

## **An Analysis of the Spanish-Speaking Congregation of Grace Christian and Missionary**

### **Alliance Church: Implications of Intentional, Culture-Informed Differences**

Grace en Español is the Spanish-speaking campus of Grace Christian and Missionary Alliance Church near Cleveland, Ohio. Grace is a large, multi-ethnic suburban church averaging approximately 3,000 in-person congregants each Sunday. Grace Church has four physical campuses which include its main suburban campus in Middleburg Heights, Ohio; another suburban campus about 15 minutes away in Olmsted Falls; a prison campus, and Grace en Español. Grace en Español has been meeting in its present form since September, 2021, though it began as a Grace Church Sunday School class several years ago and served a short stint as an independent church before the congregation voted to become a campus of Grace Church.

This small ethnography includes observations and information from four consecutive visits to Grace en Español, interviews with two pastors and three young adults who were first-time visitors to Grace en Español and conversations with a recent immigrant from Puerto Rico who is an active member of Grace Church who chose not attend Grace en Español because he'd prefer to worship in English.

The long history and intentionally close relationship between Grace en Español and the wider body of Grace Church allows for significant cultural observations to be made based on the intentional differences Grace en Español has chosen to adopt in contrast to the English-speaking congregations. Observation and discussion of the intentional liturgical decisions made by Grace en Español reveals an exceptionally high value of hospitality and relational warmth within the culture of Grace en Español which expresses itself in this congregation's attitude toward newcomers as well as their charismatic and emotionally expressive worship.

### **History of Puerto Rican Immigration to Cleveland**

Puerto Rico has been a U.S. Commonwealth since 1952, and as such, Puerto Ricans are born as citizens of the United States. According to Jorge Duany, the island's political situation has "facilitated the relocation of nearly 1.8 million persons to the United States since 1898." He goes on to add that, "today, more than half of all persons of Puerto Rican origin live outside the island." (Duany, 6). According to the 2020 census, there are over 46,000 Puerto Ricans in Cuyahoga county, making it the largest Hispanic population in the county (Smith, 2022). This is the county that contains Cleveland, Grace en Español, and Grace Church's two suburban English-speaking campuses.

### **Demographics, Background and Inclusive Leadership**

The demographics of Grace en Español are made up of several factors. Ethnically, most of Grace en Español's congregants are of Puerto Rican descent. There are also members from several other Spanish-speaking countries including Cuba, Mexico, Honduras and El Salvador. A few congregants are not Latino themselves but are married to Latinos. The age demographics were spread quite evenly among their approximately 30 congregation members each week observed. Consistently, there were several children, teenagers, young adults, adults in their 30s-60s, and senior adults present. The children, though present, were entertained with electronic devices during the services and played together afterwards. Teenagers were present in the congregation as well as serving behind the camera, and in the worship band. Adults were also serving in various capacities.

The leadership and volunteer opportunities among the congregation were clearly shared across demographics. Women and men both served in the worship teams, though the worship leaders were all women. Women and men also both served the offering, on the greeting team,

and leading Bible studies in their homes. In accordance with their denominational guidelines, the pastors are exclusively men, however this does not stop women from leading in significant shepherding roles, such as congregational prayers, scripture reading, songs, and Bible studies. A value for volunteer engagement across generations and genders was clearly on display during the four weeks observed.

Grace en Español began as a Spanish class offered at Grace Church on Sunday mornings to supplement the English services until it grew to enough people to begin having worship and preaching services. This eventually led the congregation to be faced with a decision whether or not to become an independent church or to remain closely connected with Grace Church. A pastor was hired, who, according to current Co-Pastor Luis, made decisions without much consent from the congregation. Pastor Luis shared that the congregation did not receive this well, as they shared a high value of making decisions through congregational discussion. This pastor made the decision to make the Spanish congregation an independent, unique from the leadership of Grace Church. Ultimately, Pastor Luis explained, the tension between the congregation and this hired Pastor led to his resignation as he took a different position elsewhere. Pastors Christian and Luis were then selected as pastors in his place, and after long conversations with the congregation and Grace Church leadership, a decision was made to become a campus of Grace Church, rather than becoming their own independent local church. In this model, Grace en Español is under the leadership of Grace Church's governance and mission statement. Sermons are selected by the Senior Pastor of Grace church, and, upon Pastor Christian and Pastor Luis' request, Grace en Español follows the preaching schedule of Grace Church as a whole, because of their desire to remain tightly associated with Grace Church as a whole.

