

María Teresa Unger Palmer,  
Advocate of Immigrants/Defensora y  
Consejera de los Inmigrantes



1. Getting to Know You/Aprendiendo a conocerte

Name/Nombre: María Teresa Unger Palmer

A.B. Recipient/A.B. honor: 2001

Career/Profesión: Pastora de la Iglesia, Educator,  
Advocate/Educadora, Defensora  
y Consejera

Place of birth/Lugar de nacimiento:  
Lima, Perú

Hair Color/Color de pelo: Brown/Castaño

Eyes/Ojos: Brown/Castaño

Siblings/Hermanos o hermanas? 3 brothers/3 hermanos

Birth Order/Orden de nacimiento:  
Second/Segunda

Favorite Class (in high school)/Asignatura favorita (en la escuela superior):  
Physics, history/Física, historia

Hobbies/Cuando estoy sola me gusta (in high school):  
Reading, organized events/Leer,  
organizar eventos

Persons I Admire/Heroes/Mis Héroeas: My mom, my Girl Scout  
leader/Mi madre; mi líder de las  
niñas exploradas

*We must measure each decision to see if it is building a society that is fair and just for all most vulnerable citizens and residents.<sup>1</sup>*

## 2. Career Woman

A naturalized citizen, María Teresa Unger Palmer emigrated to the United States from Perú in 1978. She received her first degree in education from Jacksonville State University in Alabama. Her first job in the United States was as a summer missionary providing help to migrant farmers. She is an educator, a minister and a political representative, an advocate of North Carolina's Hispanic community.

In 1979, María became a Baptist and developed a deep appreciation for people of faith who took their faith seriously:<sup>2</sup>

I joined a small country church where people who didn't have a clue where I was from, what my funny accent was, [but] we had something in common. We were trying to faithfully interpret the Scriptures. . . . This helped me become a Southerner in the best sense of the word. They taught and preached those basic Baptist principles of pursuit of the believer and each person having the freedom to be all he or she could be.

Although María was called to be a minister while attending a college gathering at Baptist conference grounds, the denomination proved too conservative for her.

"For me to become a minister didn't set very well with the authorities that had organized that meeting," she said. "They almost fired my campus minister because obviously, you know, he had misled me and maybe what I needed to find was a good Christian husband."

Later, when she and her husband went to a Southern Baptist seminary, they were turned down for the mission field.

"I shifted from a religious vocational career," she said, "to go back to teaching because we were told we were too liberal to be appointed by a mission board. We were told we couldn't do theology or politics in the mission field. I said, 'How do you not do theology?'"

So, María was ordained at the Chapel Hill United Church of Christ, the Anglo church where she held membership. She said, "I was a refugee of the right wing takeover of my denomination which gave me a home in an adopted country."<sup>3</sup>

She was founding pastor of a Spanish-language congregation that had not yet become part of an established church within the United Church of Christ. Today, she is still involved in ecumenical dialogue and in the movement for immigration reform.

Her professional experience in education includes serving as a Spanish teacher, a multi-cultural counselor and assistant director of the Center for Latin American Education at the University of Louisville. After receiving a master's in education at the University of Louisville, she earned a doctoral degree in educational leadership from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill.

### 3. *Iglesia Unida de Cristo*<sup>4</sup>

From 1994 to 1995, María and her husband, Mike, spent the year in Chapel Hill. María was completing coursework for her doctorate. Her husband was spending a sabbatical from Bluefield College.

Together they began a Bible study in Spanish at Chapel Hill United Church of Christ. The next year, the Palmers returned to Virginia where her husband resumed his post as a religion and philosophy professor. They traveled once a month to Chapel Hill to continue the Bible study.

