



José David Rodríguez



Javier "Jay" Alanís



Eliseo Pérez-Álvarez

# Speaking truth to the church

Three global theologians reflect on LSTC, TEEM and joy in the midst of struggle

By Jan Boden

June 30, two esteemed global theologians, José David Rodríguez and Javier "Jay" Alanís, retired from full-time duties at LSTC and the Lutheran Seminary Program of the Southwest (LSPS). Rodríguez began teaching at LSTC in 1981 and joined the faculty full-time in 1990. Alanís served at LSPS since 2000 and as its executive director since 2009.

In January, LSTC welcomed Eliseo Pérez-Álvarez as associate professor of Lutheran systematic theology and global Lutheranism. Like Rodríguez and Alanís, he earned his doctorate at LSTC.

The three have known one another for decades. Rodríguez was a professor and advisor to Alanís when he was a student at LSTC. Alanís and Pérez-Álvarez helped to shape the program at LSPS and became teaching theologians there.

Their wide-ranging areas of expertise intersect at global, Latinx and Lutheran theologies.

They recently met via Zoom to reflect on theological education, LSTC, the cost of their call and where they find joy.

## How did you decide to come to LSTC?

**Rodríguez:** I first came to LSTC in 1959. My father was a student at the School of Missions at Chicago Lutheran

Theological Seminary in Maywood, Ill., a predecessor school of LSTC.

I returned to LSTC in 1971 to study for my master of divinity degree because of LSTC's long history of working with Puerto Ricans. At that time, LSTC had the best program of advanced studies—ThM and ThD that later turned to a PhD—in the Lutheran Church in America (LCA). In 1988, when the LCA joined the American Lutheran Church (ALC) and the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC) to form the ELCA, LSTC developed one of the best Hispanic Ministry programs of study with the greatest number of Latinx students for the MDiv as well as Latinx candidates for the PhD.

In the 1960s, LSTC established a relationship with the seminary in Argentina, where my father was

a professor. When I went there in 2011–2013 to serve as rector (president) of the University Institute (ISEDET), people there remembered that relationship.

**Alanís:** I was invited by the LSPS faculty to do a PhD and return to LSPS to teach. I never dreamed that a PhD would be part of my faith journey. LSPS and local churches helped fund my studies.

LSTC was the right seminary for my PhD studies. Richard Perry Jr. was my first advisor, followed by José David Rodríguez, who advised and guided me during the PhD dissertation stage. Their global perspectives on theology formed me into a global theologian more than a Latinx theologian.

My dissertation specifically addresses the borderlands, a unique and particular region of the U.S. with global implications. I've spoken about the borderlands at places as varied as ISEDET in Argentina and the Walls Conference in Germany.

The experience of studying with a global community at LSTC allowed me to hear their voices and to see myself beyond a person from Texas. All of it was set in motion by faculty who were sensitive to the calling of the Spirit to serve the global church.

**Pérez-Álvarez:** I went to seminary at 22 with a call to be a rural pastor, but then my Old Testament professor encouraged me to pursue graduate studies. I had to wait 10 years to get a scholarship.

While I was the director of the Presbyterian Publishing House of Mexico, David White, the first history teacher of Justo González, offered me his help to continue my studies. I didn't think I could afford to go to graduate school. He wrote to Justo González about me, which resulted in a scholarship to Atlanta [Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Ga.]. In a class with Walter Brueggemann, I was so fortunate in teaming with Judy Bailey, who was our neighbor as well. She

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Eliseo Pérez-Álvarez, associate professor of Lutheran systematic theology and global Lutheranism

and her husband Jim, a Wartburg professor, were taking a sabbatical.

Justo also introduced me to José David, who brought me and my supportive wife, Gina, to Chicago.

At LSTC, I also appreciated the ACTS Consortium. Both really expanded my horizons. My wife and I studied one year in Denmark since grace happens.

### How do you see theological education evolving?

**Pérez-Álvarez:** I'm overjoyed by the re-launch of the Lutheran Theological Center in Atlanta, Ga., for new African Descent leaders. Now, regarding Latinx theological education, this is a Kairos moment for LSTC to reclaim Latinx theological education, given the fact that 10 years ago practically all the ELCA Latinx programs were dismantled. Instead of evolving, we have experienced regressing; instead of going forward we go backwards. The U.S. is the second largest Spanish speaking country in the world and Spanish is the first spoken language of world Christianity.

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congregations. It won't hurt to remember that the TEEM program is neither a shortcut to ordination to Word and Sacrament nor a springboard to be "upgraded" through more studies into the "canonical" MDiv.

**Rodríguez:** It has been a challenge that the Latinx community in the U.S. has had very few resources for theological education.

Eliseo and Jay designed the courses for students in the TEEM programs at LSPS for candidacy for ordination to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament in the ELCA that broke new ground. Future efforts in developing programs for Latinx candidacy will need to be based on their work.

