

Ethnographic Project

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The Role of Teens and Youth in the Latino, Spanish-Speaking Diaspora Church of Grand Junction, Colorado.

Iglesia Roca Eterna church is a Spanish-speaking, Independent Bible diaspora church located in downtown Grand Junction, Colorado. The church was founded in 1982 by a first-generation Mexican man, the Apostle of the church, and his wife.

The founder moved from Mexico to the United States with his family of origin when he was ten years old. He then moved to southern Texas, where he met and married his wife.

The founding couple “moved to Grand Junction with the purpose of planting a Spanish-speaking church in town.” Initially meeting in a smaller rented building in downtown Grand Junction, the church now owns the new building on 23rd Street.

The church currently consists of all Latinos (except one non-English speaking family), the majority being first-generation Mexicans and second and third-generation American-born Mexicans. Iglesia Roca Eterna has many temporary, seasonal workers and families migrating from Mexico. The church has one non-Mexican family, who were Thai missionaries and are English-speaking only.

Various church members from Iglesia Roca Eterna were interviewed, including the Apostle, the two senior pastors, the administrator, two female church members, and two teens. The one non-Spanish-speaking family was also interviewed. These members were interviewed, and their responses are recorded in this paper, and names were removed from quotes.

The interviews and observations of Iglesia Roca Eterna Church are based on two Sunday morning services (Sunday morning), one youth group meeting (Wednesday evening), one fellowship gathering (Sunday afternoon), and one Bible study (Wednesday evening).

Interviewees were emailed questions and questioned in person.

Iglesia Roca Eterna church was founded by the leader, recognized by the position called Apostle. The distinctive title of Apostle differentiates him from the other two pastors. Apostles are different from pastors because they are seen as the foundation of the church. And while the pastor becomes the leader of teaching and shepherding, the pastor cannot stand in the other offices like an Apostle. "Apostle ... is held with great esteem in this church," commented one of the interviewees.

The Apostle's unique vision for Iglesia Roca Eterna church and its ministry is to bring up the next generation of Latino leaders to preserve the local church and present the gospel to other Latino populations and the nations.

Church demographics

There are approximately 46 members of Iglesia Roca Eterna church. The number of registered members stays relatively consistent, with the Sunday and Wednesday attending services changing with the immigrant population. The mean age of the church's members was estimated at 45, which is encouraging to the leadership since its members are younger than they were in the earlier years of the church.

The gender composition of the church is 60/40 women to men. There are approximately 12 families, four singles, eight teenagers (12-19), and ten children (0-11) registered as members. It was reported that as many as 5-20 seasonal workers might be added at different times of the year.

The Apostle and his wife moved to Grand Junction from Texas with the purpose of church planting. They were interested in helping to build the population of the evangelical Mexican-speaking Latino churches in Grand Junction "while helping to preach and spread the gospel message in other countries." It soon became obvious to the leadership that the small,

evangelical Latino population was dying off with the bust of the local economy, which forced seasonal workers home and left only the elderly population of the church in the Grand Valley.

“By 1985, the vision to focus on raising up the next generation in the church began.”

Iglesia Roca Eterna church leadership developed a two-tiered vision for the church. The first part of the vision was to focus on the children at the local church level. “The younger generation is the hope that we have for the continuation of our mission.” The vision focused on the teaching, mentoring, and equipping of the Latino youth in the church. The second part of the vision was to help the Latino population in Grand Junction (and all over the Grand Valley) have exposure to Christ’s message while also assisting the worldwide Latino population both physically (providing jobs and financial resources) and spiritually (sharing the gospel, putting on conferences, holding revivals, and praying for the people).

Latino Diaspora

The Mexican diaspora is comprised of approximately 38.7 million U.S. residents who were either born in Mexico or reported Mexican ancestry or origin.¹ The Mexican diaspora is the second largest in the United States.

Education

The vision of the Iglesia Roca Eterna church is focused on the raising-up of the youth in the church. Some of the importance has been put on getting the children of the church to get educated, from the High school level and then higher education degrees. The Apostle and both pastors have had higher education training, and two of the pastors are teachers in the local school district.