In the summer of 1996, our denomination contracted with María to develop a Spanish-language<sup>5</sup> congregation. Her husband resigned his job, and in July they moved to Chapel Hill to begin *Iglesia Unida de Cristo*. María said:



Our denomination believes that ethnic congregations should be autonomous (to avoid paternalism). Thus, I needed to start a separate congregation. *Iglesia Unida de Cristo* received limited support from United Church of Chapel Hill, primarily worship and office space. My salary began at \$20,000 the first year and then decreased each year until by the fifth year it was hoped that I would have a congregation strong enough to pay my salary.<sup>6</sup>

"As pastor of an immigrant church, I strove to create a faith community where nobody feels 'foreign,'" she said. "It was a privilege to help folks become part of our community."<sup>7</sup>

Strive she did, as María would write later:

I gave the pastorate everything I had. My family's life revolved around the church and the needs of our community. My husband did the music and helped with the service. My children sang, helped with audiovisuals, went visiting with me, helped lead VBS and kept the nursery. We did lunch-fundraisers to help family members

'back home' after earthquakes or kidnappings; we had plays, pageants, cultural nights, teacher-appreciation banquets, youth seminars....

I remember so many wonderful experiences, including churchwide trips to visit our sister church in Asheville, trips to the zoo with the whole congregation, summer camps... I could go on for hours! I still miss my church and what it meant to the members.

In a sermon that María would give later at the National Cathedral in Washington D.C., she also remembered the wall built straight with the aid of the weighted measure of a plumb line (Amos 7:7-8). She likened living by God's standards to the plumb line dropped. She cautioned that "living by God's standards sometimes feels extremely risky."<sup>8</sup>

In this sermon that mirrored the Immigrant Theology born from her experience, she said, "By acknowledging where the wall is not straight and fixing it, we will be building a life that is not just pleasing to God but is full of God's breath and God's love."

The plumb line of *Iglesia Unida* sought the most adequate way to live the gospel in its local context:

Because we have been called by Christ  
to be his disciples, obeying and teaching all that he taught,  
to be part of a new community, where there are no  
foreigners,  
to be united in doing God's work as the body of Christ, to  
serve each other and those in need,  
to be the light of the world,  
We commit ourselves  
to form a church in Chapel Hill in order to share the message  
of salvation,  
to evangelize, disciple and serve our community in the name  
of Jesus,  
In the power of the Holy Spirit, and with the certainty that Christ  
will be with us until the end.<sup>9</sup>

By autumn of 1996, *Iglesia Unida* had grown enough to sponsor a preschool called *Rayito de Luz* (Ray of Light). Today, *Rayito de Luz* has its own location and is called *Mi Escuelita* (My Little School). On Easter Sunday of 2000, *Iglesia Unida* and the United Church of Chapel Hill gathered for the first time in the new sanctuary.

As part of a photographic art project documenting the life of Latino people in North Carolina, artist Susan Simone visited *Iglesia Unida*. She said:

The strongest impression I had as I worked was the feeling of the generation of community. The service emphasized participation by the congregation and was followed by a get-together for talk and the exchange of information. In the images, I sought to convey the celebration that is part of the experience of the church service.

Sermons are not a time of recrimination. Sermons focus on survival. There is music. There is a restoration of energy for people who work hard, who have undergone dangerous voyages to come here, who may doubt their choices, who may find themselves overwhelmed.<sup>10</sup>

#### 4. Seeds of a Career

The seed of María's life work as advocate of the immigrant was already stirring in the 1970s when she was an exchange student to this country. Thirty-six years later, she spoke about the impression made by her first visit to an American church:<sup>11</sup>

I came from a very conservative Catholic background and was not used to lay participation in worship. When I heard the pastor ask, "Brother \_\_\_\_\_ will you lead us in prayer for the offering?" I felt that the pastor was using the opportunity to publicly acknowledge the importance of a particular church member.

I remember being a little embarrassed; I heard echoes of the Pharisee's prayer in the temple (Luke 18:10-14), a sort of litany of privilege which sounded to me like: "Thank you that we are citizens of this great country. Thank you that we have good jobs that pay ten times what the rest of the world makes so that we can bring this bountiful offering."

I still feel somewhat embarrassed by those prayers. I want to amend them by standing up and adding: "Forgive us for taking our good jobs for granted and doing so little to secure living wages for all your children. Forgive us for enjoying our luxurious church building while so many of your children feel unwelcome and unworthy to even come in."

