To my Mom and Dad
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank my parents for their endless support. I also thank my advisor, Anna Peterson, for all her help and guidance. This project would not have been possible without them.
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This dissertation describes the transition of a Mexican Pentecostal church, the Luz del Mundo (LDM), from a church with a nationalist institutional identity associated with being Mexican to a cosmopolitan, global church. I describe the LDM’s origins just after the Mexican Revolution, when its success in a modern, liberal state depended on its nationalist claims. Today, thanks to the transnational religious networks established through the immigration of church members, the LDM has established congregations throughout North America. I argue that the process of immigration has given migrant church members the skills to negotiate new cultural contexts, and the LDM is capitalizing on these skills in order to help the church grow globally. In order to facilitate church growth, the LDM has rebranded itself as a cosmopolitan institution, where church members from any part of the world are welcomed and celebrated for the diversity they bring to the church. I document the roles of transnational networks, social media, and missionaries in transforming the church. Special attention is paid to the work second- and third-generation church members are doing to facilitate church growth.
CHAPTER 1  
INTRODUCTION

In 1954, Apostle Aarón, founder and first Apostle of the Luz del Mundo (LDM), was granted a tract of land from the government of Guadalajara to establish a colony reserved for LDM members. Securing this grant was made possible thanks to Aarón’s indigenous Mexican background and the church’s origins in Mexico. The LDM was posited as an authentically Mexican church in contrast to the Catholic Church, accused of participating in the widespread government corruption which had inspired the Mexican Revolution. In return for the grant, the LDM agreed to contribute to the development of Mexico’s infrastructure, a part of the government’s nationalist plans to prove Mexico was as strong a nation as any other world power. LDM members living in the colony, Hermosa Provincial, worked towards this goal, installing water and sewer lines and building schools. A few years later, the LDM installed a bust of former president Benito Juárez, whose actions aimed at disempowering the Catholic Church in Mexico opened the door for the establishment of non-Catholic religious institutions like the LDM. Juárez was celebrated by the LDM for all he did to establish religious freedom in Mexico, and installing a statue in his honor was just one of the many steps the LDM took to prove its loyalty to Mexico.

Several decades later, in 2016, hundreds of Latin American immigrants living in the southeastern United States gather in Orlando, Florida to see the Apostle Naasón, who decided only a few weeks ago to stop there along the “fourth leg” of his World Tour. The huge conference room at the Rosen Plaza was filled with Luz del Mundo members by eight o’clock in the morning. The exact time of the Apostle’s appearance was not known. He would appear when his time had come, an expression often repeated by church members who never doubt their Apostle. Fifty-two young women lined the conference room walls, each acting as a
A representative from all the nations around the world where the LDM has established congregations. The representatives carry flags and wear clothes reflecting the traditions or the national colors of their respective nations. At the back of the room, young people manned tables piled with computers, cameras, and sound equipment. They were responsible for recording the Apostle’s visit, which would be streamed on the LDM’s website and accessible to anyone with internet access.

Naasón’s visit to Orlando felt especially magical because the Apostle’s whereabouts for the last several months had been unknown. He finally resurfaced on the video screens set up around the baptismal pool in downtown Miami on February 14. Naasón was in Hawaii, and surprised congregations around the world when he appeared there, baptizing the newly converted or those who had come of age in a dramatic ceremony held at a picturesque Hawaiian beach. Images of Naasón at the baptisms in Hawaii were transmitted to locations around the world, where annual LDM baptisms were occurring simultaneously. The excitement of seeing Naasón resonated globally. Marta, whose family had invited me to travel with them to witness the baptisms in Miami, showed me pictures circulating on Twitter and Instagram taken by LDM members in places like El Salvador and Spain of screens in those locations streaming Naasón’s baptisms in Hawaii. Back in Orlando, Apostle Naasón finally appeared after several hours of waiting. He walked up the aisles of chairs set up in the conference room amidst deafening shrieks and cries from everyone in the room. White handkerchiefs were used both to wave at the Apostle in greeting and to wipe away tears of joy. After a few minutes, the room quieted, and Naasón began his address.

These vignettes demonstrate the institutional identity transformation that has taken place within the Luz del Mundo. A church that once based its identity on being Mexican is now a
church with an identity that transcends national borders. Today, it is a church “for the world.” As the LDM has grown globally, it has also been able to maintain continuity of worship and fidelity to the church’s teachings among the thousands of congregations that have been established. The LDM has strategically capitalized on a new generation of missionaries and the use of social media and technology to grow while maintaining homogeneity in its practices and beliefs. Connections forged by missionaries and maintained by transnational and global networks perpetuate the sense of enchantment I witnessed in Orlando and Miami.

The case of the Luz del Mundo’s institutional identity transformation contributes to larger questions about the globalization of religion, the role of social media and technology in facilitating church growth, and the role of a new generation of church members in that process. I document the strategies the LDM is using to keep up with the changing lives of its church members, many of whom no longer live in Mexico, and to grow beyond Mexico’s borders. Technology, such as the now ubiquitous smartphones and social media platforms, have been especially important in this process, as they provide a cheap and effective way to maintain connections across national borders. The participation of young church members is another key factor in the LDM’s strategies for growth. Like many other churches—such as The Church of Latter-Day Saints, the Assemblies of God, and other evangelical denominations—the LDM is increasingly reliant on its young members to act as missionaries at home and abroad. My research offers new insights on why young people continue to participate in their churches’ outreach strategies and what skills and assets they bring to their churches.

The recent history of the Iglesia del Dios Vivo, Columna y Apoyo de la Verdad, La Luz del Mundo in Mexico and the U.S. reveals a transformation of this Pentecostal denomination. The LDM has taken on a “cosmopolitan” identity, driven by its younger members, to attract new
adherents from around the world. These efforts reflect a delicate balancing act by a church that once marketed itself as being a specifically Mexican denomination. The LDM has sought simultaneously to unify and expand its member base through missionization, the use of social media, and carefully timed rituals, such as prayers and baptism ceremonies. These strategies have enabled the church to grow globally while also retaining its spiritual and organizational center at Hermosa Provincia, the church’s flagship temple.

The balancing act is evident not only in the church’s goals but also in its strategy. Changes originate in part from “above,” because church leaders have initiated much of the shift in identity. However, many changes have emerged from “below,” because of the grassroots participation of younger church members in the church’s expansion efforts who have diverse backgrounds and very different life experiences than older LDM members. The church’s “cosmopolitanization” is driven mainly by second-generation church members, a group that has received little scholarly attention until recently. In the LDM, second-generation members have enabled the church’s identity transformation and growth globally, while at the same time, the church’s growing cosmopolitanism has kept young people in the church.

These transformations build on existing literature on religion and globalization by showing how technology and the circulation of people and ideas facilitate religious change and growth. Unlike other global denominations more open to adapting to local contexts, the LDM maintains a commitment to orthodoxy even in its most distant satellite congregations. I show how technology, including the use of new devices like smartphones and social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, and transnational religious networks enable the LDM to ensure orthodox practice in all its locations. Although many of the church’s practices have been

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1 “Church of the Living god, Pillar and Ground of the Truth, the Light of the World”
maintained, the LDM’s recent shift towards a cosmopolitan identity is a strategy aimed at adapting to a globalized world in which adhering to an identity based on membership within a single nation-state seems provincial.

**Brief Background**

The founder of the Luz del Mundo, Eusebio “Aarón” Joaquín Gonzalez, became a minister in La Iglesia Apostolica de la Fe en Cristo Jesús, founded by Ramona Carbajal, a Mexican migrant who returned from living in the United States to evangelize. La Iglesia Apostolica de la Fe en Cristo Jesús became one of the first successful Pentecostal denominations in Mexico and today has more than a million members throughout the Americas. Aarón left that movement to establish the LDM in 1926, and his church has expanded in recent years to become a global denomination.²

Carbajal’s religious vision has profoundly shaped the unique nature of Mexican Pentecostalism. Her influence extends to the LDM’s liturgical and pastoral style and also specific rules. One inheritance from Carbajal is the expectation for emotional expression during prayers. Prayers are said by the entire congregation out loud and in unison, sometimes in Spanish and sometimes in tongues. Prayers are emotional, and many congregants sob and cry out as they speak. However, these loud prayers all subside after a sufficient, though unspoken, amount of time has passed.³ Influenced by Carbajal, Pentecostal denominations like the Luz del Mundo adopted strict codes of behavior. Women are not allowed to wear pants or makeup and are discouraged from cutting their hair. Men and women are also required to sit on opposite sides of the church during services.

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Carbajal’s vision, and Mexican Pentecostalism in general, have unfolded in the context of Mexico’s unique religious field. Like most of Latin America, Mexico remains predominantly Catholic. Eighty-nine percent of the Mexican population is Catholic, whereas only 7% are Protestant. The large majority of Protestants are Pentecostals, who evangelize actively, as do other religious groups, particularly Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses. Today, there are more than one million Mormons\(^4\) and 1.7 million Jehovah’s Witnesses in Mexico compared to the nearly 2 million Pentecostals there.\(^5\) Pentecostals in Mexico not only face competition from these other religious groups, but must also hold their ground against the Catholic population, which often discriminates against non-Catholic religious groups.

These different religious groups have close and competitive relationships with one another. As I will describe, some of the LDM’s practices appear to be directly related to the influence of the Catholic Church in Mexico, and it is in many ways beneficial to the LDM to keep from deviating too far from traditional Catholic religious practices. Justo González and Ondina González note, “During the course of the twentieth century every major Protestant denomination, as well as the Catholic Church, was influenced by the Pentecostal movement and its practices—particularly in worship.”\(^6\) González and González refer here to the growth of Charismatic Catholicism in Latin movement, a Catholic movement originating in North America that has adopted many Pentecostal worship styles, including song style, the practice of glossolalia, and prayer aloud. Further, other Protestant denominations in Mexico have also

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\(^6\) González and González, *Christianity in Latin America*, 287.
adopted these forms of worship, and now there exist Methodist Charismatics, Anglican Charismatics, and Presbyterian Charismatics in addition to Charismatic Catholics.\(^7\)

Even if Pentecostalism is not a serious factor in Mexico in terms of numbers, Pentecostal churches like the LDM are significant players in the Mexican religious field. Increasingly, the LDM is gaining visibility globally, as well. Today, the church claims to have a membership of about 5 million and congregations in 53 nations around the world.\(^8\) Most LDM members reside in Latin America and the United States, where congregations are growing. The LDM has made a conscious effort to make its message appeal to outsiders, through strategies that include using social media platforms for outreach, capitalizing on the networks created by transnational church members, and a new force of young missionaries willing to work for the church. These strategies for growth have led the LDM to transform its institutional identity, and in the course of its efforts has made the church more appealing to second- and third- generation church members while also attracting new members with different backgrounds.

**LDM Theology**

Most who have studied the LDM identify the church as Pentecostal, because of the church’s literal interpretation of the scripture and the close personal relationship with God experienced through proximity to the Apostle, considered to be God’s emissary on earth. Although most would describe the church as being Pentecostal, it should be noted that the members I interviewed denied this categorization.\(^9\) Rather, church members say that the church

\(^7\) González and González, *Christianity in Latin America*, 287.


\(^9\) Interview with the author, January 17, 2016.
is “primitive.” That is, the LDM believes that it is the only true form of Christianity operating today, and the church seeks to restore both Christianity and the world to its original form.

The LDM is an apostolic church, meaning that the church believes that its Apostle is the successor to Jesus as God’s messenger on earth. The LDM rejects the doctrine of the Trinity because of their belief that Jesus was not eternally divine. Rather, Jesus became the full representation of the Godhead only upon his baptism, which is why LDM members are baptized in the name of Jesus only.10 This is understood to be the fulfillment of the Great Commission in the book of Matthew where Jesus instructs his disciples to spread his teachings to all nations.11 It is important to point out that LDM Apostles aren’t thought of as manifestations of God or Jesus, but rather they are successors to the work Jesus did during his time. Jesus is considered Christianity’s first Apostle and is especially divine in ways that his successors are not. But, Apostles are understood to have a special relationship with Christ that enables them to know what God wants for Christianity.

The first Apostle, Aarón Joaquín, adopted his Biblical name upon setting out to establish a church of his own to restore Christianity. Aarón established the LDM’s first colony in Guadalajara, Mexico, called Hermosa Provincia, which continues to be the home of the flagship temple. Apostle Aarón was succeeded by his son, Samuel, who has in turn been succeeded by his son Naasón Joaquín Garcia in 2014. Each Apostle was appointed only after the death of the previous Apostle because the LDM teaches that there can only ever be one Apostle on earth at a time. LDM members are totally devoted to the Apostle, who they genuinely believe was chosen by God to restore Christianity to its pure, primitive form on earth. Wherever he goes, he is

10 González and González, Christianity in Latin America, 290-291.
greeted by an intense outpouring of emotion from those in his presence or, if the appearance is being broadcast via the internet, from those viewing the transmission. In fact, demonstrating emotions are central to LDM practice and are not just characteristic of prayers.

Today, the LDM has come a long way from the small colony Apostle Aarón first worked to establish. LDM “temples” are noteworthy for their unique architectural designs. The flagship temple in Guadalajara, built during Apostle Samuel’s tenure, is a huge, spiral-shaped building that can seat about 15,000 people. Other striking architectural structures include a temple styled after the Taj Mahal in Chiapas, a Mayan temple in Honduras, and a Greek temple in Houston, Texas. It is as though the LDM is demonstrating its own power by associating itself with the powerful empires that built the original versions of these temples, or perhaps the LDM is showing its dominance of these empires and the cultures that built them by co-opting their architecture. Whereas many immigrant churches populate what structures are available to them locally, the LDM prioritizes establishing visible temple structures to attract attention from outsiders and also give the impression that the church is a powerful institution.12

The LDM’s two most important ritual traditions, the church’s annual baptisms and the Lord’s Supper or Santa Cena, are also performed in attention-grabbing ceremonies. Each geographical division of the LDM worldwide holds a regional ceremony on the same day and at roughly the same time as the main ceremony. These are typically held in public places, such as parks, squares, or at public beaches, so that the passers-by can see the ceremony and possibly stop to ask questions, which offers a chance to evangelize. During the Santa Cena, the LDM’s annual pilgrimage to Hermosa Provincia, church members who are unable to make the journey

12 Helen Rose Ebaugh and Janet Saltzman Chafetz, Religion and the New Immigrants: Continuities and Adaptations in Immigrant Congregations (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2000), 386.
set up miniature ceremonies in their local temples, during which time special lights are cast onto the buildings calling more attention to already noticeable edifices. Because more church members reside too far away from Mexico to attend the ceremony, the LDM is increasingly reliant on temples holding their own versions of the *Santa Cena*, and then streaming local ceremonies which are broadcast on huge television screens in Hermosa Provincia.

Such practices are not uncommon for large Pentecostal churches today. These displays make the church appear to be grand and powerful, both in the eyes of church members and spectators. The LDM’s pageantry might make the church appear to be successful and powerful to some, but it has often invited criticism from others who perceive it as garish. The LDM’s use of architecture and its grand ceremonies, along with the intense displays of emotion when members see their Apostle, have given the church a negative reputation. This is particularly true in Mexico, where non-members tend to view the church pejoratively as a “cult.”

The term “cult” is used in popular discussions of religion to describe groups perceived to have, for example, authoritarian leadership, aggressive proselytization techniques, and systematic indoctrination. In Mexico, where Catholicism dominates, classifying the LDM as a cult is an example of what Jonathan Z. Smith calls the language of the “other,” which is “generated by the opposition in/out.” The language of the “other” is how we construct ourselves in relation to others. It is a strategy for policing the boundaries surrounding acceptable behaviors and morals. When dominant conceptions of what is acceptable are challenged, the

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language of the “other” takes over, inviting misunderstanding and suggesting “an ontological cleavage rather than an anthropological distinction.”

Many outsiders think that, in the LDM, Apostles are considered divine and the church is capitalizing off donations from its already impoverished members. Outsiders are also skeptical of the lack of transparency from the church hierarchy’s decision-making processes attributed vaguely to messages sent to the Apostle from God, usually via dreams. It is unclear, for example, exactly what the process behind naming new Apostles is, and often church members are unaware of where in the world the Apostle might be at a given time. It is important to remember, as Eileen Barker points out, that journalists or others reporting on the church’s activities who describe it as a cult produce stories on tight schedules, with limited space, and “unlike social scientists, the media are under no obligation to introduce comparisons to assess the relative rates of negative incidents.”

Though it is not my aim to relativize, I present a contextualized picture of the church and its member base. While these accusations are not unfair, I hope to describe why church members, who are fully aware of these charges, opt nevertheless to remain in the church and why new members continue to convert.

Global Religion

Research on contemporary religion must account for global interconnectedness between people, institutions, and ideas. It is increasingly important for ethnographers to consider the role of transnational and global relationships to understand religion and religious identity. Scholars in the past have tended to engage in what Nina Glick Schiller and Andreas Wimmer call “methodological nationalism,” defined as the naturalization of the global regime of nation-states.

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by the social sciences.”¹⁸ That is, social scientists implicitly perpetuate a form of nationalism by excluding or neglecting to consider connections people and institutions have across national borders. The authors describe several reasons why this is detrimental to scholarship, but the one most relevant for my purposes is that methodological nationalism “confines the study of social processes to the political and geographic boundaries of the nation-state.”¹⁹ This approach provincializes scholarship and perpetuates a nationalistic perspective where only local information is relevant.

Other scholars have pointed out the incomplete picture of history and society that results from this problematic perspective. To combat provincialization, historian Thomas Bender argues that “we must learn to juggle the variables of time and space, to genuinely historicize both temporal and spatial relations.”²⁰ This involves taking a multi-scalar approach to social scientific studies where global and transnational process are considered. In this vein, Arjun Appadurai asserts that ethnographers will have to change their approach to keep up with the way group identities are generated in a globalized world. Ethnographers can no longer rely on localized studies where the observations taken in one place are made without consideration of how broader forces affect individuals’ lives.

This is a multi-scalar study in which I rely on the theories of both transnationalism and globalization. Though much of the literature on the processes involved in globalization center on nation-states or global markets, I focus on how non-state entities, like religion, are also

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¹⁹ Wimmer and Glick Schiller, “Methodological Nationalism, the Social Sciences, and the Study of Migration,” 578.

globalized. I aim to write the kind of reconceptualized history that Akira Iriye proposes, in which the subjects are not only states, foreign policies, and national interests, but also “human migrations, economic exchanges, technological inventions and transfers, and cultural borrowing and transformation.”

In order to study these processes, we should look not at individual actors but at how they are situated in their local and global contexts. Arjun Appadurai offers a helpful way to conceptualize these forces, such as religion, with his framework of “-scapes,” religioscapes, ethnoscapes, mediascapes, etc., to describe the changing, mobile state of the world today. These “scapes” provide the building blocks for a better understanding of how people are connected to one another and institutions in an age of heightened mobility. The terms “transnational” and “globalization” are sometimes used interchangeably, but it is important to note the differences between the two perspectives. The “transnational” perspective refers to a “bottom-up” approach to the study of people, institutions, or ideas that are connected across national borders. On the other hand, a “global” perspective indicates a broader view of the ways different “-scapes” are interconnected around the world. Because the two perspectives are not mutually exclusive, I rely on both to understand how the LDM operates globally.

Historians tend to focus on the mobility of dominant, privileged groups, but I argue that it is important that the mobility of subaltern groups be reinserted into the narrative. Focusing on human migration is one way to recontextualize our picture of how nation-states are interconnected. Hoerder describes the relationship between migration and larger forces, such as politics or economics. He writes, “The image of a mobile society is not merely one of moving


about geographically but also one of cultural conflict, interaction, and fusion…Migration decisions depended on the demand for and supply of labor and marriage partners, on abolition of slavery, on political regulation of labor and land, on investment and industrialization strategies.”

A focus on human migrations and the global processes that drive such migration provides a clearer picture of how they affect individuals’ everyday lives. This is important to understand the globalization of the Luz del Mundo, because just as global processes affect the work of religious individuals, grassroots religious work simultaneously facilitates the LDM’s globalization.

The LDM’s cosmopolitan transition has been the result of changes taking place from the top down and from the bottom up. The LDM has encouraged social media campaigns where images of the church and its grand ceremonies are circulated. The church has also increased its missionary presence around the world. The grassroots pastoral and evangelizing work of LDM members, many of whom are immigrants, has contributed to the transformation of the church’s institutional identity. Their identities as migrants and the experience of having to adapt to life in the United States, which can be a hostile environment, in addition to their identities as members of the LDM make them uniquely suited to providing the work needed to help the church globalize.

Second- or third-generation church members living in the U.S. are especially important. Because they have grown up with the ability to navigate a variety of social situations, these

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members possess the “cosmopolitan sociability” the church seeks to adopt as an institution.\textsuperscript{25} This demographic of church members has had their religious identities cultivated in different contexts than LDM members belonging to previous generations. These younger members can identify with the dominant United States culture of their peers outside the church while also maintaining their religious identities as members of the LDM, even though these two realms cannot always be reconciled.

The LDM has harnessed the hybrid identities of its young membership base for its evangelization efforts. This is because, as Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick Schiller point out, “People living in transnational social fields experience multiple loci and layers of power and are shaped by them, but they can also act back upon them.”\textsuperscript{26} As I describe here, the ability of LDM transnational members to relate to others from different cultural backgrounds is key to the church’s global growth. This is not only because of their ability to reach out to others across cultural or national differences, but also because young LDM members’ hybrid, cosmopolitan identities have also transformed the image of the LDM in ways that makes the church more marketable.

**Case Study: The Luz del Mundo**

Amidst the large scholarly literature on Pentecostalism, my study addresses new issues. Foremost among these is what the existence of social media means for denominations like the Luz del Mundo, as it offers a form of communication that did not exist at the time of many past studies of Pentecostalism. I also include second- and third-generation Pentecostals, a group

\textsuperscript{25} Ebaugh and Chafetz, *Religion and the New Immigrants*, 386.

\textsuperscript{26} Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick Schiller, “Conceptualizing Simultaneity: A Transnational Social Field Perspective on Society,” in *The Transnational Studies Reader*, ed. Snajeev Khagram and Peggy Levitt (New York: Routledge, 2008), 289.
which has received little attention, as most scholars focus on conversion or the growth of the prosperity gospel, and, until now, studies of these later generations have not been possible because of how recently Pentecostalism arrived in the region. These factors, social media and young church members, have been integral to the globalization of the LDM.

The Luz del Mundo provides an ideal case study to better understand globalization and religion, a question which is made particularly interesting given the provincial history of the church. Most studies of religion and globalization or transnationalism tend to focus on the networks and movements of people belonging to a single nationality or ethnicity. Religions like the LDM, an immigrant and transnational church, offer the opportunity to see how globalization is taking place across ethnic and national differences. Studying the LDM helps us understand how ordinary people are learning new ways of interacting with and relating to one another across ethnic and national differences through religion.

The Luz del Mundo also defies the preconception of many that Pentecostalism is primarily a United States export. Some scholars believe that missions by US evangelical churches are the main reason for Pentecostal growth in Latin America (and elsewhere in the developing world). The Luz del Mundo’s history, though rooted to an event which took place in the United States, is contingent on the evangelizing work of a Mexican woman who brought Pentecostalism to Mexico in the first place. Further, the Luz del Mundo’s message is now being exported to the world from Mexico. “Reverse missionaries” are re-importing Pentecostalism to

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29 Stoll, Is Latin America Turning Protestant?, 70.
the United States and other parts of the world from Mexico, a nation often thought to be a mere beneficiary of the United States’s economic policies and development strategies. The LDM provides a case study where the institutional export does not originate in the United States, which challenges the idea that U.S. culture and products dominate globally.

This study also contributes to the debate over the extent to which technology is a democratizing force in today’s world. In an apparent contradiction, the Luz del Mundo has embraced new technology, especially through social media platforms, to disseminate its primitivist Christian message. Technological innovation, despite some claims to the contrary, might allow LDM members some opportunity at self-expression that is not directly regulated to the church. However, the church’s “rules” for using social media shows that this technology does not provide opportunities to usurp the church’s discipline so much as it is a disciplinary tool.

The Luz del Mundo is an excellent case study in the ways that discipline among church members who are widely dispersed is maintained. The church’s teachings, most obviously with regards to the dress code and the proscribed gender roles outlined by the church make it appear to outsiders to be extremist or authoritarian. However, the LDM has not outlined any more rules for its own members than other denominations, Christian or not. It is clear that LDM members’ adherence to their church’s rules is visible and apparently consistent. The LDM is a good case study to examine the relationship between religion and globalization because it is easier to see how LDM members deal with the challenges of migration and maintaining their dedication to the church.

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Methods

I conducted ethnographic work with LDM churches from November 2016 through July 2017. I regularly visited LDM congregations in Orlando, Bradenton, and Tampa, Florida throughout this time. I chose a multi-sited ethnographic approach to see the institutional changes taking place across the LDM. Whereas classical anthropological ethnographies focus on a limited field of study aimed at getting in-depth information about people living in a specific place, a multi-sited approach is best for contributing to questions that can be generalized to groups beyond the boundaries of the group in question.31 This study, therefore, answers questions about the LDM’s strategies for globalization, but it also contributes to questions about how other, similarly structured religious groups (Mormons, Assemblies of God, Catholicism) also globalize.

To understand LDM culture, where “culture” “consists of shared webs of meanings in language and interaction.”32 I participated in services at the temples, and I also spent time with a few church members outside church. Most of the twenty-six interviews I gathered were recorded at temples immediately following services. I learned a lot about what LDM members believe and why through interviews, but I learned more about LDM members’ everyday lives through informal interactions with them in everyday settings. I was invited to birthday parties, to visit theme parks, to lunches, and other activities during my time researching the church. Most of my information about why LDM members who live far from the LDM base in Mexico have remained in the church came from these everyday interactions. The information I gathered about


32 Nadai and Maeder, “Fuzzy Fields.”
church members’ everyday lives in this way was not recorded, but I did make detailed field notes immediately afterwards.

Although I was warned before my first visit to the Orlando temple on a Sunday morning that church members might be wary of my presence there, I was welcomed to the church as soon as I arrived. My reasons for visiting were never hidden from church members, but they still held out hope I would convert. As a white native of the United States, my conversion would go a long way to contributing to the church’s cosmopolitan image. Non-Hispanic converts are valued because their presence in the church signals that the LDM has shed its specifically Mexican identity. My conversion was also encouraged because, as a student specializing in the study of religion, my expertise would further legitimize the church as the true Christian church. Because many church members assumed me to be an expert in all religions, my choosing the LDM would prove that it is the rational choice when compared to other options. Though rare, there were times when I felt uncomfortably pressured about conversion or my failure to convert. To reinforce my position as a researcher and not a potential convert, I did not adopt the LDM’s dress codes for women. I did not wear long skirts or a veil during church services. Doing so might have helped me blend in and could helped me to gain more access to church members. However, I wanted to avoid making any false impressions and to remain professional.

Still, I think that several of my informants enjoyed introducing me to their families and traditions. Even if I did not convert, LDM members wanted to make a positive impression on me. Those who did not understand that I was researching the church for my dissertation assumed me to be a journalist. Given the negative press the church has received in the past, I worried my investigation might not be well-received. But the LDM’s recent efforts to change its image worked to my advantage. The possibility that I might provide some good press, or at least not
negative press, made some congregants more open to speaking with me. This is not to say that my work there was always encouraged. One pastor confronted me on multiple occasions, claiming each time that I did not have approval from the district pastor to interview congregants, even though I did. For the most part, however, church members tried to give me a full picture of what belonging to the church was like for them, and I was always invited to and welcomed at any church event. Church members were all eager to tell me what was going on during these events, and were proud to show me how special their religion is to them.

Although I had permission to interview congregants for my project and church members were almost always happy to speak with me, I should note that I did not have full access to church members. The most limiting factor is the fact that I am a woman, and the LDM has strict rules about what sorts of gendered interactions are appropriate. Because of that, most of my interviews were with women. When I interviewed men, women were present. I only interacted with women from the LDM when I spent time with church members outside LDM temples unless it was in a group setting. Another factor that likely influenced my fieldwork was the fact that the pastor asked my main informant, Marta, to act as a sort of guide for me. Marta, a young, single mother of three, is highly respected in the church. She is well-liked by everyone, including the church’s youth who she frequently hosts at her home for parties. More importantly, she is very knowledgeable about LDM history and doctrine and was always able to answer my questions about the church. Marta helped me approach church members for interviews, and it was Marta who encouraged me to talk with multiple generations of church members to understand the contributions young people are making to the church today. While I did establish connections with other church members who also connected me with potential interviewees, Marta was integral to the success of my project.
In addition to visiting these congregations in Florida, I also occasionally visited an obrecita, the site of a new LDM congregation consisting of only a family or two visited by a family of LDM missionaries from Orlando. I also traveled with Marta and her family from Orlando to Miami to observe the LDM’s annual baptism ceremony. In August 2016, I traveled to Guadalajara, Mexico for the LDM’s most important annual five-day ritual, the Santa Cena. I also spent time looking at the LDM’s various social media outlets, especially Facebook and Twitter. In fact, it was through Facebook messaging that I first connected with the LDM congregation in Orlando. Almost all LDM members connect with their church through social media, and so I wanted to see how the church uses these resources to pass along information. Social media also allowed me to see how the church presents itself to the public on a broader scale.