¹ US Census Bureau, “Data,” Census Website, March 3, 2023, <https://www.census.gov/data/>.

Three of the teens attend the local University, and one student is graduating in May and will be staying locally also to attend the University.

English Proficiency

“Mexican immigrants are less likely to be proficient in English than the overall foreign-born population. In 2021, about 65 percent of Mexicans ages 5 and over reported limited English proficiency, compared to about 46 percent of all immigrants. Approximately 6 percent of Mexican immigrants spoke only English at home, versus 17 percent of all immigrants.”²

Religion in Mesa County, Colorado

Iglesia Roca Eterna church is only one of the evangelical Spanish-only churches in the Grand Valley of Western Colorado. There are three Catholic churches in Grand Junction that offer Spanish-speaking services, with no Spanish-only Catholic churches. Having only one Evangelical Spanish-speaking church has resulted in the leadership of Iglesia Roca Eterna church having much pressure to continue to grow the church and put pressure on the training of the next generation.

Current Trends in Latino Protestantism

Current trends show that historically Catholic Latinos are moving toward Protestantism. Iglesia Roca Eterna church members report that many more Latinos from other countries are coming to evangelical churches. “Regardless of their ethnicity or country of origin, first-generation Latino Americans may be gravitating toward Protestant churches because they’re more likely than at Catholic churches to find Latino pastors they identify with. No one has a comprehensive tally of all the Latino pastors across the country, but less than 10 percent of

² USAFacts, April 24, 2023, <https://usafacts.org/>.

Catholic priests are Hispanic, while a 2019 study of Hispanic Protestant churches found that 80 percent of Hispanic Protestant church planters are first-generation immigrants.”³

“The Latino/Hispanic population was the second largest in Mesa County, Colorado, coming in around 24,030 people⁴. The largest population in Mesa County, Colorado being white (non-Hispanic) computed at 136,575. Latinos are leaving the Catholic Church and converting to evangelical Protestantism in increased numbers, and evangelical organizations are putting more energy and resources toward reaching potential Latino congregants. Latinos are the fastest-growing group of evangelicals in the country, and Latino Protestants, in particular, have higher levels of religiosity—meaning they tend to go to church, pray, and read the Bible more often than both Anglo Protestants and Latino Catholics.”⁵

Between 2010 and 2021, in Mesa County, the share of the population that is Hispanic/Latino grew the most, increasing 1.9 percentage points to 15.3%.⁶

History of Youth in Latino churches

The interviewees reported that, experientially, in the past, the youth of Latino churches had not had significant roles in leadership. Most interviewees had grown up in Latino churches and felt they were not given much support and encouragement. “We, especially the girls, were supposed to attend church and all associated events but not cause trouble or open our mouths.” Leaders have in the past not encouraged or helped the youth of the church to gain higher education. If a teen showed interest in the church’s

³ Meaghan Winter, “The Fastest-Growing Group of American Evangelicals,” *The Atlantic* (Atlantic Media Company), accessed April 24, 2023, <https://www.theatlantic.com/>.

⁴ Nonpartisan Government Data,” USAFacts, April 24, 2023, <https://usafacts.org/>.

⁵ Mark T. Mulder, *Latino Protestants in America: Growing and Diverse* (S.l.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021).

⁶ “Migration Policy Institute,” [migrationpolicy.org](https://www.migrationpolicy.org/), April 1, 2023, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/>.

leadership, the leaders would usually allow the youth to participate and learn “on-the-job training” without the encouragement of ordination or higher educational degrees. Mendez says, “This seems to come as a result of the organic or less-formalized leadership development dynamics and practices present within Latino congregations, where leaders often develop by being actively involved in leadership actions without necessarily first following a curriculum of study, completing a training program, or fulfilling a set of theological education requirements.”⁷

The leadership of Iglesia Roca Eterna church reported that getting training for the youth who are interested in the leadership of their church is a high priority. “One of our teens is pursuing a degree in music at Colorado Mesa so they can become a worship pastor.”