Pastors Christian and Louis have been sharing the leadership responsibility of the congregation. They trade-off the weeks in which they preach and lead Sunday school classes. Both have full-time jobs and families outside of their pastor responsibilities, and both of them are actively working towards ordination in their denomination. They were selected from within the congregation to pastor together as this congregation walked through their tumultuous time of leadership transition. Pastors Christian and Luis have carefully navigated the cultural dynamics present in their congregation and have been dedicated to a leadership style that fits the consensus-based decision making leadership style that their congregation prefers.

It is notable that, with a high value on congregation consent in decision making, the decision this congregation came to together was to remain very closely associated with the larger body of Grace Church when they made the decision to become a campus. This was a vote in favor of the mission, leadership, and overall ministry model of Grace Church. The reason that this is significant for our study is that this decision to remain closely tied to Grace Church did not mean Grace en Español chose to completely assimilate their campus' culture to the dominant culture that makes up most of the congregants and leaders in the English-speaking campuses of Grace Church. Therefore, the distinctive cultural elements that Grace en Español has chosen to strategically maintain as part of their identity are A) significant because they are preserved against the status quo of the dominant culture and B) clear, because they can be seen in direct contrast to the culture of the English speaking campuses of Grace.

### **Migration Motivations and Family Importance**

Pastor Luis explained that many members of the Grace en Español congregation made the decision to move to Cleveland because of financial opportunities and the presence of family members in the area. He cited financial factors as the main catalyst for making the decision to

leave Puerto Rico, and family connections as the reason to choose the city of Cleveland as their new home. He mentioned anecdotally that things changed for him dramatically when moving to Cleveland and living with his uncle: “three months later I had a job, three months after that I had a car.” He soon found a Puerto Rican roommate he could rent an apartment with who had also moved to Cleveland for financial reasons and had also been living with a family member. Now that Pastor Luis is established with his own family, he is allowing family members from Puerto Rico to live with him while they get acclimated, with two nieces currently living in his house.

Another young adult, Caleb, who attends Grace Church and moved to Cleveland from Puerto Rico in 2021 has a similar story. Caleb said that he was able to find jobs easier and was being offered significantly higher wages for comparable jobs in Cleveland than in Puerto Rico. He was able to move to Cleveland because his sister-in-law already lived there (who’s uncle lived there before her). Now Caleb’s brother-in-law is living with Caleb while he finishes school and gets himself established in Cleveland. They both responded that it was because they already had family in the area who could help them become established.

This high value cultural value of hospitality is strategically advantageous for those moving from Puerto Rico to the Cleveland area, providing migrants with opportunities to receive the hospitality of family members, making this cross-cultural transition possible and eventually to turn around and offer the same to their family members. One would imagine that this system of hospitality would be honored and protected with care, as it has been a critical factor in allowing many members of the Grace en Español congregation to become established in the Cleveland area. According to Jorge Duany, upon arrival to metropolitan areas in the United States, Puerto Ricans often share subordinate positions within their metropolitan societies, largely as a consequence of colonial racism, despite conditions of legal equality (Duany, 81).

Imaginably, for those who experience this, or even perceive this as a possibility, the importance of having family to receive them and understand their journey is incredibly important as they get settled and acclimated to a new culture.

### **Hospitality at Grace en Español**

Pastor Luis discussed the importance of hospitality in the culture of his church and explained it as a theological conviction for them. This is one of the areas in which Grace en Español had strategically chosen to differ from the practices of the English-speaking congregations at Grace. In explanation of their value of hospitality, he said that he doesn't want anyone to enter his congregation and feel "like a cockroach between a lot of chickens, and they're gonna eat me." On a more serious note, he said that the church is "not a museum for the saints, it's a hospital for the sick." He explained that he believes people can experience the love of Christ through a simple friendly greeting, a hug, or a formal welcome into the congregation, and that it's very important that they have a positive first experience in church.

The prominence of hospitality as a value in the congregation is evident in several ways. Upon entering and leaving, congregants are warmly greeted, often with a hug, and on a few occasions even with kisses on the cheek. Newcomers are noticed and given a newcomer survey during the singing portion of the service. These surveys are handed to the pastor towards the end of his sermon, and during the announcements, the newcomers are welcomed publicly and celebrated. On one occasion a newcomer had accepted Christ as her Savior during the service and this was also celebrated during the time of announcements. Also included in the announcements were greetings to family members whom the pastor knew were visiting from out of town and prayer requests for congregants who had needs.