**Alanís:** TEEM is not a shortcut. The TEEM program never values quantity over quality. The gift that TEEM students bring is life experience and practices of ministry while studying.

At LSPS we had over 40 TEEM grads, with more than half of them people of color.

**Rodríguez:** One of the most important things about Jay's and Eliseo's work at LSPS is their design of courses for TEEM and credit has to be given to them. That's an important contribution. Other ELCA seminaries borrowed this design for their TEEM programs of study.

**Alanís:** In the Lutheran church we

live with the tension, "How much is good enough?" Lutheran theology is meant to be contextualized. Students of color should not have the burden to prove they are Lutheran enough culturally. This misses the point of the priesthood of all believers and how we're formed differently.

**Pérez-Álvarez:** The term "multiculturalism" was coined by a white anthropologist in order to draw the line with non-whites; that's why we go by the co-equal interculturalism. And furthermore, we stay away from the hegemonic boundaries training and psychological exams [candidates are required to take]. We promote intersectionality, intersubjectivity and epistemologies from the global south as well.

**Rodríguez:** Daniel Aleshire, former long-time director of the Association of Theological Schools (ATS), recently published the book *Beyond Profession: The Next Future of Theological Education*. He says that after WWII, theological education became a profession—preparing people to be "professional theologians" in congregations. He argues that we need to go from profession to formation. He traces this back to an earlier model of theological education that focused on formation of character: being a person of character, grounded in foundational leadership skills that would serve leaders in the church and in the public arena.

TEEM started with this sort of grounding in character even without the professional academic background. But even faculty members at LSTC questioned the TEEM alternative for ordination in the ELCA because, at that time, we were so focused on the need for the academic master's degree for ELCA ordination.

I will be honest with you. The best work that we three have been engaged in has not been a happy one. We have experienced resistance.

The biggest frustration I have as I move toward retirement is that LSTC discontinued its Hispanic Ministry Program. It seems that working with the Latinx Community has not been a priority for the ELCA or LSTC. Programs of this nature seem to develop only by the efforts of those who are going against the current.

I need to share this frustration. I'm not trying to make other people feel guilty, but to allow for some space for my Latinx community. The Latinx community is not perceived as an opportunity to enrich the church as a whole.

**Alanís:** In conversations, writing, teaching and proclamation, we are speaking the truth to the church. We don't have the luxury of skirting issues. We don't mind naming things for what they are.

We are coming from experiences of being at the margins and we're willing to take the hit or the backlash. It is part of our call to serve a world and a church that is broken. We are called to speak truth and we are called

to heal. It is part of our giftedness. We speak out of our wounds.

### Are there joys that have helped you keep going?

**Rodríguez:** The work I have been doing is for the benefit of my Latinx community as well as other communities that constitute the ELCA and other Christian and non-Christian denominations. I find joy in people who take the opportunities offered them as a gift. I see that people with no academic background go far beyond the opportunities offered to them.

The work of a systematic theologian is to bring things together that are fragmented. That is not easy in a society that is individualized and fragmented.

I find joy in moving into marginalized communities, other ethnic groups, finding relationships with marginalized communities. I enjoy relating to the number of people from African American, Native American and Asian communities who have begun to learn and use the Spanish language to open a door to a different culture.

Our Latinx community has come together to create ecumenical organizations like the Hispanic Theological Initiative Consortium (HTIC), the Hispanic Summer Program (HSP) and the Association of Hispanic Theological Education (AETH). These are some of the most successful initiatives in theological education

in the USA. They emerged out of a need identified by Latinx people and their contributions have proven to be valuable for the formation of Latinx leaders for ministry.

**Alanís:** Ditto to everything José said. It's a joy when a student has come to me and said, "You have helped me find my voice." That's what gives me the drive to teach. What gives me joy in teaching? Helping students find that place within themselves.

It's a joy to teach, to worship with students, which allows me to see the Spirit at work in their lives and in my life. In this and in my ecumenical work I see how my work touches the whole church. I am a global theologian. I do not want to be pigeonholed as a scholar with a constrained epistemology and limited theological lens to interpret God's activity in the world.

**Pérez-Álvarez:** I'm overjoyed for being able to live at the borderlands. I thank God for allowing me to accompany worshiping, serving, teaching, unlearning, having table talks, dancing and laughing together with my people. For the blessing of being able to live in five countries of the Greater Caribbean and in Denmark, I'm speechless. Every morning I awaken with a sacred sip of coffee gives me joy. I'm usually optimistic at the sunrise, pessimistic at the sundown, and realistic while dreaming. ☀

*Boden is public relations manager.*

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Javier "Jay" Alanís, former director of the Lutheran Seminary Program of the Southwest