Iglesia Roca Eterna church also has a vision for reaching the lost for the Lord. The Apostle spends much of his time preaching, teaching, and participating in spiritual events in Mexico and Cuba. He was recently in San Juan Chamula, Chiapas, Mexico, in April with one of the teens from the church. The two helped facilitate a revival. The teen reported that his heart was changed and had come home with a desire for people he did not have before going.

Social Structure of the Church

Strong family dynamics are the main goals of this church’s social structure. Food is a significant symbol of family and God’s blessing to the Iglesia Roca Eterna church. God provides the food, and each member gets to share it with the church family. “The family dinners remind me of home. I feel like I am a part of the community when we sit down to eat together.”

⁷ Tamez Elizabeth Méndez, “Leadership Development among Youth in Latino Congregations: The Relationship of Religious Participation to Social Service Involvement and Engagement in Leadership Tasks” (dissertation, n.d.).

Once a month, Iglesia Roca Eterna church has a “family meal.” After the Sunday service, the church “family” comes together for a meal on the first Sunday of the month. Everyone in the congregation brings a dish to share with others. This is a time to fellowship, laugh, and eat together. The many dishes were made with pride. People would taste and look at all the food, then complement each other on their dishes. The teens had the responsibility of the dessert table. “I love to make yummy desserts, and I feel like I have a way to participate with my family,” said one youth.

Interviewees also stated that providing food for the hungry in the community and abroad is extremely important to the church. The church’s commitment to sharing the gospel is represented by sharing the food God has abundantly provided for them.

Iglesia Roca Eterna church has a top-down approach to the decision-making, leadership, and management of the church. Starting with Apostle having the most power and control, to then the senior pastors, next the administrators, and lastly, the general congregant. The church is led mainly by the family of the Apostle, his son and daughter-in-law, and his wife. The Apostle and his family have the most power and control of Iglesia Roca Eterna church because they are the founders and visionaries.

Although Iglesia Roca Eterna Church is not affiliated with a governing organization or denomination, they partner with Iglesia Casa de Alabanza church in Silt, Co. Iglesia Casa de Alabanza church is 70 minutes away, so it cannot be a weekly partnership. Iglesia Casa de Alabanza church and Iglesia Roca Eterna Church often try to support each other and work with one another striving for the same goal.

Iglesia Roca Eterna is centered on congregational worship and prayer. Most of the individual respondents spoke about spending time together in the worship of God as an essential

aspect of their church. At Iglesia Roca Eterna, the whole congregation is asked to praise and sing out loud. The music is very important to the congregation. “Singing praise songs during the worship time is my favorite part of the service.”

An interviewee explained that the music time used to use just a keyboard and a vocalist. The church youth wanted more instruments, so the church bought a drum set and a bass guitar. Currently, the worship time is led mainly by the teens in the church. The leadership allows the teens to have a lot of responsibility and flexibility regarding music. Yet another way the leadership is focusing on the equipping of the youth.

Prayer time is extremely important to the church and is planned so that it extends to the whole congregation. Adequate time is scheduled for extended times for prayer. One person will introduce the subject of prayer (i.e., a prayer for a specific person or event), then everyone participates and prays out loud for the prayer request. “When I pray with the congregation, I feel like I am a part of the process. I have been to other churches where the pastor or another person prayed for the whole congregation. I like being a part of the prayer time.”

Giving tithes and offerings is reported as helping build unity in the body and being a physical symbol of God’s blessing during the worship service. Tithes and offerings are taken up at the front of the sanctuary during the singing portion of the worship service. Everyone walks up to the front of the sanctuary to give their tithe or offerings happily. “Giving tithes to God with our church family allows us to worship Him and give Him glory for the blessings that He gives to our community.” The tithes and offerings represent God’s goodness, generosity, and faithfulness to His church.

The Iglesia Roca Eterna church’s emphasis on activities outside the formal church services shows their involvement in relationship enrichment. In April 2023, Iglesia Roca Eterna

church hosted the Men's Congress, a two-day preaching and worship time for men. The men and young men worshipped, prayed, and learned together as guest pastors and worship bands came together for a weekend. The Iglesia Roca Eterna "is committed to getting the men of the church together as least once a quarter."

