



# J. MANNY SANTIAGO

---

## KEEPING THE FAITH

**A**t home in Tacoma, Manny Santiago only drinks Puerto Rican coffee. In the morning, with milk and sugar. He grew up on a coffee farm in Puerto Rico's highlands, where the volcanic soil produces arabica beans once favored by the Vatican. He started doing what he could at 5 years old to help his family with the crop. He's a proud *jibaro*, a son of the island's rural culture. Urbanites tend to view *jibaro* as simple, poor and uneducated. "When you get out of the mountains," rural people are "looked down on," Santiago says.

Not only poor, he was Protestant on an island where Catholicism predominates. And he was deeply uncomfortable with Puerto Rico's reigning machismo. Bullied in elementary school and junior high, Santiago dreamed of studying stars and planets. He was pulled back to earth by the gravity of political activism—and then religion. The church had held a place in his heart after a parish patriarch, Don Tito, gave his own worn Bible to young Manny as a gift of gratitude.

The first openly gay Latino pastor ordained by his Baptist denomination, Santiago carried Don Tito's old Bible to New York where he ministered to immigrants and homeless people. He brought it to Seattle where he sermonized about civil rights and was active in Washington's 2012 marriage equality campaign—but struggled with his progressive-on-paper parishioners at University Baptist Church.

The marriage cause was very personal for Santiago. His partner, Ferneli Hernández, had been living in Washington for a decade without proper documentation. Legal marriage might allow Hernández to live with more freedom and security. Santiago's parents—from whom he was estranged after he came out—have since warmly embraced their only son and his husband.

"Now we are the same family that we were before," he says about his parents.

Facing page: Santiago at a reception welcoming him as the first executive director of the Washington LGBTQ Commission. *Manny Santiago*

“They love my husband. Like every mother-in-law, my mom loves my husband more than me. And he’s always right and I’m always wrong.”

In his transition from the pulpit to nonprofit leadership, Santiago became executive director of Tacoma’s Rainbow Center in 2017. He was one of the community leaders who helped shape the job description for the first executive director of the state’s LGBTQ Commission. The day before applications were closed in 2019, his husband suggested that Santiago should apply; he seemed a great fit. Governor Jay Inslee agreed and appointed him to the post.

The mission of the commission—a 15-member advisory board—is to identify community needs, and advocate for LGBTQ “equity in all aspects of state government.” Its members represent identities from “an unapologetic fa’afafine” (a nonbinary gender in Samoan culture), to a tribal police chief, to a policy guru for the Greater Seattle Business Association.

Three years into the job, Santiago is combining his passions for helping the disadvantaged and shepherding a flock.

“I love seeing my folk—my folk being gay folk and people of color and Latinos and immigrants and whatever—I love seeing them happy and achieving their goals and just thriving. I love that. And that’s what I go for. Does it pay? I don’t know. But that’s not my primary concern. I’m seeking the happiness of my community. That is my primary goal.”

JUAN MANUEL Santiago Rodríguez was born in a hospital founded by a pacifist religious order. His father’s side of the family had been in the Caribbean since the 1500s, Santiago says. They were of Moorish heritage—Muslims from Spain—and some were lightly complected and blond. His mother’s side was more diverse. “It’s like all colors, all textures, very mixed.”

“My dad’s side of the family had some resources,” Santiago says. Enough to buy shoes for his father to wear to school. “While my mom’s side of the family didn’t. They had to go barefoot. To the same school.”

His family lived in west central Puerto Rico. He grew up in Adjuntas, which remains one of the poorest communities in Puerto Rico by U.S. Census Bureau ranking, with a poverty rate above 60 percent.

Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens at birth. And yet islanders have long faced an existential question: to stay under the colonizer’s umbrella or seek independence?

