

Sunday worship at Calvary

Foursquare Church in Silver Spring, Md., starts in an empty parking lot. The congregants usually arrive on foot with well-worn Bibles in hand. They come in groups, Latino mothers and toddlers, grandparents and friends. “*Que Dios te bendiga*”—May the Lord bless you—each one says, offering hugs and kisses to everyone they meet. They board a refurbished school bus painted with a Bible verse and the church’s Spanish name:

Iglesia Cuadrangular el Calvario. When it pulls out into the busy street, I hop in my car and follow. Twenty minutes later, the bus makes a sudden left into another parking lot—this one 15 times as large, home to Trinity Assembly of God Church—and this place is packed. A dozen men in neon yellow jackets keep the cars from fighting for spaces. At least five people tumble out of every car and van, usually families of three generations, tambourines in tow. Hearing the singing from inside my car, I follow them through the sanctuary doors.

A giant flag bearing a lion with a waving mane of orange sunbeams hangs above the nearly 500 people inside. Trumpets sound, and guitars jam the *alabanzas*, Spanish songs of praise. A dozen girls dressed in white costumes with red sequined sashes dance onstage, and teenage boys step in unison below. Little

children race to the front to join. One woman waves a fan with long pink sash, and a man pounds his fist on the pew as he prays. Then a white-haired woman has a prophecy. The pastor rushes the microphone to her, and everyone falls silent as she screams. “The Lord will heal people in this room today,” she cries in Spanish. “*Gloria a Dios!* Praise be to God! The Spirit of the Lord is in this place.” People kneel at the altar, the ministers anoint them with oil, and then the fiesta begins again.

The faithful at El Calvario are not Catholic; they are Protestants: born-again, Bible-believing, Latino Protestants. They represent one of the fastest-growing segments among America’s churchgoing millions. According to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, more than two-thirds of the 52 million-plus Latinos in the U.S. are Catholic; by 2030, that percentage



could be closer to half. Many are joining evangelical Protestant congregations. Among young Latinos, the drift away from the Roman Catholic Church is even more rapid. It is a migration that is forcing both the Vatican and the Southern Baptist Convention to take notice. While many Anglo churches are struggling to retain members, congregations like El Calvario are booming: 18 months ago, the suburban Washington, D.C., church had 400 members. Now more than 800 people attend an array of services each week, and its leaders are planning a 3,000-seat sanctuary. The newly converted faithful even have their own name: they call themselves *evangélicos*.

The Latino Protestant boom is transforming American religious practices and politics. *Christianity Today*, the country's leading evangelical magazine, is preparing to publish in Spanish this year. Record

Gloria a Dios
Sunday services at El Calvario and La Roca are loud, dramatic and familial—and they attract hundreds of congregants

labels in Nashville are beginning to sign Spanish Christian-music groups. Seeing its once solidly Catholic Latino faithful shift to Protestant churches, the Vatican made a bold counterstrike in early March when it named Argentine Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio as Pope—the first Latin American Pontiff and a priest blessed with an uncommon feel for the common man. Meanwhile, the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest evangelical denomination in the U.S., hopes to make a place for these new believers, setting a goal of 7,000 Baptist Hispanic churches by 2020. Today they count 3,200, but the convention's statisticians believe the real number may be larger.

If the numbers are fuzzy, that's in part because Latino congregations are often designed to be hidden. Many start as basement prayer gatherings. Others meet in

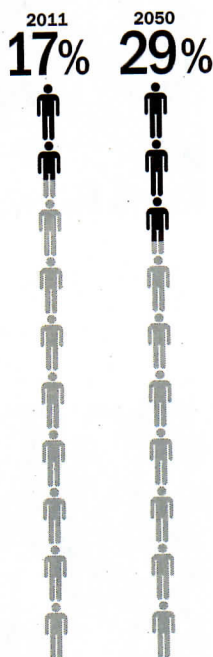
storefronts. They are often more likely to have a YouTube channel or a Facebook group than a website. Sometimes the only clues that these congregations exist are the dozens of small plastic yard signs that pop up every Sunday to guide the pilgrims. Once you start looking for them, you see them everywhere—on street corners, in yards, on the lawns of other churches. I found signs for Primera Iglesia Bautista Hispana de Maryland in Hyattsville, Md.; Iglesia de Dios del Evangelio Completo in Adelphi, Md.; Iglesia Pentecostal La Gloria de Dios; and Centro Mundial Evangelico in nearby northern Virginia.