These efforts at making visitors feel warmly welcomed were very effective. In a very brief post-service interview with three young adults who visited Grace en Español for the first time, the hospitality and kindness of the congregation was the part of their experience that they wanted to talk about the most. They were excited about how well they were treated, and how kindly they were received and expressed a desire to return because of the warmth and friendliness of the environment.

When asked about the mission behind having a Spanish-speaking congregation, Pastor Luis explained the value of having a Spanish-speaking congregation in terms of the hospitality it provides. He mentioned again his heart for people to have access to the love of Christ, and so his mission is to provide people with “another option” for worship. He explained that many who migrate from Puerto Rico and other Spanish-speaking countries don’t speak very much English, so their primary purpose is to welcome them and offer them an option for worship. He also mentioned the hospitality of many in the congregation who come, not because it is their own preference to worship in Spanish, but because one of their family members (often who live with them) only speaks Spanish, so they attend together intentionally.

Not all Spanish-speakers choose Grace en Español over the English-speaking campuses. Caleb, mentioned above, is an example of a recent migrant in his early 20s who prefers to worship in English. When asked why he thinks some people who migrate from Puerto Rico choose Spanish-speaking congregations while others, like him, choose English-speaking congregations, he said “I usually feel more myself speaking English, but that’s not to say I reject my roots and my first language.” This concept did not seem to bother Pastor Luis, who is not competitive about keeping Spanish-speakers who prefer to worship in English in his congregation; he's happy to see people connect with Christ, and that remains his focus.

### **Experiential and Emotive Worship**

Interestingly, a connection can be observed between the Grace en Español's hospitable warmth and their approach to worship. One of the more obvious areas where Grace en Español intentionally incorporates practices that are distinct from the English-speaking campuses of Grace church is their experiential and emotionally involved worship. Part of this is due to song selection. The songs they chose were about 15% songs that were translated from English that are also sung in the English-speaking congregation. The remaining 85% were songs that were originally written in Spanish by Latinos. The majority of these songs written in Spanish contain a notably strong emphasis on themes of having an experiential and emotional experience with God. One song that they sang multiple times in the four weeks observed expresses the concepts of spiritual hunger in deeply emotive language. This song describes the worshiper's hunger for the lord as debilitating, painful and desperate for the presence of God. This sentiment of longing to be in an experiential moment that impacts one's emotions was not isolated to this song, but was present within the majority of songs chosen.. Interestingly, even those songs that were translated from English we've also songs that contain these experiential themes that may be more influenced by charismatic tendencies than many of the songs sung at Grace church's other campuses that more often highlight doctrine and an intellectually-based worship. This difference in song selection, with especially with special focus on the emotive experience of worship, seems to match nicely with the warm, friendly, and emotionally connected hospitality of the culture of Grace en Español. It seems that the same warmth and emotional connection that this

congregation shares with one another is also naturally expected from their connection and relationship with God.

In other ways, Grace en Español reveals a charismatic influence when compared to the other campuses of Grace church. For example, on three out of the four occasions observed, both pastors, Luis and Christian, changed the course of their actions based on something they sensed the Holy Spirit saying in the middle of the service. Both of them sensed a prompting from the Spirit to pray for a congregation member after they concluded their preaching and engaged in fervent prayer with these congregation members. After seven years worth of observations of the other campuses of Grace church, spontaneous actions like this, prompted by the Holy Spirit, in the middle of the Sunday morning service have rarely, if ever been observed.

### **Pentecostal Missionary Influence on Central and South America**

A connection can be made between the spread of charismatic forms of Christianity, such as Pentecostalism in Latin America, and the way that this plays out in the Grace en Español congregation. Of this Pentecostal movement, Samuel Cruz points out that

“In 1906, the year in which Pentecostalism was founded at the Azusa Street revival in California, less than one percent of Puerto Ricans belonged to or participated in Protestant/evangelical churches. Since the 1930’s however, over 40% of the population of Puerto Rico has become evangelical; of these an overwhelming majority are Pentecostal” (Cruz, 126).