After Columbus came ashore on Puerto Rico’s west coast in 1493, Spain ruled the island for 400 years. That reign ended with the Spanish-American War in 1898, after which the United States seized Puerto Rico. Roughly the size and pop-



A view of the area Santiago grew up in barrio Guaybo Dulce of Adjuntas. Lake Guayo is in the background. *Manny Santiago*

ulation of Connecticut, Puerto Rico became neither a state or its own country, but a U.S. territory, with limited rights.

Santiago's home turf was once dedicated to haciendas, or plantations, of coffee and sugar. His birthplace, Lares, is renowned for supplying the spark of a peasant rebellion against Spanish control in 1868. (*El Grito de Lares*, or "The Cry of Lares," is akin to "Remember the Alamo.") Although the rebels were subdued by the better equipped Spanish militia, the colonizers made concessions, such as ending slavery.

"THERE'S LITERALLY coffee everywhere," Santiago says of the hillsides flanking his hometown. Beans, known for their low acidity and sweet tones, are sown at altitudes above 1,800 feet and grown under abundant shade. In the 19th century, Puerto Rican coffee was served in the cafes of Paris, Madrid and Vienna, as well as the Vatican. But exports plummeted after 1898, "partly because the United States was already buying coffee from Brazil and saw sugar, not coffee, as the island's most potentially lucrative crop."

Santiago's parents owned a small farm. "It's not a big corporation. It has to be you and your family," he says. At harvest time, if kids were missing from school their teachers understood why. Some teachers were themselves toiling in the fields on weekends. The crops didn't pay enough to fully support Santiago's family; his father took odd jobs and the family received food stamps at times.

His parents managed to scrape up enough money to buy encyclopedias for

Manny and his sister. The first book he owned was a gift from a friend of his mom's, who also employed her as a nanny. It was a biography of "El Maestro," Pedro Albizu Campos, the leader of Puerto Rico's independence movement. Campos spoke six languages, finished at the top of his 1921 Harvard Law class, and was later jailed by the U.S.



Santiago with his sister and parents. *Manny Santiago*

Young Manny was raised in a household very respectful of women. "I grew up with women pastors in church. In my head, I just couldn't conceive of talking about women like the way teenagers talk about women," he says.

He was hassled in school for mannerisms that weren't macho enough. He fell in with a group of nerds. One of the boys took an interest in him. "And he kind of started, like approaching me, this teenage romance kind of thing. I didn't know what to do. He was my first

kiss. But because I was in church, I was fighting that."

His parents saw his attitudes changing with his new friends. They made him go to therapy with a pastor—"from a more conservative church than ours. "I had to endure several sessions of what would be considered reparative therapy. And that was hard."

Santiago told the Washington State Legislature about his own experience, in support of a 2014 bill aiming to ban conversion therapy for LGBTQ minors. The pastor tried shaming him, Santiago recounted, saying he would never be whole in the eyes of God if he continued to feel attracted to men. "It takes years to overcome the shame, to overcome that feeling of unworthiness," he testified. "Conversion therapy, whether it's physical or mental or spiritual or psychological, is damaging to a kid."

A "fantastic" change awaited. Before 11th grade, he was accepted to a boarding school for students who excelled in math and science. It was in Mayagüez, a coastal city, about three hours from his parents. Selected through competitive testing, students received free tuition, rooms, and meals. They treasured learning and were more tolerant of others. And "you could be a little more you," he says.



As a young activist, Santiago joined protests against the U.S. Navy's use of Vieques Island for bombing practice. *Manny Santiago*

Santiago wanted to study astrophysics. Using the top of his parents' bureau as a writing surface, he filled out an application to Ohio State University. He was accepted, but his parents seemed distraught at the idea of him leaving home. He went to the University of Puerto Rico in Mayagüez instead. In his second year of college, in 1997, he came out—and became more outspoken. He protested the U.S. Navy's use of the island of Vieques as a bombing range and munitions dump, and joined other causes.

His passion shifted from the celestial to the terrestrial. He changed his major to sociology. "And I could then explain things to myself in a different language that I didn't know before. I knew religion. I knew science. I didn't know social science. I came out then because I had the language to define what it was."