**Approach**

It is not my aim to justify what can be the contentious teachings of the LDM or to moralize them. I am aware of the problematic history of religious studies, as a site where scholars often tend to either condemn or be caretakers of religions depending on how different religions measure up to Western “ethics.” In this context, as Robert Orsi asserts, “ethics” can stand for liberal Christian ethics defined broadly and universally. Orsi writes, “The mother of all religious dichotomies—us/them—has regularly been constituted as a moral distinction—good/bad religion.” For this reason, religion scholars have avoided writing about the forms of religion most challenging to the Western perspective in a serious way. Instead, these religions are delegitimized within the academy by being categorized as “sects, cults, fundamentalisms, popular piety, ritualism, magic, primitive religion, millennialism, anything but ‘religion.’”

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34 Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 188.
Certainly, the Luz del Mundo’s reputation would be a good reason to steer clear of the church as a research site. Church leaders have been accused of abusing church members, including charges of sexual assault. These accusations have been documented by media outlets, but many accusations of abuse are made on individuals’ online blogs, reportedly because of the backlash from the church risked by filing formal claims. Though these claims haven’t been proven legally, the number of informal accusations against the church point to the likelihood that abuses of power do happen. The immense wealth of the Apostles, all descendants of Apostle Aarón, compared to the poverty of most church members is also a cause for question. The Apostle’s family owns countless expensive cars and resides in several small mansions along a central street in Hermosa Provincia. Based on Aarón’s own poverty when the LDM was founded, the family’s wealth is not inherited. It is unknown how much the Apostle earns in the way of a salary, but church members claim his wealth is justified because of the amount of work he does for the church and for God.

There are other parts of the church leadership structure that demonstrates a lack of transparency within the church. One of the most highly regarded leadership positions in the church is to be named an “Untouchable.” This is a small, elite group of men chosen directly by the Apostle who live lives totally devoted to him. Their exact work is unknown except that they do whatever the Apostle needs or wants them to. Every aspect of their lives is decided for them by the Apostle, down to where they live and who they marry.

My aim is not to justify how it is that millions believe the Apostle has been chosen by God and is God’s messenger on earth by relativizing the beliefs of the LDM. I have tried to suspend my own moral judgments, following Ori’s advice for scholars who study “challenging” religions. “Religious studies,” he writes, “is not a moralizing discipline, it exists in the
suspension of the ethical… It is a moral discipline in its cultivation of a disciplined attentiveness to the many different ways men, women, and children have lived with the gods and to the things, terrible and good, violent and peaceful, they have done with the gods to themselves and to others.”35 In studying the LDM, I have tried to maintain my obligations to my informants by representing them accurately, but I have avoided making claims about whether their statements or actions are good or bad.

Suspending the ethical does not lead us to a reductionist approach to the study of religion, which would account for differences by asserting an essential spiritual sameness in all religions. This approach is not based on data but instead on the search for essential sameness through relativizing differences such that “good” religions become more like “us.”36 In the process, religions perceived to be different, and therefore bad, are not fully contextualized or understood. The previously mentioned charges of corruption against LDM leaders has meant that this church tends to be written off as a cult or an elaborate pyramid scheme rather than a “real” religion. While I do not want to deny that these charges are serious and should not be overlooked, they should not exclude the church from scholarly attention.

I do not try to draw false similarities between myself and my informants here, but rather to understand how the LDM maintains relevance in the lives of church members living in different contexts and who are connected by transnational religious networks. To do that, I consider their own, insider accounts of what their religion means to them and has done for them. To avoid a *sui generis* approach, I also consider other data, such as the history of the LDM in Mexico and as a global denomination, my informants’ actions inside and outside the church,

35 Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 203.

their economic position, and their status as immigrants living in what can be a hostile environment. Contextualizing beliefs is an important way to understand them without engaging in relativism.

In the spirit of the topic of this dissertation, cosmopolitanism, I have tried to adopt a “cosmopolitan” perspective as a researcher by maintaining an awareness of what is unfamiliar, especially given the increased mobility of human beings today.\textsuperscript{37} As group and individual identities emerge and change rapidly in our globalized world, ethnography must try to keep up, as Appadurai advises. He argues that a focus on mobility, the movement of people, ideas, and materials, can help ethnography maintain relevance today. I have applied this to my study by highlighting how the LDM has benefitted from and been transformed by the mobility of its church members. This “ethnographic cosmopolitanism” prevents the limitations of traditional, localized ethnographies through a consideration of “the negotiation between imagined lives and deterritorialized worlds.”\textsuperscript{38} The cosmopolitan approach to ethnography not only accounts for the changes brought on by globalization, but it also prevents positing religion as a \textit{sui generis} category by the inclusion of other, measurable data in addition to insiders’ accounts.

**Chapter Outline**

In Chapter 1, I provide a history of the LDM’s beginnings, including its founding by Apostle Aarón around the time of the Mexican Revolution. I not only give a history of the denomination, but I contextualize the history of the LDM in relation to Mexico’s history. Aarón was only able to establish his church by utilizing the modernist, nationalist message perpetuated

\textsuperscript{37} Bender, “Introduction,” 11.

by the new Mexican government to show the LDM was, in contrast to Catholicism, a truly Mexican faith. Understanding the LDM’s historical background will clarify why it is so significant that the church’s institutional identity has changed.

In Chapter 2, I focus on the migration of many LDM members outside Mexico, mainly to the United States. It was this migration that initiated the LDM’s growth outside the Americas. While the LDM had been establishing congregations throughout Mexico and Latin America, congregations were only established in the United States when Mexican members moved there. These members established congregations in the U.S. that attracted other, non-Mexican, Hispanic and, sometimes, North American members. Congregations in the U.S. were increasingly home to church members from different national backgrounds, which set the stage for the cosmopolitanization of the church. Further, the process of settlement in the United States gave these church members the skills to navigate different social contexts: their churches, schools, workplaces, etc. Perhaps most importantly, migrants to the United States acquired the ability to speak English, which has been a key component of the LDM’s global expansion.

In Chapter 3, I highlight the LDM’s cosmopolitan institutional identity. I describe how the LDM has made this identity transformation visible, through ceremonial displays and the use of social media. Technology has become increasingly important for the church practically speaking, as it is the main way that the LDM is able to maintain connections between the Apostle and congregations around the world. The use of technology is also an important way that the church showcases its status as church that is not only the light of the world and the true Christian church, but also a modern institution. The LDM uses both its cosmopolitan embrace of members from different nations and cultural backgrounds and its use of modern technology to ward off the charge that it is “backwards” despite its primitivist theology.
In Chapter 4, I describe the LDM’s cosmopolitanization from a grassroots perspective. I document interviews with missionaries and church members whose work has directly contributed to the church’s new image. I show how much of the work to transform the church’s image and to help the church to grow is being done by second- or third-generation church members and often by women, whose roles have historically been quite limited. This brings up two important questions which are explored here. There has been little research done on Pentecostalism’s ability to retain church members, let alone the extent to which later generations keep their parents’ faith. My interviews yield insight into the reasons why young people stay in the LDM, and part of it is because of the church’s use of modern technology and the opportunities church growth offers young people in the way of travel and work experience. Second, I argue that the LDM has relied on younger church members, particularly those from the United States, because of the cosmopolitan sensibilities that they already have grown up as the children of migrants. This skill set means that sometimes women can take on tasks that might otherwise be offered to men first. The LDM’s strategies for growth, then, might mean that some LDM traditions and rules might be malleable if the tradeoff is church growth.

I conclude by reflecting on what questions I could or could not answer as a researcher. I consider my position as a young woman and citizen of the United States and how my own positionality opened some doors but may have closed others. I describe how my experience in the field differed from that of past researches of the LDM, and I argue that these differences in many ways allude to the institutional identity transformation of the LDM described in this dissertation. I acknowledge that there are still questions to be answered and point to the direction of future research might take to better understand Pentecostalism and global religion.

Figure 1-3. Photo of the temple interior in Hermosa Provincia. Posted on lldm.org Facebook page, https://www.facebook.com/LaLuzDelMundo.org/photos/a.10150586231509297.394598.47008384296/10153829975539297/?type=3&theater (last modified December 7, 2015).

Figure 1-4. Photo of LDM temple in Chiapas. Posted on LDM Chiapas’s website, http://www.lldmhptapachula.org/ (accessed May 7, 2017).

Figure 1-6. Photo of LDM temple in Miami. From lldm.org Facebook page, https://www.facebook.com/LaLuzDelMundo.org/photos/a.1015588157579297.1073741912.47008384296/10155610629209297/?type=3&theater (last modified August 9, 2017).
CHAPTER 2
THE ORIGINS OF THE LUZ DEL MUNDO

I will address how, initially in its history, the LDM posited itself as a Mexican religious institution. I describe the ways that the Luz del Mundo generated an institutional identity that enabled the church to become established in Mexico. The institutional identity generated by the LDM helped the church, as a Pentecostal denomination in a nation dominated by Catholicism, gain acceptance. The LDM's founder and first Apostle, Apostle Aarón, took advantage of post-Revolutionary Mexican nationalism and hostility towards Catholicism during the early 20th century by emphasizing the dimensions of the church’s history and doctrine that aligned with the dominant narratives of Mexican national identity at the time. These pragmatic moves by the LDM set the church up for success in Mexico and laid the foundations for the it to become a global church.

The Mexican Revolution and Transition to Liberalism

The history of the Luz del Mundo is directly linked to the political, social, and economic history of Mexico. The historical context that created the possibility for non-Catholic religious institutions like the Luz del Mundo to flourish in a nation dominated by Catholicism begins with the transition to liberalism in the 19th century. In the years preceding this transition, Mexico had been led by Porfirio Díaz, whose presidency was marked by corruption and cronyism. The Porfiriato (1876-1910) also offered privileges to the Catholic Church in the form of political favors and protection from the law. Many Mexicans came to view the connection between the government and the Church as a sign of backwardness, preventing Mexico from the possibility of having a true democratic government and progressing into modernity.

Though slow to arrive in Latin America, the liberal values which first emerged during the 18th century Enlightenment governed post-Revolutionary Mexico. Liberal values, such as reason,
democracy, and intellectualism, challenged the authority of the Catholic Church. As people sought “knowledge free of the constraints of a theology and philosophy taught by priests,” the Catholic Church lost its secular power.¹ Liberal philosophy held that progress could only be made upon freedom from the religious “prejudices” of the past, and “the Church was thus seen as a rival to the state, a focus of sovereignty which should belong to the nation alone.”²

In addition, positivism, based on the philosophy of August Comte, had become influential at this time and was regarded as the key to Mexico’s progress. Positivist philosophy holds that knowledge is derived from observation and experimentation, which yields facts that can be scientifically proven. Although the Catholic Church objected to positivism because the philosophy challenged its authority, Mexicans’ objections to the governance of Porfirio Díaz and his government’s favoritism of the Catholic Church were put into law through a series of legislative acts passed in the mid-19th century. Benito Juárez’s “Law of the 23rd of November,” passed in 1855, abolished clerical immunity from civil law offered during the Porfiriato. Juárez is one of the most notable political figures in Mexico’s transition to liberalism and is also one of the most important figures of Mexico’s history for the Luz del Mundo. In 1859, the government nationalized Church property, separated Church and state, and suppressed male religious orders. According to John Lynch, “It was this which opened the door to Protestantism in Mexico, reinforcing the influence of the United States and projecting the liberal model of religion as a reform movement complementing the political Reforma.”³ Opposition to the Porfiriato

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² Lynch, *New Worlds*, 129.
culminated in the Mexican Revolution (1910-20), which was followed by a series of nation-building efforts which transformed Mexico culturally and politically.

In 1929, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) came to power in Mexico and implemented a series of nation-building projects to bring unity and progress to the nation. Catholicism continued to be driven back by the government, which viewed Catholicism as being both an opposition to Mexican nation-state formation and as a hindrance to national economic and cultural progress. However, Mexico under the PRI was not a democracy. Williamson describes the PRI as steering a middle course between the free-market capitalism of the United States and the “socialistic nationalism” which marked the official ideology of the party.⁴ Although the PRI did not implement a true democracy in Mexico, this party was the first to be able to rule Mexico with stability since the Porfiriato. The PRI sought to ensure Mexico’s progress and economic success through domestic investments with import substitution strategies and protections for domestic industries.⁵ These policies transformed Mexico from an agricultural to an urban and industrial nation. This transformation was also given a boost during WWII, when the USA “offered technical and financial assistance for the industrial exploitation of the country’s mineral wealth.”⁶

Although the nationalist policies of the PRI helped the Mexican economy to grow initially, the PRI was unable to manage the tensions that arose out of it. Industrial import-substitution had saturated internal demand, which stagnated without expanding to new markets. This resulted in a surplus of labor that could not be absorbed. Further, increased migration to

⁵ Williamson, *History of Latin America*, 400.
cities and a sudden population boom resulting from the combination of lowered mortality rates and traditionally high birth rates resulted in a declining rural society and the rise of shantytowns in cities. Finally, most Mexicans did not feel any of the benefits of economic development. The distribution of wealth was still grossly uneven, with the top ten percent of the population receiving about forty percent of the national income.\footnote{Williamson, \textit{History of Latin America}, 403.} The most impoverished Mexicans needed help the government wasn’t providing. Many were without jobs or the skills necessary to find employment, and the Luz del Mundo would become one of the few resources the most impoverished Mexicans could look to for help.

\textbf{LDM History}

The Luz del Mundo was founded by the man who would become the church’s first Apostle, Eusebio “Aarón” Joaquín González, in 1926, just as the PRI was rising to power following the revolution. Eusebio was born in Jalisco to a Catholic family. Eusebio’s dark skin is claimed by church members to be an indication of his Mexican indigeneity, a trait equated with humility within the LDM. Eusebio’s skin color is emphasized by church members to demonstrate that the LDM, like its founder, is authentically Mexican. Even as late as 1987, the church cited the indigenous appearance of Eusebio to distinguish the LDM’s origins from Catholicism, which is seen as a European religion imposed on Mexicans rather than a religion Mexicans can call their own.\footnote{Jason H. Dormady, \textit{Primitive Revolution: Restorationist Religion and the Idea of the Mexican Revolution, 1940-1968} (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2011), 21.} Patricia Fortuny and Renee de la Torre also note the connections the LDM has made between the indigenous appearance of Eusebio and Benito Juárez, the reformer the LDM most often credits with establishing the religious freedom laws that made it possible for the church’s
Eusebio pursued his education and became a teacher during his teenage years. He then joined the Revolution, eventually siding with the constitucionalistas, where he built relationships with his military superiors that would be beneficial for the LDM in the future.

In the early 1920s, Eusebio married Elisa Flores González. Elisa converted to Pentecostalism before Eusebio, and Elisa was largely responsible for Eusebio’s eventual conversion. After the Revolution, Eusebio and Elisa joined an evangelizing duo known as Saul and Silas. This partnership lasted until April 1926 when Eusebio received a vision from God telling him to leave and begin his own ministry. The vision came to Eusebio at a time when he and his wife were unhappy with their relationship with Saul and Silas, and although the Catholic Church was the main object of the government’s suspicions with regards to religion, Pentecostalism (and other Protestant groups) still had not gained a strong enough foundation in Mexico to prevent animosity towards converts. Eusebio and Elisa had joined Saul and Silas as a way to practice and evangelize their Pentecostal beliefs, but also because these two pastors had a relatively strong following in Mexico, which offered some security to the couple. However, Eusebio and Elisa took issue with the corrupt way Saul and Silas ran their ministry and felt that their vulnerable position was being abused.

Eusebio’s vision came in the night, as he was sleeping alongside Elisa in the pantry Saul and Silas had allowed the couple to use for shelter in exchange for their ministerial work. According to LDM reports, Eusebio heard a voice in the night saying, “Here is a man whose name will be Aarón,” along with a vision of the stars and galaxies Eusebio saw through a hole that appeared in the windowless pantry ceiling. This vision was followed by a pact Eusebio made

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10 Dormady Primitive Revolution, 25.
with God to bring a religious revolution to Mexico which would help ensure the nation’s bright future. Of course, this vision is reminiscent of Samuel’s calling in the Old Testament during a time when Eli’s sons had been abusing their powers as priests, as had Saul and Silas in Eusebio’s view. The choice of the name “Aarón” also has biblical significance: Aaron was the brother of Moses who was called to be the high priest of Israel and whose sons were called to continue on in the function of high priest. After receiving this vision, Aarón and Elisa left Saul and Silas to gather followers in southern Mexico.

The LDM demonstrated its support for the PRI’s efforts to rebuild Mexico after the revolution through narratives emphasizing the indigenous appearance of Apostle Aarón or the combativeness of the Catholic Church with the Mexican government. Dormady notes that one LDM narrative he was able to access points out the “fanatic” nature of the Catholics Aarón and Elisa encountered as they missionized and notes that the “ecclesiastical hierarchies from the priestly pulpit” challenged government institutions to emphasize the Catholic Church’s lack of patriotism relative to the LDM. Patricia Fortuny and Reneé de la Torre quote a popular saying of Apostle Aarón on the position of the LDM was, “Buenos cristianos para el mundo pero también Buenos ciudadanos para nuestra patria.” Such efforts were viewed as being vital for Mexico’s success because, as Benedict Anderson has theorized, nations are “imagined” political communities, a description indicating the tenuousness of national boundaries which must, therefore, be carefully policed and protected. Imagining a nation into existence “invents” a limited, sovereign, and distinct national identity whose members comprise the national

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12 De la Torre and Fortuny, “La construcción de una identidad nacional en la Luz del Mundo,” 41
community. Anderson writes that even “the most messianic nationalists do not dream of a day when all the members of the human race will join their nation.”

Imagined national boundaries distinguish insiders from outsiders, and the LDM narratives described here show that it is the Luz del Mundo, as the truly Mexican religious institution, and not the Catholic Church that deserves a place in Mexican society. Not only does the LDM connect itself to Mexican indigenous roots through Apostle Aarón’s dark skin, but the LDM also posits the Catholic Church as being antithetical to Mexican nation-building projects through descriptions of Catholics’ rejections of the government’s censure of Catholicism. The LDM continues to work to maintain a positive relationship with the Mexican government and its authorities, to the extent that Fortuny and de la Torre have wondered whether the PRI could have succeeded without the LDM. This political relationship is an important reason why the church was able to become successfully established in Mexico, and the fruitions of this relationship are most visible in the LDM’s colony in Guadalajara, Hermosa Provincia.

**Hermosa Provincia**

In 1954, the government of Guadalajara granted the Luz del Mundo permission to establish a colony exclusively for the church and church members. According to Dormady, the argument set forward by the LDM to support their petition for such a space was that, by providing the church with an exclusive space for their worship, “they can be the best Christians possible and, as a result, the best citizens for Mexico.” Government officials at this time sought

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15 De la Torre and Fortuny. “La construcción de una identidad nacional en la Luz del Mundo,”, 44.

to develop a clean, modern urban environment in Guadalajara that could accommodate the influx of migrants to the city resulting from the import substitution strategies implemented by the PRI. The LDM was given approval to establish the colony on the conditions that the church take responsibility for resolving local social problems, such as homelessness and joblessness. The church was also responsible for funding all the urbanization improvements required by law within five years, including leveling streets, installing sewer systems and electricity, providing a network of potable water, and paving streets and sidewalks. In complying with these stipulations, the LDM played an important supporting role in the government’s decision to focus on the urban development and expansion of Guadalajara.

Critics have interpreted Guadalajara’s approval of Hermosa Provincia as being the product of some kind of pact between the LDM and the PRI made possible by the military connections that Aarón had with government officials in Guadalajara, but such agreements with private parties were not uncommon at a time when cities had few financial resources to fund these kinds of development projects.17 Certainly, the relationship between the LDM and the PRI, which remained in power until the year 2000 and which regained power in the most recent Mexican presidential election held in 2012, has been the subject of much suspicion from outsiders. For example, statistics show LDM voters gave 100% of their support to the PRI in the 2012 election. However, LDM member and journalist Sarah Pozos Bravo reports that this statistic is probably based on fraud committed by the PRI since the LDM poll worker she interviewed claimed there was almost no voter turnout.18

Although the PRI has been notoriously corrupt since the party took power in Mexico following the revolution, there seems to be no definitive evidence that the LDM has acted in any unlawful way to ensure the PRI’s success, even if the personal relationships between Aarón and his military contacts working as government officials might have given the LDM a leg up in securing the land needed to establish Hermosa Provincia. The LDM’s acquiescence to the stipulations outlined by the government for the construction of Hermosa Provincia was likely motivated by the church’s desire to contribute to the improvement of Mexico. Such a move served to demonstrate that, by fulfilling its patriotic obligations to contribute to Mexico’s progress and the modernization of Guadalajara, the LDM was a truly Mexican church.

The development of Hermosa Provincia provided a space for the LDM to establish a community of believers and improved the quality of life for those who chose to live within the colony, many of whom were impoverished as a result of the government's economic strategies. Aarón worked alongside members of the LDM during the colony’s construction, which gave the emerging church a sense of ownership and pride that has contributed to the cleanliness and order that exist still today. The work of constructing the colony also gave church members practical skills and experience that would help many to find employment in construction or other similar fields. Aarón, who valued the education of his followers, also provided formal education, and he used his connections to help improve the economic status of LDM members. The urbanization efforts by the LDM did lead to a gradual improvement in the quality of life in Hermosa Provincia. According to Dormady, the birthrate in the community tripled between 1959-1964, and the stillborn rate dropped from around 10 percent to zero.

The LDM had successfully accomplished what the government of Guadalajara had outlined for the church, and the community developments and improvements continue to be a point of pride for LDM members. Today, the church continues to develop and improve the colony. An impressive cone-shaped temple which seats 14,000 people stands at the center of Hermosa Provincia. The temple was constructed during the tenure of the LDM’s second Apostle, Samuel Joaquín Flores, who claimed God sent the image of what the temple should look like to him in a dream. Church members told me that the shape of the church resembles the shape of the skirt of a bridal gown, signifying that the LDM is the bride of Christ. A series of streets surrounds the temple in concentric circles and are connected by streets extending outward from the temple, like a spider’s web.

The LDM has also continued its efforts modernize Hermosa Provencia. The LDM recently built a hospital with a dental office, maternity ward, and pediatric facilities. The church has also constructed a new bookstore, where titles and items specific to the LDM including hymnals, Bibles, chalinas, and DVDs documenting important church figures like the Apostles or their wives can be purchased alongside more conventional religious publications, such as those by Mitch Albom, or even nonreligious items, like Disney-themed coloring books for children. Hermosa Provincia also has all the conveniences that any other neighborhood might have, including two pizza restaurants and several boutiques that are owned and staffed by church members. These modern amenities built and maintained by the church add to the sense of pride LDM members feel in their church. In my interviews and interactions with church members, it was often claimed that many outsiders from Guadalajara utilize the resources made available by the church, such as the colony’s hospital or educational programs offered by the church. For
church members, Hermosa Provincia offers proof that the LDM is a forward-thinking, modern community.

**Theology and Doctrine**

The Luz del Mundo is a primitivist, Apostolic church. The LDM was described by church members as a “primitive” church to emphasize the desire for a return to Christianity as it was practiced during the time of Jesus and the Apostles according to the New Testament. Grant Wacker describes “primitivism” as being a Pentecostal impulse that reflects the desire for direct contact with the divine. According to Wacker,

> Primitivism suggests, in accord with its Latin root *primus*, a determination to return to first things, original things, fundamental things. It denotes believers’ yearnings to be guided solely by God’s Spirit in every aspect of their lives, however great or small. With this term I hope to connote not so much an upward reach for transcendence as a downward or even backward quest for the infinitely pure and powerful fount of being itself.21

The LDM’s primitive doctrine is behind many of its practices that are sometimes perceived as being outdated or “backwards.” Like many other Pentecostal denominations, the LDM does not allow church members to consume alcohol, smoke cigarettes, or gamble.

Luz del Mundo doctrine strictly outlines the types of behaviors that are expected of its congregants, especially with regards to the different roles of men and women within the church. According to LDM doctrine, based largely on the LDM’s interpretation of Paul’s writings in the New Testament, women are to cover their heads with scarves, called *chalinanas*, during worship services and must always wear long skirts. Women are not able to lead worship services that are attended by men, and men are considered to be closer than women to God.22 During worship

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22 1 Cor. 11:6-7 KJV; Interview with the author, 7 January 2016.
services, men and women sit on opposite sides of the church so that “there are fewer
distractions.” This gendered understanding of the spiritual order of women and men extends
also to daily life. At home, husbands are expected to be the heads of their households and are
responsible for providing their families with food, a place to live, and other material needs.
Women in the LDM are not discouraged from working outside the home. In fact, both women
and men are encouraged to get an education and find work. However, women are still expected
to do housework that has traditionally been assigned to women, such as cleaning or raising
children, even if they do work outside the home.

These gendered requirements proscribed by the LDM have attracted negative attention
for many years. This is mainly because women and women’s actions appear to be more strictly
regulated by the church than men’s are, and outsiders claim that the church’s control of women
prevents gender equality between men and women both spiritually and materially. Patricia
Fortuny, whose work has focused on gender roles within the LDM, argues that this perception is
not necessarily fair to women. Fortuny acknowledges that by regulating women’s dress codes in
its doctrine, the LDM points to women’s bodies as being the source of original sin. However,
Fortuny also argues that, by obeying these dress codes, women are able to transform themselves
into models of purity for their church and the rest of the world. In her own fieldwork with
women in the LDM, Fortuny found that women gained prestige and esteem among their fellow
church members by following the dress codes and gender role proscriptions outlined by the

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23 Interview with the author, 7 January 2016.

church which they may not be able to attain elsewhere in their lives. Although the LDM also has high expectations for men, the requirements of women are more visible and attract more attention from outsiders who criticize the amount of control the church exerts over the women who belong to it.

As a primitive church, the LDM seeks to restore Christianity to the way it was practiced during the time of the New Testament. This means the gender roles proscribed by the church reflect a literal interpretation of scripture, and it also means that the church as an institution is guided by an Apostle. According to the LDM, the Apostles of Jesus in the New Testament, including the most important for the LDM, Paul, were responsible for fulfilling Jesus’ teachings and mission after Jesus’ death. The LDM seeks to restore Christianity to the time of Paul, and that includes the establishment of an Apostolic succession. Since Apostle Aarón, who served from 1926-1964, all of the LDM’s Apostles have belonged to the same family, though church members claim that the Apostleship is not dynastic. “It is just a very special family,” Marta tells me, “They are very blessed by God.” Aarón was succeeded by his son, Samuel (1964-2014), whose tenure is marked by his successful efforts at achieving church growth. Currently, Samuels’s son, Naasón, serves as the LDM’s Apostle and continues Apostle Samuel’s focus on missionary efforts. There is only one Apostle who leads the LDM at any time, and Apostles serve for a lifetime once appointed. Importantly, LDM members say the Apostle is chosen by God rather than by a council of church members, something that distinguishes the LDM from Catholicism, where popes are elected by a council of men. The Apostle acts as the spiritual leader of the church, guiding church members on how to live according to God’s intentions.

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26 Interview with the author, 13 August 2016.
LDM members love and respect their Apostle unconditionally, although this may sometimes come at the expense of the church’s reputation.

The importance of the Apostle for the LDM has been the source of much controversy surrounding the church, even more so than the church’s rules about gender roles. Many outsiders consider the centrality of the Apostle, who they believe is being worshipped by LDM members rather than God, to be a sign that the church is a cult rather than a legitimate Christian denomination. The fact that church members continue to praise and love their Apostle despite multiple allegations against Apostle Samuel for the physical and sexual abuse of church members makes it difficult to understand how a church could continue to revere him.27 Many outsiders are also suspicious of the fact that all of the Apostles have belonged to the same family, and the claim that Apostles are chosen by God is met with skepticism. Elena, a young woman who belongs to the LDM, explained to me that proof that the Apostleship was not based on a dynastic succession was clear when Apostle Naasón was chosen to follow Apostle Samuel. If it were a true dynasty, according to Elena, Apostle Samuel’s eldest son would have been chosen. Instead, it was the family’s youngest son, Naasón, who was chosen by God to lead the church.

The validity of the LDM’s Apostleship is almost continually being explained by LDM members. Elena told me numerous times that the LDM doesn’t worship the Apostle, even though they have much love and respect for him, but that their worship is directed towards God. The Apostle is God’s messenger on earth whose guidance is available exclusively to the LDM. A few church spokespeople defended the Apostleship in a webcast produced by the church’s newest ministerial wing of the church, Berea Internacional, and hosted by Sister Hannah, Sister Rachel

(sister-in-law to the Apostle), and Brother David. The hosts explained the meaning and justification of the Apostleship for any potential members because, according to Sister Hannah, the Apostolic election is the dimension of the church that is most difficult for visitors to accept.

However, not to accept the possibility that God can do work like appointing an Apostle is to set limitations on an omnipotent God and is therefore impossible. A correspondent to the webcast, Brother Nick, compares the LDM Apostleship to the days of Paul’s Apostleship to respond to the hypothetical argument that, because the LDM’s Apostles are not named in the Bible, they are not true Apostles. According to Nick:

Where is [the Apostle’s] name in the Bible? . . . The Apostle Paul, his name was not in the Old Testament. And at the time that he was preaching, at the time that he was called, the New Testament didn’t exist. And so the Apostle Paul’s name was not in the Bible either. In fact, he was persecuting the church. He was looking to do harm to the church, to put the members of the church in prison and do harm to them. And so, after the Lord spoke to him and sent him as an Apostle imagine, how hard it was for those brothers to believe that he was an Apostle of God. That’s the work of God: to do the impossible.28

LDM members understand that it can be difficult for outsiders to accept the validity of their Apostle. But it is assumed that, once converts accept the leadership and position of the Apostle, conversion is guaranteed. LDM members explain and defend their Apostle to convince potential converts that the LDM doctrine is the true doctrine of God and to dispel outside rumors that the church worships the Apostle rather than God.