The "Why's?" began to unfold. She continued in the sermon:

*[In church,] why do we introduce visitors and new members by their job titles and degrees?*

*What title do we give to a poor, unemployed widow?*

*Could this lack of sensitivity be the reason she is not joining our worship?*

María would not, could not, remain silent, ever, even if her words spoke truth that would get her into trouble. She would always be out there on the edge – sometimes pushing, sometimes risking her career – but encouraging others like her, also out there on the edge. She would come out on the side of the poor widow in the story of the widow's coin.

## 5. Ministry Finds Its Form

María was to serve for nine years as pastor of the mission church. Her congregation was transient, poor and immigrant. In no way could they become a self-supporting church.

At best on a Sunday, she said, there were six or eight adults who could read well enough to help in the liturgy. Some needed glasses -- a luxury for new immigrants. Others were illiterate or lacked self-confidence. One man liked to stay close to the back door "in case immigration police come." Most felt inadequate and undeserving.

After I finished my doctorate in education, something I had been working on for many years before and while pastoring, I realized that I could not continue to subsidize my ministry with educational loans or fellowships. We had gone through all our life savings in this time. I did not have the support needed to continue my ministry.

I was offered a principal ship and had to decide. I knew that I couldn't be a one-day-a-week pastor to an immigrant community that needed full-time ministry, so I resigned.

In time, the church was faced with dwindling membership and possible dissolution. United Church of Chapel Hill decided to incorporate *Iglesia Unida* as a ministry of its congregation. *Iglesia Unida* and United Church of Chapel Hill became one congregation with services in two languages. Even though the church employed a part-time pastor, as long as María attended church there, her parishioners could not let go of her.

"I had to stop attending *Iglesia*," she said.

When she found a church home in another denomination, thereby ceasing to be a member of the United Church of Christ, María also lost ministerial standing in her denomination.

"While I would do some things differently, I would still start *Iglesia* all over again given the chance," María reflected. "It changed lives. It saved

people from isolation, loneliness, despair. It brought the grace of God into many lives. The people I met continue to bless me. "

"It is critical," she said, "that we hear an indictment of the preference we show to the rich and successful."<sup>12</sup>

María understands poverty. She understands the excluded widow. She goes to court with poor immigrants. She visits their children in schools. She translates at job interviews.

Still today, she said, she is struck by her social capital of simply being able to speak English well and to work as a professional in the community:

The immigrants are poor in voice and status. May God forgive me when I feel that I am of more value to the kingdom. May God forgive us, his church people, for using our social capital to attract to our churches those who are powerful and rich while we ignore those who might seem a burden – those whose humble worship surely pleases God.<sup>13</sup>

María also understands a prophetic role of the church as speaking "in a loud voice" to other congregations and saying, "Your faith requires that you see these people as your brothers and sisters and you help them find a spiritual home."

How can María Teresa Unger Palmer not do ministry?

## 6. *That All May Be One*

The covenant that María shepherded at *Iglesia Unida* expresses a community that works toward the inclusive justice that Christ proclaimed in the words from John 17:22 – *I have given them the glory that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one:*

At *Iglesia Unida* we see evangelism in much broader terms (beyond limiting it to the beliefs of the individual)... We define evangelism in terms of *all* the needs of people as human beings, not just their spiritual needs... In addition to preaching the message of faith, we help the poor to furnish their houses, to find adequate work, to obtain food for their children. We pray for the sick, but we also take them to the doctor when they do not have transportation. We invite our community to come to church, but we also take our church to the community.<sup>14</sup>

At a 2005 conference, María was a member of a panel that discussed the role of the progressive faith community in the South. When the topic

turned to the church's role in racial reconciliation, she said, "I have to tell you, it is such, such hard work and it can be very painful."

When only about half her congregation showed up at the first two services she planned with an Anglo congregation, she visited with her members in their homes. They told her:

When you knew you would be with white people, you would have to dress a certain way, and you know that you're not going to understand them and, you know, you don't know if somebody from Immigration's going to show up. You don't know if somebody that is your boss is going to show up and they're going to ask questions about you.

"And if you are asking them to take that risk," María said, "you have to provide so much support – especially if it's the group that is always at the bottom, the group that has to smile and act nice when they go to work."