His ties with a campus religious group were severely strained. His parents threw him out of the house.

"And the only community I had was my friends who were queers or allies," he recalls. "They became my chosen family."

THE DAY AFTER graduating from college in June 2000, Santiago moved to New York City. He landed a research job at the Mellon Foundation and enrolled in an English immersion program at Columbia University. He was in the Bronx for 9/11. It was particularly traumatic, he says, because he didn't have a support network in New York.

He returned to Puerto Rico, where people said his fluency in English would help him in job-hunting. But his first interview, for a government position, ended abruptly, he says, because of his pro-independence politics.

He was drawn back to religion after learning that an underground network of LGBTQ clergy existed in Puerto Rico.

Santiago's family had long been religious, even if his parents were not regular churchgoers. His father's side, once non-practicing Muslims, had been Protestant for generations. At the turn of the 20th century, his great-grandfather helped found the First Baptist Church of Adjuntas. His mother's side were spiritists, dev-

otees of a movement started by French philosopher and scientist, Allan Kardec.\* “They were pure Kardecians,” Santiago says. They didn’t concoct potions, or cast spells, or create reality. But his maternal grandfather held a weekly *séance*.

He and his sister started going to the local Baptist church. Then, one Sunday, when he was an adolescent, the church had a special ceremony for Father’s Day.

His Sunday School teacher asked him if he’d be willing to walk one of the older men in the parish, Don Tito, to the altar where fathers would be recognized. Santiago’s father didn’t attend church, and neither did Don Tito’s family; they were Seventh-day Adventists.

Santiago gladly accompanied Don Tito Feliciano. On the following Sunday, the old man thanked the young man for his “beautiful” gesture with a gift—Don Tito’s own Bible.

Manny’s simple act had such profound results.

“And that basically sealed the deal right there,” he recalls. “That sort of connected me to the church in a way I did not expect.”

He still has Don Tito’s Bible, held together by tape.



The Bible that changed Santiago’s life. *Manny Santiago*

HE WANTED more. He wanted to go to seminary. His local congregation was part of the American Baptist Churches, one of the many Baptist denominations. (The largest, the evangelical Southern Baptists, split from their northern counterparts over slavery. Southern Baptists tend to be more conservative and Caucasian than other Baptists.) Considered moderate in their theology, the American Baptist Churches were not then welcoming to LGBTQ parishioners.

Santiago began a process of reconciling his identity with his faith. A friendly minister had recommended that Santiago study divinity at the oldest seminary in the United States, Andover Newton Theological School in Massachusetts, just outside Boston.

He was accepted. But before starting studies he had a crisis of faith—not uncommon among aspiring clergy. A friend, a gay Presbyterian minister, had given him some theology books. “And all of the sudden, I realized ‘I don’t believe any of this. This is ridiculous and I’m going to seminary. What am I going to do?’ ”

\* Allan Kardec was the pen name of Hippolyte Rivail, 1804-1869, who defined spiritism as the science of spirits and their relation to the material world.

His Presbyterian friend said not to worry. It happens all the time. He invited Manny to a meeting of Amnesty International. The president of Amnesty's Puerto Rico chapter was an ordained minister, Margarita Sánchez de León.

A Black Puerto Rican lesbian, Sánchez de León was acclaimed for challenging Puerto Rico's criminal law prohibiting sodomy. While she was testifying against an anti-same-sex marriage bill, a legislator had interrupted her to ask if she was a "practicing lesbian." She bravely replied "yes." She went to the Justice Department to confess she had violated the sodomy law. She then led a coalition to overturn the law.

Santiago sought her advice, pouring out his problems.

"And she smiled," he recalls, "and said—and I will never forget— 'Manny, I'm so happy for you because what you're going through is that the building that has been given to you has been shattered. And now it's your turn to take those bricks and find a way to build the building that works for you.' "

Sánchez de León said the faith handed down by his family was theirs. And it was not the faith that would sustain him. He had to find what worked for him.

