

Identity, Assimilation, and Transnationalism in Latino Immigrant Churches:
The Case of Recent Immigrants to Rural Pennsylvania

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Abstract

Church participation may have an important influence on the identities of Latino immigrants in the United States. Recent research suggests that Latino church communities foster either transnational identities that connect immigrant communities and their home countries or increased levels of political participation and civic engagement in the United States. This paper uses a case study of two Latino immigrant churches in central Pennsylvania to demonstrate that the local community environment, the ethnic makeup of the church and particular church practices are essential contextual factors that affect the ascription of identities. In these rural Latino churches, the lack of broad community support, the multiethnic congregations and the unique religious practices lead to neither transnationalism nor political participation. Instead, these churches demonstrate a collective and exclusive identity focused on day-to-day coping through faith in God and reliance on the church.

Introduction

The last two decades of mass migration from Latin America have led many scholars to examine why Latinos are coming to the United States, what they are doing once they are here, and how their migration affects the United States as a whole. Specifically, scholars have sought to understand what institutions have had important impacts on immigrant identities. One such institution, that of the church, was long overlooked as a key influence on immigrants' experiences and decision making (Hagan and Ebaugh 2003, Levitt 2004). Religious life and church organizations play a vital role in the identities and choices made by many immigrants. Past research suggests two patterns of immigrant church participation and identity construction. Some churches foster transnationalism, encouraging their members to strengthen their ties either

culturally, financially or politically with their home countries (Levitt 2004, Baia 1999, Hagan and Ebaugh 2003, Vasquez 1999) Other churches promote strong civic engagement and political participation within the United States, therefore encouraging patterns of integration (Jones-Correa and Leal 2001, Ecklund 2005). Key variables in determining the types of identities encouraged by the church are the ethnic makeup of the church, the local community environment and the uniqueness of specific church practices for the immigrants.

In this paper I use a case study of two Latino immigrant congregations in rural Pennsylvania to show how these variables shape immigrant identities in the context of a rural community. Through in-depth interviews with pastors and church members in addition to participant-observation over the course of two years, I find that the churches neither promote transnational ties nor civic engagement. Instead, both of these congregations focus on creating relatively exclusive community groups in which members build a collective identity based on day-to-day coping. The churches are both situated in rural towns that have little experience with Latino immigrants. The incoming immigrants are predominantly low income, yet hardly any community organizations provide social services in Spanish. Because of the dearth of community resources, the churches are forced to bear the burden of the tangible as well as the spiritual and psychological needs of many immigrants. The ethnic makeup and the unique religious practices within the churches discourage both transnationalism and civic engagement. These congregations are, however, essential to the construction of immigrant identities and the wellbeing of many of the participants. This paper will use the case study of the two rural immigrant churches to demonstrate the importance of church location, ethnicity and specific church practices in shaping Latino immigrant identities.

Transnational Ties and Civic Participation within the Immigrant Church

Churches inculcate beliefs and shape worldviews. They provide plausibility structures – i.e., ways of dealing with life’s puzzles – and they offer social norms. They make different assumptions about the innate goodness or depravity of humankind, formulate rationales for the design and purpose of political systems, and generate expectations about the end of time and the outcomes of salvation (Leege and Lyman 1993: 3)

For immigrants, churches use their structural and social powers to shape the way these newcomers negotiate life in a different nation. They are highly influential structures that can impact perceptions and identities. Churches shape identities through participation in communal events during and outside of services and build a culture around their actions (Leege and Lyman 1993). Recent studies of immigrant church congregations point to two types of identities constructed through church participation. The first common pattern is the promotion of transnational identities. In an era of technological innovation and globalization, scholars are noting a rise in transnational participation among many immigrants (Levitt 2001, Guarnizo et.al 2003, Vertovec 2004, Adler 2008). Because new technologies facilitate transportation and communication between the United States and immigrant sending communities, many immigrants are able to maintain close ties with their communities of origin while in the U.S. Some immigrants choose to continue to participate politically in their home countries while others use remittances or frequent travel to maintain hometown and familial ties (Vertovec 2004). These transnational ties have important implications for immigrant identities because they allow immigrants to maintain the cultural, social and political norms of their home countries while in the United States. Therefore, immigrants can adhere to traditional practices through the support provided by maintaining close ties with their communities of origin instead of past immigrants who were cut off from their traditional cultures and thus were more likely to participate in American culture, society and politics. One of the most important implications of

transnationalism is that it is transmitted to subsequent generations, continuing to impact second and third generation immigrants (Levitt and Waters 2002, Vertovec 2004).