These *iglesias*, or churches, are different in kind as well as in number. Latino Protestants are more likely to get up and dance in church than to fall asleep there. Ushers stand armed not with service bulletins but with Kleenex boxes and folded blue modesty cloths to cover women when they faint in God's presence. The intercessory prayer list includes typical petitions for healing and comfort as well as for more earthly needs—Samuel's *papi* has been missing for a week; Maria's cousin needs immigration papers; Ernesto's friend is facing jail time. Richard Land, a former president of the Southern Baptist Convention's religious-liberty commission, told his pastors four years ago to ignore the Latino reformation at their peril: "Because if you left [Washington, D.C.] and drove all the way to L.A., there wouldn't be one town you'd pass that doesn't have a Baptist church with an *iglesia bautista* attached to it. They came here to work, we're evangelistic, we shared the Gospel with them, they became Baptist."

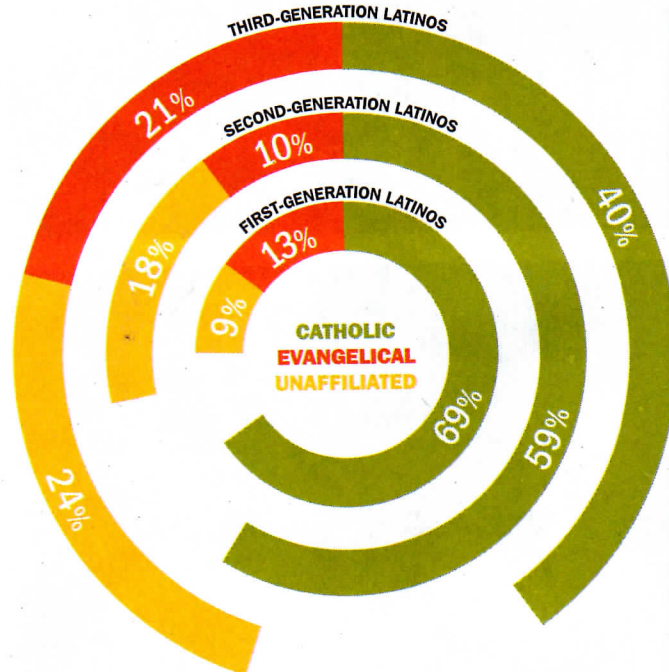
The *evangélico* boom is inextricably linked to the immigrant experience. *Evangélicos* are socially more conservative than Hispanics generally, but they are quicker to fight for social justice than their white brethren are. They are eager to believe in the miraculous but also much more willing to bend ecclesiastical rules to include women in church duties and invite other ethnic groups into their pews. The new churches are in many cases a deliberate departure from the countries and the faith their members left behind—but they don't look or sound anything like the megachurches of the U.S. *Evangélicos* are numerous and growing fast. And they are hiding in plain sight.

Leaving the Rosary Behind Latino Catholics, particularly

The percentage of Latinos in the U.S. is increasing



The longer their families have been in the U.S., the more likely Latinos are to be Protestant



A Reformation in Maryland

JUST 10 MINUTES AWAY FROM EL CALVARIO is Iglesia Roca de la Eternidad—Rock of Eternity Assemblies of God Church. Some 700 people attend one of its three services each week. Flags from their home countries—El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Mexico, Colombia—line the meeting hall. At least half the congregation, Pastor Heber David Paredes estimates, are Catholic converts. Even more may be undocumented, he says, and about a third have trouble reading and writing in English. They call one another *hermana*, *hermano*—sister, brother. "Church is what they have," says Paredes, who is from Guatemala. "They don't have many places where they can feel welcome. That's what they are looking for. That's where they have a family, a place to belong."