After the September 11 attacks, people from her church went to the arena to pray with other congregations. Soon afterward, her folks started getting fired and losing their jobs.

"Of 67 families," she said, "about 30 had a member of the family lose a job because of mismatched Social Security numbers, because people were scared of hiring a foreigner."

"How," she said, "do you tell them, we're going to go worship with a congregation where they know somebody that they were cleaning the house for that just let them go because they're scared about somebody finding out they have a, quote, unquote, illegal person. It's asking a lot. They are afraid."

## 7. The Right Time

In 1999, María was appointed by Governor James B. Hunt, Jr., to fill a vacancy on the State Board of Education. She knew the risks of speaking out. She knew the consequences of being a prophetic voice. "Yet," she said, "there's nothing more important than education to the immigrant community. I will take this opportunity to serve and represent that community."

She served on the State Board from 1999 to 2005. In that time, she was also appointed principal of a Spanish Immersion Elementary School.

In the decade of the 1990s, North Carolina led the nation with an estimated 394% growth of Latino population. María learned from the

2000 census that one of almost every five children under five born in North Carolina was growing up in a Spanish-speaking home. While about half of the immigrant students were from Mexico, Spanish-speaking students also were from Colombia, El Salvador, Honduras, Argentina, Venezuela, Perú, and from other countries in Central and South America.

The Hispanic people were putting down permanent roots in North Carolina. They comprised 6% to 8% of the student population. María wanted to understand the schooling experience of immigrant people. She wanted to bring about changes in the policy and practices of schools.

## 8. Why?

*Why do half of all teenage Latino immigrants in North Carolina never enroll in or even complete high school?*

*What can be done about it?*

*What can I do about it?*

Again María's mind teemed with questions. From *Iglesia Unida*, she had become familiar with the struggles of individual Latino families. If education leaders understood what was happening, they could adjust policy and ways of doing things. María went to the students. She interviewed them. They taught her what they needed. They became the center of her dissertation.

Here, in part, is what she learned:<sup>15</sup>

Many students were caught in a limbo of missed information. Confused identity, racial and ethnic conflict plus mixed messages about the purposes of the high school education they were receiving added more complications. Students expended time and energy simply trying to figure out what was happening around them and how to meet class and school requirements instead of focusing on studies.

Students had a *no sé* attitude. "I don't know" was often the answer to her questions. There was little way for students and their families to communicate with teachers.

"The problem is that I don't know how to explain to teachers, how to say it so they can understand me, how to ask for help," another student said. Others felt that without an invitation to ask for help they would be seen as disrespectful.

Even in schools where the administration and teachers were welcoming, barriers and problems persisted:

About 80% of the immigrant students I interviewed blamed not having *alguien de confianza*. Not having somebody with answers whom the student can trust to talk to was the main reason for lacking necessary information or for not receiving academic and personal assistance.<sup>16</sup>

As a Rockefeller Fellow at the U-NC Chapel Hill's University Center for International Studies, María prepared her research for publication. After its completion in 2003, she shared what she had learned. She went to professional conferences. She reviewed her insights with state policymakers, faculty and college students on several campuses and with Latino parents, teachers and high school students across North Carolina. She worked with groups of future teachers and practicing teachers. She made a difference.

"It is so important for the academic community to understand how research can serve the goals of a more just and inclusive community," she explained. "Immigrants come to North Carolina to seek a better future for their children. They have so many hopes and dreams, most of which will be dashed without a high school diploma."<sup>17</sup>

## 9. Advocate

For the Easter Story of March 27, 2005, Nancy McLaughlin, Religion Reporter of the News-Record in Greensboro, NC, asked area ministers to select a Disciple and to write as if Jesus had been born thirty years ago. María chose James, Son of Alphaeus. Always the advocate, she wrote a story about the Disciple that was suggestive of her own journey:

The News-Record said they got my name from a list of Jesus' followers. I really have done little to deserve the name of "follower."