Timothy Tennent, in his discussion on the spread of Pentecostalism in Latin America, lists four major theological and practical distinctions that all Pentecostals hold in common, including “expressive forms of worship, including lifting hands, dancing, shouting, and clapping” in his list of Pentecostal distinctives (Tennent, 167). Grace Church theologically aligns with all four of these distinctives, although the majority of congregants at the English-speaking campuses are not noticeably expressive in their worship. On this matter of expressiveness in

worship, Grace en Español is decidedly more expressive in their worship than the English-speaking campuses. Hands are raised in worship, hands clap, and on one occasion observed, someone who was not on the platform was praying loudly from among the congregation, at times ringing out more loudly than the amplified music.

Samuel Cruz points out a very interesting fact that Pentecostalism came to Puerto Rico through a Puerto Rican man named Juan Luco, and, citing Anna Adams, points out that pentecostalism continued to spread among Puerto Ricans in both Puerto Rico and in the United States through fellow Puerto Ricans, rather than being introduced by cross-cultural missionaries. He points to the significance of this observation, saying: “This unique aspect of Puerto Rican Pentecostalism is important in its development, because, although Lugo was influenced by the North American variant of the Pentecostal movement, its origins are very authentic to Puerto Rican culture, cosmology and religious outlook” (Cruz 129). This observation that there is cultural overlap between Puerto Rican culture and the nuances of charismatic expressions of worship would inform observations regarding the intentionally charismatic expressions of worship expressed in the Grace en Español congregation. The relational warmth expressed through physical affection and expressive hospitality that flows naturally through congregants of Grace en Español toward each other are also naturally expressed in their worship to the Lord. A longing for a nearly physically affectionate experience with the Lord is expressed through their worship and their generous use of their bodies as instruments of worship.

### **Conclusion**

The testimony of several inside informants alongside observations regarding the intentional choices Grace en Español has made to preserve certain elements of their culture in contrast to the larger body of Grace Church reveals much about the beauty of this church’s

commitment to warm and expressive hospitality as well as passionately expressive worship. The decision to remain closely tied to the larger body of Grace Church, though it has presented many complicated questions regarding assimilation and ministry philosophy, Grace en Español has established itself as an extremely important option for many migrants and immigrants to the Cleveland area while standing as a powerful witness to the English-speaking campuses of the power of hospitality and the beauty of unhindered expression in worship.

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## Week 1 - 3/5

I entered the room where the church meets about 10 minutes before the service started. I had talked to Pastor Louis, letting him know I was going to be attending for four weeks. I wanted him to know that he didn't need to accommodate me at all, or translate. He **wanted me to hear from the Lord too**, so He told me to sit next to a particular person who would help translate. She was up front, and I felt the need to observe from the back, so I didn't sit by her.

In the songs I understood about 90% of the lyrics since I could read them and they're repetitive. In the preaching I probably understood 30% of his words. Prayer about 50%

There were about 30 people in the room, mostly between 40-60. 3 teenagers, 3 kids. Two attendees were white (not including me), one was black, and the rest were Latino. It didn't seem like families were sitting together? Need to observe more next week.

The service started about 5 minutes late because the keyboardist forgot her glasses in her car. An older gentleman took her keys and found her glasses for her. As they were preparing for worship and waiting for the glasses, the female worship leader was **taking the moment seriously**, singing under her breath to Jesus and remaining in a posture of worship.

A woman read scripture to open the service. **Half the congregation stood for the reading of scripture**. Maybe it was traditional for some but not others? Maybe it was because there wasn't clear instruction?

**Worship was passionate**. They sang one song translated from English (Graves into Gardens), 2 songs that were original in Spanish, and the 4th song I wasn't sure if it was originally English. They sang all of them with passion and vocal strength. A few members of the congregation had their hands up in worship. The 4 teenagers and kids (who were not on the platform) were not engaged and remained seated and playing with their phones.

Both of the songs that were originally written in Spanish were about the human emotional response to being in the presence of God. They sang about desire, trembling, crying, singing, and devotion. **The melodies in these songs were strategically written and sung to match these powerfully emotional lyrics**. Two women and a young boy led the vocals, all singing passionately, though the boy was not physically expressive. One of the pastors played bass, the white female attendee played keyboard, and a teenage boy played the drums.