La Roca is part of a revolution. Catholic

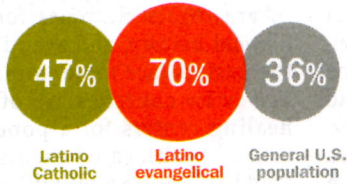
Latin America experienced the first inklings of the 16th century European Protestant Reformation only in the 1970s and '80s, thanks largely to evangelistic Pentecostal television and radio programs. Catholics were 81% of Latin America's population in 1996, while Protestants made up only 4%, according to Latinobarómetro, a Chilean polling group. By 2010, Protestants had jumped to 13% of the population, while the percentage of Catholics dropped to 70%. Says Samuel Rodriguez, president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference in Sacramento: "We are in the first generation of the Hispanic Protestant Reformation."

Latinos are turning not just to Protestantism but to its evangelical strain for a variety of reasons. Above all, Latinos who convert say they want to know God personally, without a priest as a middleman. More than 35% of Hispanics in America

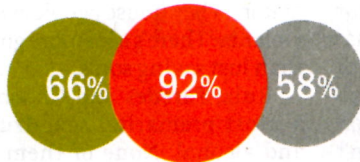
particularly young adults, are moving toward evangelical churches

Who are evangelical Latinos?

THEY ATTEND SERVICES MORE OFTEN
Percentage attending at least once a week



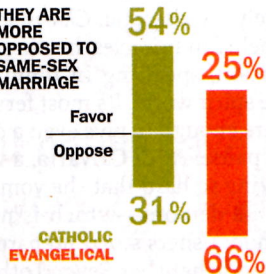
THEY SAY RELIGION IS VERY IMPORTANT IN THEIR LIVES



MOST ARE OPPOSED TO ABORTION IN ALL OR MOST CASES

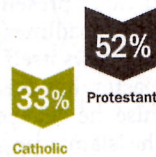


THEY ARE MORE OPPOSED TO SAME-SEX MARRIAGE

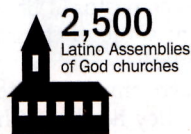


THEY HOLD PARTICULAR APPEAL FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Percentage of Latinos ages 18 to 29 who describe themselves as very religious



THEY ARE FORMING LINKS ACROSS U.S. DENOMINATIONS



Sources: Pew Research Center; Gallup

call themselves born-again, according to the Pew Forum, and 9 out of 10 *evangélicos* say a spiritual search drove their conversion. "People are looking for a real experience with God," says Paredes. That direct experience comes largely from exploring the Bible. "We do the best to preach with the Bible open. When they read the Bible, they find a lot of things they didn't know before. They may have had religion, but they did not have an experience."

Among *evangélicos*, worship is adaptable and open to self-expression. You want to pray aloud in your pew? Do it at the top of your voice, even when the pastor is praying. Want to fall to your knees? Run to the altar. Sing in Spanish and switch to English at Verse 3? Go for it. "The evangelical church says this: Listen, you want to come to our church? If you are Mexican, we will show you a church where you can sing mariachi music," explains Ro-

driguez. "If you are Puerto Rican, we will have salsa. If you are Dominican, we will have merengue. If you are Colombian, we will have cumbia."

Like an earlier generation of immigrants from Europe, Latino Christians often see Protestantism as the path to a more genuine, more prosperous "American" life. "They see the move to Protestantism, particularly evangelicalism, as a form of upward mobility, and very often I think they associate Catholicism with what they left behind in Latin America," says Randall Balmer, the chair of Dartmouth's religion department. "They want to start anew."

Instead of the classic three-point, German-influenced sermons found in many mainline churches, the message at La Roca is theologically raw, unpolished and aimed right at the immigrant experience. Heber Paredes Jr., son of La Roca's pastor, preached one Friday evening about

the example of the Apostle Paul's assistant Timothy, who was half Greek and half Jew. Timothy, he preached, had a lot in common with the young Latino men in America today. "When a young man grows up without a father, being half and half, he is mocked. Usually what you see is a troublesome child. Not Timothy ... It is time that we are not just another statistic—it is time we rise up for revival."