One way LDM church members most often expressed their love for the Apostle to me was in their recollections of Apostle Samuel's death. LDM members I spoke with were all eager to describe both the sense of devastating loss they felt and the subsequent sense of joy they experienced when the new Apostle was named. Upon hearing the news that Apostle Samuel had

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died in 2014, Marta says she felt like “a cockroach that had been smashed.”29 The death of Samuel and the appointment of a new Apostle is an important transition within the LDM, and church members must carefully maintain respect for the past Apostle and welcome the next Apostle chosen. Jennifer described her experience at her family’s home in Hermosa Provincia mourning the death of Samuel and upon learning that a new Apostle had been chosen:

That day, it’s a day I’ll never forget I can tell you that. And the other thing is that I feel so much love for Apostle Naasón. You can even see it: he throws kisses to us, he hugs us. And I feel that, I feel it whenever he does that I honestly do feel that when he does it. So, I don’t think he’s changing anything, I feel like he’s continuing everything that we’ve learned since-I wasn’t alive-but since Apostle Aaron. Everything is the same. It’s all the same. The same doctrine and the same teachings.30

Days after Samuel’s death, Naasón was appointed to take over as Apostle. Church members will never claim that the any of the Apostles bring change to the church because that would insinuate that the church’s doctrine is fallible when, in fact, it is (according to the LDM) the purest form of Christianity, governed by the practices and teachings of Jesus’ own Apostles. The measure of a good Apostle is his ability to continue to uphold the church’s doctrine, and LDM members express their confidence in Naasón’s ability to do so in order to show their love and loyalty to the new Apostle.

Apostle Naasón has been wholeheartedly accepted by the LDM, whose status as the youngest son in his family endears him even more to church members. Naasón has been able to generate a sense of connection with his congregants, who speak about him as though he is a personal friend. Apostle Naasón’s ability, like the Apostles before him, to connect with congregants in this way is attractive to potential converts. Most Latin Americans convert to

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29 Interview with the author, January 17, 2016.

30 Interview with the author, January 17, 2016.
Protestantism because they are looking for a closer connection with God, and the LDM offers this to congregants in a variety of ways, such as the practice of glossolalia during prayers. But most importantly, the church offers congregants a chance to worship alongside God’s own representative on earth, the Apostle. The Apostle unites and leads the church, and, most importantly, the Apostle facilitates congregants’ connections with God. Like Apostle Samuel, Apostle Naasón has an especially reserved chair for him in each LDM temple throughout the globe in the event that he should visit. The chair is usually situated beneath a decorative trellis and behind a lectern, also reserved for the Apostle, bearing the Apostle’s signature phrase “Mi tiempo ha llegado,” alluding to the surprise felt by the church upon his appointment by God, inscribed either on the lectern or behind the chair.

Like many Pentecostal churches, prayer services are offered multiple times every day in LDM temples. Generally, prayer services are led by local ministers or pastors, depending on who is available. Church members seeking to take on leadership roles begin as missionaries or “obreros” and are later promoted as ministers who are then able lead church services or take charge of a temple, before reaching the rank of pastor, who generally take charge of a region of temples. Roberto, the pastor located in Orlando, was responsible for overseeing LDM temples throughout Florida and the Caribbean, and since he was sometimes unavailable because of travel, other ministers from within the church would step in to lead church services. Some of these ministers were also able to lead the development of “obritas” or "obrecitas," fledgling temples usually set up in the home of a potential or new convert who might live too far from a temple to attend regularly. Although the Apostle is the LDM’s most powerful leader, the church has

numerous positions and leadership roles which makes the church leadership structure less
autocratic than is often perceived by outsiders.\footnote{de la Torre, and Fortuny “La Mujer in La Luz del Mundo,” 130-131; Patricia Fortuny, “The Santa Cena in La Luz del Mundo,” in \textit{Religion Across Borders: Transnational Immigrant Networks} ed. Helen Rose Ebaugh and Janet Saltzman Chafetz, (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2002), 29.}

LDM members are expected to attend as many of these services as they possibly can. There are five services or “prayers” held throughout the day in each temple, the first beginning at five o’clock in the morning and the last beginning at six o’clock in the evening. Each prayer lasts about ninety minutes. Some prayers are better attended than others, with the evening prayer being the most popular besides the Sunday mid-morning prayer service. Each service is structured around a series of five prayers, each said with a specific purpose. Congregants always pray at the beginning of a service to reconcile their souls by asking for God’s forgiveness. Prayers are then offered for the Apostle and all of LDM’s preachers, and this prayer is followed by a prayer for the Apostle’s wife and family. These prayers are generally followed by scripture readings and the sermon, and the final two prayers are held for church needs, for oneself or for loved ones and, finally, a prayer in praise of God.

A few of these services, or prayers, are set apart for specific topics each week depending on whether there has been correspondence from the Apostle. Frequently, the Apostle will send a letter to all of his churches letting the pastors know if there is a topic or issue that needs to be addressed during prayer services. The letter will outline the Apostle’s teaching on the issue, and the letters are usually posted on the walls of the temples for congregants to read if they choose. There are also special topics reserved for specific prayer services throughout the week. For example, Sunday night services focus on the topic of marriage and Wednesday night services are led by church youth and focus on young LDM members’ spiritual growth.
The nine o’clock service held on Thursday mornings are led and attended exclusively by women. This Thursday morning service is held after husbands and children have gone to work or school for the day to provide women with an opportunity to focus on their roles as wives and mothers at home and in church. This weekly schedule is observed by all LDM congregations worldwide: all congregations meet at the same times and, usually, the same messages are addressed by leaders during the services based on what the Apostle has advised in his communications with LDM pastors. The only interruptions occur when the Apostle addresses the LDM via a satellite transmission of one of his messages given somewhere else, either from Guadalajara or from one of the stops on any of the Apostle’s “tours” he frequently takes of congregations or potential new temple sites.

The LDM does not celebrate many Christian holidays, including Christmas and Easter. LDM members claim that the connections between pagan Middle Eastern holidays and Christmas make these holidays impure. The LDM also claims that the Catholic Church celebrates the death of Christ in their observance of Easter, which the LDM also takes issue with. Instead, the LDM has its own, busy, yearly ritual calendar. Each February 14, converts or young people from within the church who have reached the age of fourteen, solidify their dedication to the LDM and to God through a celebration of baptisms. On this day, which also marks Apostle Samuel’s birthday, all who intend to become official church members participate in los bautismos, mass baptisms that take place in this important service in special locations throughout the world. In 2016, more than eighty new members from states in the southeastern United States were baptized at a spectacular service held at Bayside Park in downtown Miami.

For two weeks in March, the LDM holds a series of revival services aimed at refocusing church members on their relationship with God. During revivals, church members who have
been baptized might try to speak in tongues during a special service exclusive to baptized church members held twice during the revival period after the last prayer service of the day. Only members who have been carefully “consecrating” themselves by adhering as closely as possible to the church's rules and teachings prior to the revivals are encouraged to try to encounter the Holy Spirit in this way to prevent glossolalia from becoming a spectacle.

*Los bautismos* and the yearly revivals are only two of many important rituals and events held every year in the LDM, but the most important event on the LDM ritual calendar is the *Santa Cena*. The first *Santa Cena* was held in 1931, during Apostle Aarón’s tenure, and is celebrated every year on August 14 in honor of Apostle Aarón’s birthday and to commemorate the last supper of Christ. The *Santa Cena* has become a spectacular event for the LDM. Church members pilgrimage to Hermosa Provincia from all across the globe to celebrate the Holy Supper. In 2016, nearly half a million members traveled to Hermosa Provincia for the event, and many people arrived several days in advance to attend the special Welcome Ceremony and other special services held at the temple during the week preceding the *Santa Cena*.

The *Santa Cena* is a time of spiritual renewal for LDM members, and they consecrate themselves for weeks in preparation for the trip to Hermosa Provincia by being extra careful to avoid “worldly” influences like swearing or listening to secular music and by making sure to attend as many prayer services as possible. LDM members want to ensure that they are worthy of participating in this most holy event. Being in Hermosa Provincia, the LDM’s holy land and residence of God’s Apostle on earth, is special, and participating in the *Santa Cena* offers LDM members to be closer to the Apostle, and therefore God. The event renews the connections between LDM members and God and reorients church members to the church’s homeland, Hermosa Provincia.
The *Santa Cena* is also an important social event for LDM members. During the *Santa Cena*, LDM members from around the world have a unique opportunity to connect or reconnect with one another. Many LDM congregations are small and isolated from other congregations, and so the *Santa Cena* provides an opportunity for church members to regain a sense of community. Although LDM congregations maintain connections with one another and to Hermosa Provincia through digital transmissions and social media networks, LDM members enjoy the opportunity to renew connections with former pastors or church members who have relocated to start new congregations or to support smaller ones.

It is also a time when family members are able to reconnect. Many church members from Orlando had decided to remain in Guadalajara after the *Santa Cena* to catch up with family members still residing in Mexico or with family members who live in other parts of the United States. The *Santa Cena* provides young people an important opportunity to meet and socialize with potential marriage partners. The LDM endorses endogamy among its members, and since it can be difficult to find a mate in small congregations, the *Santa Cena* is a perfect opportunity for youth to connect with others their age from within the church, especially in a place like Hermosa Provincia, where the church has provided special spaces for youth to socialize with one another apart from their parents.33

**The Primitivism and Pragmatism of the LDM**

The LDM’s primitivist theology contradicts the liberal, modernist state projects of Mexico during the 20th century and directly challenges the authority of the dominant Catholic Church. However, the church was able to do what many Pentecostal denominations have done in order to maintain relevance by balancing what Grant Wacker has called “primitivism,” the desire

to return Christianity to the way it was practiced during Jesus’ time, with “pragmatism,” described as the willingness to “work within the social and cultural expectations of the age.” Wacker has observed that Pentecostals are never purely primitivists because they demonstrate a clear grasp of the way things work on earth. Since its beginnings, the LDM has been able to reconcile its primitivist message with the liberal and modern values of the emerging Mexican state and to successfully market itself to Catholics, both of which have contributed to the church’s success. Today, the church continues to demonstrate its ability to “weave heavenly aspirations with everyday realities.” The LDM has pragmatically negotiated its place in Mexico during the transition to liberalism in order to maintain favor with the state and attract new members from an almost entirely Catholic population.

Hybridity, what Homi Bhaba calls cultural “difference,” is a helpful concept here. Hybrid spaces, or institutions like the LDM, are the spaces where “the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated.” The hybridization of the LDM is a part of the church’s negotiation between its own doctrine and teachings and two dominant dimensions of Mexican culture, Catholicism and modernism. The process of hybridization is described by Jan Peiterse as “part of the power relationship between center and margin, hegemony and minority, and indicates a blurring, destabilization or subversion of that hierarchical relationship.”

The negotiation of the LDM’s institutional identity with Catholicism and the modern, liberal Mexican state ensured the LDM’s survival and success. The church’s ability to highlight its commonalities with modern Mexico prevented the LDM from being censured as the Catholic church was. The similarities between the LDM and Catholicism made the transition easier for converts at a time before Protestant forms of religion were still foreign in Mexican society. Understanding the hybridity of the LDM reveals how church members are able to assert their religious identities while living in societies that sometimes challenge the values of the church. The hybridization of the LDM is what enables the success of the church and church members in Mexico and, since hybridity is “a complex ongoing negotiation,” continues to contribute to the success of the church in congregations throughout the world.

The LDM is, therefore, a hybrid church. For example, it is similar to the Catholic Church in many ways. The Apostle has been called a “Protestant Pope” in the context of the LDM, and Hermosa Provincia can be compared to the significance of the Vatican for Catholics. The chalinas women are required to wear during church services look similar to the scarves that Catholic women once wore to attend church services, and, the chalinas that are most desired by LDM women are manufactured by in Spain for use in Catholic services in Europe. The LDM is often designated as being a Pentecostal church rather than a “primitive” church, the designation preferred by LDM members, because of the church’s Pentecostal roots and the Pentecostal practices that are a part of LDM doctrine, including the centrality of the Holy Spirit, the practice of glossolalia, and the literal interpretation of scripture.

The similarities between the LDM and both Catholicism and other Pentecostal denominations that are a part of LDM doctrine mean that the church must also be sure, at the same time, to distinguish itself from these other religious institutions. Hybridity can be deployed
in multiple ways, and some of these deployments are hegemonic, serving to consolidate power asymmetries. Others are destabilizing and challenge normative practices, creating “alternative publics” in the process.\(^{39}\) As Jonathan Z. Smith has claimed, “Relations are discovered and reconstituted through projects of differentiation.”\(^{40}\) Though the LDM is similar to dominant Mexican culture in many ways, pragmatically aligning with some part of dominant culture, the church is adamant that it is distinct from other religious institutions or secular society.

For example, the ritual calendar unites LDM congregations throughout the globe and serves to distinguish the LDM from other Pentecostal churches and the Catholic Church. Rather than acknowledge that the tradition of wearing \textit{chalin}as was borrowed from Catholicism, the LDM claims that their enforcement of such dress codes demonstrates their faith is pure and authentic, and the Catholic Church’s abandonment of these dress codes shows that Catholicism is no longer a true church.\(^{41}\) The LDM also rejects being categorized as a Pentecostal church at all, preferring instead to be designated as a “primitive” church. The LDM also continuously reiterates its differences from Catholicism, and other religious groups, through sermons and social media. One LDM pastor Tweeted in response to a recent statement issued by the Pope regarding the judgement of non-heteronormative couples, “The Vatican is full of homosexuals, the Catholic Church is depraved.”\(^{42}\) Pastors take any opportunity to articulate why their church is different from and superior to other, similar and competing religions.

\(^{39}\) Pieterse, \textit{Globalization and Culture}, 72.

\(^{40}\) Smith, “Differential Equations, 246.

\(^{41}\) De la Torre and Fortuny, “La Mujer in La Luz del Mundo,” 138.

\(^{42}\) Carlos A. Montemayor, Twitter post, March 13, 2017, \url{https://twitter.com/CaMontemayor/status/841235808564727808}. 
Such strategies to differentiate the church from other religious organizations also helped the LDM during its formative years in Guadalajara as the Mexican state liberalized and modernized, a process which positioned the Catholic Church as a symbol of antiquated Mexico ruled by powerful, wealthy elites. Webb Keane describes the progression towards modernity and how this is related to Protestant forms of religion as follows:

The “narrative progress” of liberal thought is not only a matter of improvements in technology, economic well-being, or health but is also, and perhaps above all, about human emancipation and self-mastery. If in the past, humans were in thrall to illegitimate rulers, rigid traditions, and unreal fetishes, as they become modern they realize the true character of human agency.43

While modernity is associated with innovations in technology, health, and economic growth, it is also associated with individual agency. Protestant values parallel these in that the individual is responsible for their own unmediated, salvation. In a sense, Mexico converted to modernity at the same time that the LDM sought to convert Mexico. The LDM capitalized on this process of state “purification” of antiquity by marketing itself as a church purified of sacrilegious Catholic practices.44 Both institutions sought to purify themselves from existing traditions, perceived as being morally backwards and deleterious to progress.

The LDM has, historically, embraced modern practices, such as the state’s emphasis on hygiene and cleanliness when constructing Hermosa Provincia. Dormady writes, “There was a growing trend in the 1930s to cease shutting down churches and instead focus on shutting down unhygienic operations.”45 In order to show that Mexico could keep up with the rest of the modernizing world, the state participated in the “development of a medicine whose main


44 Keane, Christian Moderns, 197.

45 Dormady, Primitive Revolution, 33.
function will now be public hygiene, with institutions to coordinate medical care, centralize power, and normalize knowledge.”

The LDM participated in the Mexican state’s “biopolitics” intended to regulate the health of rapidly growing urban populations, a move which the church’s willingness to comply with state’s goal of optimizing the health of its citizens. Today, these efforts continue. There are two hospitals in the colony, offering women’s health services a dentist office, and surgical facilities.

The LDM links physical health to being a good Christian because being physically healthy is a way of being a good citizen. This is also why LDM members emphasize the importance of voting and being politically active. This emphasis on the importance of good citizenship helps restore the LDM’s image in society generally, and it is yet another way that the church distinguishes itself from Catholicism. LDM members claim that the main difference between themselves and Catholics is that, whereas Catholics worship the Pope—a man chosen by a group of men—and saints, the Luz del Mundo is led by someone who is Jesus’ Apostle, a man who has been chosen by God. LDM members claim that they do not worship their Apostle and so are still able to respect local laws unlike Catholics, who maintain loyalty only to the Pope or one of their saints.

The LDM continues to embrace modern values through the utilization of technological innovations that allow the church to broadcast its message and connect with church members across the globe. Each church building is equipped with a webcam and projector screen. In small congregations without a permanent pastor in place, these cameras are used to project church

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47 Interview with the author, January 17, 2016.

48 Interview with the author, January 6, 2016.
services at other locations. Until recently, the minister at the Luz del Mundo congregation in Bradenton, Florida, Isaac Garcia, alternated preaching at congregations in Bradenton and in Tampa. Garcia’s sermons would be simulcast so that both congregations could hear his message and participate in the prayer service. These cameras are also used to stream special events being held in other parts of the world or special messages given by the Apostle in other locations. A few times each month, a transmission from the Apostle is screened in all LDM congregations simultaneously in place of one of the regular prayer services, events which heighten the sense of unity felt by LDM members during everyday prayer services. In order to strengthen the sense of connectedness felt among LDM congregations, various congregations are also broadcast alongside the Apostle as these services take place so that congregants can see their spiritual brothers and sisters in other parts of the world.

The Luz del Mundo has also embraced social media as a way to both connect church members and as a way of advertising the church. Each LDM congregation has a Facebook page and, usually, a website. There are also websites for the missionary office based in Hermosa Provincia, Casa Cultural Berea (http://bereainternacional.com), and for various regional LDM offices, such as the LDM USA, http://lldmusa.org. These entities of the LDM also have their own respective Facebook and Twitter accounts, which unite following congregants through such metadata tagging strategies as #somosLDM alongside pictures of church members worshipping. The LDM has invested in sophisticated cameras and drones that are used to document important events, like the baptisms or the Santa Cena. The LDM’s camera technicians are able to capture dramatic photos of special events that impart a sense of pride to LDM members, who, of course, attribute the grandeur depicted in these photos to the work of God.
The use of social media is also a way that the church reaches out to potential converts. The Facebook accounts of most LDM congregations have a messaging feature, and there are dedicated church members responsible for checking and responding to Facebook messages. It was through Facebook that I was able to reach out to the congregation in Orlando. Bernice, the congregant in charge of Facebook messages there, responded to my queries about visiting the church almost immediately and was open to having me visit for the purposes of this project. This openness to outsiders like myself is an important way that the LDM demonstrates that it is first, the universal church, and, second, that it is a church that is not detached from the rest of the world. Although many of its practices, such as glossolalia, women’s dress codes, and devotion to an Apostle, give outsiders the perception that the LDM is “backwards” or is a “cult,” the use of social media and other technological innovations shows that the church does not totally deny modernity.

Another pragmatic move by the LDM has been the recent establishment of the Casa Cultural Berea in Hermosa Provincia. Casa Cultural Berea is the home office of all missionary efforts by the LDM. It was constructed during Apostle Samuel’s tenure as a part of his emphasis on church growth. This office, a huge, mirrored building in its own enclave of Hermosa Provincia near the temple, houses the offices that facilitate missionary activities. It is run by young LDM members and is equipped with hip Apple computers that young missionaries can use to communicate with one another. This building also houses the LDM’s language learning center, where potential missionaries can begin learning the local languages of the different places where they will be working. Casa Cultural Berea acts as a plausibility structure for the LDM, legitimizing the church’s mission in the perspective of outsiders by demonstrating the church’s willingness to grow by adapting to other cultures rather than imposing the language dominant
within the LDM, Spanish, onto converts.\footnote{Peter L. Berger, \textit{The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion} (New York: Open Road Media, 2011), 45-46; Joel A. Carpenter, \textit{Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 86.} A similar plausibility structure within the LDM is RASP, the Regional Alliance of Student Professionals, a youth organization within the church which aims to help youth continue in their education and to find professional jobs. Organizations like Casa Cultural Berea and RASP show that the LDM shares many of the same values as dominant society, such as education, and these organizations also demonstrate the church’s openness to cultural difference, a value which contradicts accusations from outsiders that the church is closed off and secretive.

Plausibility structures within the LDM such as Casa Cultural Berea or RASP, and the church’s utilization of modern technology legitimizes the church and gives the institution a sense of relevance within modern society. It is important to note, however, that the church carefully balances these pragmatic moves by continually reminding church members of what should be the true motivations behind these actions: God. Just as the LDM is careful to distinguish its message from Catholicism and other Pentecostal groups, the church also distinguishes itself from secular society even if it has adopted some forms of modern culture. Entire sermons may be devoted to the appropriate use of social media by church members.

Orlando’s Pastor Roberto acknowledged that social networking can be a very good thing for the church, as it is a way to communicate with those outside the church and to connect churches with one another. However, Roberto emphasized also that social media must be utilized with caution, as posting photos or comments that do not reflect LDM values could give the church a bad name or compromise its reputation. Roberto cited Ephesians 4:29 as evidence that
this is a topic the church cannot ignore. According to Roberto, it is the responsibility of congregants to help ensure the protection of the LDM’s reputation. The pastor gave two examples of how to give bad publicity to the LDM that were noteworthy: selfies and grammar. He cautioned against, for example, taking a selfie at the beach with a bar or cantina visible in the background. According to Roberto, a trip to the beach is innocent, as is taking a selfie, but if a bar/cantina is included in the background, it could appear as though the church member visits such places, which would reflect negatively on the LDM. Roberto’s second example cautioned against making “ignorant” comments and using bad grammar on social media. The pastor claimed that these kinds of comments made all LDM members appear stupid.

The desire for church members to be well-educated is related to the church’s frequent appeals to reason in justifying their beliefs against Catholicism, a strategy that also meets the liberal values of the emerging Mexican state during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Apostle Aarón also valued education, as did Samuel and as Nassón does. The assumption is that educated church members make decisions based on reason, which is used to convince converts that choosing the LDM is the most logical religious choice. Church members are taught to use reason to demonstrate the validity of the LDM against other religious practices as children. LDM youth are required to learn about other religions, namely the LDM’s main competitors: Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Catholics, and they hold debates with their youth leaders where they

50 “Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers,” Eph. 4:29 KJV. I use the King James Version here since that is the version used in the LDM.

51 Interview with the author, January 3, 2016.
are tasked with arguing why those religions might be superior to the LDM. Inevitably, the LDM always ends up as the most logical choice at the end of these debates.\(^{52}\)

Church members are totally convinced that other religions are inferior, even if the basis for this perception is evidence that is outdated or suspicious. For example, the LDM continues to malign the Mormon church for polygamy, even though the practice was disbanded in the late 19\(^{th}\) century. Marta once told me a story, told to her by her own mother and one that is fairly common among church members in the LDM, about the procession of the Virgin of Guadalupe on her feast day, December 12, through a LDM temple outside Hermosa Provincia, the temple Bethel. Marta said she has heard this story many times, from many people, so she’s not sure exactly when it happened. She claims the Virgin’s devotees demanded that the LDM pastor who was at Bethel at the time allow the Virgin to proceed through the temple. In response, the pastor told the devotees that, if the Virgin could walk through on her own, she could pass through the temple. Marta said, haughtily, that “that shut them up.”\(^{53}\) This story posits the LDM as the rational religion against Catholicism, a move that delegitimizes the place of the Catholic Church in a modern context and answers the charge that the church is “backwards,” both intellectually and doctrinally.

**Chapter 2: Conclusion**

The balance between modernity and culture the LDM has struck has enabled the church to be successful in Mexico, and this balance continues to equip church members to connect with potential converts across cultural divides. This relationship between the origins of the LDM and the political, economic, and religious history of Mexico during the 19\(^{th}\) and 20\(^{th}\) centuries helped

\(^{52}\) Interview with the author, December 6, 2015.

\(^{53}\) Interview with the author, August 11, 2016.
the church thrive in a region dominated by Catholicism and during a time of skepticism about religion. The way that the LDM situated itself in Mexico during the church’s formative years prepared the church for its expansion to fifty-three nations throughout the globe in the last twenty years. Today, the LDM’s institutional identity has changed so that the church is able to attract new members from other national and cultural backgrounds. Rather than identifying as a specifically Mexican church, the LDM has begun to alter its identity to connect with a wider variety of members. The LDM’s “cosmopolitan” identity not only facilitates the conversion of new members, but it also allows the church to maintain its relevance for church members who have left Mexico. Second or third generation immigrants who belong to the LDM have adapted to the environments of their receiving country, and may no longer identify with the church’s Mexican identity. As the LDM has become more cosmopolitan, the church is better able to facilitate the immigration process for its members who live outside Mexico. In Chapter 3, I will describe how the LDM helps church members “reterritorialize” in new cultural environments while maintaining connections to the flagship church in Mexico.
CHAPTER 3
THE LDM AS A TRANSNATIONAL CHURCH

In recent years, the LDM has transformed its institutional identity from that of a specifically Mexican church to one that is cosmopolitan. The LDM is now marketing itself as a church that is not only the “Light of the World,” but is the church for the world. The church is working to generate an image of itself as an institution with which members or potential members from anywhere in the world, not just Mexico, can identify. Chapter 3 focuses on LDM members living in the United States to demonstrate how the LDM can remain central to the lives of migrants outside Mexico. Many of these church members identify as being “American” as much or more than they connect with their Mexican heritage.

I will argue that belonging to the LDM actually helps transmigrant church members successfully adjust to life in the United States while simultaneously maintaining connections to Hermosa Provincia. In fact, this continued orientation towards Mexico is what most helps migrants and their families adapt successfully to life in the United States. The ability for church doctrine and teachings to be successful in locations outside Mexico will provide the basis for Chapter 4, which will explore the global cosmopolitanism of the LDM.

**LDM and Transnational Social Fields**

The transnational approach to the study of religion is useful because of its focus on how religion helps immigrants settle into new environments while maintaining connections with their homelands. The inability of so many LDM members to travel to Hermosa Provincia on a regular basis means that the church must rely heavily on forms of electronic media to maintain connections between LDM congregations and Hermosa Provincia. Through what Appadurai calls “mediascapes,” the LDM has created an “imagined” global community. The LDM has become extremely savvy in its ability to utilize social media and other electronic forms of
communication which, as was described previously, legitimized the church as a modern religious institution. The LDM’s utilization of electronic media is also critical for maintaining connections with congregations and church members who may have limited access not only to Hermosa Provincia, but even to a local LDM congregation. Electronic media offers every LDM member the chance to participate in the church remotely. The decreasing cost of the basic technology necessary to access the LDM’s social media means that almost everyone can acquire it. Today, even the least expensive cellular phone plans offer smartphones with access to the internet as a free option with purchase.

I explore how religion is used in people’s everyday lives, something that is often overlooked in more broadly focused studies of religion. The transnational perspective solves the problem of over-localized approaches to the study of religion, which tend to ignore the fact that global processes have an effect on the everyday lives of human beings.¹ This perspective allows for a view of the global as well as the local, without risking the fluidity that often accompanies a focus purely on the global or the lack of perspective that can characterize localized studies.² I use the definition of “transnationalism” and “transmigrants” proposed by Nina Glick Schiller et al.:

We define “transnationalism” as the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement. We call these processes transnationalism to emphasize that many immigrants today build social fields that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders. Immigrants who develop and maintain multiple relationships—familial, economic, social, organizational, religious, and political—that span borders we call “transmigrants.”³


² Levitt, God Needs No Passport, 23.

Transnational migrants, or “transmigrants,” are simultaneously embedded in two or more nation-states, which is true of all LDM members residing outside Mexico because of the connections all congregations maintain with the flagship church in Hermosa Provincia. Even if church members do not physically travel to Hermosa Provincia from wherever else in the world they reside, there is a continuous exchange of information, communication, and money between the flagship church and LDM congregations outside Mexico. Almost all members of the LDM are first or second generation transmigrants from Latin America and maintain relationships with family members who still live there. These connections ensure a continuous exchange of information and materials and support the maintenance of relationships across national borders.

Most LDM members, immigrant or not, travel to Hermosa Provincia at least once during their lifetime for the *Santa Cena*. In fieldwork conducted in the late 1990s, Patricia Fortuny found that 94% of the fifty interviewees she spoke with traveled to Hermosa Provincia one year for the *Santa Cena*. Many of my own informants also travel to Hermosa Provincia each year for the pilgrimage. Joseph, age 24, and Abraham, age 23, have both traveled to Hermosa Provincia for the *Santa Cena* every year since birth and visit at other times for special occasions (many LDM members traveled to Hermosa Provincia around the time of Apostle Samuel’s death, for example).

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4 A portion of all tithes and offerings taken during prayer services is sent to Hermosa Provincia. Sometimes, there are special offerings for specific projects going on in Hermosa Provincia. For example, several offerings throughout the year are taken up to support the construction of new apartments in Hermosa Provincia to house pilgrims visiting for the *Santa Cena*.


6 Field notes, December 6, 2015, and January 3, 2016.
However, Joseph and Abraham are not representative of most LDM members I interviewed in the United States. Rachel, a second-generation Mexican immigrant, whose family has belonged to the LDM since the time of Apostle Aarón, has spent most of her life in the United States. But Rachel, also age 24, has never been to Hermosa Provincia although, she says, “This might be my first year.”

Jessie, age 31, is American and found the church through her husband, whose family also belongs to the church. The couple married when Jessie was 19, and since then Jessie has only visited Hermosa Provincia twice. Marta estimated that only about 40% of the congregation in Orlando was able to travel to Hermosa Provincia for the Santa Cena in 2016.