Basically, I just make sure that we have the donuts ready for the prayer breakfasts and bread and cheese to hand out when the homeless people won't leave and Jesus invites them to stay for lunch. Sometimes I think Jesus was thinking about my mamma's famous fried chicken when he asked me to work with him. That's not completely fair, though, 'cause he keeps saying he believes I'll make a difference in Greensboro.

Lately, Jesus has been talking about dying for justice and God's kingdom. I'm not interested in dying. I don't even have insurance, and my family can't pay for my funeral. People did want to kill JC last Sunday. We were at a big church, in their well-known Super Singles Sunday School. They are studying Amos, and the lesson was really well done. Jesus was getting all into the lesson, offering ideas,

so then the teacher asks us visitors—looking at JC like she would do anything for him—how we could apply the teaching of Amos to our life in Greensboro.

What does JC do? He asks her a question: “Well, what do you do for a living?” She got a little tense. “I’m a National Board Certified Teacher and I work with gifted students at Country Club Lane School,” she said. Jesus said “Great! What about working in a low-performing school? I hear they have problems recruiting good teachers.”

If looks could kill, Jesus would be a dead man. She didn’t even invite us to stay for the service. Now I would teach anywhere. I’m just a lowly teacher assistant and I don’t know if I’ll ever finish my degree and get to teach like my dad. Everyone thinks it’s a given, they even call me “little Alphaeus,” since my dad was such a beloved teacher. Jesus insists I’ll be remembered. That may be good or bad.

The other day he said, “James, you will be a great educator. I can see you putting your career on the line to do what’s right for children. I can see you speaking out against resegregation; against suspending kids instead of helping them; against celebrating test scores and forgetting the whole child and the communities our schools are supposed to be serving.” God bless me if Jesus is right. I’ve got my work cut out for me.<sup>18</sup>



Today, from her position as director of the Multicultural Student Center, North Carolina Agricultural and Technical University, María continues to do the work of advocacy for immigrant justice. In finding her voice she said, she appreciates "that I am still called to ministry. Everything I do can honor my calling to proclaim God's healing and grace."

## 10. So What about You?

- María Palmer traveled several paths to find full expression of her faith and to discover how God would use her talents. Trace through her journey, noting how one event led to another.

***What disappointments and encouragements did she find as her voice emerged?***

***In what ways can advocacy and education also be ministry?***

***How has one event lead to another in your finding who God intends for you to be? Name some disappointments, encouragements along your way.***

- More than anything, María wants to create a community – a church, a school, a society – where no one feels like a "foreigner."

***Look up "foreigner."***

***Tell about a time that you felt like an outsider.***

***How were you able to get inside?***

***Tell about a time that you had the joy of making someone feel at home.***

- Reread the Good Samaritan Story (Luke 10:29-37) thinking about immigrant people.

***Whom do you walk by and not see?***

***How does your community treat immigrants or others sometimes held on the outside?***

***What can you do about it?***

- Read Luke 18:10-14 and Mark 12:38-44. Contrast the well-to-do and well-educated person with the person who lives in poverty.

***Name issues that churches are not discussing.***

***What do you see are some risks of not speaking out?***

***What exclusion injustices would you want to speak out about?***

***What should, what does my church care about immigration reform? Minimum wage? Living wage? About training? About the lack of money or classes available at community colleges?***

***What are some risks of your speaking out?***

***In John 17:22, how do you define "One"?***

## 11. Church Family Activity

Invite your minister or worship leader to lead the congregation in a Spanish/English litany, *La Declaración de Fe de la Iglesia Unida de Cristo*/the Statement of Faith of the United Church of Christ. Invite (a)

Spanish-speaking person(s) in your church family or, if you have none, invite a Spanish teacher or student from your school to lead the Spanish.

Both Spanish and English languages are found at <http://www.ucc.org/beliefs/statement-of-faith.html>.