"That actually re-framed the whole thing," Santiago says. "I went to seminary, still with a lot of questions, still with lot of doubts, still with a lot of gaps, but committed to finding a denomination that would affirm who I was in my quest."

He experimented with other faith traditions, visiting churches to see how they felt. "And I didn't find myself in any of them," he says.

What he was seeking was waiting just around the corner.

Running late one Sunday for a service he planned to attend in Boston, he went instead to the nearby First Baptist Church in Newton Centre. The senior minister was a woman, Meg Hess, as was the associate minister, Mindi Welton-Mitchell.

Welton-Mitchell was bluntly pro-LGBTQ, having grown up in the Church of the Covenant in Palmer, Alaska, one of



While a seminary student, Santiago sampled other faiths before returning to the American Baptist Churches denomination. *Manny Santiago*

the first "welcoming and affirming" U.S. churches in the Baptist denomination. Years later, Santiago joined the board of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists.



But his struggles continued. “I often say I went to seminary because I had so many questions that I wanted to answer, and then I came out with even more questions.”

HE WAS CALLED to pastoral service by a church in the Elmhurst neighborhood of Queens, New York. Queens itself has a diverse population of more than 2 million; only one-quarter of the borough is white. Santiago’s first assignment, *Primera Iglesia Bautista de la Comunidad*, was a church of immigrants. Roughly half of the congregation was from Ecuador. Others came from Puerto Rico, Cuba, Colombia, Bolivia and Peru. He welcomed the chance to help marginalized communities. “Of course, I was going to be there,” he says.

There was, however, one major complication.

“I knew the Latino church that I was about to start serving was more theologically conservative than the church that was sending me off,” he says. “So, I had to make the conscious decision to go back into the closet.”

His people were in need. “Not only for spiritual and moral support, but literally for letters to immigration and visits to the detention center,” he says. “Or just crying with them because they were about to be deported.”

He introduced his congregants to a more “liberating lens” through which to read the Bible. He started with the *Book of Revelation* and comparing the persecution of immigrants and refugees to that of early Christians. He hoped his congregants would take away a message of hope, not fear.

But being closeted was taking a toll on Santiago. “At some point I had to recognize that it was affecting my health, my mental health, my physical health, so I started searching for other jobs,” he says.

He landed one as an associate pastor at the Church of St. Paul and St. Andrew, a progressive United Methodist church on Manhattan’s Upper West Side. There, he’d see a symphony cellist serving meals alongside a homeless woman who slept on the stairs of the church. Although he enjoyed the special privilege he was granted to officiate at a Methodist church, he wanted to come back home to the American Baptist Churches.

And 2010 offered an opportunity in Seattle’s University District.



A mentor and friend, the Rev. Mindi Welton-Mitchell says of Santiago: “I was always telling him, ‘We need your voice. You are needed in the church.’” *Manny Santiago*

HE HAD NEVER been to Seattle. But he liked what he gleaned while interviewing at University Baptist. The previous pastor was openly gay. The church had a progressive reputation. And indeed, Santiago would use the pulpit to talk about women's rights, immigration reform, LGBTQ issues and marriage equality. "I did a whole series of sermons about anti-Blackness and how the church was complicit in the narrative about a Black person being inferior," he says.

As a tax-exempt nonprofit, the church could not endorse candidates or ballot measures. Santiago, though, participated in the campaign for marriage equality as a voice of the religious community.

He had met Ferneli Hernández at a club in Seattle, on a Latin night. They



Santiago with two fellow Baptist pastors who supported marriage equality in Washington, Rev. Chris Boyer of Lynnwood, left, and Rev. Craig Darling of Seattle, right.  
*Manny Santiago*

started dating. Hernández was born in Mexico; a descendant of the Yucatec Maya people. He had come to the U.S. because he did not feel safe as a gay man in southern Mexico, where indigenous Mayas had long faced discrimination, poverty, even slaughter.