Similar stories of the limited ability of LDM members to travel to Hermosa Provincia apply to church members in other places, as well. I spoke with a Salvadoran church member who told me that only four of the more than 400 church members from San Salvador could attend the pilgrimage in 2016, and most of the missionaries working in Europe and Asia at the time of the Santa Cena were also unable to attend. Although the church claims to have more than 5 million members, only 450 or 500,000 pilgrims traveled to Hermosa Provincia for the 2016 Santa Cena.

This information challenges Fortuny’s estimate, which should be updated given the church’s recent global expansion and the increasing numbers of church members residing outside Mexico. It is important to note that, Fortuny’s research was based on congregations from

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7 Field notes, April 24, 2016.  
8 Field notes, April 24, 2016.  
9 Field notes, August 11, 2016.  
Houston, Guadalajara, and Monterrey, for whom travel to Hermosa Provincia is less expensive and easier to arrange because of their close proximity to the flagship temple. My own findings indicate that demographic changes in recent years have significantly altered the shape of the church, including links to Hermosa Provincia. These demographic changes have contributed to the cosmopolitanization of the LDM, and looking closely at how LDM members deal with the challenges associated with traveling to Mexico can provides some insight as to how this process happens.

A higher percentage of church members are now unable attend the Santa Cena, for a variety of reasons. The distance between LDM members and Hermosa Provincia is the main deterrent. It is expensive to travel, and most LDM members would have to fly since driving would take too much time away from work. In addition, there are some LDM members who have not yet attained the documents necessary to travel across the Mexican border and back to the U.S. It is important to recognize that it is not only the U.S.-Mexican border that is difficult to cross. The Salvadoran church member I spoke with told me that the main reason it is difficult for other Salvadorans to attend the Santa Cena is that it is difficult to get proper documentation to travel into Mexico. Many undocumented migrants who enter the U.S. do so through Mexico, so the Mexican government has intensified border protection in southern Mexico. Even for LDM members who have the documentation necessary to cross borders, the cost of travel to Mexico can be cost-prohibitive. For this reason, many families only send a few members back to Mexico.

Clara, mother of four, says she and her husband alternate which children they bring along with them to the pilgrimage each year to save money. It is also difficult to find housing at a reasonable price. Although the LDM does provide makeshift dormitories for travelers who

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cannot afford a hotel or do not have family or friends in the area, these spaces are limited and reserved for those LDM members who are most in need financially. It is also difficult for many church members who live farther from Hermosa Provincia to take time off work for the pilgrimage. The increased travel time means that those members might compromise their employment by asking for too much time off.

**Luz del Mundo and Electronic Media Connections**

In addition to the local, regional, and global websites that represent LDM congregations and districts, the church has its own news channel, where any LDM member can learn about the relevant developments taking place both within the church and the rest of the world. Though it is possible to purchase LDM hymnbooks and bibles online, many LDM members are instead downloading phone or tablet applications, which are less expensive than physical copies, for use during church services instead. It was not unusual for at least half of the congregation of 150 in Orlando to use phones or tablets to follow along during church services. These applications are also more convenient: it is much easier to find one of the 600 hymns in the LLDM Hymnbook app through the search function than to page through a physical copy of the book. The LDM Instagram and Facebook pages offer continually updated images of church members across the globe worshipping or of the Apostle, usually captioned by one of his quotes as an inspiration. The LDM offers its members unfettered access to the temple of Hermosa Provincia through a livestream of all the church services that take place inside. Hundreds of videos recorded by LDM members of special services that have taken place throughout the world, such as baptisms or revivals are accessible anytime through YouTube.

The connections formed by the LDM’s utilization of electronic media become most apparent during transmissions from the Apostle. Transmissions from the Apostle happen a few times each month, but they are not generally scheduled. Church members usually have only a
few hours of notice that there will be a transmission, and the spontaneity adds to the excitement and sense of specialness surrounding the occasion. Although the transmissions are not scheduled, they may be pre-recorded. On one Sunday evening, a recording of the Apostle’s address to the LDM in Washington, D.C. as he was completing his fourth “World Tour” was streamed in lieu of the regular Sunday evening service. I noticed no difference in the sincerity of the worship of church members even though this was not a live service. Much like the ability of televangelists to connect with viewers via pre-recorded sermons, the effect of the Apostle’s words lost none of their power when played back for the congregation. In fact, church members seemed to participate as though they were seeing the Apostle in person by being more enthusiastic than during a regular prayer service. There were more cries of “Amen” and “Glory to God” in response to the Apostle, and the crying that typically occurs during prayers was amplified and carried on for a bit longer than usual. The entire congregation also waved to the Apostle as the transmission ended, a way that congregations greet one another and the Apostle. Although this practice might make more sense during live transmissions, when LDM congregations simultaneously livestream of themselves worshipping in a transmission viewable to the Apostle or other congregations, LDM members waved during this pre-recorded service anyway, demonstrating the real sense of participation these transmissions generate for church members.

Virtual connections between church members create the “imagined community” of the Luz del Mundo. Appadurai describes mediascapes as being one of the building blocks of “imagined worlds,” and for the LDM, electronic media do create a sense of community and

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belonging for far flung church members. These connections are especially important in facilitating a sense of community in fledgling congregations, called obritas. At one obrita in Newberry, Florida, the Mendoza family is the first in the area to convert to the LDM. It is in their personal home that missionaries from Orlando visit each week because the Mendoza family of six is unable to make the drive to any LDM congregations. In between visits from the obreros, the Mendozas watch transmissions of regular church services in Orlando or other parts of the world, and they are easily able to stay connected to the LDM thanks to its vast social media network. The sense of belonging and acceptance within the LDM community that these connections foster strengthens church members’ commitment to the church.

LDM Migrants in the United States

The global community generated through the LDM’s use of electronic media is a part of the transnational social field within which the LDM is situated. Here, I refer to the description of “transnational social fields” offered by Levitt and Glick Schiller:

We define social field as a set of multiple interlocking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices, and resources are unequally exchanged, organized, and transformed. Social fields are multidimensional, encompassing structured interactions of differing forms, depth, and breadth that are differentiated in social theory by the terms organization, institution, and social movement. National boundaries are not necessarily contiguous with the boundaries of social fields. National social fields are those that stay within national boundaries while transnational social fields connect actors through direct and indirect relations across borders.14

Levitt and Glick Schiller build on Bordieu’s concept of “social field” to account for the fact that social fields cannot be bounded by geopolitical borders because the relationships that exist within social fields often extend across geopolitical borders. It is particularly important to

conceptualize religious social fields as being transnational because, as Levitt has claimed, “God needs no passport” since religion travels across national borders unregulated.\textsuperscript{15}

LDM members in the U.S. consider themselves citizens of a nation-state, the U.S., but also and foremost members of a global religious community. In order to understand how the LDM’s transformed institutional identity affects LDM members living outside Mexico, it is necessary to acknowledge the multiple citizenships claimed by LDM members. According to Levitt,

When we talk about citizenship, we are also talking about identity. How people think of themselves racially, ethnically, or religiously strongly influences how they see themselves as citizens, how they perceive their rights and obligations, how they participate in the public sphere and why.\textsuperscript{16}

Bordieu’s concept of “social field” calls attention to the differences of power and the struggles for power between people, institutions, and social structures that take place within the social field. By extending this concept to be transnational, a clear picture of how LDM members negotiate their dual memberships to the U.S. and the community of the LDM to generate identities that enable them to attain success as both U.S. citizens and LDM members.

An individual’s subjectivity is generated through the “structuring structures” of society, which include state laws, local social norms, and the rules outlined by other institutions, such as religious institutions. LDM member’s identities are generated, therefore, through the ways their habitus is structured by the institutions that exist within their social fields. Bordieu describes the concept of “habitus” as follows:

The structures constitutive of a particular type of environment (e.g. the material conditions of existence characteristic of a class condition) produce habitus, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function


as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively “regulated” and “regular” without in any way being the product of obedience to rules.\(^{17}\)

The networks of social relationships that exist within the LDM’s transnational social field generate and solidify the identities of LDM members. It forms what Bordieu called the “habitus” of LDM members, which is what forms individuals’ subjectivities. Bordieu’s concept of habitus clarifies the complicated ways that LDM members’ subjectivities and identities are formed within the LDM social field.

The “structuring structures” negotiated daily by LDM members in the United States are complex. Although transmigrants typically strive to adapt to life in the U.S., certain structures prevent some transmigrants from doing so. Transmigrants, particularly from Latin America, face discrimination upon relocation to the United States. Alejandro Portes and Rubén Rumbaut compared the different ways that transmigrants from across the globe have been received in the U.S. to understand the necessary conditions for migrants to successfully adapt to life here. All groups in this study from Latin America were found to experience hostility from the U.S. government and face prejudice from dominant, white society. Although transmigrants desire to enter the U.S., it is expensive and difficult to obtain the necessary documentation, and the U.S. government provides few resources to help with the process. According to Portes and Rumbaut, Latin American migrants are nearly always suspected of being unauthorized and are often presumed to be involved in the drug trade.\(^{18}\) As a result, Latin American migrants frequently become targets for deportation by U.S. immigration authorities. These perceptions of Latin


American migrants create difficulties when they search for a job or try to participate in life in the United States.

One main difficulty that transmigrants encounter is the language divide. Only in large cities are Latin American migrants able to find communities where Spanish is spoken, but, even in these places, it is unlikely that migrants will be able to communicate in Spanish with anyone else. As Portes and Rumbaut point out, “In the United States, in particular, the pressure toward linguistic assimilation is all the greater because the country has few other elements on which to ground a sense of national identity.”

\[19\] English fluency is an important qualification for belonging to the “imagined community” that is the United States, and the inability to speak the language is interpreted as a sign of migrants’ refusal to accept an important value shared by true citizens of the U.S.

Not accepting migrants whose language is not English is a way that people in the U.S. police the nation’s cultural borders. In schools, the children of migrants are forced to learn English quickly, through total immersion in an English-speaking environment. Because schools in the U.S. do not encourage or even allow migrant students to maintain their home language through bilingual instruction, migrant children often learn English much more quickly than their parents. A resulting problem is that these children simultaneously lose their ability to speak their parents’ language, and a language divide can develop between parents and children which disrupts the family unit.

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Prejudice against Latin American migrants also inhibits their ability to find good jobs. These migrants are often forced to work in situations that can be dangerous, are underpaid, and


\[20\] Portes and Rumbaut, *Legacies*, 130.
without overtime pay. Women often also face sexist discrimination.\textsuperscript{21} Because Latin American migrants fear deportation or assume that their complaints will only cost them their jobs, these conditions usually go unreported. In addition, the transformation of jobs available to Latin American migrants has changed since deindustrialization in the 1970s and 1980s. Previously, Latinos migrated to the U.S. in search of factory jobs or as farm laborers. These positions still exist, but on a smaller scale than before meaning that these jobs are more competitive. For Latina migrants, however, the situation is different. Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo has documented the transformation of the job market available to Latin American migrants since the twentieth century. Sotelo’s research demonstrates that, since the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, women began migrating to the U.S. from Latin America in higher numbers because of the new employment options open to them. Many of these women found the best job opportunity in domestic work, which has expanded in the U.S. since middle-class women increasingly work outside the home. Because men have not “picked up the slack at home” and because it is inexpensive to pay a Latina migrant for domestic work, many families have opted to pay someone to care for their homes and children.\textsuperscript{22}

This new job market means that it is more difficult for men to find work than for women. Women who have jobs are able to attain some financial autonomy and control over their households, roles that were once relegated to men. The transformation of gender roles with regards to who is the primary breadwinner can create tension between men and women. Sotelo describes the situation here:

\begin{quote}
Compared with women, men still have more status and they are more mobile, but men have new constraints placed on their spatial mobility, and they lose power and
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{21} Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, \textit{Domestica: Immigrant Workers Cleaning and Caring in the Shadows of Affluence} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), xii.

\textsuperscript{22} Hondagneu-Sotelo, \textit{Domestica}, 4
status in the public sphere, especially as it is expressed at the workplace. As men lose their monopoly of control over resources, they lose some of their power and status within the family.\textsuperscript{23}

The dependency on women’s income relative to men’s can make some husbands resentful of their wives’ financial success compared to their own although they still have more status compared to women.\textsuperscript{24} However, women’s increased decision-making power within the household, combined with the overall loss of status experienced by men trying to adjust to life in the U.S., creates a destructive relationship between men and women.

\textbf{The LDM as a “Structuring Structure”}

Transnational migrants’ lives are not only structured by the conditions of life in the U.S., but may also be subjected to the doctrine and teachings of their religious institutions, as is the case with LDM members. LDM members in the United States often successfully adapt to life here and also maintain a connection to their home culture via the transnational religious networks that connect Hermosa Provincia to LDM congregations in the U.S. Through the LDM’s doctrine and the church community, church members are able to navigate the transnational social field that extends across the U.S.-Mexico border. The strict worship requirements outlined by the LDM help structure the everyday lives of members. Since church members are required to attend as many of the five services that are offered at most congregations each day, there is not much empty time left in the day for members to encounter trouble.

Membership in the church also provides moral guidance, which helps migrants in both their home lives and in their daily lives outside the church and home. Church members are not allowed to drink or smoke, which means that issues related to drunkenness are no longer a part of


\textsuperscript{24} Hondagneu-Sotelo, \textit{Gendered Transitions}, 123.
their lives. The teachings of the church help avoid temptations. Joseph, 24, says the “fear of God” helps him to avoid strip clubs and bars. Though he has never had alcohol, he has been tempted by co-workers drinking beer in their car on the way to and from job sites.25 Nevertheless, Joseph has always maintained his dedication to the church, and he tries to attend at least one service daily to help him stay focused on God.

The LDM maintains a close watch on the activities of its members through what Michel Foucault describes as the “panoptic mechanism.” According to Foucault,

The panoptic mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately. In short, it reverses the principle of the dungeon; or rather of its three functions-to enclose, to deprive of light and to hide-it preserves only the first and eliminates the other two. Full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected…Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power.26

The LDM hierarchy maintains discipline over its members in multiple ways. As has already been described, the Apostle can watch the worship services taking place in any congregation throughout the globe as they are streamed via the internet. Although these connections reinforce the sense of unity among LDM congregations, the possibility of being viewed by the Apostle must also ensure that church members are worshipping fully, participating in prayers and hymns with enough emotion to demonstrate their sincerity.

LDM members are disciplined in their religious subjectivities not only by the watchful eyes of the Apostle but also through the surveillance of the complex leadership hierarchy and fellow church members. Foucault claims, “The success of disciplinary power derives no doubt from the use of simple instruments; hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment and their

25 Field notes, December 6, 2015.
combination in a procedure that is specific to it, the examination." The complex leadership structure in the LDM divies up roles and responsibilities, making individuals responsible for carrying out these tasks, and, if they fail, they will be subject to the scrutiny of the church and possibly excluded from other such tasks in the future.

Church members are also subject to surveillance from one another. The “normalizing judgement” of church members when watching one another ensures a high level of participation in church activities. Church members who do not attend services are not as readily accepted or as highly respected as those who do. To both demonstrate and cultivate their religious subjectivities, LDM members “perform” their piety. Judith Butler has theorized that gendered subjectivities are generated through the act of “performing” a desired gendered identity. Butler describes gender performativity as being “produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence.” That is, gender is performed, through dispositions, actions, or words, in accordance with what is accepted by dominant culture. Similarly, LDM members’ religious subjectivities are generated through performance of the required and expected actions and practices of the LDM. Saba Mahmood builds on Butler’s theory to describe how Muslim women “perform piety” to demonstrate and generate their religious subjectivities. Mahmood writes, “Action does not issue forth from natural feelings but creates them.” By fulfilling the required and expected actions of the LDM-attending prayer services, abstaining from alcohol, obeying

27 Foucault, Discipline & Punish, 170.
28 Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 2006), 34.
dress codes-LDM members both become more pious church members and are able to show their fellow church members and the outside world that they are devoted to the church.

The church teaches members family values that result in what Elizabeth Brusco has called a “reformation of machismo.” Brusco’s study of the pragmatic results of Pentecostal conversion in Columbia reveal that the most practical function “is to reform gender roles and, (by extension, marital roles), thereby dramatically improving the quality of life within the confines of the family.”31 Brusco’s study of Colombian Pentecostals revealed that, in this case, “machismo” was replaced by “peace seeking, humility, self-restraint, and a collective orientation and identity with the church and the home.”32 I found a similar effect on men in the LDM. As described earlier, the family structure outlined by the church is patriarchal. Men are expected to take the reigns as the head of the household, spiritually and materially. Women can hold jobs and generate income, but even if this income surpasses that of their husbands, women maintain a subordinate position to men within the household.

The teachings of the LDM, including injunctions against drinking, violent behavior, and gambling, combat many of the issues related to “machismo” culture in Latin America described by Brusco. Marta’s mother, for example, described her husband, Caesar’s, transition into a family man once she converted. Although Caesar, who doesn’t always attend prayer services or participate in church activities, may not be the most dedicated LDM member, he does work to ensure that his wife, daughter, and grandchildren are all cared for. And, since injuries from years working in construction forced Caesar to retire, his wife, Marta’s mother, is now the

31 Elizabeth E. Brusco. The Reformation of Machismo: Evangelical Conversion and Gender in Colombia (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 137.

breadwinner. Caesar is able to be at home when his grandchildren come home from school and drives his wife to choir practice, knowing that participating in the choir is important to her.

The household structure also solves the domestic turmoil that can result from the changing job market in the United States for migrants. This is because LDM doctrine reinforces the subordination of women to men in church and at home even if women are the breadwinners in their families. Clara, 41, has two children, ages 19 and 15. She is a Head Start teacher and has been for many years. Clara is also pursuing a Master’s degree in early childhood education. Despite her busy schedule, Clara does not have much help with domestic work from her husband, but she does not seem to take issue with that. Clara’s husband generally works late at the family restaurant, The Three Martas, in addition to his work as a mechanic. Clara tells me that she still has obligations within her home as a woman even though she and other women are increasingly stepping into the professional workforce. Clara claims there is always time in the day for everything: work, cleaning the house, going to church, studying. Though Clara’s domestic obligations might be slowing her progress in school, she understands that one of her responsibilities is to be supportive of her husband’s work, which is necessary for the family’s survival. The subordination of women to men within the LDM mitigates any resentment men might feel towards women for earning higher incomes or gaining social status through the acquisition of, as in Clara’s case, a higher education.

Marta and most of her family are very active in the church and have gained respect from church members for their piety and commitment to church doctrine. The exception is her father, Cesar, who she claims only attends church on Sunday mornings to please his wife. According to Marta, Cesar is not a “real” church member. One indication that Cesar is not quite as dedicated

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33 Field notes, January 17.
to the church occurred during choir practice in Miami in preparation for the Baptisms. Because Marta’s children are all choir members, Marta and her parents also attended the practice, which followed the Friday evening service at the LDM temple in Miami. After sitting through four hours of choir practice, Cesar approached one of the pastors leading the Baptism services and excoriated him for forcing the choir to practice for so long. “They need to go to bed!” “It is too late for this!” he exclaimed, much to Marta’s embarrassment.\(^\text{34}\)

Church members who participate in church life are given more responsibilities and opportunities for leadership, which in turn leads to respect from the congregation. Marta is one of the most popular and well-respected church members in the Orlando congregation. Because Marta is so active in the church, as a RASP leader and organizer of activities for the youth, she was made responsible for me during my research. Marta’s knowledge about the practices and doctrine of the LDM meant that she would be able not only to describe these things to me, but she was also able to confront any questions I had that might undermine the LDM, the church’s doctrine, or the Apostle. Marta often invited me to try to provoke her with my own knowledge about different religious practices, just so that she could show me how airtight the logic of the LDM’s belief system is. Marta’s dedication and knowledge about the church have earned her the respect of the youth, other church members, and the pastor, Roberto, who recommended Marta and only a handful of other members to speak with me about my research.

The trust church leaders like Roberto have for Marta is clearly important to her. Marta is divorced and currently unmarried with three teenaged children. This situation might be reason enough for a church member to be ostracized by the rest of the congregation, but Marta has proven herself, through her dedication to the church, to be of such value to the church

\(^{34}\) Field notes, February 13, 2016.
community that her marital status is no longer an issue. At one time in the LDM’s history, divorce might have led to total ostracization. But Marta embodies qualities most desired and valued by the church—she has a respected job, speaks English, and knows a great deal about LDM doctrine and is dedicated to the church—which offset any issues her marital status might create for her status. The respect that Marta has earned from the pastor and congregation, based on her dedication to the church, has allowed her to play an important and influential role within it.

The value the church holds for Marta as a congregant is important to her, as it is for other leaders and active church members, because they are often treated with disrespect or devalued outside the church. This is true for nearly all LDM members, migrants or non-migrants, in Mexico and the United States because of the negative perception that outsiders have of the church. This is especially true for LDM members who are transmigrants, first or second generation, because of the stigma that exists against Latino/a migrants in the United States. The LDM offers transmigrants a space where they are valued and appreciated for their work and dedication in ways that their everyday lives may not. Most the church members I spoke with did have jobs, but many these jobs are blue collar and labor intensive. Several men in Orlando and Bradenton work for tree removal services and in construction. Marta’s career is possibly the most prestigious within the LDM Orlando congregation, at least in terms of status outside the church. She holds a lower management position at one of the Walt Disney World parks, and her success outside the church contributes even further to the respect her fellow LDM members have for her. Though church members are proud of the work they do outside the church, this type of work does not bring church members a sense of belonging or accomplishment that activism within the LDM does. The acceptance and sense of belonging church members find in the LDM
further motivates church members to seek recognition from within LDM congregations by demonstrating their dedication to the church through participation.

Immigrant LDM members gain an important sense of pride and self-worth from participating in the church. Importantly, the respect that is gained from fellow church members and church leaders from adhering to LDM doctrine is potentially accessible by anyone within the church so long as they follow the church’s rules. The behavioral and moral requirements outlined in church doctrine leaves no space for ambiguity in its interpretation. It provides an important moral guide for church members as they live their lives day-to-day, but it is also the source of empowerment for LDM members who otherwise are regarded as second-class citizens within dominant society outside the church.

Brendan Jamal Thornton calls this “orthodox exceptionalism,” or the capitalization on “dominant cultural values that privilege religious purity and a conservative form of Christian orthodoxy.” LDM members understand themselves to have special knowledge that they have the spiritual answers so many others seek. The orthodox exceptionalism felt by the LDM is reiterated in sermons on a nearly daily basis. Assurance in the truth of LDM doctrine empowers church members to express their faith to the outside world as witnesses.

For example, Joseph says that outsiders in Mexico view the LDM as being a peaceful respite from the rest of Guadalajara, and Marta and Bernice say that LDM members are considered more trustworthy than others by outsiders and outside business owners. It is not uncommon for entire sermons to be devoted to reinforcing the notion of the LDM’s moral superiority relative to other religions. One Sunday, Pastor Roberto compared the LDM to

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Mormons, claiming that the LDM accepted all nationalities, races, ethnicities, etc., whereas Mormons taught that Africans were part of the tribe of Ham without acknowledging that this is no longer a part of Mormon teaching. I do not know whether Roberto left this out to make a point or if the Pastor simply does not know the full history of the Mormon Church. Either way, the purpose of stating this was clear: to relate to church members the moral and theological superiority of the LDM compared to Mormonism. Orthodox exceptionalism and the drive to achieve a pious subjectivity according to LDM doctrine help migrants to adjust to their new environments at home and gives church members a sense of belonging and self-worth that is empowering.

**LDM Values and U.S. Culture**

The spiritual and moral discipline exerted over LDM members by the church not only helps LDM members deal with the sense of alienation and the strain on the family that the process of migration can cause, but it also helps migrants in their lives outside the church and home. The values taught by the LDM benefit them in their life in the U.S. because these values are shared by many middle-class, white U.S. citizens, especially in the south. Both the LDM and U.S. society strongly emphasize the importance of traditional family values: households headed by men where women perform most domestic housework and are primarily responsible for raising children. Both value self-reliance and the pursuit of employment and education. The LDM and dominant U.S. society value the importance of participating in civic activities, especially voting. Most LDM members I spoke to claimed to be registered to vote in the U.S. and agreed that voting is an important part of belonging in the U.S. Though most church members withheld their party affiliation, one member, Jennifer, revealed a little bit about her own political viewpoint. At lunch one afternoon just after the 2016 Republican and Democratic primaries, Jennifer lamented Hillary Clinton’s win saying, “I was for Bernie.” I responded by wondering
what would be the outcome of the forthcoming Clinton-Trump race, and Jennifer indicated that Clinton and Trump were equally despicable to her. Though Trump’s positions on migration to the U.S. would suggest that migrants would prefer Clinton, Jennifer did not indicate that this was an issue that concerned her.

LDM members also value the religious freedom that exists in the U.S. relative to Mexico. Fortuny has documented that many women in the LDM have been discriminated against in Mexico for wearing long skirts and belonging to an Apostolic church, but these women do not feel discriminated against in the U.S.\(^36\) This value of religious freedom within the LDM goes back to the transition to liberalism in Mexico during the early 20\(^{th}\) century, and is important to the church not because the LDM values religious diversity, but because it guarantees the LDM the right to exist and grow. Since the U.S. is primarily Protestant, LDM members benefit also from belonging to a Protestant church, whereas in Mexico, Protestant denominations like the LDM experience discrimination from dominant Catholics. Along with this is the benefit to the LDM’s image that the church’s ban on alcohol and drugs brings. This prohibition is shared by other dominant Protestant denominations in the U.S., especially in the southern U.S., such as the Southern Baptist Convention. LDM members who avoid drinking or smoking avoid possible encounters with law enforcement for bad behavior, reallocate these funds to the household, and are less likely to be abusive at home. Avoiding alcohol and smoking also gives LDM members a respectable reputation within U.S. society.

Many of the values held by the Luz del Mundo and shared by many citizens of the United States, and this is one way that belonging to the LDM helps church members who migrate to the

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\(^{36}\) Patricia Fortuny, “Long Hair and Dresses Are Not Always a Patriarchal Tradition,” CIESAS (Occidente, Mexico, 2000), 8.
United States successfully establish themselves here. LDM leaders of congregations in the United States emphasize these shared values so that the church and its congregants. Previously, I described a sermon where Roberto warned against inappropriate use of social media because of the negative image this might create for the church. Churches are always clean and well-maintained inside and out, and cleanliness is something church members bring up often when describing church activities. The LDM in Orlando makes tamales to sell in the community to raise money for the church. On one occasion, when I helped make these tamales, the women who were also participating wore hair nets and gloves. Marta emphasized the cleanliness and health precautions taken by LDM members in Hermosa Provincia when making the grape juice and bread to be used for the Santa Cena.

These actions serve to combat the stereotype many in the United States have of Mexicans as being dirty or vulgar and are some examples of how the LDM engages in what Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham calls a “politics of respectability.” Higginbotham uses the phrase “politics of respectability” to describe the steps taken by women in the black Baptist church during the 19th and 20th centuries intended to create a positive image of black people in the U.S. According to Higginbotham, these women “felt certain that “respectable” behavior in public would earn their people a measure of esteem from white America, and hence they strove to win the black lower class’s psychological allegiance to temperance, industriousness, thrift, refined manners, and Victorian sexual morals.”

The LDM’s emphasis on the education and employment of its members, conservative position on immigration legislation, and traditional family values is how the church engages in a

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politics of respectability. These values are a part of church doctrine, but they are also a strategy which the church capitalizes on to become an accepted part of U.S. society. Despite the relative religious freedom that LDM members experience in the United States, the fact that the church is comprised primarily of Latino/a members, rumors about the actions of Apostle Samuel, and the church’s strong devotion to a sole individual continues to draw suspicion from outsiders.

**Hybridity**

The LDM and its members often emphasize the unity and similarities among its members. This unity is expressed in the popular hashtag used alongside photos of the LDM on any of its Twitter, Instagram, or Facebook accounts, #somosLDM. This sense of unity was also expressed to me by Bernice, a member of the LDM congregation in Orlando, who said that, to facilitate my research, I could have her respond as a representative for all other church members. Bernice offered:

I will suggest something, why don’t you send me all the questions that you have and I [will] fill [in] the answers…It is almost 100% all of the brothers or sisters will answer the same since we believe in the same and know pretty much the same…The rest will be information that you gather by what you see, what you hear and what you feel.\(^{38}\)

These sentiments make it difficult to understand exactly how LDM members can express individuality or accept any part of dominant culture outside the church, which would limit church members’ ability to assimilate to life in the U.S.

Arjun Appadurai argues that although past scholars have focused on the power of Bordieu’s “habitus” to limit individual expression, Bordieu did allow room for improvisation. Bordieu recognized, for example, that when the “conditions of existence” change, “different

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\(^{38}\) Field Notes, January 12, 2016.
definitions of the impossible, the possible, and the probable” arise. Appadurai thinks that transnational scholars need to stress this idea of improvisation to better understand how migrants can adapt and adjust to life in a transnational social field. Homi Bhaba writes that the spaces of improvisation and sites of human agency in marginalized, minority populations exist in negotiations of cultural differences. Bhaba writes that, “these are the spaces through which minorities translate their dominant designations of difference—gender, ethnicity, class—into a solidarity that refuses both the binary politics of polarity, or the necessity of a homogeneous, unitary oppositional “bloc.” These negotiations of differences produce unfixed, hybrid identities that migrants continually negotiate to reconcile cultural differences. Bhaba argues that transnational scholars need to adopt an “interstitial perspective” that focuses on hybrid identities to better understand how marginalized populations negotiate identity and assert agency.