The women also have a conference planned for the spring of 2023. Iglesia Roca Eterna and Iglesia Casa de Alabanza church in Rifle will combine their women to have a conference.

Iglesia Roca Eterna church has a big emphasis on sharing the gospel. The Apostle spends much time building up other Latino pastors and churches. He often returns to Mexico to lead revivals and preach the gospel message. In April 2023, the Apostle held a revival in Mexico. The Apostle believes his "calling is to help his church in Grand Junction to grow and glorify the Lord, Jesus Christ, and to also bring the Gospel message to the people of Mexico."

The people of Iglesia Roca Eterna church want to see all members participate in the church in whatever way possible. Each practicing member is treated like a family member, each with a place in the church's extended family.

Hierarchy in the church

The roles of the church would be labeled as egalitarian. The women share leadership, teaching, and preaching positions with the men in the church. One of the two senior pastors is a female. Women are allowed to fulfill any role to which God is calling them.

Men and women of different families typically do not socialize or sit together. During the many events of the church, men are grouped together with other men, and women are grouped together with other women or families just stay together. The teens move more freely within the gender categories.

Teen roles

The teens at Iglesia Roca Eterna are given a lot of responsibility. The teens are involved in administration, preaching, worship, and teaching. The teens are given leadership and encouraged to pursue ministry and higher education if that is their calling from the Lord.

The teens are seen as the church's future and are given much attention and focus.

Migration chain

Grand Junction has two main areas of the labor force that bring seasonal workers from Latino countries. First, Grand Junction, although located in the high desert of Western Colorado, has a temperate climate and perfect soil to grow peaches and grapes. Over 30 wineries in Mesa County, Colorado, allow for many seasonal jobs. Many Mexicans come to Grand Junction from Mid-May to the end of September for work in the vineyards.

Iglesia Roca Eterna church has participated in recruiting Latinos from Mexico to join this seasonal labor force to help provide jobs, food, and money.

Interview reports explained how many seasonal vineyard workers return to Mexico and bring individuals back to Grand Junction to work. Many others follow as individuals return home to Mexico and tell family and friends about their experiences. The circular migration chain keeps the migration of seasonal workers steady, which gives Iglesia Roca Eterna church a constant population of individuals to share the gospel.

The second form of labor is with the oil and gas industry in Grand Junction. These workers will come to Grand Junction to work in the oil and gas fields to earn money for their families. After a specific project is finished, these workers will go back to Mexico until called again for another project. Iglesia Roca Eterna church has a role in helping those in Mexico that need work. These workers are then supported by the Iglesia Roca Eterna church families, relationships are built, and the gospel message is preached. Iglesia Roca Eterna church is using

immigration from Mexico to Colorado as an opportunity to support many immigrants by helping with jobs and housing and sharing the gospel message of Jesus Christ.

Most Iglesia Roca Eterna church activities are centered around sharing the gospel with non-believers and the growth and equipping of the children.

The church building is small compared to the other churches in Grand Junction. Other than the sanctuary, there is only one other area in the church, the fellowship hall. This room has a kitchen and two bathrooms and holds the children's church area. The church has a dedicated area for the children's church which is about half of the space of its fellowship hall. It seems evident that the children of Iglesia Roca Eterna church are very important.

The body of Iglesia Roca Eterna church believers spends much time and effort supporting its youth.

The leaders have designated times for question-and-answer sessions with the adults and teens. These sessions allow church teens to talk to adults about potentially confusing topics, discuss current events, and even anonymously ask questions that would be hard to ask in person.

It was reported that implementing the question-and-answer sessions was important for the older congregants because they felt they were not allowed to ask questions or express doubts in their youth.

The youth are encouraged to participate in the leading of the Sunday service. During the Sunday services, many teens play in the worship band, facilitate prayer, and provide technical support. Interviewees reported that the leadership wanted to have youth representation in all areas of the ministry. On any particular Sunday, you may find a young person in the sound booth running the technical equipment, playing music in the worship band, or greeting people at the front door.