Hernández had lived in Seattle's Eastside suburbs since 2001, when he was 19, but lacked proper immigration documents. At the time Santiago proposed to him—

in bed, after watching Governor Chris Gregoire advocate for marriage equality on TV news—federal agents had recently raided farms and restaurants in King County.

"So, there was some urgency in that sense," Santiago recalls. "But my pastor heart also said this is not something to take lightly. It's a commitment and something to take seriously."

They were married in May 2013 at University Baptist, which had nevertheless disenchanted Santiago. In his first year as pastor there, someone told him about what happened behind the scenes when church leaders were making the decision to hire him. One of the church members said they had somewhat enjoyed his sermon, but found it difficult to follow because of his accent. "In the mind of this woman, my accent made my theology unsound and weak," he says.

He was told a retired minister who attended the church said they could pay



Santiago proposed to his husband Ferneli Hernández one night in 2012 after they saw Gov. Chris Gregoire on TV advocating marriage equality. *Manny Santiago*

for Santiago to get speech therapy. Coming from New York, where his accent didn't stand out, never mind incite criticism, Santiago felt demeaned by racism.

“And had I known about that, I would've declined the offer to come to Seattle to be their pastor. It was very painful to hear that. And after that, it was just downhill.”

Questions, concerns, and doubts about faith were creeping back. “And I was looking to transition to something else.”

HIS NEXT STOP was Madison, Wisconsin, where he was hired as executive director of a non-denominational ministry on the campus of the University of Wisconsin. He would be more administrator than pastor. That would be a good chance to show lay people he could do more than preach and pray.

Santiago loved his job and the liberal Madison community. But his husband missed Washington. And after Donald Trump was elected president in 2016, Hernández experienced racism in the private club where he worked as a server. “It just made sense for us to leave that and come back to Washington where his family is,” Santiago says.

It felt like their destiny to return—and where else, but to the City of Destiny?

In its list of the “Gayest Cities in America,” *The Advocate* magazine ranked Tacoma #1 in 2013. *The Advocate's* criteria were both serious and cheeky. Cities had to have at least 150,000 residents and they received points for electing LGBTQ public officials and enacting non-discrimination policies. They also scored for “fabulous shopping” and having a roller derby league. Marriage equality was



Tacoma Mayor Victoria Woodards gave Santiago the city's LGBTQ Pride Month proclamation in 2018. *Manny Santiago*

heavily weighted in that year's rankings, which helped Spokane and Seattle make the top 15. Washington was the only state that year with three of the gayest cities.

*The Advocate* encouraged visits to Tacoma in July when the city celebrated Pride at "Out in the Park."

The city's Pride Festival is produced by the Rainbow Center, South Puget Sound's leading LGBTQ2S resource center. (Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, and two-spirit.) It educates community members and allies, and advocates for policy, as well.

In his two years as executive director of the Rainbow Center, one of Santiago's proudest moments was when the rainbow flag was raised over the roof of the Tacoma Dome for the first time. It culminated a 10-year effort that started with a letter-writing campaign by trans women activists.

NOW RECOGNIZED as a community leader, Santiago joined a percolating movement to create a formal LGBTQ voice in state policy-making. Other minority communities were represented by the state African American Affairs Commission and the Hispanic Affairs Commission.

Governor Jay Inslee was receptive to the idea, as were members of the state Legislature. Claire Wilson, Washington's first openly lesbian state senator led the push to create a LGBTQ Commission in 2019, along with Senator Marko Lias (whose proposed bans on conversion therapy had been supported by Santiago's testimony.) Skyler Rude, the state's first openly gay Republican legislator, was instrumental in gaining GOP support for the commission, Santiago says.

The final vote in the Senate was 30-16, with nays from GOP Senate Leader Mark Schoesler and his successor, John Braun.