In its emphasis on universality and sameness among its believers, the LDM appears to promote what Jan Nedervan Pieterse calls a “destabilizing hybridity.” Like Bhaba, Pieterse describes the function of hybridity “as part of the power relationship between center and margin, hegemony and minority, and indicates a blurring, destabilization or subversion of that hierarchical relationship.” Pieterse proposes that hybridity be envisioned as a continuum with “on the one end, an assimilationist hybridity that leans over toward the center, adopts the canon,

39 Bordieu, Outline of a Theory of Practice, 78.


and mimics the hegemony, and, at the other end, a destabilizing hybridity that blurs the canon, reverses the current, subverts the center.”  

The LDM, in some ways, encourages a “destabilizing hybridity” in its members by discouraging church members from participating in some of the most dominant parts of U.S. culture, such as drinking, dancing, listening to pop music, or wearing fashions considered inappropriate by the church.

However, the LDM allows church members to interact with and adopt some parts of U.S. culture. Patricia Fortuny has argued that the LDM’s authoritative structure is actually quite negotiable, which may help church members to assimilate to the dominant culture rather than set church members apart.  

Though the preponderance of positions of authority within the church might increase the power of the LDM panopticon to monitor and control the actions of church members, the large numbers of church leaders also means that there is a wide variety of exemplars setting precedents within the church. When church leaders in positions of power or authority adopt parts of popular culture in their own lives, other church members take this as approval.

The increased number of church leaders means that there are more opportunities for this to happen. The Apostle’s sister-in-law, Henrietta, wore Louboutin heels and aviator RayBan sunglasses throughout the *Santa Cena*, and was always dressed in the most fashionable style of long skirts or dresses that would be acceptable even outside the context of the LDM. Most LDM members are also aware of current fashions and pop culture trends. Marta and Jennifer both remarked on how great it was that maxi skirts had become popular because it made their practice

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45 Fortuny, “The *Santa Cena* of *La Luz Del Mundo*,” 33.
of wearing long skirts normal and gave LDM women many more clothing options. This trend allowed LDM women to dress fashionably without breaking the LDM’s dress codes.

Even though LDM members are not supposed to listen to popular music, Fernando, age 26, was very excited about the release of Beyoncé’s recent album, *Lemonade*. Further, almost all LDM members share an appreciation for Disney. Marta once brought the youth of her Orlando congregation to visit Downtown Disney, an event that was still talked about one year later. Marta told me that, when she found out she was pregnant with her first child, she bought an entire library of Disney classics for her future children to enjoy. Disney’s popularity is not limited to LDM members in Central Florida. The bookstore in Hermosa Provincia also sells Disney-inspired books for children, such as one about the character Dory from the film *Finding Nemo* in her search for her family. This book was sold alongside children’s Bibles and other devotional literature, indicating that, for the LDM, Disney is not an objectionable form of entertainment.

Young LDM members also enjoy doing the same activities as others their age. Jennifer, who was working at Universal Studios, took me to the theme park for my first visit there, and she enjoyed taking me on the roller coasters.

The LDM, therefore, also facilitates the creation of “assimilative hybridities” among church members, enabling them to adapt to U.S. culture through engaging with some parts of it. The LDM’s teachings strike a balance between Pieterse’s destabilizing and assimilative models of hybridity by instilling in its members the desire to cultivate inner and outward piety while also allowing church members to interact with U.S. culture outside the context of the church. Recall pastor Roberto’s sermon on the proper use of social media, which is a good example of how the church balances dedication to the church with forms of culture that are not necessarily church-related. So long as there are no vulgarities or embarrassing uses of language, LDM members are
encouraged to utilize social media to connect with one another and with outsiders since any interaction is understood as being an opportunity to evangelize. This tacit approval of LDM members’ engagement with popular culture is one way that church members can express their individual personalities while maintaining dedication to the church.

**Transnational Religious Identities**

The moral discipline exerted by the LDM acts as a “mechanism of power” that produces religious subjectivities that are better able to thrive in new environments. The structure of the LDM allows church members who have migrated to the U.S. from Central and South America to engage with popular culture in the U.S., which helps them to gain acceptance from outsiders in their daily lives, including classmates, work colleagues, or neighbors. As Peggy Levitt writes, “Above all, transnationalism is a defensive grassroots strategy born of the need to navigate the challenges of an increasingly globalized reality…undocumented immigrants need the safety net provided by strong homeland connections,” particularly at a time of great hostility toward immigrants.46 The doctrine and teachings of the LDM also structure the daily lives of church members so that they can adapt to life in the U.S., which can be quite hostile for Latino/a transmigrants whether they have documents or not. It is important to highlight the strength of the connections to church members’ homelands that belonging to the LDM facilitates and the benefits this has for families.

The family values taught by the LDM ensure that young people remain church members and encourage multiple generations of family members to remain together. But, on a more practical level, the LDM encourages church members to find housing near the church, which also

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means that church members live near to one another. This facilitates a church community that enables the possibility for what Portes and Rumbaut call “selective acculturation”:

Selective acculturation offers the most solid basis for preservation of parental authority along with the strongest bulwark against effects of external discrimination. This happens because individuals and families do not face the strains of acculturation alone but rather within the framework of their own communities. This situation alone slows down the process while placing the acquisition of new cultural knowledge and language within a supportive context...Parent-child conflict is reduced, and children are less prone to feel embarrassed by their parents’ ways.47

The community that is formed among LDM members contributes to the successful acculturation of transmigrants to their new environment by providing church members with a supportive community that can provide church members with resources for learning English, finding a job, or figuring out everyday tasks like where to send mail or buy special ingredients to prepare Mexican food. Marta lives in a home with her parents and three children. Marta’s two neighbors are also family members and members of the church, and they have opened their backyards to create one, vast play area where the children play soccer and where parties are often held, both for Marta’s children and for other youth belonging to the church. This space provides LDM youth with a safe place to play and socialize, which can be difficult to find in an urban environment like Orlando.

Although it is impossible to establish neighborhoods as large as Hermosa Provincia, LDM members in Orlando have established several smaller enclaves where LDM members live which are, for the most part, near the temple. The LDM provides church members with social capital, or resources, such as information about jobs or how to obtain visas, that help newcomers adjust to life in the U.S. helps immigrants figure out their new environments. “The core idea of

47 Portes and Rumbaut, Legacies, 54.
social capital theory,” according to Robert Putnam, “is that social networks have value. Just as a screwdriver (physical capital) or a college education (human capital) can increase productivity (both individual and collective), so too social contacts affect the productivity of individuals and groups.”48 The LDM provides immigrants with a community that is ready to welcome new or relocated LDM members and help them to adjust to life in a new place. The social capital and community that the LDM provides its members offsets other factors that might hinder the acculturation of Latino/a migrants, such as poverty, lack of education, or discrimination.49

Importantly, the structure of the church also enables LDM members to maintain connections to their physical homelands and their spiritual homeland, Hermosa Provincia. “Selective acculturation,” as Portes and Rumbaut assert, “requires a socially and politically supportive environment where learning of English and American culture takes place in a paced fashion, without losing valuable cultural resources in turn.”50 As has been mentioned, many LDM congregations sell food to raise money for their churches and church outreach programs. In Orlando, women make tamales to sell. On Saturdays, Salvadoran women belonging to the Orlando congregation began selling pupusas to passers-by. In this way, church members are given the opportunity to enjoy and share an important part of their homeland culture: food.

Though food is an important part of LDM culture and plays an important role in connecting migrants to their homelands, LDM members in Orlando maintain connections to their home cultures in other ways, as well. At age 14, LDM youth are given the opportunity to decide whether to remain in the church. If they decide to stay, a big celebration is held in the church,


49 Portes and Rumbaut, Legacies, 69.

50 Portes and Rumbaut, Legacies, 275.
hosted by the young person’s family, in honor of the fourteenth birthday and marking the transition to adulthood. These celebrations are expensive and grand: girls wear grand dresses and the family provides food and entertainment for church members and their extended family. This celebration directly parallels the quinceañera, the fifteenth birthday celebration of young girls throughout Latin America, marking their transition to womanhood. These practices allow church members, especially youth, to carry on traditions that would otherwise be disallowed because of their association with aspects of secular culture that are prohibited, like popular music and dancing. Finally, church members connect with their home cultures by consuming popular culture, which, as was mentioned previously, is tacitly accepted by the LDM in small doses.

Marta’s mother, for example, enjoys listening to mariachi music, which originated in her home state of Jalisco, and, according to Marta, did not protest when a group of mariachis at a Mexican restaurant played for her on her birthday.

These events not only allow LDM members to continue the traditional celebrations and foodways from their home cultures, but they also provide an opportunity for LDM members from different Latin American countries to connect with one another. Based on their study of Pentecostal migrant churches in Immokalee, Florida, Patricia Fortuny and Phillip Williams have found “that while religious organizations are an important source of social capital, they may be ill-equipped to deal with the heterogeneity and mobility of immigrant populations.”51 The authors conclude that Pentecostal churches facilitate “bonding” but not “bridging” social capital.52 Whereas bonding social capital is limited to benefits gained within the confines of a church or specific group, bridging social capital includes knowledge and connections that can

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52 Fortuny and Williams, “Religion and Social Capital,” 235.
benefit an individual in life outside the church and among different groups of people.\(^{53}\) According to their research, Fortuny and Williams conclude that Pentecostal churches tend to reinforce national or ethnic boundaries, and the social capital that these churches do provide do not help church members to connect with church members of different backgrounds. Thus, these churches only provided church members with a limited form of social capital.

However, the interactions I observed at LDM congregations and events demonstrated otherwise. It is not only Mexican women who make the tamales to sell in Orlando. Women from other countries are instructed in the proper way to assemble them. Clara, upon correcting another woman for her heavy-handedness with the masa in the tamales she was building, shook her head and looked at me saying, “She’s Venezuelan,” to explain the novice form. LDM members also actively seek to engage with US culture through the consumption of popular culture, as has already been described, but also in other ways. Like other LDM congregations, the Bradenton congregation prepares food for congregants after church services. Rachel, the daughter of Mexican migrants, described to me her excitement when Jesse, a white, native-born U.S. citizen, joined the church through her husband, Ramón, because of Jesse’s knowledge of North American culture and traditions. Both women help make food at the church, and when asked what they like to make for the congregation, the women responded:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jesse</td>
<td>My mother-in-law taught me to make some Mexican dishes, so I can make a few, but I can’t make them all. But, as far as American-wise, I don’t know what have we done?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>We made those mustard chicken wings, remember that?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Jesse  | Oh yeah, my mother-in-law taught me that, but it’s still American-y-ish. I made meatloaf before, remember that meatloaf? We did it southern-style. But, there’s a

couple of members here who are like, “American food, finally!” But I still don’t think it’s as good as they can cook.54

This conversation shows how eager LDM members are to experience and learn about a different culture through one of the most accessible routes, food. This desire to reach out to church members of different backgrounds extends to members from other nations, as well. Another, larger-scale example the annual Santa Cena, where individual congregations had set up food stands to sell traditional dishes from their home nations. These connections will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4, but it is important to note that the LDM in fact does facilitate both bonding and bridging forms of social capital, which is crucial to the success of migrants who must be able to adjust to an increasingly heterogeneous social environment.

Chapter 3: Conclusion

Through the use of technology, the Luz del Mundo is able to connect with church members across the transnational social field within which many LDM members reside. Church members living almost anywhere around the world can maintain connections to the Apostle and other LDM congregations. This ensures their continued dedication and devotion to the LDM, which has positive effects in the lives of immigrant church members. The networks established between LDM congregations in Mexico and in the U.S., ensure that immigrants arrive with a community already in place where they can find help adjusting to their new lives. Transnational migrants belonging to the LDM benefit from the moral teachings and rules outlined by the church because these help structure transmigrants’ lives such that they can successfully adapt to life in the U.S. The church’s gender proscriptions mediate tensions between men and women

54 Fieldnotes, April 24, 2016
brought on by the process of migration and settlement by outlining their roles and expectations within and outside the household.

The fact that the LDM’s teachings, despite their strictness, are able to operate, in positive ways, in contexts outside Hermosa Provincia, the LDM has great potential for expansion beyond the Americas. Chapter 3 has described the benefits that belonging has for LDM members who are transmigrants. In Chapter 4, I will describe how the LDM has begun adapting strategies for growth to become a global church with a message that is universally relevant in an increasingly interconnected world and that helps church members to navigate a globalized world through the adaptation of a cosmopolitan institutional identity.
Figure 3-1. Casa Cultural Berea’s Facebook cover photo, demonstrating the LDM’s unity with the large goal of church growth and the church’s diversity, evidenced in the incorporation of English here. From Berea Internacional Facebook page, https://www.facebook.com/Berea.Inter/ (last modified September 1, 2016).

Figure 3-2. Twitter post of Berea Internacional’s celebration of Apostle Naasón’s birthday. From Berea Internacional’s Twitter feed, https://twitter.com/BereaInter/status/861032858370093056 (posted May 6, 2017).
Figure 3-3. A young photographer documents the 2016 Baptisms in Miami. Author photo.

Figure 3-4. LDM members around the world wear white to watch the 2016 Baptisms. Author photo.
Figure 3-5. Drones used during the LDM’s annual baptisms are used to broadcast the ceremony so that it is viewable by other congregations or church members unable to attend. Author photo.
CHAPTER 4
THE LUZ DEL MUNDO AS A COSMOPOLITAN CHURCH

In Chapter 4, I describe the transformation of the Luz del Mundo’s institutional identity from a primarily Mexican church to one with a cosmopolitan identity. During Samuel’s apostleship, the LDM began aggressive efforts to expand with the goal of establishing an LDM congregation on every continent of the globe. Samuel’s successor, Naasón Joaquin Garcia, has continued and even amplified Samuel’s efforts by creating new institutions and funding more missionary efforts aimed at globalizing the LDM. Here, I describe how the church’s Mexican identity has been transformed to fit the new institutional narrative claimed by the LDM, that the church is a church literally “of the world.”

Chapter 4 offers contributions to the literature exploring the relationship between transnationalism and cosmopolitanism. Previously, I demonstrated how transmigrants have created networks facilitating the connections between LDM members residing in the U.S. and Mexico. Cultural remittances have changed the relationship between churches and dominant culture. Today, LDM members utilize social media and consume elements of popular culture such as music or movies almost as much as non-members do. The transnational networks that are used to connect church members with their families are also utilized by the church to connect congregations to Hermosa Provincia, creating a sense of unity among church members living far apart. These grassroots connections are a part of a much larger network of LDM congregations spanning the globe. In Chapter 4, I will describe how the church has rebranded itself as a church of the world by adopting a cosmopolitan outlook to reach out to potential new members.
“Cosmopolitanism”: A Contested Term

Most generally, the term “cosmopolitan” is an outlook that expresses concern for all humanity without ignoring the differences that exist among human beings throughout the world.\(^1\) However, the term is vague and contested. While in many ways cosmopolitanism and transnationalism are similar—both connote movement across political borders or other boundaries—cosmopolitanism is also associated with class and status. Since the LDM wants to distinguish itself from ordinary Latino/a migrants and demonstrate that it is a modern, successful church, with members that are productive and successful contributors to society, cosmopolitanism is a more fitting description for the way the LDM views its own globalization.

The association between cosmopolitanism and class or status originated with Kant’s description of the term. Kant believed cosmopolitanism to be the type of outlook that might one day result in a global civil society subject to universal law.\(^2\) However, Kant’s vision was also imperialistic in that this future global village would be based on Greek and Roman systems of governance and guided by Enlightenment values. These Western ideals shun alternative social values and norms, making Kant’s cosmopolitan future one that is really based on European ideological dominance. Peggy Levitt summarizes the problem with the Kantian vision of cosmopolitanism:

There is the promise of cosmopolitanism: the willingness and desire to deal respectfully and reflexively with difference and to confront how our starting point affects the shared project we collectively define. And there are its dangers: that those of us lucky enough to try to be cosmopolitan fail to acknowledge how our

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status influences what gets included in the package, which we dismiss as uncosmopolitan when we disagree.³

Though Kant’s cosmopolitan vision might have had noble hopes, it assumes that irreconcilable cultural differences will be replaced with Western ideas and values.

However, the term "transnationalism" also carries baggage. It is problematic that transnationalism tends to be the term reserved for migrants or “people out of place,” which is also related to racial stereotypes.⁴ Today, many migrants to the United States from the Middle East or Latin America with darker skin fall into the stereotype of being poor, uneducated, jobless, and possibly terrorists. These groups are often the focus of scholarship on transnationalism. In contrast, “cosmopolitanism” has become “a manifestation of the mentality of the upper and middle classes,”⁵ whose ranks are mostly filled by white Americans. The association between “transnationals” and immigrants, as opposed to everyday people who have connections across national borders, is reinforced by scholarly literature where “transnational” is used in place of “immigrant.”⁶ Though immigrants are, obviously, transnational, this association reinforces the connection between immigrants and transnationalism, leaving the term “cosmopolitan” to refer to non-migrants’ connections across borders.

Cosmopolitanism suggests that the appreciation of cultural or other human differences is voluntary and stems from travels abroad, a leisure activity typically reserved for those with higher class positions and who can travel freely. It is assumed that transnationals, though they


⁶ See Levitt, God Needs No Passport and Portes and Rumbaut, Legacies.
are able to navigate life in multiple social environments, still live lives that are bounded by their transnational social field described in Chapter 3, and these boundaries include limitations set by negative stereotypes which inhibit the mobility of some groups. In the U.S., many view Latinos/as to be the source of crime, drugs, and gang violence. The migration of Latin Americans to the United States is assumed to be motivated by the need for money and it is not expected that these migrants have no desire to participate in U.S. society in a positive way. The difference between transnationals, the term typically used to describe Latin American migration to the U.S., and cosmopolitans is that, though transnationals “inevitably must engage in social processes of ‘opening up to the world’…that world is still relatively circumscribed culturally.”

Importantly, “transnationalism” and “cosmopolitanism” as they are considered here do not necessarily imply mobility. As I noted in Chapter 3, the transnational social field can include any connection between people or institutions across national borders. The main way that the LDM and LDM members connect is through social and electronic media, which I will discuss in more detail in the following pages. LDM members, and many other transnationals, are connected to people and places in ways that do not require them to physically travel. Similarly, the willingness to engage with other cultures and the appreciation of human differences across the world is not an outlook that is gained only through travel.

Scholars agree that “communication and interaction that transcend national borders are likely to contribute to a change of people’s frame of mind.” Some studies have concluded that

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9 Mau, Mewes, and Zimmermann, “Cosmopolitan attitudes,” 7.
increased transnational relationships demonstrate a positive correlation between transnational relationships and a cosmopolitan outlook. But being transnational certainly does not guarantee this. Although society is becoming increasingly transnational, individuals are not necessarily adopting a cosmopolitan outlook. In fact, sometimes transnationalism results in a sense of insecurity and can be a source of xenophobic attitudes. Increased interactions with people from different national backgrounds can cause fears that one’s own national boundaries aren’t being effectively policed and need to be shored up to prevent the possibility of being overpowered by outsiders.

Chapter 4 will build on the previous one to show that the transnational connections linking church members in the U.S. and Mexico have contributed to the LDM’s cosmopolitan identity. Importantly, I show how LDM members’ desire to reach across national, cultural, or ethnic differences does not reflect physical mobility. Rather, I argue that the way LDM members in the United States were forced to engage with dominant culture laid the groundwork for a cosmopolitan outlook. The ability to participate in dominant culture, which does not interrupt church members’ dedication to the LDM, has been taken back to Hermosa Provincia as a type of cultural remittance. It is a skill and an outlook that the LDM now utilizes in its missionary and other outreach efforts to attract new members and to bolster its public image.

**Cosmopolitanism and the Luz del Mundo**

A definition of cosmopolitanism that acknowledges the possibility of a simultaneous sense of nationalism and loyalty to one’s own nation is important here because LDM members

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10 Mau, Mewes, and Zimmermann, “Cosmopolitan attitudes,” 16-17.


demonstrate a cosmopolitan outlook but maintain a devotion to their own “nation,” the Luz del Mundo. Specifically, this nation is Hermosa Provincia, considered to be the most important place for the LDM. As it is the place where the Apostle and his family live and the flagship church is located, this is the site of ultimate allegiance to LDM members around the world. Importantly, Hermosa Provincia’s location in Mexico has nothing to do with the site’s significance. Although at one time, the colony’s Mexicanness might have been emphasized, it is now viewed to be a universally important place in that its significance is not based in any nationality. LDM members, therefore, negotiate their relationship between cosmopolitanism and their church rather than their home nations.

For the purposes of this study, I rely on Kwame Appiah’s description of what he calls “rooted cosmopolitanism” or “a cosmopolitan patriotism”:

The cosmopolitan patriot can entertain the possibility of a world in which everyone is a rooted cosmopolitan, attached to a home of his or her own, with its own cultural particularities, but taking pleasure from the presence of other, different, places that are home to other, different, people. The cosmopolitan also imagines that in such a world not everyone will find it best to stay in a natal patria, so that the circulation of people among different localities will involve not only cultural tourism (which the cosmopolitan admits to enjoying) but migration, nomadism, diaspora.\footnote{Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Cosmopolitan Patriots,” in Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation, ed. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 91-92.}

Appiah’s description of “rooted cosmopolitanism” takes into account the “cultural particularities” that inform multiple cosmopolitanisms and also acknowledges that cosmopolitanism is an outlook that can be adopted by human beings regardless of their class standing. Both cultural tourists and migrants can be cosmopolitan.

The idea of a “rooted” cosmopolitanism implies that the specific characteristics of cosmopolitanism are situated and based on the individual or groups’ social location. Importantly,
Appiah’s definition of cosmopolitanism acknowledges that this outlook is not necessarily at odds with another outlook, a sense of patriotism. The willingness to engage with different people would seem to be at odds with patriotism and the nationalist work of constructing boundaries that Anderson describes. Appiah’s definition also acknowledges that there are varying degrees of patriotism and cosmopolitanism that can make up an individual or group’s perspective. There isn’t necessarily a choice to make between being patriotic or cosmopolitan, but, as Levitt puts it, “there is a continuum of cosmopolitan nationalism, and that the cosmopolitan side always comes with a dose of the national, and the national with some element of the cosmopolitan.”

**Becoming A Church for the World**

Aarón’s establishment of the Luz del Mundo relied on his ability to posit the church as a specifically Mexican Pentecostal Church in contrast to Mexico’s dominant religion, Catholicism. Even though Pentecostalism’s roots can be traced to Topeka, Kansas and Asuza Street before its arrival in Mexico, Joaquín was able to convince Mexican authorities that the church’s identity was consistent with the nationalist projects that were instituted during the 20th century. During his time as Apostle, Aarón wanted to expand the church to locations not just in the Americas, but throughout the globe. Aarón’s successor, Samuel, played an important role in seeing Aarón’s vision realized. During Samuel’s tenure, the church expanded exponentially. According to Fortuny, in 1972 the church could claim 75,000 members, and in 1986 there were 1.5 million. Fortuny writes, “The period of Samuel’s leadership [had] been so outward-oriented that in 1993

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the faith had been taken to 23 countries around the world, although missionary efforts have been concentrated in Latin America and the southern United States.”15

Fortuny claims that the LDM “exports a Mexicanized Pentecostalism to the United States,”16 but I argue that, since his appointment, current apostle, Naasón, has tried to export a globalized, cosmopolitan Pentecostalism. Naasón has amplified the church growth that Samuel started by instituting new ways of approaching potential converts and expanding missionary efforts to locations throughout the globe. In Naasón’s address to the LDM on the day of his appointment in 2014, he addressed the transition from his father’s Apostleship to his own saying, “You were not alone, there was only a pause…Today a new era of triumph begins, for the glory and victory of God.”17 Naasón here acknowledges that he intends to carry on with his predecessor’s efforts, amplifying them during his dispensation. Evidence of the LDM’s desire to reach across differences is demonstrated in a recent Facebook post outlining the objectives and civic principles of the church. I have translated them here:

Objectives of the Luz del Mundo:

To give knowledge to all people, without distinction or discrimination, the message of spiritual salvation.”

To provide, through the evangelism of Jesus Christ, peace and brotherhood between all men as in all nations.

To reconcile humanity with God, infusing man with the hope of life eternal, through the subjection to divine laws.

To inculcate among believers the feeling of personal, familial, civic and social responsibility through the universal fraternal principles of Christianity


Civic Principles of the Luz del Mundo:

We affirm that we have the right to integrate ourselves into the general context of society, work, health, and education, without discrimination, limits or religious prejudice in the exercise of our constitutional rights.

We believe that governments are established to impart justice, punishing what is wrong and protecting what is good.

We pray for the authorities because it is commanded by God to respect human institutions.

We are obligated as citizens to comply with the laws of each country, with respect to national cultures and national symbols.

Respect for life is a divine decree, our duty is to comply.\textsuperscript{18}

These are the “Universal Principles” of the LDM which were first outlined under the Apostleship of Samuel. These principles are so generic they are non-objectable. Highlighting these basic beliefs and principles from the LDM’s doctrine presents a church that is compatible anywhere and to anyone. Emphasizing these principles is how the LDM demonstrates the largely universally acceptable parts of the church’s doctrine, and it is through messages like these that the church is able to begin to reach out to new members. It is a reflection of the LDM’s cosmopolitanism in that the idea is that, ultimately, the differences between human beings are superficial. Underneath these superficial differences, all human beings are ultimately the same. These principles act as a hook to attract new converts. Specifics on church doctrine, which might seem alienating and strict to outsiders, come later, after missionaries have had an opportunity to make more personal connections with potential converts to convince them that they belong in the church.

Outreach Efforts

One of the most important ways that Apostle Naasón has amplified efforts at church growth is through the increased efforts to build up an LDM institution called Casa Cultural Berea. Casa Cultural Berea is a large, bright blue building located adjacent to the temple in Hermosa Provincia. It houses the LDM bookstore and a coffee shop. The building itself was commissioned by Apostle Samuel, but Naasón has made Berea into an important center for LDM social media activities and is also the home office of LDM mission efforts. LDM members are perhaps most proud of Naasón’s efforts at recruiting missionaries and funding the construction of temples in places the LDM has not been before. Beginning in 2015, Naasón put out a call for applications from young people in the church to be a part of a new “battalion of warriors” to embark on missionary activities throughout the world. The LDM received thousands of applications, and carefully vetted applicants to determine whether they were spiritually and mentally strong enough for the work. Once accepted, young missionaries spend a year in places like Russia, Singapore, India, or, most recently, Israel.

The LDM’s social media and webpages are also called “Casa Cultural Berea,” as they are essentially extensions of the physical building. The consistent name among these entities makes it possible to access the Casa Cultural Berea in Hermosa Provincia from anywhere in the world via the internet. As has already been discussed, the LDM has been successful in its adoption of social media as a way of connecting with church members living across borders. Previously, I described how belonging to the LDM helped church members adjust to life as immigrants in new places. The networks formed through social media also reinforce the sense of connection that LDM members feel to the church and to their church brothers and sisters around the world. The use of social media and the internet ensures that church members are able to feel connected to the church regardless of where they are physically located, a strategy that helps new members to
feel a sense of belonging and which helps members that have migrated away from Mexico to maintain their faith.

Social media has also played an important role in the way LDM members imagine themselves in relation to the church’s cosmopolitanism. This technology has contributed to a reimagining of their own identities as cosmopolitan individuals. Appadurai writes:

More persons in more parts of the world consider a wider set of possible lives than they ever did before. One important source of this change is the mass media, which present a rich, ever-changing store of possible lives, some of which enter the lived imaginations of ordinary people more successfully than others. Important also are contacts with, news of, and rumors about others in one’s social neighborhood who have become inhabitants of these faraway worlds. The importance of media is not so much as direct sources of new images and scenarios for life possibilities but as semiotic diacritics of great power, which also inflect social contact with the metropolitan world facilitated by other channels.\(^\text{19}\)

The ability to see other people, places, advertisements, news, etc. via the media allows individuals to imagine new ways of life and new desires for one’s life. Imagining new possibilities also changes the way one understands the self to be situated in the world: you can start to connect your personal identity to new religions, social movements, and groups of people that may not be physically nearby.

It is helpful to consider the role of the imagination in combination with images circulated via mass media when thinking about why the LDM’s use of social media is so important for the church’s growth. In addition we should acknowledge the fluidity of what Appadurai calls “ethnoscpes,” or social fields. The concept of social field is typically used to recognize the powerful role of social relationships within them which almost totally govern individual subjectivity. The lives of transnational migrants, for example, are very much determined by

governmental policies and power relations between people. Appadurai, however, does not want the fluidity of life in a globalized world to be overlooked.20 He writes, “The landscapes of group identity—the ethnoscapes—around the world are no longer familiar anthropological objects, insofar as groups are no longer tightly territorialized, spatially bounded, historically unselfconscious, or culturally homogeneous.”21

For people in the LDM, the imaginative possibilities that are opened up because of the ubiquity of mass media create the possibility for a new “semiotic diacritics of great power.” That is, the ability to reimagine your life means that you might start to reassert power over its direction.22 This is why, Appadurai argues, studies of transnationalism and globalization should also consider the new opportunities available for people to reimagine their lives—there are new technologies and forms of communication that have created the possibility for a renegotiation of power among different groups of people.

For individual LDM members, technology has enabled them to imagine themselves to be cosmopolitan. They view themselves as people who value cultural difference and desire to reach across these differences to connect with other people. Whether they actually do interact with people from different backgrounds does not matter, but what does matter is the desire to interact with different people. I previously described the connotations between cosmopolitanism and class, another connection that gives LDM members a sense of empowerment. As cosmopolitans, LDM members view themselves as equal to other cultural elites, a far different position to be in than many Latino/a migrants living in the U.S. Through the LDM’s identity transformation,

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individual LDM members are able to renegotiate their sense of power in relation to the rest of society.

