

# "Esperanza: Hope for Our Cities" film portrays impressive urban ministry in Philadelphia

BY JAMES AULT JR.

*If you were the mayor of a major city looking to renew inner-city neighborhoods impacted by poverty, unemployment, poor educational performance, gang violence, and more, would you turn to a faith-based organization led by Hispanic Protestant clergy to undertake that daunting task? Philadelphia's Esperanza is an inspiringly successful example of just that. Its broad impact through its education, immigration, housing, and business corridor development work in North Philadelphia neighborhoods, as well as on a national level with its National Hispanic Prayer Breakfast and civic engagement work with youth, are portrayed in a new documentary film showing how such a faith-based organization can achieve community-transforming results.*

I was amazed by the quality and effectiveness of every branch of Esperanza's work when I began filming them—a project I came to by happenstance. I had received a grant from the Louisville Institute for a documentary on the life of Father Virgilio Elizondo, one of the founders of Hispanic theology in the United States, whom I had met when filming "Earthen Vessels: Challenges for the Good Theological School" for ATS in 1994.



After Elizondo's tragic and unexpected death following some preliminary filming with him, we turned that small grant to portraying Esperanza, whose work I was aware of but did not know well. This was a much more complex subject than a biography of a single person, however, and it would require additional funding. Nevertheless, I was so impressed by Esperanza's work that I committed myself to completing the film—"Esperanza: Hope for Our Cities." It was not a subject I came to lightly, having spent some of my college years working with youth in housing projects in East Harlem, New York, and Roxbury, Massachusetts, and having studied and taught urban sociology. I could see how Esperanza was meeting the needs of the youth and their families in terms of their life circumstances and cultural backgrounds—lessons vividly present in personal stories we filmed.

From its founding in 1987, Esperanza has grown to a robust organization with more than 630 employees and an annual budget of more than \$72 million. The film's intimate character-driven storytelling shows how Esperanza's staff—from diverse religious backgrounds, including atheists, yet united around the mission "to serve the



least of these” (Matthew 25)—meets youth and their families where they are with transforming community-strengthening results. Praised by experts in urban education like Larry Cuban, and by theologians like Edwin Hernández, Edwin Aponte, and Justo González, the film and more than a dozen short “Educational Extras” on specific subjects of practical interest are all available [online](#).

After watching the film, González, Cuban-American historical theologian and Methodist elder who taught at the Evangelical Seminary of Puerto Rico, Candler School of Theology of Emory University, Columbia Theological Seminary, and the Interdenominational Theological Center, said he felt like “crying and singing for joy . . . and sharing it with others.”

He thought it might be used to introduce people to Esperanza’s work, but also for those church and community leaders interested in replicating Esperanza’s work in their own cities. For that, González thought additional materials and practical exercises might be helpful.

It turns out that for *cinéma vérité* ethnographic documentaries like this, one films far more footage than ever appears in any final production. As part of the editing process for this film, I created sequences about specific features of Esperanza’s work that don’t appear in the final version.

For example, I produced various segments on the work involved in establishing the culture of its newly opened public charter elementary school, on the background of some of its founding pastors and how they continue to participate in Esperanza’s work, and on hearing more from the life-story interviews filmed with major characters like Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, former religious education professor at Claremont School of Theology who was serving as dean of Esperanza College during some of its formative years when we were filming. These are some of the 13 “Educational Extras”—short videos that mostly run five to ten minutes—available for educational use with the full-length film.

Esperanza continues to have a broad impact on Philadelphia’s North End, strengthening Hispanic communities through education, economic development, and advocacy. Its public charter schools outperforming all other schools in its district, its two-year Christian college, its housing and immigration counseling services, business corridor development, music school, and more have earned Esperanza’s founding president, Luis Cortés, Philadelphia’s citizen of the year award—the first Hispanic person to be so honored.

Learning more about Esperanza’s community-transforming work prompted me to reach out directly to the ATS

membership—those interested in urban ministry, in the work of Christian ministry in general, and in educating people for it.

Please watch the documentary or its trailer online and see what lessons it holds for holistic urban ministry and for positively transforming inner-city life.



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