Several midwives aided the commission's birthing. When draft legislation was ready, legislators brought it to community leaders for feedback. Santiago and others also were asked for input on the job description for the commission's executive director. "You're talking about someone who is going to be part of the governor's cabinet, whose job description is getting feedback from the community that the position is going to serve. What a



Santiago was on hand when Gov. Jay Inslee signed a bill in 2018 banning conversion therapy.  
*Manny Santiago*

wonderful way of being a democracy,” Santiago says. “Right?”

It made the commission seem like more than window dressing. It was a collaborative product, with its creators willing to seek community expertise, evidently in an ongoing fashion.

Santiago says he was gushing to his husband over dinner about “all the wonderful things in the process,” and said, “I hope we find someone good.”

His husband said, “Well, why can’t it be you?”

Hours before the window closed, Santiago submitted his application. Again, the Governor’s Office was intentional about getting community response. Santiago was one of four finalists invited to a public interview, town-hall style. The finalists presented their visions and forum participants were able to submit questions. The LGBTQ community could also offer assessments of the candidates.

Asked to evaluate Santiago in a 2022 interview, Marsha Botzer, the state’s most renowned trans activist, points back to the hiring process and the ownership stake she felt in it. “Well, since I selected him,” she says, “I think he’s pretty good.”

Why?

“I had known him before for his work in aspects of the community,” says Botzer, who became a co-chair of the commission. “I thought that he would have the best energy, background, and ability to do the job.”

INSLEE APPOINTED Santiago in August 2019, praising him as an “activist and administrator.” Santiago started in late October. His pronouns are he, her, they. He doesn’t have a problem with whichever one you use.

He explains:

“Obviously, language and culture go hand-in-hand. In Spanish speaking countries, one of the ways of defusing the *machista* (male chauvinist) and misogynistic society in which we live is by breaking down the barriers of gender and sex and that sort of thing.

“In order for us to break with those stereotypes and things, gay men use female pronouns when we are interacting with each other and lesbian women use masculine pronouns. In Spanish, my closest friends and I refer to each other as *ella*, her, or she and her.

“Again, it’s just a cultural thing for me in Spanish; you want to stick it to the man.”

He identifies as “queer” for similar reasons:

“‘Queer’ was something imposed on us as an insult. And the community had to reclaim it. So, I’m reclaiming it. So, I do identify as both a gay man and a



Washington LGBTQ Commission officers and staff in 2020, left to right: Santiago, Jac Archer (vice-chair), Marsha Botzer (co-chair), Agaiotupu Viena (co-chair), Alvaro Figueroa (secretary) and Omar Santana-Gomez, (executive assistant). *Washington State LGBTQ Commission*

queer person, queer being my political identity and gay being my sexual orientation.

“I also use some of the slur words in Spanish to identify myself—and in a shocking way for Spanish speakers. Like I want them to be shocked. I want them to know your machismo didn’t break me. It tried. But it didn’t. And I’m not going to let it. And if you call me *maricón*, which is equivalent to ‘fag’ in Puerto Rican Spanish, if you call me *maricón*, well, yes, I am Manny Santiago and I am *maricón*. I’m very proud of it.”

SANTIAGO WORKS with 15 volunteer commissioners appointed for three-year terms. They come from Walla Walla, Skagit and Okanogan counties; they’re descended from Apaches, Guatemalans and Scandinavians. One thing they have in common? “We’re all from activist-world,” says Botzer, founder of the Ingersoll Gender Center in Seattle. “I’d say we’re all equals in that respect.”

Rounding out the panel are four members of the Legislature, two from each chamber and each party.

Why is the commission needed?

“From my perspective, our minority types are underrepresented precisely because we are not part of the policy-making processes,” Santiago says. “And there needs to be a bold way of having our opinions, our realities, our ideas as part of the process.”

Hatched shortly before the Covid pandemic and meeting remotely through much of it, Santiago and the commission have focused on two broad areas: reaching out to learn about community problems in all corners of the state; and remedying gaps, blind spots, and obstacles—down to the syntax of state government.