Although I frequently asked church members to describe any changes that had taken place within the LDM since Apostle Naasón’s apostleship began, they repeatedly denied that any changes had taken place. However, what was once a distinctly Mexican church is now being billed as a church of the world. This outlook is expressed, for example, in its claims of ultimate universality, as exemplified in the church’s Universal Principles. As was described in the Chapter 3, the LDM makes efforts to ensure the unity of its members through actions like the tag #somosLDM on social media or the dress codes the church enforces for special occasions. However, the church is also open to national and cultural differences, and the LDM makes an effort to demonstrate to outsiders the variety of national and cultural identities among its members in addition to their religious identities. The church’s openness to cultural difference is a strategic move that has helped the church gain members in places outside Mexico.

Importantly, the church’s use of technology to strengthen the church’s religious networks also enables church authorities and church leaders to influence lay members’ behavior. LDM members are constantly aware of the possibility that they are being watched not only by their brothers and sisters worshipping alongside them, but also by church members across the world and, potentially, the Apostle himself. The use of tags like #somosLDM or the dress codes that are enforced for special occasions like baptisms or the Santa Cena reinforce a sense of community and universality within church members even though they are physically far apart.

Webcams giving live video feeds of church services taking place in different locations at the same time also create a sense of unity for church members. These technologies also allow fellow church members and church authorities, including Apostle Naasón, to monitor the
faithfulness of congregations throughout the globe. The cameras provide proof that church members are maintaining the standards of worship practice and are abiding by the church’s rules such that the various cultural or regional differences among church members can be contained to acceptable levels. The webcams are important for solidifying the religious networks connecting church members globally, but they also make up the “panopticon” that ensures the proper practice of LDM rituals and doctrine. They ensure worshippers’ constant visibility which causes them to self-police and self-discipline with the knowledge that they are potentially being watched at any time. This visibility produces interchangeable religious subjectivities regardless of how far they are from Hermosa Provincia or the Apostle.

This panoptical network ensures that church members are following the rules and practices of the church, and it is also how the differences among church members are kept in check. It helps assure, as Foucault says, “the ordering of human multiplicities.” The religious networks connecting LDM congregations around the world also provide surveillance to make sure congregants outside Mexico, who are exposed to pressures to conform to local cultures and norms, maintain their fidelity to the LDM. Fortuny describes the disciplinary power of religious surveillance, writing, “Normal or correct behavior is intimately related to divinity, a reward in the ‘great beyond’, which is what distinguishes religion from other spheres of social life.” The surveillance provided by the LDM’s constant use of social media and the livestreaming of services between Hermosa Provincia and the LDM’s satellite congregations worldwide ensure

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that congregants’ local cultural practices do not usurp the prioritization of the LDM in their lives. These networks allow LDM members to adapt to local cultures in ways that were described in Chapter 3, such as the adoption of popular fashion or listening to popular music, without compromising their fidelity, or ultimately their salvation, to the LDM.

These surveillance networks also help to negotiate the potential pressures for the church to change as it expands to new places around the world. The LDM’s expansion during the tenure of Apostle Samuel hastened the transformation of the church’s institutional identity. The church needed to present potential new members with a church that reflects and belongs to members in Europe, Asia, and North America as much as it does Mexican members, and the LDM displays its cosmopolitan institutional identity at important events, especially the Santa Cena.

**Cosmopolitanism at the Santa Cena**

One point of pride among LDM members during the Santa Cena is relating the number of nation-states that are represented at the pilgrimage. The inner walls of the temple in Hermosa Provincia are decorated with flags from each of the nations where LDM congregations have been established. Members are not only proud of how widespread their church has become, but they also take pride in their ability to represent their respective home countries in Hermosa Provincia during the pilgrimage. One way that this happens is through participation in the chorus. The LDM does not use musical instruments during worship services because of the belief that their use could detract from focus on God and eventually lead to secularization. In fact, church members are not supposed to listen to music other than LDM choirs at all, though my interactions suggest otherwise. It seems that the strict enforcement of this rule might be changing also as I listened to Jennifer, a young third-generation LDM member, and one of her friends playing piano and violin, respectively, in preparation for a possible performance for the Apostle during the Santa Cena. Also, two LDM women had made an album of their own songs which
were about the LDM but that included background music similar to other Christian popular music albums available now.

During the most important ceremonies, such as the *Santa Cena*, the rejection of musical instruments remains, and the choirs from LDM congregations worldwide have a very special place during worship services. The Apostle always thanks choir members for their service and dedication (participating in the choir requires rehearsals for many hours each week), and worship services are typically comprised of the choir performing for about half of the service. Participating in the choir at Hermosa Provincia during *Santa Cena* is a high honor, both because of the important role of the choir in the church and because choir members are able to sit inside the temple during *Santa Cena* services, which seats only 14,000—a small portion relative to the overall attendance.

There is no single, unified choir that performs in Hermosa Provincia for the *Santa Cena*. Instead, choirs from across the world wear special, color-coded choir robes to distinguish them based on nationality. In 2016, the choir representing the United States wore white and silver robes, the Salvadoran choir wore emerald green robes, and the Costa Rican choir wore ruby red robes. The variety of colors distinguishing the national identity of the choirs performing at the *Santa Cena* is one way that the church displays its cosmopolitanism: the colors highlight the church’s aim to reach across national boundaries to attract a following while still honoring the different national backgrounds of church members.

An even more conspicuous display of the LDM’s cosmopolitan outlook is the “Welcoming Ceremony” held to open the *Santa Cena*. One comparison offered to me was, “It’s like the Olympics,” to emphasize the similarities between the Welcoming Ceremony and the
opening ceremonies of the Olympic games.\textsuperscript{27} This ceremony features a procession of delegates from each of the nations where LDM congregations have been established, carrying their countries’ flags and wearing “typical” clothing that represents the distinct cultural traditions of those countries. The Swedish delegate wore traditional \textit{sverigedräkten}, the Indian delegate wore a sari and bindi, the Chinese delegate wore a Mandarin-style \textit{cheongsam}, and the Jewish delegate wore a \textit{tallit} draped around his neck. This cosmopolitan display is a point of pride for members because it demonstrates the church’s successful growth, but also because it reflects the attitude within the church that the church’s doctrine is not outmoded, that it can keep up with the trends of a globalized world. This is a display of the church’s transformation of a parochial, Mexican church which sought insulation from the outside world by establishing its own communal utopia, Hermosa Provincia. Events like the Welcoming Ceremony establish the church as forward-thinking and able to be successful in a globalized world.\textsuperscript{28}

These sorts of displays took place throughout the \textit{Santa Cena}, but perhaps the LDM is most proud that the church now includes converts such as Pham. Pham introduced himself to me in one of the gardens bordering the English-language temple that had been set up to accommodate non-Spanish speaking attendees. Pham, who appears to be in his mid-30s, drove to Hermosa Provincia from Houston with his three children. Pham’s conversion process took five years, and he is currently married to a woman who was born in the church and whose family is deeply rooted in it. Although his wife couldn’t make it, Pham and his children opted to drive

\textsuperscript{27} Field notes, August 9, 2016.

\textsuperscript{28} This is, of course, a seeming contradiction given the church’s Primitivist doctrine which seeks to re-establish Christianity as it was practiced during the time of Jesus and his Apostles—document citations on the contrariness of Pentecostalism. For a discussion of the history of the relationship between Pentecostals and modern technology, see Joel A. Carpenter, \textit{Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 129-130.
rather than fly since they live relatively close to Guadalajara. Because Pham is a second-generation Vietnamese immigrant, the Apostle told him he would be the “key” who would unlock Vietnam. Pham is open to the idea of acting as a missionary to Vietnam even though his Vietnamese has been largely forgotten. He says that he plans on refreshing his knowledge of the language and also putting his kids into classes offered by the Catholic Church in Houston, emphasizing that Catholic doctrine is not also a part of the curriculum at these classes.

Pham does not speak Spanish, which is becoming more common, and although he plans to learn, he does appreciate some of the perks of being an English-speaking brother. Pham gets to sit at the front of worship services and inside the temple, as I also did, during the Welcoming Ceremony. But this privilege is likely also due to Pham’s race. Although he is fairly Americanized in that his first language is English and he has grown up accustomed to US culture, Pham looks Vietnamese and has recently begun to embrace his Vietnamese heritage. During the Santa Cena and the closing service held the day after, Pham was featured prominently on the church’s feed of the services that were broadcast on screens immediately outside the temple and on the Casa Cultural Berea’s webpage. Not only was Pham featured in many of the camera sweeps across the temple’s congregation, but Pham wore clothing considered by the church to be representative of Vietnam: a silvery silk suit with a Mandarin-style collar. Pham was also given the opportunity to sing a hymn in Vietnamese alongside a few other LDM members of Asian descent during the Santa Cena and the closing prayer service.

Pham and the delegates at the LDM’s Welcoming Ceremony are two ways that the LDM showcases its cosmopolitanism. These examples show that cosmopolitanism is an outlook rather than a material condition. Many of the delegates in the Welcome Ceremony are not actually citizens of the nations they represent or members of the cultures that are associated with these
nations. Most are, in fact, from Mexico, the United States, or elsewhere in Latin America. Processions like this one aren’t limited to the *Santa Cena*. There are similar representatives of these nations dressed for other special occasions, like baptisms or times when the Apostle makes a special address. At occasions other than the *Santa Cena*, delegates are chosen from nearby congregations. For example, when the Apostle visited Orlando on one of his World Tours, young girls from congregations in Florida and Georgia vied for positions as representatives. Similarly, Pham is not native to Vietnam, but the LDM celebrates his Vietnamese background in order to show the church’s openness to cultural diversity. Even though he doesn’t speak Vietnamese or have any direct connections to Vietnam, Pham’s Vietnamese heritage is enough for the church to choose him to be a representative of the church’s cosmopolitanism and, one day, a representative of the church in Vietnam. Pham’s position embodies the church’s new institutional identity, and is also a way that the church is reaching out to potential new members. By demonstrating that the church’s message transcends national identity, the LDM’s message becomes appealing to a far wider population.

Pham occupies a unique position in that he speaks neither Spanish nor Vietnamese, but he belongs to a church where Spanish remains the dominant language and might one day be the church’s representative in Vietnam. Language barriers pose a problem for the LDM in its vision of global expansion. Church services I attended in the US are offered almost exclusively in Spanish, the first language of most congregants living here. As I described in Chapter 3, using Spanish in church services is an important way that migrants from Latin America can maintain a connection with their home cultures. However, the church seems to have recognized the limitations this poses for a church which aims to reach out to people all over the world, since Spanish is a relatively uncommon language worldwide. Some of the church’s outreach strategies
try to get around the need for a common language. The church emphasizes images over text in its social media posts and on the church’s webpages, the most accessible avenues for outsiders or far away members to get information about the church. Similar observations have been made of the outreach strategies of the Brazilian IURD arguing that the reliance on oral rather than written materials has helped that church successfully grow outside Brazil. In stepping away from reliance on written materials, the LDM has also found a way to connect with a broader audience. Comparing the LDM’s webpage to, for example, the Vatican’s website provides some insight on why new religious movements, including Pentecostal-style religions, are growing as Catholic membership has stagnated.

To overcome the language barriers faced by missionaries as they work in new places, the LDM has established a language school in Hermosa Provincia to provide them with the basic language skills they will need to begin working. Although this has helped missionaries some, what has been even more beneficial to the LDM with regards to communication is the increased number of LDM members who can speak English, a language that many people throughout the world are familiar with. As the LDM has grown in North America largely through the migration of church members northward, second generation members who have grown up speaking English offer the church an important resource to help with outreach. This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5, but it is important to note here because the increased number of English and non-Spanish speaking members, along with the church’s efforts to train missionaries in other languages, is another sign of the church’s cosmopolitanism. The church’s reliance on Spanish, even in congregations in North America, was once an assertion of the LDM’s Mexican identity.

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Increasingly, the LDM is making efforts to diversify the languages used in worship services and in missionary work.

**LDM Members Maintain Church Roots**

The LDM has become a church that is cosmopolitan, and is no longer rooted to any specific national identity. Although some of the LDM’s newer practices are aimed at allowing people from around the world to maintain connections to their local cultures and national identities, the church must also be sure that members maintain adherence to LDM doctrine. I previously outlined how the church prevents the localization of doctrine through its panoptic system of digital connections. This is noteworthy because scholars of some of the most successful global religious movements have attributed growth to the adaptability of doctrine. Bruce Calder, for example, has described how Vatican II made the “Mayanization” of Catholicism in Guatemala possible, which helped the church connect with Mayan people there.\(^{30}\) Kristin Norget makes a similar assertion in *Days of Death, Days of Life*. Here, Norget connects popular Catholicism to indigenous Mexican traditions, connections that are possible because the flexible structure of Catholicism allows for its indigenization.\(^{31}\) Similarly, the IURD’s flexible theology allows that church’s message to be adapted to different contexts, such as the focus on exorcism of *exus* in Brazil but on the vanquishment of witchcraft or AIDS in South Africa.\(^{32}\)

The case of the LDM is different. The LDM does not want variation in its doctrine, and it is partly its system of surveillance that ensures this doesn’t happen. By allowing for the

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incorporation of local cultural expressions, through the use of other languages or the celebration of cultural differences that takes place during important services, LDM members are able to remain rooted to their homelands. This rootedness is, in some respects, superficial. The LDM would not permit any cultural expressions that might compromise the church’s teachings. For example, the delegate representing India during the Welcome Ceremony wore a sari, but the garment was made such that the delegate’s body was covered according to the dress code proscriptions outlined by the church. Along these lines, the LDM would not permit the inclusion of local religious practices or symbols to enrich worship services, and LDM members everywhere are required to honor the church’s dress codes and rules for behavior in the same way.\(^{33}\)

It is helpful to think of the relationship between church members’ dedication to the LDM and their home countries as being two ends of a continuum, with the space in between accounting for the variable degrees of loyalty to one end or the other. The LDM does not desire or require that members relinquish all ties with their homelands and give their full loyalties to the church. As mentioned previously, the church encourages its members to be good citizens of whatever nation they inhabit. Church members are expected to vote and participate in their local communities for the betterment of members and non-members alike. LDM youth attend public schools and participate in extracurricular activities like soccer or band. The church’s

\(^{33}\) This is not to say that the LDM isn’t syncretic, as Fortuny describes in “Origins,” (p. 152). LDM practices and beliefs reflect elements of Catholicism, Judaism, and, most recently, Mormonism. I am arguing that there are limits to the church’s ability to localize such that local expressions of LDM doctrine are variable. The LDM emphasizes uniformity in its practices and beliefs too much to allow for localization, even if the church actually reflects other religious institutions’ doctrines and practices. This is different from the process of “Mayanization” described by Calder in that, during the 1970s in Guatemala, changes were made to Catholic church policy to show respect for indigenous culture and there were efforts made to revitalize the traditional Mayan priesthood independent of the Catholic Church (Calder, 102). The LDM would not promote such efforts, which would be viewed as challenges to its doctrine.
encouragement of members’ continued identification with the cultures of their national origin also demonstrates that the church is open to difference within. Finally, as was described in Chapter 3, church members’ adoption of local trends, especially fashion and social media, demonstrate the church’s openness to members’ increased interactions with the outside world.

Of course, LDM members are expected to direct their lives foremost towards the church. Along the LDM-homeland continuum, LDM members certainly occupy a position closer to the LDM end. However, they are able to remain “rooted,” “attached to a home of his or her own, with its own cultural particularities,” even though the LDM remains a priority.34 Further, the LDM’s cosmopolitan values set an important example for church members. According to the institutional church’s precedent, LDM members also celebrate seeing the cultural and national differences that have begun to appear within their church. Church members with family in Mexico appreciated visiting Mexico for the opportunity to see their family, but otherwise did not connect the meaningfulness of the Santa Cena to Hermosa Provincia being in Mexico. “We are a church of the world,” was the refrain I heard countless times. It is clearly no longer necessary that members be Mexican, or even necessarily have ties to Mexico, to feel a sense of belonging within the church.

The Process of Cosmopolitanization

The identity transformation that has taken place within the LDM is stark, but it seems to have happened with ease. Although members deny that any changes of the sort have taken place within the LDM, but the church has begun to significantly alter its approaches to outreach. The LDM has scaled-up approaches to conversion, still relying on face-to-face interactions, but supplementing these with a social media presence and increased access to church services online.

Further, missionary activities have been amplified to include locations around the world rather than just in the vicinity of Hermosa Provincia. The LDM has also opened its doors to visitors, including researchers, like myself, and, increasingly, to reporters. Although this might be a strategic move on the church’s part to try to drum up publicity and some authentication, it also demonstrates increased trust for the outside world. In addition, the church hopes that events like the Santa Cena or the large gatherings for baptisms can be beneficial financially for the surrounding communities. As such, the LDM has accepted that these events should be monitored and controlled by the authorities of those communities, such as police forces or public officials. Again, it is possible that this sort of cooperation is based on special relationships the LDM might have with these officials. After all, it was in part the connections Apostle Aarón had with a Guadalajara government official that lead to Hermosa Provincia’s establishment.

The LDM has always tried to ensure that it is in the good graces of government officials. The church does this by continually acknowledging its respect for local authorities as it does in the outline of civil principles cited earlier. The LDM’s statement claims, “We believe that the government that government was establish to impart justice, punishing all who do wring and protecting all who do right.” Apostles also traditionally thank local authorities who maintain order during the Santa Cena in their concluding remarks. Apostle Samuel prayed thanks to “the authorities at all levels of government: federal, state, and municipal, for the valuable support they have given us in the framework of their legal abilities for our great festival.” The LDM’s reporting of events like a recent one in Honduras demonstrate how the church uses its

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relationship with government authorities as a legitimizing strategy. Apostle Naasón was presented with the keys to the city of San Pedro Sula for his Evangelical message, his “perfect” teaching (as reported by Berea Internacional), and for his social outreach. Such coverage is interpreted by the LDM as being a demonstration that the church’s doctrine is accepted and praised even by secular governments, offering proof of the church’s legitimacy.

The LDM’s transition to cosmopolitanism was eased by the church’s general lack of accessible historical documents and its reliance on “oral traditions” rather than written records to disseminate information. Documents and records of the LDM’s history have notoriously been difficult to attain. In Hermosa Provincia, I was told that the church’s written records are maintained in the basement floors of the temple and only LDM higher-ups have access. This is a stark contrast to, for example, Catholicism. The Vatican’ webpage has links to all papal encyclicals and homilies. The Vatican does have an Instagram account, but otherwise, the materials included on this webpage are textual. In contrast, the LDM’s websites and social media pages are mostly images and short video clips documenting the Apostle’s movements. Further, these images and clips are all relatively recent: the LDM continuously updates its websites, where members can find the most information about their church, with the newest pictures and most recent coverage of the Apostle’s newest speeches and sermons.

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37 The event was also reported by Honduran news outlets, such as Hondudiario.com, “En honduras el apóstol Naasón Joaquín García, lí de la iglesia la luz del mundo,” last modified February 6, 2017, http://hondudiario.com/2017/02/06/en-honduras-el-apostol-naason-joaquin-garcia-lider-de-la-iglesia-la-luz-del-mundo/.


Reliance on easily accessible and continually updated social media encourages a short historical memory. It also makes the transition to a new Apostle easier. It is difficult now to find any information through the LDM on the Apostleship of Samuel because all attention is now focused on Naasón. Memorials to past Apostles might delegitimize the position of the current Apostle and could also make the church appear polytheistic. Similarly, the LDM’s failure to historicize itself to its members eases the transition to cosmopolitanism. Church members never told me the church was Mexican as members might have in the early 20th century. Instead, the church is the “light of the world,” unbounded by a national affiliation. Since the church has emphasized its cosmopolitan identity through pictures of events like the Welcoming Ceremony, missionary efforts in faraway places, and church services throughout the globe in place of, say, emphasizing the church’s activities in Mexico, it is easier for church members to understand and accept this new identity.

The church’s panoptic network naturalizes this identity shift for church members. The constant circulation of images of the church as cosmopolitan acts as a “structuring structure” which produces the LDM’s habitus. Because the church’s history is unavailable, what Bordieu called the “hysteresis effect” is prevented. The “hysteresis effect” explains:

> Why generational conflicts oppose not age-classes separated by natural properties, but habitus which have been produced by different modes of generation, that is, by conditions of existence which, in imposing different definitions of the impossible, the possible, and the probable, cause one group to experience as natural or reasonable practices or aspirations which another group finds unthinkable or scandalous, and vice versa.

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41 Bordieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 78.
Bourdieu here describes generational conflicts that result from the change in habitus that gradually takes place over time. By obscuring the church’s past, the LDM prevents such conflicts from taking place among church members. This eases the transition from Apostle to Apostle, as happened when Apostle Naasón was appointed following the death of his predecessor, Apostle Samuel. Several church members related to me that the appointment of Naasón was a surprise, that they didn’t know how to move forward under the direction of a new Apostle. What likely eased the transition was the church’s digital campaign celebrating Naasón’s appointment and deemphasizing Samuel’s former role. Similarly, church members were able to embrace the church’s new identity because the church’s past Mexican identity has been obscured and replaced by the new digital campaign showcasing its cosmopolitan one.

**LDM: A Limited Cosmopolitanism**

As cosmopolitan as the LDM has become, there are still limits to what the church is willing to relinquish in order to reach out to more people and facilitate church growth. The church’s identity transformation and missionary efforts are ultimately not intended simply to foster a sense of tolerance towards people with different beliefs and backgrounds, but were intended as strategies to entrench the church in locations throughout the world. The LDM’s cosmopolitanism has also worked as a public relations strategy. The LDM’s openness to other cultures, visitors, and scholars of religion like myself makes the church appear to be less insular and closed-off from the outside world. These efforts counter accusations that the church is “backwards” because of its primitivist Christian practices, most obviously women’s dress codes. The LDM’s cosmopolitanism facilitates church growth by making the church an institution that non-Mexicans feel they can belong to, and it also makes this primitivist church appear to be modern and relevant in today’s world.
It is important not to lose sight of the fact that the LDM’s cosmopolitanism is not just about tolerance and acceptance of difference. The primary motivation behind such efforts as the LDM’s missionary activities and its identity transformation is church growth. This is important to remember because cosmopolitanism inspired by such motivations has the potential to become what Appiah calls “toxic cosmopolitanism.” Appiah writes,

An ideology can be staunchly supranational and also staunchly illiberal: moral universalism can carry a uniformitarian agenda. Especially in their ruthlessly utopian varieties, universalisms can be malignant indeed. One could speak, then, of toxic cosmopolitans, some connected with radical social movements, and some, of course, with reactionary ones.42

Although the LDM wants to reach out to others to achieve church growth, the church community envisioned will still be beholden to church doctrine above all. On the other side of this, there are limits to the extent to which the church will allow its members to participate in dominant culture. Although some movies and music are not totally outlawed, there are certainly some aspects of popular culture the church will never accept. The LDM’s cosmopolitanism increases opportunities to gain converts, as when generic messages like the Universal Principles are used to give outsiders a first impression of the church. That is why I was able to do fieldwork at LDM congregations and in LDM members’ homes. I was granted permission for my fieldwork because my publications could be positive press for the church. Pastor Roberto, however, instructed me to look to only a select few church members to guide me during my fieldwork because, I suspect, these were the members who would present the church to me in the most positive light. While the LDM was open to allowing me to do fieldwork, I still had to do it on the terms outlined by Roberto.

“Toxic cosmopolitanism” is meant to describe radical groups. Appiah’s example is 9/11 terrorists who were well traveled and well educated but dedicated to “a universalist version of ummah—the global Muslim community.” Appiah writes, “Their thinking was planetary (indeed, cosmic), multiethnic, and, with one obvious exception, unconcerned with sublunary human particularity. It was also a photo negative of everything a liberal might hope to find in cosmopolitanism (a measure of tolerance, epistemic, modesty, open-mindedness, let’s say).” Although the LDM is not a radical or violent social movement, the church’s ultimate motivations are important to acknowledge because the LDM’s intentions are similar: to create a universal, global community of LDM adherents that exists within the boundaries of its own beliefs and doctrine.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

The Luz del Mundo has successfully been rebranded to reflect its new, cosmopolitan identity. As I have described, the church has made significant efforts to change its image in order to attract members from different backgrounds, widening the pool of potential converts. However, I do not think that the church will ever be able to relinquish control over its doctrine and practices enough to actually transform its membership base. In fact, the LDM’s growth might eventually result in even less flexibility with regards to the actions of church members around the world. Concern over the possibility that church doctrine is being compromised might make church leaders become stricter and increase control over congregations.

For now, the LDM’s cosmopolitanism is limited. The church certainly demonstrates the desire to interact and accept people with different backgrounds and cultures, but continues to

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43 Appiah, Cosmopolitanism, 220.
44 Appiah, Cosmopolitanism, 220.
require strict adherence to its own doctrine. Syncretism is not a possibility within the LDM, so new converts will have to relinquish all but the most superficial parts of their nationality or cultural background upon conversion. Although church members are allowed to speak different languages or wear traditional clothing, any part of their background which might challenge LDM doctrine must be relinquished.

The LDM’s Universal Principles are demonstrative of the church’s superficial cosmopolitanism. These principles ignore the parts of the church’s doctrine that are so difficult for outsiders to deal with: the gender inequality, devotion to an Apostle, and the extreme investment in time spent attending church services. It will be more difficult than the church expects to convince new members that these aspects of the LDM are as unobjectionable. In Chapter 5, I will describe in detail the missionary efforts of the LDM, including the struggles and successes of the missionaries I interviewed. The experiences had by these missionaries demonstrates why the LDM’s cosmopolitanism might not bring as much success to the church as expected.
Figure 4-1. Apostle arrives in Hermosa Provincia at the Welcome Ceremony for 2016 *Santa Cena*. Photo from Berea Internacional website, [http://bereainternacional.com](http://bereainternacional.com) (accessed 15 August 2016).

Figure 4-2. Chinese “delegate” enters the temple at the 2016 *Santa Cena* Welcome Ceremony. Photo from Berea Internacional website, [http://bereainternacional.com](http://bereainternacional.com) (accessed 15 August 2016).
Figure 4-3. USA “delegate” enters the temple at the 2016 Santa Cena Welcome Ceremony. Photo from Berea Internacional website, http://bereainternacional.com (accessed 15 August 2016).
Figure 4-4. Swedish “delegate” enters the temple at the 2016 Santa Cena Welcome Ceremony. Photo from Berea Internacional website, http://bereainternacional.com (accessed 15 August 2016).
Figure 4-5. Indian “delegate” enters the temple at the 2016 *Santa Cena* Welcome Ceremony. Photo from Berea Internacional website, [http://bereainternacional.com](http://bereainternacional.com) (accessed 15 August 2016).

Figure 4-6. Sculpture in honor of previous Apostle Samuel at Temple Bethel in Guadalajara reminiscent of the Eiffel Tower. Author photo.
CHAPTER 5
LDM YOUTH AND COSMOPOLITAN SOCIABILITIES

In Chapter 5, I argue that it is the growing number of second- and third-generation, English speaking transmigrants from Latin America residing in North America that have enabled the Luz del Mundo’s cosmopolitan transformation. Their ability to navigate different social and cultural contexts makes them ideal candidates for LDM outreach. Further, these church members express dedication and enthusiasm for this work, which is both a function of their faith and because of the many potential benefits missionary work offers them both within and outside church life. I will further argue that it is the work of younger church members that will continue to help the church grow globally. I begin by describing the LDM’s missionary strategies and how these strategies have changed in recent years. Then, I will describe the service work that LDM youth have been doing lately and why this work is so attractive to young people, particularly young women. Chapter 4 provided a global perspective of the LDM’s cosmopolitanization. Here, I describe the church’s cosmopolitanization from a grassroots perspective to show that the church’s institutional identity transformation is taking place at all levels of the church.

Missionary Strategies

Early in its history, the LDM reached out to potential new family members on an individual basis. Missionaries, or even lay church members, would visit acquaintances or family members who did not belong to the church in their homes. Church members would visit potential converts regularly, spending time with individuals or families talking about LDM doctrine and practices.¹ This is how Marta’s mother, Linda, was converted. Linda recalls that the local LDM pastor in Guadalajara would drive two hours each way to visit her every week to talk about the

LDM. Perhaps more importantly, the pastor would listen to Linda describe her everyday struggles as a mother and wife in rural Mexico. These conversations, where Linda felt listened to and understood, lead to her conversion and, subsequently, the conversion of the rest of Marta’s family.

I observed a similar conversion in process at an obrecita in rural Florida. Two Orlando-based missionaries, or obreros, and their families alternated visiting a family considering conversion in a small town about 120 miles from the Orlando temple. The Orlando missionaries lead services in the home of this family considering conversion and, again, it is the wife and mother, Joanna, who is most interested in her family’s conversion. These services are just the same as a regular prayer services at the temple, held at the same time and with the same order of events. Usually the missionary will lead the message, but sometimes, one of the missionary’s teenaged sons would lead the service as a way of practicing to be a future church leader.