Iglesia Roca Eterna church members are Latino Christians with a vision for their church community to be like family, serve those around them, and help other Spanish-speaking people gain resources and hear the gospel message of Jesus Christ. Another primary goal of the Iglesia Roca Eterna church is to help equip and educate the next generation of believers to enable the church and the ministries initially started by the Apostle.

Field Notes #1
Jennifer Hanly
People as Social and Cultural Beings

Roca Eterna Iglesia church

Wednesday evening Bible study 7:00 pm, 02/08/2023.

When I arrived, I was greeted by the retired pastor, Doris. She was extremely friendly but seemed a bit confused or at least curious about why I was there.

Upon entering, I was surprised to find out that I was about to attend a Bible study and not a Wednesday night service. The church website and the church's sign on the front lawn advertised a Wednesday night service.

The eight tables were arranged in a rectangle where everyone could face others across from them.

The pastor's wife was informed by the retired pastor's wife (her mother-in-law) that I was there. She came over to question me. I was forced to tell her about my seminary and ethnography assignments. She seemed very skeptical at first. Providentially, I recognized her as a former Spanish teacher of my eldest daughter. She warmed up after we talked for a while.

Many people were standing around and talking before the study began.

When the study started, I was introduced to everyone and told why I was there. Everything was spoken in Spanish, but another couple was there who were English speakers only, so we had a translator for the whole study.

The Bible study room was in an older room with cement walls and floors. Doris told me the ceiling had just been replaced because of water damage. Doris also told me that she and her husband had retired from the ministry around five years ago, and her son took over the senior pastor role.

We had a time of intercessory prayer where everyone shared their prayers, and everyone prayed out loud at the same time.

Field Notes #2
Jennifer Hanly
People as Social and Cultural Beings

Roca Eterna Iglesia church

Wednesday Night Youth Group, 02/15/23, 7:00 pm

I arrived to find that the youth group was having a special night. The youth kids had previously written questions about the Christian walk, faith, and spirituality. The kids ranged in age from 14-22 years old. I was told that the church leadership liked to hold the Q&A occasionally.

This time was spent honestly answering the questions that the older youth had. For instance,

- 1) What has been your biggest regret?
- 2) Have you ever doubted God?
- 3) How do you avoid temptation?
- 4) How do you know God exists?
- 5) Have you ever done anything that you felt you could not be forgiven for?

The adults seemed very interested in helping the youth kids answer their questions.

The kids sat at one end of the square of tables while the adults sat on the other side, but the kids did not seem intimidated. The kids seemed very respectful when talking to adults using terms like senior, pastor, and Apostle.

The kids seemed interested in hearing the answers to the questions but not necessarily wanting to add anything to the discussion at that time. I wanted to ask if the questions had been asked anonymously or not. It seemed like most of the children's parents were in attendance.

After the question-and-answer segment, the kids were released into a different room while the adults had their Bible study. The kids were then led in worship together.

The youth group seemed generally interested in worship. Most kids seemed to be singing, and some genuinely praised God. The older teens led the worship.

I tried not to interfere and left right after the worship time ended. I did not feel it was appropriate for me to stay and talk like I have in the other services.

Field Notes #3
Jennifer Hanly
People as Social and Cultural Beings

Roca Eterna Iglesia church

Sunday Morning Service, March 5, 2023, at 11:00 am

I attended a Sunday morning church service. Surprisingly, I arrived just a few minutes before 11:00, and the sanctuary was locked. I found that most people were not yet there, but the few there were talking in the fellowship hall.

I was again met by Doris, and we had a friendly chat. Her English is very good, and she is very welcoming. She continued to introduce me to other women I had not met.

Eventually, the sanctuary doors were opened, and we could sit down. Most people greeted each other with hugs and kisses. Families sat together in a pew. I was given a welcome page and asked if I would complete my information. I was greeted by the retired pastor who was preaching that day. He remembered me from my previous visits. I noticed that Christian music was playing, but it was in English.

The service started with the band playing contemporary music. A young man from The band sang English songs that I knew, vacillating between English and Spanish verses. Most people sang (when led in Spanish), and many raised their hands. Like previous events, the participants were asked to pray out loud for their own dependency on God. The whole congregation started speaking at once while they prayed. Many hallelujahs and praises were verbalized during the service.