## 12. Still Curious?

- ✓ Read the complete text of Michelle Coppedge. "A Culture Emerging: Almost Unnoticed, Latinos are shaping the future of North Carolina."  
<http://research.unc.edu/endeavors/spr2004/latino.html>
- ✓ Read the transcript of the "Belief and Politics – Rethinking the Role of the Faith" Community portion or listen to the entire New Strategies for Southern Progress Conference at
- ✓ <http://southnow.org/leadership-and-public-engagement/new-strategies-conference/new-strategies-conference>
- ✓ Read about differences among cultural terms:
  - See "What is the Difference between Chicanos, Latinos and Hispanics" at <http://wisegeek.com/what-is-the-difference-between-chicano-latino-and-hispanic.htm>
  - See "An American's Guide to Understanding the Difference between Hispanic, Chicano, and Latino" at [http://associatedcontent.com/article/32885/an\\_american\\_s\\_guide\\_to\\_understanding.html?cat=47](http://associatedcontent.com/article/32885/an_american_s_guide_to_understanding.html?cat=47)
  - See "Hispanic, Latino—what's the right word? An examination of the language used to categorize people" at <http://layouth.com/index.php?module=htmlpages&func=display&pid=28>

*We must measure each decision to see if it is building a society that is fair and just for all most vulnerable citizens and residents.*

*As a pastor of an immigrant congregation, I strove to create a faith community where nobody feels "foreign." It is a privilege to help folks become part of our community.*

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<sup>1</sup> From Maria's sermon at the Washington National Cathedral on November 21, 2004

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<sup>2</sup> The following section is from the transcription of the "Belief and Politics – Rethinking the Role of the Faith Community," a panel discussion from the New Strategies for Southern Progress Conference, February 25, 2005, Carolina Inn, Chapel Hill, N.C.

<sup>3</sup> From South Now Panel in the New Strategies for Southern Progress Conference. Carolina Inn, Chapel Hill, N.C. February 25, 2005

<sup>4</sup> Read more about *Iglesia Unida* at <http://iglesiaunida.org/historia/ingles.html>. Available in *Español* and in English.

<sup>5</sup> For other Spanish language UCC churches, visit Recommended Web Sites at [www.iglesiaunida.org](http://www.iglesiaunida.org). This web site is available in Spanish and English.

<sup>6</sup> María Teresa Unger Palmer in an email to the author date January 23, 2009, 9:46 a.m.

<sup>7</sup> As quoted by Michelle Coppedge in "A Culture Emerging unnoticed, Latinos are shaping the future of North Carolina" in *Endeavors*, UNC-Chapel Hill (Spring, 2004), p. 2

<sup>8</sup> This sermon can be heard in Spanish and in English at the Iglesia Unida website.

<sup>9</sup> From [www.Iglesiaunida.org](http://www.Iglesiaunida.org)

<sup>10</sup> See *Fotos del Pueblo* at Projects in docu-Art Susan Simone at [www.PurpleValley.net](http://www.PurpleValley.net).

<sup>11</sup> From Maria Teresa Palmer, "Small Change" in *The Christian Century*, October 31, 2006, p. 19, prepared for [www.religion-online.org](http://www.religion-online.org) by Ted and Winnie Borck

<sup>12</sup> From "Small Change."

<sup>13</sup> Maria Palmer as quoted by Michelle Coppedge in "A Culture Emerging unnoticed, Latinos are shaping the future of North Carolina" in *Endeavors*, UNC-Chapel Hill (Spring, 2004), p. 2

<sup>14</sup> From the Iglesia Unida website.

<sup>15</sup> "Desperate to Learn: Latino Children in North Carolina" is based on the 2003 dissertation. Read complete text in Spanish and in English at <http://www.nchumanities.org/crossroads.html>. See June 2006.

<sup>16</sup> The Spanish word "confianza" is used to denote a relationship of trust and intimacy that would allow a student to ask for help or share her problems or frustrations with somebody in a position to help.

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<sup>17</sup> Palmer as quoted in "Maria Teresa Palmer, School of Education Alumna, Disseminates Research on Latina Schooling Experiences." The NC Slate – [http://soe.unc.edu/alumni/slate/slate\\_fallo4.pdf](http://soe.unc.edu/alumni/slate/slate_fallo4.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> <http://blog.news-record.com/staff/frontpew/archives/2005/03/>

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Dallas (Dee) A. Brauninger. *Antoinette Brown Women: Finding Voice*, November, 2008