But music and sermons alone are not enough to draw people. A hungry person, the saying goes, has no ears. "I don't want to say from the altar on Sunday, 'If someone has a need, let me know,' because I will have a line of people out the door Monday morning, needing money for rent, food. People will take advantage of that," says Paredes Sr. "But we never let people stay in need. We are not going to be able to sleep if we know a family needs food."

Like other *evangélico* churches, La Roca takes the Bible's "feed the hungry and clothe the naked" mandate literally. At a roundtable conversation one night, a woman wept as she shared how she first met members of a La Roca family when she was a single mother. They were cleaning her office building late one night, and when they learned she did not have an apartment, they decided to move to a two-bedroom unit so she could stay with them. The church is divided into small groups called cells that meet weekly to pray and keep tabs on everyone's needs so they can bring them to the pastor. The church has a rule: on Sunday mornings, you have to greet 10 people before you can hear the sermon.

How Choco Changed Chicago

IF ONE *EVANGÉLICO* CHURCH HAS MADE the leap from immigrant barrio to booming American megachurch, it is New Life Covenant Church in Chicago. New Life had just 100 members in 2000; all were Spanish speakers. Now more than 17,000 people attend one of the church's four campuses every Sunday, making New Life the largest Assemblies of God church in the U.S. Nine of its 11 weekly services are in English. The pastor, Wilfredo De Jesús, has the support of evangelical giants like Rick Warren, the pastor of Saddleback Church and author of *The Purpose Driven Life*, who wrote the foreword to De Jesús'

book *Amazing Faith*, published last year.

De Jesús, 48, is tall and broad-shouldered, a straight talker with a firm handshake and a deep voice. He says his nickname, Choco, comes from his love of sweets and the color of his skin. He's of a different genre from the pastors of La Roca and El Calvario. English is his first language. He grew up in Chicago's Humboldt Park neighborhood during its gang-ridden days and then got a master's degree in Christian ministries from North Park Theological Seminary. In terms of the American Dream, he has crossed the great divide.

After he took over New Life from his father-in-law in 2000, Choco bought a farm outside the city and converted it into a home for recovering drug addicts and prostitutes. Then he purchased a liquor store near the church and turned it into a café to reduce loitering and crime in the neighborhood. He recalls, "We started doing English services to reach third-generation Hispanics, who love their culture, who love their rice and beans, but prefer to hear a sermon in English. I started doing that, and the church started growing."

New Life didn't just grow—it exploded. Choco leased nearby Roberto Clemente High School for Sunday use and later transformed his original location into a new site for a Spanish-language service for first-generation Latinos. Five months later, a second Spanish service was added. He also started to stream services online. Now people tune in from Arizona, Massachusetts, Kentucky and other states. A pastor is available to serve the needs of online congregants.

Soon even the high school became too small, so New Life bought a another property in now gentrifying Humboldt Park last August. There will be 1,000 seats in the main sanctuary, with overflow seating for at least 300 more. (Choco wants the sanctuary's new stage to be able to hold a live elephant and feature harnesses for flying angels—part of his sermons-as-drama series.) At the same time, Choco has branched out, opening a church in Oakwood, which is attracting a largely African-American congregation. Diversity, for New Life, is a recipe for growth. "Latino evangelicals have forced white evangelicals to own their own deepest convictions," explains Grant Wacker,

professor of Christian history at Duke Divinity School, "to embrace the neighbor, to embrace the other without regard to social, economic or ethnic distinctions."

The *Evangélico* Effect

ONE REASON THE LATINO PROTESTANT movement is important to watch is that it is largely charismatic. *Charismatic* connotes a belief in miracles, healing, divine intervention, speaking in tongues and an active spirit world. Its most fervent extremes are enough to give even a devoted believer pause. At El Calvario, a woman was praying so hard that she vomited (or exorcised a demon)—which is not that uncommon: ushers stood prepared with plastic bags to help her. Several others collapsed on the floor in convulsions when they felt God's presence. Sermons aren't drawn from headlines; instead, they often sound like news itself. Eliud Ruiz, El Calvario's pastor, has preached against Russia because, he believes, "Russia is going to lead the Islamic republics against Israel. It's in the Bible."