During worship, the pastor's wife approached the two newcomers and asked them to fill out a paper. After worship, during announcements, the pastor introduced me to the congregation, and then read from the newcomer cards and introduced the two new ladies by name. He was also aware of someone's relative who was visiting and acknowledged and welcomed them. **Very relational!**

The preaching was relatable, passionate, thoughtful. From what I could understand, he used many references to daily life. He used an illustration of giving a woman a mediocre bouquet of flowers (which he had on stage) versus giving her a beautiful bouquet (which he revealed from back stage) as a metaphor for giving Jesus our complete devotion (I think, could have misunderstood the application). He made the congregation laugh a few times, and towards the end a few in the congregation were vocally saying "amen" to his points.

After preaching, during the final song, the pastor approached the two newcomers and asked if he could pray for them, which they invited.

The offering was passed in a serious way. Those who passed the plates held them up during the prayer for the offering. The two newcomers gave to the offering.

There were announcements about small groups and Bible studies, all of them except for the Sunday morning class **met in people's homes**.

The pastors were engaged with people immediately after the service, showing pastoral care to everyone.

I got the impression that hospitality is a very high value. That there is great reverence for traditions related to scripture and the offering. That people honor their pastors highly. Almost everyone dressed up more than at Grace, both pastors wearing suits and one of them wearing a tie.

## Week 2 - 3/12

I went with my son Silas and we showed up a few minutes late. Wish it was passionate again and focused on God's power this time. The sermon by Pastor Christian was very reverent and serious, with the theme of worship the themes for the sermons are chosen by the senior pastor, or whoever is preaching for our main campus, and sent to our Spanish church as an outline for them to work off of. They have requested this to keep their Sermon preparation time down as they both work full-time jobs outside of the church. This provides a unique opportunity to observe cultural differences. The senior pastor preached about worship as well, but without as much obvious emotional passion, Pastor Christian use the relevant illustration and make people understand the seriousness of God's power, but also towards the end lifted up the congregation to think about , the beauty of being in God's presence, and the power that comes from being in God's presence. It was very inspiring. There was a group of three young adults whom I found out. We're all medical students one pursuing her PhD, who attended for the first time Again they were given newcomer cards to fill out during worship. They were physically embraced after the service and I overheard them in the lobby afterwards speaking an English about how much they loved the people at this church, and they planned on coming back after Pastor Kristin's message I observed him as he heard a prompt from the Holy Spirit , he went up to play the bass

guitar during the last song but as he was reaching for the guitar, he changed his mind and got off the platform and prayed for a woman in the third row. They announced during announcements after the song that this woman had accepted Christ for the first time with Pastor Christian while Pastor Christian was praying she was praying with a lot of passion, and , his volume nearly match the volume of the amplified worship team. On the way out, I noticed the person who has greeting at the door was extremely warm and friendly, and was even kissing the Latinos on the cheek as they left. I awkwardly gave her a handshake, not knowing if a kiss would be appropriate .

## Week 3 - 3/19

There is consistently about 30 people in the congregation with a variation of about 10 of them being different people each week again there was a newcomer that they handed a welcome card to you. Pastor Luis's message was again both passionate and relevant and quite joyful. he began the message with some humor that really connected with the congregation and had everyone laughing, he brought an illustration including a wedding invitation that seem to connect well to the message. However, he speaks much faster than Pastor Christian, so I wasn't able to follow his message as well. This week the worship team was not present except for three vocalists who are using YouTube videos to leave the congregation , this did not subtract from any of their passion or ability to lead with spontaneous moments and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Again the music was mostly originally to Spanish, with only one English song that was translated, and again most of the songs were centered around the beauty of being in God's presence .

## Week 4: 3/26

Pastor wearing a bright pink tie, other bright colors.

Two classic Spanish songs about longing for his presence in opening set. First song was Dios Te Bendiga Hermano. They shook hands in the middle.

25 people, 5 kids, 3 teens

Pastor said they are mostly Puerto Rican, but members from Cuba, Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador, and people who aren't Latino but are married to Latinos.

Today's message stayed closer to the main campus's notes.

Pastor Christian was still very passionate.

Josiah Stumbo  
April 30, 2023

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They get there early to pray once a month at 7AM and skip breakfast until after their service at about 1:30. This fasting and prayer is for the church, to express their love for the Lord, and to pray for the requests that come in for their church. Then they have worship practice, lead a Sunday School class, and have their service.

The fellowship afterwards was very hospitable, they insisted that I eat with them and offered coffee and juice and donuts several times.