After the service, our hostess set out some food for us all to share and everyone sat down to chat. The pastor answered some questions from a neighbor and Joanna’s husband about the LDM. Veronica, the pastor’s wife, told me that Joanna’s neighbor also liked the message of the LDM, but she couldn’t convince her husband, who attends a local Pentecostal church, and their young boys (who, she says, always want to follow their father) to come with her to LDM services. She asked the pastor about baptism and said she was still trying to convince her husband. These exchanges did not seem coercive and, in fact, the pastor was kind and related his own conversion story. He also said that joining the LDM might mean losing relationships with your friends or family, and that she should be prepared for this possibility. Joanna and her husband, however, were both secure in their decisions to convert, and Veronica told me the LDM

2 Field notes, January 17, 2017.
hopes to establish a congregation in this town starting with Joanna’s family and her acquaintances and neighbors possibly interested in conversion.³

The pastor mentioned the possibility of losing one’s connections to non-members in order to fully disclose the dedication necessary for conversion. At this point, potential converts are aware of how serious conversion is and the amount of dedication required to join the church. Advertisements like the Universal Principles hook converts, but to get beyond this requires careful communication and relationship building. This is why missionaries are so critical to the LDM’s growth. Interpersonal relationships are integral to gaining real converts. This is also why the LDM needs its missionaries to be able to interact with people from different backgrounds and to be able to fit into the world outside the church. The ability to present a doctrine, which can be alienating and is quite strict, to an outsider while also convincing them that they will not be totally alienated from the rest of the world upon conversion, is necessary for missionaries’ success.

I encountered several instances where LDM members interacted on a regular basis with non-members, and even, on one occasion, an LDM member married to a woman who did not, and still does not, belong to the church.⁴ These are examples of what should be considered a conversion continuum. LDM conversions described here don’t happen in an instantaneous, Pauline moment but are expected to be processual. This is one reason why LDM members remain in the church. They are given time to think about their decisions to join the church and the consequences this might have for them. So, it’s not only that converts invest so much that they think getting out would be a loss as much as it is the fact that they have made a careful

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³ Field notes, July 2, 2017.
⁴ Field notes, June 12, 2017.
decision to change their lifestyle and be baptized as members. Missionary relationships built in
the field are aimed at making this decision less daunting.

Based both on these accounts and the LDM’s rapid growth, it appears that this method of
conversion is successful. As described in Chapter 4, the LDM has begun to supplement this
interpersonal form of outreach with digital forms. However, this grassroots evangelism is the
preferred form of outreach the LDM continues to utilize to gain converts. Based on the wide
variety of national and cultural backgrounds I observed in Hermosa Provincia during the Santa
Cena, the church’s demographics are definitely changing. Behind this change is the LDM’s
emphasis on the importance and value of missionary efforts, which has created an increased
number of volunteers to support LDM outreach.

**New Generations of LDM Members**

The role of church youth in the LDM’s growth is noteworthy, especially since one
question that remains difficult to answer is the extent to which Pentecostal converts remain in the
church. Though much research exists on conversion to Pentecostalism in the Americas, far less
exists on whether converts leave or stay in evangelical churches. Individual churches do not
typically keep careful track of this information. Brenda, the LDM member responsible for
keeping “statistics,” records and keeps track of the number of people in attendance at each
church service. This number includes non-members and visitors, and the number is used to gauge
church growth. The number Brenda records might remain the same even if the church sees a
revolving door of visitors who come to one service and then never return. The “statistics” Brenda
keep do not account for the number of visitors who come for one service and do not return, so it
is difficult to discern whether the church is actually growing or if church members are able to
convince visitors to attend a service or two without getting them to commit.
Although data on the extent to which converts to evangelical churches remain in the fold is unclear, new scholarship focuses on second generation evangelicals. These studies seek to understand the reasons converts remain in evangelical churches and how these churches have managed to retain converts’ children as members. In Brazil, St. Clair has observed that Pentecostal youth don’t just remain in their churches because they passively inherited their faith from their parents. Rather, he describes how Pentecostal youth only make the decision to be baptized after careful consideration.  

Baptism in these churches isn’t a decision that should be influenced by parents or other family members in the church and those who make the decision to be baptized should be prepared to honor their commitment.

Parents, family members, and church leaders expect Pentecostal youth to make the decision to remain in the church carefully. It is the type of moral decision-making described by Carol Gilligan in her study of the different ways men and women make moral decisions. Gilligan shows that women make decisions based on their relationships to others rather than based on the concept of fairness and equal rights. As Gilligan describes it, “This conception of morality as concerned with the activity of care centers moral development around the understanding of responsibility and relationships, just as the conception of morality as fairness ties moral development to the understanding of rights and rules.”

Though Gilligan doesn’t seek to explain the reasons behind differences between men’s and women’s approaches to moral decision-

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making, she *does* assert that moral decision-making isn’t always based on strict obedience to a set of universal laws. This is just the type of decision-making strategy society tends to value.

The Pentecostal youth studied by Csordas based moral decisions on both the religious rules of their parents and their own ideas of right and wrong based on the situation at hand. According to Csordas, this type of decision-making reflects awareness that Pentecostal youth have a sort of “‘bicultural’ status” that “imposes a choice between relativism and rigidity.” Csordas concludes that the youth at the center of his study don’t passively embody the moral code of their charismatic culture, but make careful decisions about when to follow these codes and when to subvert them. These youth considered their relationships to the outside world and what aspects of that they would have to give up, and they weighed this against their relationship with God.

Much of what has been described in the context of other Pentecostal denominations also applies to young people in the Luz del Mundo. Church members who were parents described to me the pride and joy they experienced when their children made the decision to be baptized, a decision that youth make only after years of consideration. Youth in the LDM learn about other religions and compare them to their own to better understand other options. Many church members recall their experiences visiting other churches to reiterate how sure they are in their decision to join the LDM. In addition to the consideration young people put towards the decision to become a church member and be baptized, there is also the sense of familiarity they feel

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towards the church they were born into.\textsuperscript{11} Undoubtedly, the classes LDM youth attend where they learn about other faiths are biased towards the LDM. As in church services, it is likely that only the most strange, objectionable (at least for someone brought up according to LDM values), and sometimes out of date information about Mormons, Catholics, and Jehovah’s Witnesses is emphasized. However, it is not as though membership in the LDM is inherited or even assumed. Even if the decision to remain in the church is based on a sense of familiarity with church doctrine, young people are required to think about their decision to be baptized carefully.

The careful decision LDM youth make to get baptized means that they become serious church members. Because they feel that they have come to the decision to remain in the church on their own, they take the responsibilities that go along with membership seriously. These responsibilities include participation in church activities and attending prayer services. Beyond fulfilling the basic expectations of church members, young church members work towards a good standing within the church by serving in ways that other church members are not able, such as through missionary service or applying their knowledge of English to other outreach efforts.

\textit{Cultural Bricoleurs}

Previously, I discussed the ways that the LDM has helped second generation migrants and their families adjust to life in a new place because of the close family structure the church encourages. These familial relations extend to other church members who become “fictive kin,” and are referred to as “Brother” or “Sister.” This sense of closeness among church members facilitates “selective acculturation” described by Portes and Rambaut where new generations are able to adapt to dominant culture without becoming distanced from the culture and traditions of their parents. In this way, the LDM helps youth develop “cosmopolitan sociabilities” defined as,

\textsuperscript{11} St. Clair, “Growing Up Pentecostal in Brazil,” 128.
Forms of competence and communication skills that are based on the human capacity to create social relations of inclusiveness and openness to the world. As such cosmopolitan sociability is an ability to find aspects of the shared human experience including aspirations for a better world within or despite what would seem to be divides of culture and belief. These forms of cosmopolitan sociability are challenged or facilitated in different historical contexts and locations.\(^\text{12}\)

LDM youth develop relationships with people outside the church without compromising their religious values, making them ideal candidates for evangelizing. They are what Lévi Strauss describes as cultural *bricoleurs*, adept at performing diverse tasks and operating within diverse contexts.\(^\text{13}\)

LDM youth have embraced many elements of popular culture, but their dedication to the church is steadfast. It is not just the work of young people that has allowed the church to grow, but also their ability to embrace dominant culture without compromising their faith that has enabled this success. Though some Pentecostal denominations claim salvation is based on the convert’s ability to escape the secular world, being Pentecostal has never really involved a complete break with the past. According to Meyer, “Rather than exchanging the ‘past’ identity with its emphasis on family ties for a new, individualist identity, [Pentecostalism] offers members an elaborate discourse and ritual practice to oscillate between both and to address the gap which exists between aspirations and actual circumstance.”\(^\text{14}\)

Meyer describes how Pentecostals continue to draw on local traditions to distinguish their new religious subjectivities such that they are never totally separated from this past. Conversion to Pentecostalism isn’t a thoroughgoing progression forward with a new identity because of the continual need to draw on


\(^{13}\) Claude Lévi Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), 17

the past and on extant outside world where the traditions Pentecostals claim to have left behind are still practiced.

Similar observations have been made about second generation Pentecostals in Chile, who, according to Lindhardt, have “Embraced certain aspects of globalized youth ideologies as fundamental features of their Pentecostal self-identities.”\(^{15}\) Lindhardt argues that these Pentecostals defined a unique religious identity as Pentecostals who are neither set apart from the outside world, which is what Pentecostalism meant for many of their parents, nor as members of “decadent secular society.”\(^{16}\) Through creative \textit{bricolage}, church youth have generated new religious identities that aren’t totally incompatible with life outside their churches.

I observed similar expressions of religious identity among younger generation church members in the LDM. As I have already pointed out, young church members consume popular culture in ways similar to their non-church member peers. They listen to pop music, wear fashionable clothes, and use popular phrases like “you do you” to respond to peers doing something disagreeable or unusual. This is a result of their adaptation to their new environment, which the church structure and values enable. They have been able to find their place outside the context of the LDM, but have remained connected to the faith and culture of their parents. The result of this is a \textit{bricolage} religious identity that enables youth to successfully fit in as church members and as regular teenagers or young adults outside the church.

During my fieldwork, I primarily interacted with young church members, ranging in age from teenagers to young adults. This was probably because every person in the church is considered responsible for evangelizing visitors, and younger church members can connect more


easily with someone relatively close to them in age. This probably also had to do with language. Most church members assumed I only spoke English, and the English-speaking emissaries in the church are from the church’s younger generation. For many of youth who are second or third generation Latin American immigrants, English is their first language. Certainly, this helped me to communicate with church members, and I gained a more nuanced understanding of what it means to belong to the LDM thanks to this group.

Young people were also sent as emissaries to me because this is the demographic of which the LDM is most proud. They have demonstrated that it is possible for Latin American immigrants to fit in with U.S. culture, and, even more importantly, they do so as dedicated members of the Luz del Mundo. They also challenge the assumption that the LDM is cut off from dominant society. In addition, the knowledge and ability of young church members to communicate with outsiders makes them best suited to participate in the LDM’s outreach efforts and the recent transformation the institutional identity of the church. Not only do younger generation LDM members act as positive representatives of the LDM, it is in large part thanks to the knowledge, skills, and efforts of young people in the church that the LDM has been able to pursue efforts at growth.

**A Battalion of Warriors**

The most important way that LDM youth support evangelizing projects initiated by the Apostle is through their work as missionaries. Valerie, 22, is an exemplary church member and, during our most recent interview, had just completed her first year of missionary work overseas. The first time we spoke was after an evening prayer service was just two weeks before she was scheduled to leave Orlando to begin her work. Prior to her appointment, Valerie contributed to the church in many ways: she regularly participated in church activities, she frequently leads the
women’s-only prayer service held every Thursday, and she attended nearly all the five prayer services held daily.

Although Valerie grew up surrounded by a family dedicated to the LDM, she has demonstrated her own sense of dedication through her participation in church life. Like thousands of other LDM youth, Valerie submitted an application to be a missionary to church leaders in Mexico. She described to me her desire to serve the church from a young age:

Well, the servant of god invited the youth to serve the Lord…to go and let the world know that there’s an Apostle of God and there’s salvation. And so, as soon as I heard that invitation for the youth, a thought came up to my mind and…not a thought, but a memory, of when I was 14 years old and I got up…for my 14th presentation, and I said these words. That I wanted to be of help to the servant of God. And, that memory came up to my mind…and after that this feeling of wanting to be of help. To wanting to use that blessing that the servant of God was…in need. From that moment, I was like, I want to do this and, you know this is my calling.17

Valerie had been considering dedicating her life to church service since joining the church at 14. For Valerie, the Apostle’s call for youth to participate as missionaries was perfectly timed. Valerie had worked in a veterinarian’s office for a while with plans to become a veterinary assistant and, eventually, a veterinarian herself. This ended up being a bad experience for her, however, and, because being around animals is still something she enjoys, Valerie got a job at Sea World. The offer for youth to serve came just as Valerie was considering what next steps to take in her life, and the call fulfilled her longstanding hope to serve the Apostle and her church.

Though Valerie’s dedication to the LDM and her availability to serve as a missionary makes her an obvious choice for the position, she was denied the first few rounds of applications.

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17 Interview with the author, January 21, 2016.
Valerie recalled the anxiety she felt about this when I first spoke to her, two weeks before her departure:

Everyone had their time to be called, the first group of missionaries went out in August. I was hoping I was called, but I wasn't and I cried. My mom was like, ‘You just gotta wait and be patient,’ cause I was like, [do] I need to consecrate myself more? But God does everything for a reason…Right after August, some youth from Texas, I believe, also got called to Africa and I wasn't called. But I started praying and, you know, going more into studying and learning a new language, I was learning Portuguese until my time came…And [then] I got called by the grace of God to go to Europe, to Spain. We will be preaching, which would be probably the most, you know, I think what we would be focused on more. But you know whatever they tell us to do, if they're like ‘ok we need you to take a 9 o’clock prayer,’ ‘we need you to clean the temple,’ ‘we need you to give out flyers,’ anything…we would be doing. If the brother would be like ‘oh we're gonna need a group to make some income come in to help the other group’ and, you know, we'd work or do something you know. To my idea, that's probably something that, you know, we would be doing.18

Valerie’s disappointment at not being chosen and her willingness to wait until “her time had come” to be chosen reflects the careful reflection and consideration St. Clair noted in the aforementioned study of second generation Pentecostals. This was not a quick decision on either Valerie’s part or, in Valerie’s mind, the part of LDM officials, and her interest in the job did not go away after being passed over initially.

Valerie also acknowledges that, while she hoped to be doing a lot of preaching, she is not disillusioned about the likelihood that she will be called upon to do other, more mundane tasks. Recalling her first year in the missionary field, Valerie demonstrated all the patience and endurance she anticipated would come with this work, if not more. She was able to participate as a missionary in some of the ways she looked forward to most. Almost as soon as she arrived in Spain, Valerie and her colleagues were charged with preparing the temple in Barcelona for the upcoming baptisms. She described preaching and handing out flyers in Barcelona, where there

18 Interview with the author, January 21, 2016.
were 26 baptisms on February 14. Valerie recalled meeting a woman from Nigeria in a Burger King who, after hearing about the LDM, wanted very much to attend prayer services, and the church would send a car to bring the woman and her children to church after that. Valerie also taught English classes to children in Spain which were open to anyone, member or not, for free, as a way of serving the community and as an evangelization strategy.

Valerie did experience frustration, and she did not try to hide the challenges she faced in the field. Valerie described working in Spain:

Spain is very very hard. It's very different from the states. There's a lot of older people, first of all. . . . People are hard to receive the word of God. We were not allowed to knock on doors, so we were only allowed to give out flyers. So we would go out on the streets and give out flyers. Some people would crumple them up and throw them at us or some people would just throw them away. They never had time. A lot of people were like ‘no I don't have time for that’ or ‘I don't believe, I'm an atheist,’ but once in a while you know we would get someone that opened the door.19

Though she tried to sound positive about finding someone “once in a while” who would listen to them, it was clear to me that Valerie had not anticipated such obstinacy from Spanish people. There were also practical challenges. With little notice, Valerie was transferred from Madrid to a part of rural Spain where the weather was much colder, and she was unprepared for it. Valerie recalled layering all the clothes she had brought with her to stay warm during her first week, but still said, “It was a really good experience you know, there.”20

Only a few weeks later, and again without much notice, Valerie was called upon to relocate to the Philippines. The Apostle had ordered 25 American English-speaking missionaries to make the move. Valerie and twenty or so others were sent to the Philippines, a move she

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19 Interview with the author, August 13, 2016.

20 Interview with the author, August 13, 2016.
regretted especially since she had become comfortable in the care of the LDM members in charge of the churches in Spain, who she knew from Florida. The Philippines offered a new set of challenges, namely a lack of funds and the inability to communicate with the locals.

Money and communication are the two main issues the LDM seems to have with regards to its missionary efforts. Valerie described working to do a lot of fundraising, “We sell bread, we sell doughnuts, we sell ice candy, which is like an icicle. Every day we sell. So a group goes to sell and a group preaches, and we take turns doing that.”21 Valerie says the locals there were more receptive than in Spain, but not as many spoke English as the Apostle had anticipated. Although efforts were being made to learn the local language, this still posed a huge problem for Valerie and her peers. The need to communicate was heightened by the fact that previous local practice of LDM doctrine was compromised by the uneven leadership prior to the recent missionary efforts. The congregation in the Philippines was started by a few LDM members who had traveled there to install freezers, but because they were only there every six months, missionaries were needed to properly indoctrinate locals.

The LDM has vastly underestimated the financial investments necessary to fund its growth. Like many denominations, the LDM doesn’t have unlimited funds to supply their missionaries.22 Based on what Valerie told me, it wasn’t just that missionaries go unpaid, but they are also not always provided with basic necessities, like a place to live or food. Valerie said that missionaries are also responsible for finding a way to transport potential converts to prayer services. According to Valerie:

We used to be able with ease go and pick them up cause you know we had the financial support, but now that we're using a lot of the funds that we had, it's really

21 Interview with the author, August 13, 2016.

hard to go pick them up know . . . but we're trying, you know. Little by little we're selling more and more, we're making large quantities, so God has helped us a lot.23

Although Valerie repeatedly described her work as being a “blessing” and claims that things in the Philippines are gradually improving, Valerie’s account makes it seem otherwise, as though the church might be stretched a little thin for resources.

It might seem difficult to understand how Valerie was able to deal with the discomforts she experienced in the missionary field and the lack of control over her situation, which she yielded when she applied for the job, before she even entered the missionary field. Such trials, however, are hardly unexpected. Missionaries and other young people active in the LDM throughout the world are referred to as being the church’s “battalion of warriors,” ready to take on the world of unbelievers and transform it into the Kingdom of God. The popular evangelical hymn “Onward Christian Soldiers,” translated as “Firmes y Adelante” in the LDM Himnario, was often invoked when this earthly transformation was discussed during prayer services, and the chorus describes the mindset of missionaries well:

> Onward Christian soldiers marching as to war,
> With the cross of Jesus going on before;
> Christ the royal Master, leads against the foe,
> Forward into battle, see His banners go.24

The missionaries’ struggles are justified as being a part of God’s divine plane. The challenges and discomforts they face are affirmations that they are participating in this cosmic war to save the world’s souls.

23 Interview with the author, August 13, 2016.

Dedication as Conversion

Valerie’s narration of her time waiting to be chosen to go into the missionary field and, later, her account of her own experience working as a missionary are noteworthy for another reason. Though Valerie was born into the church, these accounts can be understood to be Valerie’s version of a conversion narrative. Martin Lindhardt argues that, “The experience of conversion is foundational to Pentecostal religiosity and the subsequent narrating of that experience constitutive of Pentecostal self-identity.”25 Pentecostals’ experience of narration is based on how they position themselves within the Pentecostal community: it is through describing their own historical trajectory of becoming Pentecostal that they can claim to have come out on the other side, with a new identity as a full-fledged convert.26 Lindhardt notes that conversion narratives have common themes, but these serve an integrative function. Lindhardt writes, “By being personal and stereotypical at the same time, testimonies connect individual stories to a common story of the religious community, that is the metanarrative of an ongoing movement, struggle, and tension between God and the ‘world’ of sin.”27 The commonalities that occur in conversion narratives should not be understood merely as parroting language, but rather as a way that individuals insert themselves into the Pentecostal narrative.

Valerie’s narratives serve a similar purpose for her, as they do for other second or third generation LDM members. Because these members do not have a conversion process to recall, church members describe their experience of different religious events but with a similar purpose. Valerie’s recollection of her anticipation and disappointment at awaiting to be chosen as

25 Lindhardt, Power in Powerlessness, 91.
26 Lindhardt, Power in Powerlessness, 102.
27 Lindhardt, Power in Powerlessness, 103.
a missionary might be viewed as her “pre-conversion” life, but, eventually her “time had come,” and she was chosen to embark on her God-ordained journey. She described even her most difficult times in the mission fields as being a “blessing,” reflecting Lindhardt’s characterization of religious narratives: “Rather than being experienced as a mere succession, lived time becomes structured, meaningful, and coherent by being enrolled within biblical time and thus liberated from elements of ambiguity, chance, and bad luck.”

Valerie’s recollection of struggles to become a missionary and the discomforts she experienced later in the field solidify her identity as a part of the LDM’s “battalion of warriors” and mark her as an insider to the LDM community.

The LDM’s relatively full ritual calendar, moreover, provides both new and old church members with the opportunity to reaffirm the sense of community within the church through the recollection of common events. Sometimes, it seems like LDM members don’t care much about what has happened beyond the recent past. But this can be help incorporate new members into the church or to facilitate institutional changes, such as the transition of the Apostleship or even the transformation of the church’s identity. Events like the *Santa Cena* and the annual Baptisms occur every year, and these provide all church members, young and old, with the chance to newly narrate their own experience of a common ritual. Such events offer continuing LDM members an opportunity to renew their sense of religious identity and perpetuates the initial sense of excitement and transformation that converts experience early in their transformations.

**Youth as a Workforce**

Without the dedicated efforts of LDM youth, it is unlikely that the church would be able to establish congregations in as many locations as it has. Valerie endured feelings of isolation

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and homesickness, and she and her colleagues lived at the behest of the church. They had to be willing to move to new places with little notice and sometimes endure climates they were unprepared for. Finally, missionaries work long, unpaid hours at a job that yields slow church growth, largely because these congregations lack sufficient funding to help facilitate transportation or the resources to provide missionaries appropriate language training. Not only are missionaries working as ambassadors for the church in these places, but they are also earning money for the LDM doing odd jobs and selling goods, which may be the only source of income for some missionary congregations.

The unpaid labor provided to the church by its missionaries brings up an important question about the LDM’s relationship to prosperity theology. The “gospel of health and wealth” or prosperity gospel is considered a United States export that teaches church members that their financial wealth or physical health are indicators of faith. According to the prosperity gospel, the financial investments church members make in their churches will be, with enough faith, returned with a profit. I did hear sermons where pastors emphasized the great personal gain members could hope for in return for their volunteered labor and donated money, but I never heard that members would be blessed in the form of monetary wealth. LDM members are often asked to make “special donations,” and are usually warned of these a few weeks ahead of time. Specific dates are set aside by the Apostle where members are asked to give money for various causes. Most frequently, he asks for money to fund the construction of housing in Hermosa Provincia to provide for the increasing number of church members who visit during the Santa Cena who are not Mexican and do not have families locally who can provide a place to stay.

during the pilgrimage. One sermon I heard specifically addressed the topic of giving. It was based on a verse from Malachi 3:10 which reads: “Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it.” Another bible verse cited was Proverbs 11:25: “The liberal soul shall be made fat: and he that watereth shall be watered also himself.” According these verses, those that give will receive something for what they have given. The topic of giving is a tricky topic because the minister didn’t want to make it seem as though the church was forcing people to give money, but he did want to reinforce the fact that the church survives on donations from church members.

On this day, the minister emphasized that tithes were important for church growth and global development. “This is the money,” says the minister, “that helps provide missionaries with housing and the funds necessary to start new churches.” The pastor said that peoples’ hearts must have the right, giving disposition to give because “it is necessary for the development of the church.” The minister used the analogy of raising a baby, saying that, just as it is necessary to feed a baby, the church must be similarly “fed.” He emphasized several times that congregants aren’t asked to give anything but rather are “invited” to give. The only one who asks is God, not the church. The feeling of generosity, moreover, is good in the eyes of God. The desire to give indicates one’s righteousness, so, if you’re obeying God, you give and are righteous. Further, because the LDM is the “true” church, it is obvious that this is where God wants people to direct their donations. Also, he claimed that other churches do require congregants to give money and says that the LDM is unique in that it does not. The pastor reiterated that the tithe is not so that Apostle Naasón can be rich because God has already provided “the Servant” what he needs and
deserves financially (although exactly how the Apostles earn the money used to purchase, for example, personal properties outside Hermosa Provincia is unknown).

The minister said that the Servant doesn’t want to impoverish his congregants. Rather, the Apostle wants congregants to be successful and to prosper. The minister then invoked 1 Chronicles 29:2-18 to show that Christians are supposed to provide the resources for God, even if that means donating personal treasures. According to the minister, the Servant of God has used his own money for the good of the church, and this should serve as a model for congregants. Generosity is viewed as an indicator of love for God, and God doesn’t forget generosity. Again, the minister likened “feeding” the church to caring for a child. In a problematic example “one that might offend,” the minister referred to a congregant in the church who has a son with Down’s syndrome. The minister says that the cause of these defects is that the child didn’t receive adequate care, and used this analogy as further warning against neglecting the church’s financial needs.30

Sermons like these as well as the self-supporting workforce the church has in its missionaries raise the question posed by Simon Coleman in his own study of a Pentecostal denomination in Sweden: Is this church merely a moneymaking business?31 Despite this minister’s claims against it, it appears that the church does have a self-sustaining economy and workforce its members. The constant need of money for church expansion becomes “an economy of evangelization” that creates a cycle of generated funds and a simultaneous need for more funds.32 The more the LDM grows, the more donations it will need to accommodate new

30 Notes, June 5, 2017, Bradenton.
32 Coleman, “Materializing the Self,” 177.
members through the construction of new buildings or by paying the salaries of a bigger pastoral workforce.

However, the LDM does not fully embrace the gospel of prosperity because LDM members do not expect monetary wealth in return for their donated money, time, labor, etc. Coleman uses the notion of the gift as described by Mauss to understand the relationship between the Pentecostals at the focus of his study and money. Coleman summarizes Mauss who observes,

The gift contains some part of the spiritual essence of the donor, and that this situation compels the recipient to make a return. Because the thing contains an aspect of the person, it is not truly alienated from the giver, and because of the participation of the person in the object, the gift creates enduring bonds between people…The giver acquires superiority over receiver since indebtedness is established.\textsuperscript{33}

Giving to the church puts an individual into a relationship with God, which is what donating money is centrally about. Although on the surface it looks like the LDM is putting a price on salvation, money as it is used here is not just an object for exchange.

Instead, providing money, or free labor in the case of missionaries, both signifies that one is in a proper relationship with God and, therefore, will bring spiritual rewards, like being in good favor with God and by extension the Apostle. The measure of donations, then, becomes a measure of the amount of faith and correct practice among church members.\textsuperscript{34} Giving money or labor for the church puts the mind of the giver at ease because of the knowledge that these investments are outward signs of a good relationship with God.

\textsuperscript{33} Coleman, “Materializing the Self,” 173.

\textsuperscript{34} Coleman, “Materializing the Self,” 177-178.
This sermon is an example of what Wacker calls “financial faith narratives,” which are ultimately about faith and not money. The relationship between the individual and God established through money demonstrates that one has “Made oneself entirely dependent on the Lord for all of one’s daily needs.” It signifies a trust in God that this relationship will be beneficial. LDM members, like the church members Coleman studied, operate under the understanding that by giving gifts (money, labor, or sacrificing their own desires), the ultimate beneficiaries will be themselves and their church.

Because many church members have little money or time away from work to spare, their donations are a significant statement of faith and the relationship with God this establishes. That is why Valerie endured the hardships she experienced in the mission field and continue to call herself “blessed.” This was an important opportunity for her to give to the church and participate in the LDM’s “economy of evangelization.”

Benefits for Youth

Luz del Mundo leaders have identified an important resource in its dedicated youth, but working for the church is also beneficial to these volunteers. Many young people, like Valerie, have from a young age wanted to go into the service of the church. This type of work is considered respectable in the United States, and is, in Valerie’s mind, a step up from her part time position working at Sea World. Many missionaries view this as an opportunity to see new places and have new experiences they might not have access to otherwise. Valerie, like other missionary youth I spoke with, has graduated college but is still considering what type of career to pursue in the future. Marta’s daughter, Amy, has also elected to work for the church in lieu of

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36 Coleman, “Materializing the Self,” 180.
pursuing college. Though she did not apply to be a missionary, Amy, 18, has been working as a nanny and assistant to the Apostle’s sister-in-law who is working with her husband to establish a LDM temple in rural North Carolina.

Working as missionaries offers young people the opportunity to gain new skills, including public speaking, organizing, and whatever work skills they learn when taking on odd jobs to support their congregations in the mission field. In addition, young missionaries will be able to give a respectable reason for being away from the workforce or from school for a few years when applying for a job or school. Working as a missionary is valuable experience for men who decide to pursue their life’s work in the church as pastors, as well. This work is also a way that young people can generate what Elaine Peña calls “devotional capital.” That is the idea that, “one may acquire advantages or attain profit as easily or as effectively through symbolic exchange as through traditional business or monetary donations.” Missionaries gain power within the church through their efforts, or devotional labor, which in turn gives them a sense of empowerment.

The devotional capital missionaries accrue is important. Many have documented that something that makes Pentecostalism so attractive is its relatively democratic structure. As has been noted, Fortuny argues that the LDM is, in fact, quite democratic despite devotion to a single Apostle because there are so many leadership positions available within local churches. Missionary work is the way most LDM members enter leadership positions, and it is the only leadership position open to women. The devotional capital derived from work in the mission field and from participation in smaller leadership positions gives young people self-esteem,

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Missionary work also offers young LDM members the opportunity to fulfill a cosmopolitan desire to travel and see the world. In describing her work in the Philippines, Valerie said she was excited to have the chance to visit a place where no one else in her family had been. I spoke with other young women who had recently served as missionaries in Canada, Africa, and Europe who reiterated the sense of adventure they felt at experiencing new places. One woman told me she insisted on traveling to Hawaii for several weeks with her new husband just after the birth of her first child because it didn’t seem fair to her that she should have to pass up the opportunity to visit the island. After working as a missionary in other, less exciting places, she wanted to take advantage of the chance to see what Hawaii was like. Young women and men in the LDM are motivated by the idea of taking their religion to new, sometimes exotic, places.