Then there are the miracles, which can seem almost commonplace in Hispanic churches. An El Calvario woman waved two medical reports—one from when she was diagnosed with osteoporosis, another from the day doctors said it had disappeared. A restaurant cook testifies that God stopped her 12 years of migraines after she fasted with the church for three days, and another woman says her internal bleeding stopped when the pastor poured oil on her forehead and the people prayed.

This kind of church treads on shaky theological ground. But it's important to remember that most *evangélico* churches are relatively new, still sorting out their

place in a country where many in the congregation aren't yet citizens. And with the exception of the rare leader like Choco, many *evangélico* pastors rely more on experience than on any formal training in college, much less divinity school. There isn't much extra cash lying around in grassroots churches for courses on biblical history, and even if there were, the pastors face more immediate needs. *Evangélico* churches are often de facto healing centers for a population with limited health care benefits. They act as food banks for people with empty refrigerators. They house people avoiding street violence. There's a lot more going on there than just saving souls.

Ruiz, Paredes and Choco all preach against premarital sex, drugs, cursing and alcohol. None of them drink, and they ask their volunteers and staff to similarly abstain. At the same time, *evangélicos* are often willing to put women in the pulpit. That's a huge advance from many of their white evangelical siblings, who still tend to relegate women to music or children's ministries. Ruiz and his wife Lucia co-pastor El Calvario. Women solo-pastor some of the most dynamic Latino churches.

Evangélico churches often face immigration policy head-on. Choco preaches against the deportation system because it breaks up families, and Paredes is planning an immigration conference for La Roca members this spring. Those efforts help explain why some white evangelical church leaders are quietly urging Republican lawmakers to get behind comprehensive immigration reform. "When groups appear that are similar to one's own but with some striking ethnic or musical or cultural differences, they can appear threatening as well as promising," explains Mark Noll, a historian of American Christianity at Notre Dame. "I think it would be very positive for the evangelical world to look at issues of social concern—immigration, environment, employment—as theological issues."

A New Rock of Ages

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH NOW HAS 4,800 parishes with Latino programs of various kinds across the U.S. According to the U.S. Council of Catholic Bishops, up to half of Latino Catholics in America are

The Latino Protestant surge, says Rick Warren, is 'the untold story'



expressing their faith much as the evangelical community does—praying with hands raised, speaking in tongues, expecting the miraculous. One attempt to keep those members in the fold has been the Catholic Charismatic Renewal movement, which has gathered steam over the past few decades. But it may not be enough.

Only 15% of all new priests ordained in the U.S. are Latino. “The challenge for the Catholic Church is to make the parish structure very flexible, very family-oriented,” explains Alejandro Aguilera-Titus of the bishops’ cultural-diversity office. “To the degree that we fail to do this ... we will continue to lose a significant number of Hispanic Catholics to other religious groups, mostly Pentecostals.”

The Catholics and the megachurches have little choice but to adapt. By the year 2050, Latinos will make up nearly a third of the U.S. population. By then, the first-generation *iglesias* like El Calvario

A place in the pulpit

Evangelical Latinos are more willing than Catholics or some traditionally white evangelical denominations to put women in pastoral roles

and La Roca will be third-generation churches. If they follow even part of New Life’s path, their pastors will be preaching in English and merging their new strain of Protestantism with the largely white evangelical mainstream. Warren realized years ago—thanks to his ministry’s location in Southern California—that the Latino influx meant he could not stand still. Over the past decade, he has helped launch 35 Spanish-speaking congregations in Orange County alone. “The greatest growth of all is coming in the Pentecostal or charismatic churches,” he says. “It is the untold story.”

The U.S.—and the entire Latino world—is changing. The rock on which God is building his Latino church all over America is a blacktop parking lot in suburban Maryland and a low-income high school in Illinois. Right now, they may be hard to find. But as Jesus teaches in Matthew, May they who have eyes see. ■

RICARDO CASES FOR TIME