captivity Theology,” 2.

<sup>14</sup> “Captivity Theology,” 2.

<sup>15</sup> “Captivity Theology,” 2.

<sup>16</sup> “Captivity Theology,” 2.

<sup>17</sup> “Captivity Theology,” 2.

<sup>18</sup> Rivera and Montes, *Liberty to the captives*, 50.

<sup>19</sup> “Theology of Urban Mission,” 2.

commissioned to go forth from ourselves toward our sisters and brothers in response to God's gift, Jesus Christ. The Sanctuary Church believes that there is an "*upward journey*" with God, others (outward), the environment (outward), and ourselves (inward), throughout the Scripture.<sup>20</sup> As The Sanctuary Church works to develop holistic discipleship, it relies on four principles: Conceptual ("Transcendent Vision"), Contextual ("Interrelated Events"), Incarnational (In the Midst"), and Organic (Interdependent Growth").<sup>21</sup>

### **Urban Theological Implementation**

The Sanctuary Church approaches the urban ministry using four pillars of the community. They include the family, school, community-based organizations, and churches.<sup>22</sup> They believe that when working towards a healthy community, there is a need to seek and strengthen these four pillars. The Church sees families as a crucial component of the community. It encourages each family member to identify their gifts and knowledge "*towards fulfilling their family plans.*"<sup>23</sup>

These members then employ collective gifts and knowledge to achieve a common good. As a Christian ministry, the Church aligns its structures and programs to address its congregation's emotional, spiritual, physical, mental, and social needs.<sup>24</sup> Sanctuary Church also implements urban ministry from a school-based approach. Their schools use structures and programs that maximize "quality education and engagement of students, parents, and the community."<sup>25</sup> They ensure that members are part of the decision-making process hence engaging the whole person with the whole gospel. Good choices in life, meaningful vocations, a

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<sup>20</sup> "Holistic Discipleship," 1.

<sup>21</sup> "Holistic Ministry Framework, 1.

<sup>22</sup> "Holistic Ministry," 4.

<sup>23</sup> "Holistic Ministry," 4.

<sup>24</sup> "Holistic Ministry," 4.

<sup>25</sup> "Holistic Ministry," 4.

healthy family, and good character are all intertwined with worship, discipleship, and fellowship. These engagements promote individual and collective accountability.

The Sanctuary Church utilizes programs and structures to offer services and address community developmental needs. They align their structures and programs to address their congregation's emotional, spiritual, physical, mental, and social needs.<sup>26</sup> God desires that His people live in unity and harmony built on the foundation that is Jesus Christ. It is through the cleansing blood of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit that we are drawn together and our bonds made stronger. There is nothing more important than being united in love in the Kingdom of God. God calls each of us to be bearers of His fruit. The way we accomplish this is by working together. Unity is vital to building strong families, communities, and churches. The truth of God's word brings unity and not division. Satan is threatened by foundations built on the love of God. That is why we are commanded and commissioned to love one another repeatedly in the Bible.

### ***My Reflection on The Sanctuary Church's Urban Theology***

By its very nature, the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ refuses to be bottled up. It must be shared. While methods and strategies will vary, the timeless call of God to his people to bring his saving message to a lost and dying world does not vary. The church must press on in its vital mission of bringing the mercy of God to the world, the most crucial aspect of which is bringing the greatest news the world has ever known, the gospel of Christ, to the ends of the earth—for the joy of the church, the salvation of the nations, and the glory of the Triune God. The strength of The Sanctuary Church's urban theology is that it acknowledges the city's significance as a hub for intricate social, religious, and economic processes that affect people's lives.

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<sup>26</sup> "Holistic Ministry, "4

To liberate and promote the poor, every Believer, church, and community is called to be an instrument of God. As a result, we must be docile and attentive to the cries of the poor and come to their rescue. In addition to eliminating structural causes of poverty, it means promoting the integral development of the poor as well as meeting the real needs that are in front of us every Day. Christians are called to watch over and protect the fragile world in which we live, and all its people.

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