

# U.S. Hispanics Choose Churches Outside Catholicism

by BARBARA BRADLEY HAGERTY



Courtesy of Miriam Acosta

The Rev. Wilfredo de Jesus delivers a sermon at the New Life Covenant Church in Chicago. The church has grown from a congregation of dozens to thousands of families in just a few years.

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As their numbers grow, Latinos are not only changing where and how they worship; they're also beginning to affect the larger Christian faith.

You can see evidence of that in the Assemblies of God, once a historically white, suburban Pentecostal denomination. When you walk into the denomination's largest church, it's sensory overload: The auditorium is jam-packed with hundreds of Latino worshipers singing in Spanish, swaying and dancing.

In little more than a decade, [New Life Covenant Church](#) in Chicago has grown from 68 people to more than 4,000 members; it had to abandon its old building and meet in Clemente High School. When you include the other churches New Life has started, its membership comes to some 12,000 people.

**Hispanics Bolster Church Rolls**

The Rev. Wilfredo de Jesus is leading the movement to give a little color to the mostly white Pentecostal faith. He says — and statistics bear him out — that Latinos are saving American Christianity.

"No doubt, every denomination would have decreased in membership," he says, "if it had not been for Hispanic growth, including our fellowship, the Assemblies of God."

It's a truism that 11 o'clock on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of the week. But the people streaming into New Life's sanctuary are black, white and Asian, as well as Hispanic. Most, like de Jesus, are second-generation Latinos. And three of four services are in English. Indeed, much of the church's growth is fueled by Hispanic-Americans shedding the faith of their parents.

De Jesus says he can spot them every time.

"People come to the church, and I'm in the lobby area, greeting visitors — and they say, 'Hey Father, thank you for the Mass today.' I know where they're coming from."

They're coming from Catholicism. Polls by Pew Research Center show that fewer than 60 percent of second-generation Latinos are Catholic — and the ones who leave Catholicism head for the more boisterous evangelical churches, like New Life.

### Hitting A 'Glass Ceiling'

Sitting in the church's cafe, Isaac Vega says he chafed at the structured Catholic masses, with priests who served as intermediaries between him and God.



[Enlarge](#)

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Orlando Quintana (right) and Enrique Omar Nieves frequently attend services at New Life Covenant. "This church makes you feel like family," Quintana says.

"I felt like my personal relationship with God — I was seeking more, and I needed more. And there was kind of like a glass ceiling," he says. "I was hitting something that wasn't allowing me to grow, and I wasn't quite sure what it was."

That's why most Latinos leave Catholicism, Pew researchers found. There's another reason, too: Because they can. New Life member Betty Ochoa says that in Mexico, where her parents are from, she never could have made the switch — her culture, her family wouldn't let her.

But things are different in the United States, she says.

"It's more open. We can go to different churches, and visit different churches — or, what do they call it, church-shopping?" she asks with a smile.

In this, Ochoa is just like most Americans, who change their religion at least once in their lifetimes. Ochoa's parents thought she had joined a cult when she found New Life. Her daughter thought they had landed on another planet.

"Oh my goodness. I was so overwhelmed!" says Natalie Ochoa, 28.

"I didn't know that you could sing like this — and people raising their hands, and calling out, shouting," she says as she starts to laugh. "I'm like, 'This doesn't happen in Catholic church. Like, people just don't do that.' "

### **A Church Fills A Community's Gap**

On this particular Sunday, the youth group is leading worship. And it seems that third-generation Latinos have a different spiritual journey from even their parents'. Many of the teens and 20-somethings are not fleeing their parents' religion. They're more like Orlando Quintana.

"Religiously, I didn't really go to church that much, but I was dragged once in a while. And it wasn't fun," he says.



Enlarge

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Natalie Ochoa (left) and her mother, Betty Ochoa, say that services at the New Life Covenant church are less formal than those of the Catholic church they once attended.

family, and people that are not family, bringing them in as family. And I think that's what keeps the kids — that's what draws them."

### **Finding A Religious Identity**

Natalie Ochoa says that New Life's style — urban, gritty, flavored with Latino exuberance — is pushing the boundaries of the conservative Assemblies of God.

"Some of the Pentecostal churches, looking at New Life," she says, seem to think, " 'Oh, you guys are like, rebels,' or like, 'You guys are too wild,' or 'The way the women dress.' And I'm sure there's probably controversy in that, but I definitely think we've raised the bar."

They've also raised some eyebrows. And yet, leaders in every denomination have to recognize that this is their destiny, says Luis Lugo, director of the [Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life](#). For proof, he says, just look at the recent census projections.

"We got a postcard from the future," Lugo says. "And it told us that in the not-too-distant future, this country is going to be minority white. So, the future of many religious traditions in this country

Many of the kids from this tough corner of Chicago came from broken homes and had no interest in church. Quintana's story was typical: His father is a street gang leader; his family was evicted from its house — and Quintana was kicked out of high school for fighting.

"Yeah, I was doing dumb stuff," he confirms.

But then a friend brought him to New Life, where he made friends first, and then got religion. Every Thursday night, he comes to the youth service, along with 600 other kids.

"And I think the key is family," Quintana says. "I think this church really makes you feel like family. Hispanics are really big on extended

will depend upon the second-generation Latinos."

Which is why de Jesus is traveling the country, telling other pastors how to expand their churches, Latino-style.

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