Through panels, presentations, or meetings with individuals or grass roots groups, the commission may hear about a problem between a queer family and a state agency. Santiago will explore it further, from his vantage in the governor’s cabinet. “I don’t go to a case worker or front desk person to complain,” he says. “I

go to my colleagues in the cabinet to let them know about systemic issues happening within an agency so they can actually make some changes.”

Santiago and the commission have become go-to sources for some in state government. In one case, an agency was developing a training manual for people who provide services for housebound folks. The agency realized they lacked expertise about the some of the clients they serve. They turned to the commission. Santiago had the opportunity to review and revise the manual to make sure its language was inclusive and accurate about LGBTQ identities and experiences.

The commission also amplifies the viewpoints of community members who have lacked a voice in policy-making. Santiago points to a work-group that Inslee



Santiago’s work involves speaking to groups and communities, such as Somos Seattle, one of the state’s organizations for LGBTQ Latinos. *Manny Santiago*

put together to advise him on reducing poverty. With the commission’s help, it gained perspectives about unhoused youth—who are disturbingly over-represented in surveys of the homeless. “We were able to bring in more voices,” Santiago says, “especially of trans people of color who are experiencing poverty and problems with housing and challenges accessing health care.”

It’s not always easy. Commissioners have heard about school boards adopting guidelines preventing LGBTQ visibility, he says, such as removing books from schools and preventing trans students from engaging in sports.

The state doesn’t have jurisdiction in those matters unless the local policies are unconstitutional. Santiago says the commission has been able to prevent some actions by sending letters, and reminding school boards of their educational duties. He also works with the Office of the Education Ombuds in the Governor’s Office, which may facilitate talks with administrators and faculty to protect students facing attacks in school.

“I am very transparent about not being able to change government overnight,” he adds. “We are in a system that moves slowly and we need to understand that and play within those rules, while, at the same, changing the system. And those two things work hand-in-hand.

“I think we do have influence because we’re visible. But at the same time, I



Santiago was estranged from his parents after he came out. "Now we are the same family as before," he says about their reconciliation. "They love my husband." *Manny Santiago*

cannot change someone's heart just because I'm director of the commission."

The Reverend Mindi Welton-Mitchell has known Santiago for 20 years, back to when he was a seminary student and she was associate minister at the church he attended outside Boston. Welton-Mitchell and her husband, J.C., consider Santiago and his husband, Hernández, family. Santiago is godfather to the couple's son A.J. who has autism. Manny babysat for A.J. so his parents could go on date nights. "He's not afraid of the challenges that come with disabilities," Welton-Mitchell says.

She sensed long ago that a traditional church would be a difficult fit for Santiago. "He's creative. He wants to change the status quo. He wants to transform the world."

She sees his current job as ideal. Being a voice at the state level for inclusion and equality, "is one of the highest ways to live out Christ's call to love our neighbors as ourselves in the world. I think he's settled into what he wants to do. I see him leading the call to justice by being in that position."



WHILE URGING patience, Santiago lives with urgency. He was diagnosed with a heart condition at 13. He also has cancer—a kind of sarcoma that is not curable but is manageable, he says. He sees his oncologist every six months and gets treatments “off and on.”

“So I know that my time is limited. Now does that mean that I have 50 more years, or five more years, or five more seconds? I don’t know. Therefore, I’m going to do as much for my community, for the people that I love, for my country, for my adopted country, for as long as I can.”

He wants the community to keep pushing, sending emails, making calls. To show its needs.

“Their mobilization is one of the tools I have to change the system. I’m always telling the community, ‘Keep doing that. Even though it’s a slow process that’s the only tool that I have.’ ”

The cadence of a Latino Baptist pastor kicks in.

“And that doesn’t mean I’m always right in the final decision. Or that I always understand the complexity of the issue. But I try my best to not see the urgency and desperation of the community as an attack on me and my work.

“It is a tool that I use. The desperation, and the pain, it is also my pain, my desperation.

“Because I am a queer, gay Latino man in Washington.”

He pauses, then smiles.

“There’s some preaching there,” he says.

**Bob Young**