Next came the announcements. I, along with two other visitors, was introduced and welcomed. Other announcements were given, and the retired pastor was asked to come forward. He first talked about his upcoming mission trip to Mexico.

He then moved on to his sermon. He preached on John 5:1-17. HE spoke about perseverance in the faith. As he preached, he became louder and louder until the sound was hurting my ears.

Many amens and Gracious Senior was heard.

A tithe was taken where everyone had to come to the front to give their offering. From what I could see, most people gave money.

Field Notes #4
Jennifer Hanly
People as Social and Cultural Beings

Roca Eterna Iglesia church

Sunday “family dinner,” March 5, 1:00 pm.

I was invited to join everyone for lunch, so I agreed. I believed that this was the kind of event that would be good for observation.

The female pastor opened the prayer, and just like other prayer times, everyone joined and prayed out loud at the same time. I felt very connected to the church and could freely pray and give thanks, for I had now been in a few prayer times with the congregation.

There was a lot of food. It seemed that everyone was incredibly proud of what they had brought. Most people sat with their families. Kids sat with their families, not with each other. I sat with a single woman who spoke English reasonably well. She was a good information source and seemed not bothered by answering questions.

I spoke to the only non-Spanish-speaking couple at the church. They told me that they were missionaries from Thailand. The wife was actually from Thailand, so she had also immigrated. I asked why they attended a Spanish-speaking church when they both spoke English well. They told me this church had a sense of family they could feel when they first arrived. They wanted to be a part of a body of believers who were very committed to each other. They also said that culturally, they felt more at home at this church. (for instance, the food was spicier). There are no Thai churches in Grand Junction.

I noticed the teens sitting at different tables with all the desserts. I asked about it and was told that the teens provided the desserts for the table.

Everyone smiled at me, but no one talked to me. The men did not smile long and did not give me eye contact. It seemed that there was either a group of all men, groups of all women, or family units, besides the teens, who were a mix of genders.

Doris joined me for dessert and told me a lot about the history of the church. She and her husband were the founding members.

People seemed relaxed and comfortable with one another. After the food was consumed, most people stayed and talked. Everyone was still there when I decided to leave.

Field Notes #5
Jennifer Hanly
People as Social and Cultural Beings

Roca Eterna Iglesia church

Sunday Morning Service, 11:00 am, 04/16/2023.

I arrived early and found that no one was in the parking lot. I waited in my car until 11:00 and then went into the church. The teens were still practicing the worship music, so everyone stayed in the fellowship hall.

I was immediately greeted by Maria and Doris. I felt that I was finally being accepted by some of the church members. Others still looked like they questioned why I was there.

I could practice my Spanish with Maria, who seemed generally pleased that I was trying to speak her language.

The church service started about 15 minutes late, yet many people trickled in even later. As I entered, I recognized worship music that was playing in English.

The worship team was joined by Mrs. Guajardo, who led the vocals. To my surprise and delight, they interweaved a few verses in English of two worship songs. I was able to really worship and praise God, not only because some of the music was in my language but because I was becoming comfortable in the church.

Apostle Guajardo and his grandson were in Mexico, so Mrs. Guajardo led the service.

They started with an extended time of prayer. Mrs. Guajardo would look at a list (of prayer requests) and tell the congregation the subject of prayer. Everyone would pray out loud the prayers of their heart. Mrs. Guajardo would then proceed down her list of requests. She ended the prayer time by asking everyone to pray for anything not already covered. This last prayer time

was the loudest. I tried not to look around at the people praying, but I could hear so many voices that I was sure most people were praying.

Mrs. Guajardo gave the message out of 1 Samuel 10.

After the service, I asked Maria about the words on the wall. Amar, Crecer, and Servir. She told me that they were the creed of the church. Love, grow, and serve. She told me they wanted to love God and his people, grow spiritually, help the younger generations grow spiritually, and serve the people God put in their church.

I talked with Judah, one of the older teens in the church.

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