**Opportunities for Youth**

The Luz del Mundo relies on youth not only to provide much of the church’s missionary labor force, but also to contribute to the church’s institutional identity transformation at the grassroots level. Though missionary work didn’t appeal to her, Amy, for example, still found ways to use her talents to serve her church closer to home. Amy enjoys taking care of children, and is one of the most popular young people at her church because she is funny, good-natured, and sets a good example as a dedicated church member who is also considered “cool” both at church and among her peers at school. Amy isn’t afraid to stand up for her beliefs at school or to confront peers who make fun of her for wearing a skirt all the time or for going to church all the
time. Amy’s ability to respond to outsider’s questions about her faith with a positive attitude and continued pride in her identity as a member of the Luz del Mundo is something that Amy’s peers within the church are expected to model. Amy is cosmopolitan in that she is able to interact with outsiders. She has many friends from school and other extra-curricular activities who don’t belong to the church, and Amy can get along with them because she has adopted enough of the behaviors and trends of the dominant culture to not be alienated by the LDM’s doctrine.

Since Amy wasn’t ready to decide on a career right away, she decided to take some time off from school before college to work for the church. Though her work is unpaid, she has the honor of serving the Apostle’s family directly in her role as nanny and tutor and is able to participate in helping establish a new LDM congregation in North Carolina. Amy sets a good example for others of how to be a dedicated church member but also interact with outsiders, something that is crucial for the LDM’s ability to expand. The church cannot be cordoned off from the rest of society, but must figure out how to operate within it as Amy has.

Young people in the LDM contribute in other ways, as well. Jeremiah, 20, plays multiple roles in worship services at Bradenton. Jeremiah is a third generation LDM member who has spent his entire life in Bradenton since his parents migrated from Mexico before he was born. Jeremiah plays one of the most important roles in the church as choir director. Jeremiah says the choir is important because it “brings the church to life.” Jeremiah leads the choir every day in the temple and is responsible for organizing and leading choir practice twice each week after evening prayer services. Jeremiah described his responsibilities to me in an interview after a Sunday prayer service:

When I was 16, that was a young age to be in charge of the choir. Well, I’ve always loved the choir, as a kid I loved the choir…In middle school, I was in the orchestra. I play the violin at home and at school. And I was always naturally talented at music, so I can help use those skills. I can help the choir here with notes or
anything. And it's been a huge blessing for me to be in charge of the choir...With this blessing I have, I've also directed the choir for the state of Florida. It was this past February in Miami, I had the blessing of directing everybody. A few years ago...in Atlanta for the Holy Supper, I also had the opportunity to direct even a bigger choir. So, yeah, it's a blessing...it's a LOT of work, it's a LOT of work. Being someone who's a member of the choir they only have to remember one voice and that's it. I have to know everybody's voices and...I'll learn [the music] and teach them...it's a teaching role.... But once it comes all together, you feel like you did something good. 39

Jeremiah uses the skills he acquired in public school, where he participated in the orchestra, to serve as Bradenton’s choir director since he was 16. He holds one of the most visible and important leadership positions in the church, second only perhaps to the pastor, at least at the local level.

Jeremiah also contributes other skills he has learned from being in school to Bradenton temple. His career goal is to work in cyber security, and he is currently studying information technology at a local college. Jeremiah says that he applies this knowledge to facilitate broadcasting or receiving transmissions and to help adjust the sound system in the temple. The LDM relies heavily on young people to operate the technology necessary to maintain connections transnationally.

Though Amy was chosen partly because her mother has connections to the Apostle’s family, she was also chosen because of her dedication to the church, because she is a native English-speaker, and because she socialized and connected with peers outside the church without compromising her values. Missionaries like Valerie and youth like Amy and Jeremiah exemplify the type of church member the LDM wants to showcase. They all speak fluent English and have adapted well to U.S. culture, that is, they dress fashionably, use social media, and interact with outsiders easily. Church youth like them who are dedicated to the church but who can also

39 Interview with the author, June 19, 2016.
successfully fit into the culture of the outside world are exemplary because they are how the church defies assumptions often made by outsiders that the church’s practices, such as the emotive prayers, are strange or backwards, or that veneration of the Apostle is “cultish.” The youth that I describe here are “normal” by the standards of dominant society and act as important emissaries to outsiders in each of their different roles.

**Cosmopolitanism and Women**

Women in the LDM are limited in the type of work they can do to serve the church. They are permitted to read passages from the Bible during worship services, are active in the choir, and can lead youth activities or children’s church services. Women also lead the weekly women’s only service, but they are not able to lead men during regular church services. Though these and other similar restrictions are not uncommon in in Pentecostal denominations, the LDM’s gender proscriptions are far more restrictive than was characteristic of early Mexican Pentecostalism. It is notable that Pentecostalism’s real growth in Mexico was initiated by a Mexican woman. Congregationalists Ramona Carbajal de Valenzuela and her husband fled the Mexican Revolution in 1910 and settled in Los Angeles where they joined a Mexican congregation that had grown out of the Azusa Street mission. Leaving her husband in Los Angeles, Carbajal decided to return to Mexico in 1914, and she brought the teachings of her church in Los Angeles with her. The Apostolic movement initiated by Carbajal grew to a membership of more than one million by the twenty-first century and included the notorious “Saul” and “Silas,” who recruited eventual first Apostle of the LDM, Eusebio Joaquín González, as leaders during the early years.

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40 González and González, *Christianity in Latin America*, 283.

41 Christianity in Latin America, 283-284.
As reliant on women as the history of Pentecostalism in Mexico, including the Luz del Mundo, is, the church established by Eusebio quickly set limitations on what women were permitted to do within it. A similar transformation took place among primitivist Pentecostals in the United States. According to Wacker:

> When the primitivist impulse surged, both Scripture and the Holy Spirit seemed to authorize nontraditional roles for women. But when due regard for the dictates of prudence—the pragmatic impulse—began to take over, pundits of both sexes started calling for a more thoughtful reading of Scripture and a more judicious hearing of what the Holy Spirit really was saying. In this latter mode everyone agreed that women enjoyed the right to speak in public, as long as they testified to what the Lord had done for them personally, or as long as they restricted themselves to serving as a mouthpiece for the Holy Spirit.\(^{42}\)

During the early years of Pentecostalism in Mexico, women acted as ministers and church leaders in ways that are impossible within the LDM today. As denominations like the LDM grow, reliance on egalitarian parts of scripture becomes replaced by an emphasis on patriarchal texts that justify women’s subjection.\(^{43}\) As emerging denominations rely on the grassroots work women do less, the patriarchal structures tend to take over.

Acting as missionaries is the highest-level role women can hold, and it is noteworthy that many missionaries active in the LDM are women. Young members of the LDM, particularly those from the United States who speak English, are valuable commodities as the church seeks to connect with potential members globally. Though the church is making efforts to learn local languages, English is the best alternative language, and the best resource the LDM has available, for outreach. Because there are a limited number of LDM members who both speak English and

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\(^{42}\) Wacker, *Heaven Below*, 171.

are willing to act as missionaries, the church has little choice but to permit, and even encourage, young women to participate in this work for the church.

Recent developments in the church, such as increased outreach efforts, offer new possibilities for young people in general to contribute their knowledge of modern technology to the LDM. These developments also offer young women in the church important new ways to serve the church. LDM higher-ups haven’t yet gendered these roles, and young women are taking advantage of it. I noticed that at least half of those working at Casa Cultural Berea in Guadalajara were young women, responsible for coordinating social media, missionary reports, and other youth-related activities. Young women take advantage of their ability to operate new technology, including cameras and drones, as I saw in Miami during the annual baptisms. Women, in fact, were specifically designated to operate the cameras filming the baptismal pool. Practically speaking, it is preferable for the LDM to have women do this job because, as Marta pointed out, sometimes women’s skirts billow around them in the water, and having a woman operating the cameras preserves the church’s modesty standards. It would be inappropriate for a man to do this job in case this happens. Women also are the face of the LDM’s online broadcasts that provide coverage for special events and celebrations.\(^{44}\) Women co-anchor these shows and interview guests on platforms that draw attention from viewers around the globe.

However, it is unlikely that the increased reliance on women’s contributions to the church and its outreach efforts will destabilize the patriarchal leadership structure. As the LDM continues to transform its identity, new positions for women might open, but it is doubtful women within the church will call for a more egalitarian church. As Mahmood has pointed out, it is important not to read a feminist, modernist teleology into religious traditions where women

appear to be disempowered. The assumption that women in the LDM will eventually realize that their limitations are unjust and rebel comes out of a Western, feminist perspective that is not applicable to this case study. Women in the LDM do not understand what many might call their second-class status to be disempowerment. On the contrary, none of the women I spoke with took issue with the limitations set on their behaviors that apply not just to church life, but also to life at home.

Rather, women in the LDM are happy to contribute whatever sort of labor and effort is most needed. Valerie, Amy, Marta, and other women I encountered throughout my fieldwork are experts at identifying ways they can contribute to the church. Sometimes, the contributions seem obvious: missionary work, leading women’s services, leading children or youth activities. But, at other times, the niches women fill are less obvious: assembling tamales to sell as a church fundraiser, operating cameras at Baptisms, or operating social media. But even as the church’s institutional identity changes, bringing with it new opportunities for women’s participation, the patriarchal leadership structure does not appear to be changing.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

LDM youth exemplify the cosmopolitan religious identities the LDM wants to make a part of its own institutional identity. They can navigate different social contexts easily, which also makes them ideal candidates for missionizing in new places. Even more so than their parents, second or third generation LDM members have grown up with the need to succeed in school, work, and church, so they are accustomed to getting to know people from different backgrounds and must also adopt personalities that make them likeable and relatable to other

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people. These cultural *bricoleurs* are not only adept at adjusting to different cultural contexts, but they also exhibit the cosmopolitan sociability described earlier. LDM youth have the capacity to create inclusive relationships with outsiders despite cultural or national differences.⁴⁶ Valerie, Amy, Jeremiah, and other youth who have dedicated this part of their life to church service are valuable because they are able to engage with people who are different, a requisite skill for any church seeking to recruit members from new places. Because they have grown up needing to be able to navigate relationships with people from different cultures, especially in cities like Orlando where people from a wide range of national and cultural backgrounds also reside, young people are uniquely equipped to participate in the LDM’s outreach efforts.

Figure 5-1. A young woman operates the camera at the LDM annual baptisms in Miami, Florida. Author photo.

Figure 5-2. Picture of the English language auditorium in Guadalajara during the 2016 *Santa Cena*, largely attended by youth. Photo from Berea Internacional website, [http://bereainternacional.com](http://bereainternacional.com) (accessed 15 August 2016).
Figure 5-3. Photos taken of the *Santa Cena* 2016 Youth Walk where all church youth walk from the nearby Temple Bethel to Hermosa Provincia, where they are greeted by the Apostle and celebrated by the church. Photo from Berea Internacional website, [http://bereainternacional.com](http://bereainternacional.com) (accessed 15 August 2016).

Figure 5-4. Photo from 2016 *Santa Cena* Youth Walk. Photo from Berea Internacional website, [http://bereainternacional.com](http://bereainternacional.com) (accessed 15 August 2016).
Figure 5-5. Photo from 2016 Santa Cena Youth Walk. Photo from Berea Internacional website, http://bereainternacional.com (accessed 15 August 2016).

Figure 5-6. Photos of a youth jazz band concert at the Recreation center in Hermosa Provincia featured on the lldm.org Facebook page, https://www.facebook.com/LLDMHPGDL/photos/a.1695834363761104.1073743265.494637970547422/1695834527094421/?type=3&theater (posted September 1, 2017).
Figure 5-7. Youth jazz band concert in Hermosa Provincia featured on the lldm.org Facebook page, https://www.facebook.com/LLDMHPGDL/photos/a.1695834363761104.1073743265.494637970547422/1695834527094421/?type=3&theater (posted September 1, 2017).
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION: FIELDWORK CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The Luz del Mundo began as a distinctly Mexican Church. Its adherents in the early and mid-20th century highlighted church values that aligned with the nationalist and progressive values that were dominant in post-Revolutionary Mexico. The LDM accomplished this by emphasizing the indigenous appearance of the church’s founder, Aarón Joaquin, and the church’s Mexican origins. The LDM also contrasted these attributes against the Catholic Church, which was at the time considered to be a symbol of Mexico’s colonial past and was repressed for church leaders’ participation in government corruption. Positioned against the Catholic Church, the LDM appeared to offer a modern and purified Christianity that suitable to Mexico’s progressive values.

Once the LDM became established in Guadalajara, missionaries worked quickly to expand the church to other places in Mexico and throughout Latin America. As the church has expanded globally, the church’s message has changed. Today, the church is marketed on social media and in its visible and public rituals like the annual day of baptisms as a cosmopolitan church whose universal message transcends national identity. The LDM no longer aims to connect only with potential Mexican members but with potential members worldwide, and today church members are encouraged to reach out to one another and to new members with different national origins. The LDM now proclaims it is a church for the world, not just for Mexico.

The LDM’s identity shift was initiated by the migration of church members from Latin America to the United States. Some of the most important congregations for the LDM in the U.S. today were the first established in California, where there are now at least thirty congregations,
and Texas, where there are at least nineteen congregations.¹ From Houston and Los Angeles, the LDM has grown so that there is a congregation in nearly every state, with countless obritas, or mission sites. As church members in the United States became accustomed to life in the US, the LDM had access to more potential members.

Most important, as new generations of LDM members were born into churches in the United States, the LDM had a new group of missionaries who are able to fit in to different cultural contexts. Family-oriented values taught by the church mean that children are raised in stable households. The church also encourages members to live close to one another and to the church when possible, which creates a sense of community and facilitates the formation of networks that help church members to find jobs and exchange information helpful to church members who are new to the U.S.

The close communities formed around LDM congregations does not mean that church members are totally isolated from the rest of society. Although temples have been described as ethnic enclaves, encouraging second-generation members to retain their Spanish and to value their Mexican heritage, this was not the case at the congregations I observed.² Certainly the LDM’s colony in Guadalajara, Hermosa Provincia, may have provided an enclave for members in the church’s early years, but pastors at the churches I attended encouraged members to be cosmopolitan and to interact with and learn from other cultures. Belonging to the LDM and practicing the church’s values means that family units remain strong. But church members also strive to fit in to their local social and cultural contexts. They have friends and participate in activities outside the church, as young members do when they visit theme parks or participate in


extracurricular activities. They also make efforts to fit in to local cultures, as was apparent in the fashion trends worn by women in the church, who still dressed for the most part according to LDM dress codes. Church members, especially young church members, also listen to popular music and television shows.

LDM members living in the United States carefully decide on what parts of the local culture to participate in so that they maintain fidelity to church teachings. As I described, pastors are aware that church members are not completely isolated from dominant society, and address things like the appropriate use of social media during prayer services, and in doing so, the LDM hierarchy condones members’ participation in dominant society. Although LDM members in the U.S. may lead lives that are less carefully regimented than LDM members living in Hermosa Provincia or in the past, church leaders are not ignoring the fact that church members living in different places will be influenced by local trends. Their response is to acknowledge this and be open about how this is appropriate.

The LDM has also embraced new technologies, as is evident in the use of technology like smart phones and various social media platforms which are used to connect church members around the world and which acts as a form of outreach. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are quick outlets the church can use to showcase images of a modern, global institution. Posting dramatic photos and videos of Hermosa Provincia and of church members worshiping in unison reinforces the sense of community felt by church members. Using social media and broadcasting special events or prayer services lead by the Apostle also maintains church members’ orientation towards the Luz del Mundo and maintains the centrality of Hermosa Provincia as the most sacred site. Church members are not, therefore, encouraged to forget their Mexican heritage so much as they are encouraged to remember that they should
remember the centrality of Hermosa Provincia as a universally holy place. The fact that it is located in Mexico is not so important, as church members are today encouraged to become a part of their local communities, as long as the church is still a priority.

This attitude has ultimately been very beneficial to the LDM as an institution and to its members. The strong transnational networks the church has established ensure that church members around the world can become a part of their local environment without losing sight of the importance of the LDM and Hermosa Provincia. Because members are encouraged not to eschew popular culture and society in their hometowns, they are able to more successfully adjust to their environments, which helps when looking for jobs or trying to make friends at school or work. The LDM has also benefitted from this because the ability for LDM members who have immigrated or who are the children of immigrants become ideal candidates for missionizing to potential new members.

Once LDM members migrated to the United States, the church began to market itself as a cosmopolitan church rather than a Mexican church in order to gain acceptance. One main problem church members from Mexico continue to encounter is discrimination against them as Latin Americans. In the US, it is beneficial for Latin Americans to strive to fit in with mainstream culture. Many LDM beliefs are in line with dominant values in the United States, particularly in the South. For example, both the LDM and many in the southern U.S. espouse traditional family values where households are headed by men. The church’s close adherence to what is written in the Bible is something that is also practiced in many churches in the American South, and the frequency of prayer meetings is also not all that unusual in a region where similar Pentecostal denominations, such as the Assemblies of God, are popular. As a religion, the LDM
fits in relatively well in the U.S. religious field, perhaps even more so than in Mexico, where Catholicism continues to dominate.

The LDM’s transition from a specifically Mexican church to one that is a global, “Light of the World” church has helped the denomination avoid stigmatization in the United States most of all. By avoiding identification with a nation that many in the United States believe to be a source of crime and poverty, the LDM is able to avoid scrutiny. Not only does the LDM today avoid a specific identification as a Mexican, or even a Latin American, church, but the LDM actively advertises the desire to engage with other cultures and nationalities as part of its global agenda. LDM congregations like the ones I visited all highlighted the various national backgrounds of its members and sought to incorporate new traditions from different cultures. This was noticeable with the foods that are prepared either for congregations to enjoy after prayer services or for congregations to sell as a fundraiser.

On a larger scale, the LDM showcases its efforts at reaching out to new nationalities through social media and with the church’s visible ritual celebrations. LDM congregations that have been established throughout the world are almost continuously posting photos of missionaries working next to recognizable landmarks, such as the Eiffel Tower or alongside canals in Amsterdam, to show that it is not a provincial denomination but one where members are encouraged to leave the confines of the temple and interact with outsiders. The LDM also demonstrates its cosmopolitanism in its rituals, particularly in the Santa Cena and the annual baptism ceremonies. During both of these rituals, girls wearing what the church considers to be the traditional dress of each of the nations where the LDM has established congregations parade through the crowd carrying the flags of the nations they represent. This parade is visible to outsiders during the annual baptism ceremonies, when regional conferences of LDM
congregations gather in public places, such as Bayfront Park in Miami, to perform all the baptisms of the temples represented. These are some of the main ways the LDM demonstrates to both members and outsiders that it is a church of the world, whose missionaries want to reach out across national or cultural divisions to unite as the true Christian church.

The LDM’s cosmopolitan identity is an effective outreach and member-retention strategy. While the church has not substantially relaxed its rules regarding codes of behavior, LDM leaders have allowed the incorporation of trends from dominant society into church members’ lifestyles as long as church members participate in these trends in the right way. Pastors take the time, for example, to talk to their congregations about the proper use of social media. Similarly, women are permitted to wear trendy skirts and fashionable patterns as long as they remain within the length requirements of the dress code. Young people who want to be able to fit in at school and with their peers outside the church are less alienated from others when permitted to participate in these trends. The fact that second-generation (or later) church members do not have to compromise their ability to fit in at their school or work environments by obeying regulations that might otherwise set them apart makes it easier to remain in the LDM. In the United States, part of the reason church members fit in at work or at school is because the church no longer identifies as a Mexican church. In the United States, such an identity might be viewed as a refusal to acculturate when acculturation is the standard generally used to judge whether an immigrant has “successfully” adjusted to life here.

LDM members in the United States who consume popular culture, especially through social media become important ambassadors for the church to non-Hispanic people. The ability of church members to fit into social situations outside the church means that they have far more opportunities to evangelize. In my experience, church members took every opportunity they had
to interact with me, as opportunities to act as missionaries for their church. In many ways, from the outside, church members do not appear to be all that different from anyone else in the United States. Of course, women are required to wear ankle-length skirts at all times, but long skirts and dresses have become trendy in the past few years. Also, as just mentioned, Pentecostalism is not an unusual denomination in the U.S. south, and many Pentecostal denominations also require that women wear long skirts. Other than women’s dress codes, LDM members aren’t conspicuous members of their local community, and their ability to connect with outsiders through popular culture creates more opportunities for evangelization.

Finally, I have argued that LDM youth have been the key to the LDM’s identity transformation. In particular, the migration of LDM members to the United States and the church’s subsequent growth there means there are new generations of church members who can speak English and who have been exposed to a new culture. As I described previously, the LDM’s structure, which encourages the maintenance of close family ties while also working to fit in with the local culture has helped immigrants adjust to life in the United States, and an important skill necessary to make this adjustment is the ability to speak English. This has proven to be a very valuable resource for the LDM, as it is more likely that missionaries working outside the Americas will encounter people who can speak English than Spanish. This generation is also able to reach out to non-Hispanic Americans to extend the church’s religious networks even further. Increasingly, non-Hispanic Americans are joining the LDM, enough to justify a new English only auditorium for Santa Cena services in Hermosa Provincia. This generation is the LDM’s best hope for becoming a global church.

Fieldwork Opportunities

My personal background and the context of my fieldwork offered me the opportunity to see the LDM from a new perspective. In preparation for my study, I conferred with Patricia
Fortuny who advised me to wear skirts and to keep my long hair to both gain acceptance from church members and to show respect. Dr. Fortuny advised, for example, that one way of opening up channels of communication with women in the church might be to ask them about the best places to find long skirts of my own, since similar strategies had worked for her. However, Dr. Fortuny’s position as a researcher is notably different from my own. She is Mexican, for example, and she worked in congregations in Mexico or close to the Mexican border. On the other hand, I am a non-Hispanic citizen of the U.S., and most of my fieldwork took place in north and central Florida. While there is a significant Latino/a population in this region, it is also home to people from a variety of backgrounds.

In addition, my pool of informants came, for the most part, from an entirely new generation than the generation of LDM members Dr. Fortuny studied. Most of my closest informants were second- or third- generation Mexican immigrants, who were also likely younger in age than Fortuny’s informants. Although some were married and had families, most were still between the ages of 18-28. I was able to gain access to this age group because of how close I was in age. It is easier to talk candidly with someone seen as a peer, and I suspect that this was why I was invited to lunches and theme parks. These invitations allowed me to see the extent to which the LDM is relying on the groundwork and background efforts of church youth.

When thinking about what to wear to do fieldwork, whether at a prayer service or for a birthday party, I considered carefully what was appropriate. I ultimately decided not to wear skirts or to take up the offer from church members to wear a chalina because I worried I might give the impression that I was converting. Instead, I tried to maintain a sort of uniform of dress pants and a sleeved blouse. If I wore jewelry, it was minimal, and I never wore much makeup.
Although I didn’t want to give LDM members the impression that I was converting, I aimed to be respectful.

My decision on what to wear was never challenged by church members, and this is because of my position. Expectations for what I should be wearing were different for me than for Dr. Fortuny. Since LDM members are most suspicious of other Mexicans based on the negative press the church has received there, she would have had to make more of an effort, by wearing a veil or long skirts, to prove to her informants that she was not a threat. I was also allowed more freedom with my dress code because LDM members wanted me to feel accepted, probably in the hope of my eventual conversion. When I traveled to Miami with the Orlando congregation for the annual baptisms, I was given notice that everyone was expected to wear white. But I was told I could still wear whatever I preferred and that the notice was just so I would be able to consider what to wear in order to feel most comfortable, whether that meant looking like I fit in or to establish myself as an outsider by wearing something completely different. Church members continually asked me what I thought about the church and its doctrine, hoping to hear me agree with their claims about the LDM’s superiority. As a white American, I would have added to the cosmopolitan image the LDM is working to cultivate. Further, having my “approval” as a U.S. religion scholar would go far to legitimize the church as something more than a fanatical cult. The possibility of positive press generated by my study of the church outweighed the chance that I might write something negative about it, and so LDM members worked very hard to make sure I felt included and welcomed.

My thoughts when deciding what to wear were probably similar to those of LDM members as they negotiate how to be a part of dominant culture and maintain dedication to the church. Women might decide that while it is ok to wear makeup to prayer services at the temple
in Orlando on Sunday, it is not acceptable to wear makeup during the Santa Cena. Church members must decide when listening to pop music is acceptable and when it interrupts their devotion to God. While young church members listen to pop music and watch popular movies throughout most of the year, they will stop doing so in the weeks prior to important rituals in order to prepare themselves for the events.

Thinking about how young LDM members want to be dedicated members of their church and also to fit in with the world outside the church is what brought to my mind the question of how the LDM has changed in recent years. In the church’s earliest years, members could live their lives almost entirely separate from the outside world in Hermosa Provincia. Today, church members have to learn how to maintain dedication to the church and how to be successful a new cultural environment. They have to be able to perform well in school, get jobs, and maintain these jobs. A huge part of this is the ability to have good relationships with co-workers and peers. As LDM members have migrated away from Mexico, the church itself has changed in order to both maintain relevancy in the lives of those church members and as an evangelizing strategy.

**Fieldwork Challenges**

Although LDM members exceeded my expectations in their willingness to talk with me about their lives in the church on an individual level, it was impossible for me to find statistics on how the church is doing on a broader scale and across time. This information is not available on the LDM’s websites, and the numbers that I have cited throughout this dissertation come from scholars’ best estimates. When I asked church members about church growth, they cite the numbers of baptisms that occur yearly to demonstrate church growth. But, for the most part, those being baptized are young people who have decided to remain in the church. And it is impossible to say whether new converts actually maintain the commitment to the church they
make at their baptisms. Also, no one could give me an estimated sum total of church members, so it is difficult to know whether or not the church is growing year to year because there is no base number of church members to which I could add the number of people who are newly baptized.

What I would like to know most is the extent to which the LDM has actually gained members since the church began increasing its outreach efforts. Without knowing these numbers, it is impossible to say whether LDM missionaries are successfully gaining converts in places like China, Russia, or Israel. Only the locations where at least several baptisms took place were highlighted in social media posts and in church sermons following the day of baptisms last February, and these included places that might be expected, like Miami, El Salvador, and Los Angeles.

However, the actual number of converts missionaries are or are not gaining around the world has no bearing on my argument about the LDM’s cosmopolitanism. What I have described is the LDM’s institutional identity transition from a Mexican to a cosmopolitan church. It is the desire of church members to become a church for the world, across national or cultural differences, which makes this a cosmopolitan church. This is especially noteworthy as many groups and states today become increasingly hostile towards immigrants. Many nations, including the United States and Great Britain, are shoring up their borders against immigrants in an isolationist, nationalist effort to protect against the influx of new cultures or ideas that are viewed as threats to national security. It is most surprising that a Pentecostal denomination like the LDM appears to be taking the opposite stance, since Pentecostal churches tend to be closely aligned with conservative political views.
New Directions

Developments like these indicate the need for continued research on Pentecostalism and globalization. What does it mean that the LDM is in some ways very liberal in its acceptance, even celebration, of human differences? And at what point does this acceptance end? I suspect that it is still fairly easy for the church to make claims that it desires to incorporate church members of different backgrounds because there are not actually that many converts from different backgrounds yet. If the LDM does start to gain these converts, will the church’s message change again to reinforce the strict adherence to doctrine that is expected? These questions extend to other churches with structures and beliefs that are similar to the LDM, such as the Assemblies of God or the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.

Future research should continue to emphasize the role of social media and other technologies as outreach strategies. In the LDM, social media has been integral in maintaining global connections and relationships between church members. Although evangelicals have been using different forms of mass media, including radio and television, to reach believers for at least a hundred years, it appears to be increasingly important. These forms of communication are also much different from the technologies used during much of the twentieth century, as they allow individuals to communicate in multiple directions. Not only are users listening to and watching media, but they can respond, comment, and share directly with friends. The possibility for virtual interactions across the globe opens up new possibilities for churches looking to grow, change, or reinforce doctrine. Religions will continue change their outreach strategies to take advantage of these technological advances.

Finally, the question of how new generations of Pentecostals are affecting religious practice has not been fully explored. Scholars tend to focus on explaining why people convert to Pentecostalism, but more research should also focus on why Pentecostals decide to remain in
their churches. This might go farther to explain why Pentecostalism continues to grow in places like Latin America even several decades after its arrival. While many mainline churches are worried about losing their younger church members, evangelical and Pentecostal denominations like the LDM appear to have a thriving new generation. How is it that Pentecostalism can be attractive to several generations at once and over time? The LDM is providing some answers to this question, but there is still much we do not know.

My research has shown that Latin American Pentecostalism continues to be an important player in the religious field, not only in Latin America, but in North America and around the globe. The Luz del Mundo has demonstrated its resourcefulness in using the skills and knowledge of its young church members to work at establishing a new institutional identity and to further expand the church. True to Pentecostal form, the primitivist and otherwise politically conservative Luz del Mundo has ambivalently embraced new technologies and a liberal openness to new church members regardless of cultural background. Though the LDM has not had much success in actually attracting new members around the globe yet, the church’s openness to outsiders and its missionaries’ endurance in the field may eventually result in a cosmopolitan church with a diverse membership base.


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Mary Puckett received her Ph.D. from the University of Florida in December 2017. She received her Master of Arts degree from the University of Virginia in 2011 and her Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Miami in 2009.