Transnationalism is not universal among immigrants. Guarnizo and others (2003) demonstrate that transnational engagement varies among immigrants by age, gender, income and social capital. Furthermore, they state that “Transnational actions are socially bounded across national borders and occur in quite specific territorial jurisdictions” (1239). Levitt (2001) argues that specific immigrant organizations are central to maintaining close ties with hometown communities for Dominican immigrants. Transnational relations are reinforced through particular institutions and are acted on by specific groups of immigrants. One of the institutions that has the potential to greatly influence transnational identity is the immigrant church.

Latino immigrant churches are not a new phenomenon in the United States and can be traced back to Texas, where churches were founded by Catholic Mexican immigrants fleeing political and social unrest in Mexico at the beginning of the twentieth century (Badillo 2006). More recently, however, the contribution of these Latino churches to the migration process for some immigrants has been examined, as well as their impact on the formation of transnational identities or assimilation patterns (Levitt 2004, 2007, Baia 1999, Hagan and Ebaugh 2003, Vasquez 1999). The church is essential for the maintenance of traditional cultural practices and allows for migrants to participate politically in their home communities. Religion is also used in the migration process because the process itself is challenging. “The hypothesis suggested here is that migrants make more use of, or rely more strongly on, religion when they feel little control over the situations they confront; when risks are extremely high.” (Hagan and Ebaugh 2003: 1159).

The type of religion and particular religious practices influence the existence or absence of transnationalism in church congregations. Transnational relationships fostered by the church are often connected to other churches in the immigrants' home countries (Hagan and Ebaugh 2003, Levitt 2007). Therefore, a relatively uniform ethnic composition and shared religion with the country of origin are essential factors in determining transnationalism. Moreover, specific practices often link churches to one another. Maintaining religious ceremonies that were practiced in the country of origin greatly facilitates transnationalism. Immigrants continue to think of their actions as originating in their home countries, in contrast to immigrants who adopt a new denomination when they come to the U.S. or who adopt new religious practices within the same denomination. These distinctions lessen ties with home communities and strengthen ties within the American church (Baia 1999).

Current research on churches that promote transnationalism shares these central contextual variables. First, all of the studies that found strong transnational ties focused on religious organizations where the overwhelming majority of the congregation was from the same country (Levitt 2004 and 2007, Hagan and Ebaugh 2003, Baia 1999, Vasquez 1999). Political, cultural and social practices are most likely to be transmitted when there are consistent beliefs and values found in a shared nationality. Second, all of these congregations were in urban areas where the effects of globalization are most influential. Transportation and communication are facilitated by easy access to airports or the availability of internet connections.

Some argue that instead of transnationalism, churches promote civic engagement and political participation in the United States (Ecklund 2005, Jones-Correa and Leal 2001, Levitt 2008, Leege and Lyman 1993). Indeed, political action and religious institutions are often linked, and religious involvement is shown to increase political participation, especially in electoral

politics, for Latino immigrants (Jones-Correa and Leal 2001). Religion provides moral and divine justification for political actions or for political circumstances, such as undocumented noncitizen status, by conceptualizing the conditions through a religious, rather than purely political, lens (Leege and Lyman 1993). In immigrant congregations, issues such as justification for undocumented status or making primary connections within new communities are negotiated through church organizations (Jones-Correa and Leal 2001, Levitt 2008). A mutual understanding of political structures and civic engagement is often shaped by the political systems from which immigrants come (Levitt 2008). Immigrants' understanding of American ideals and the way that their churches dictate civic responsibilities depend on past experiences with politics as well as the local political structures in which immigrant congregations can participate (Jones-Correa and Leal 2001).

Political participation in immigrant churches does not require the same homogeneity that transnationalism entails. Ethnic makeup and variables such as age and socioeconomic status do not play a significant role in the development of political and civic involvement. Instead a church's role as an association linking individuals with outside connections and local resources is most likely to determine civic and political participation (Jones-Correa and Leal 2001). There is a debate among researchers about the role that specific religions and denominations play in transnational identity construction or civic engagement in the United States, especially when comparing Catholic and Protestant congregations. There may be some aspects in which religious denomination has an important role in maintaining transnational ties or developing civic ties in the U.S. and areas where it does not. Jones-Correa and Leal (2001) argue that political participation in the U.S. for Catholic Latinos is virtually the same as that of Protestant Latinos. Instead of looking for denominational differences, they argue that the intensity of church

participation is the most significant indicator of political engagement. Levitt (2004) argues that Catholic Latino immigrant congregations are more effective at maintaining transnational citizenship and promoting more assimilatory patterns for their members because the Catholic Church is dominant both religiously and politically in the immigrants' countries of origin. The church therefore offers an "extended" pattern of transnationalism that allows immigrants to maintain political, social and religious connections to the Catholic Church in their home countries. Protestant immigrants are less likely to have strong political and social networks in their countries of origin, and therefore must "negotiate" a pattern of civic participation and transnational identity. Also, Protestants from predominantly Catholic countries are more wary of complete civic and political incorporation and engagement because of the connection between the Catholic Church and national politics in many Latin American countries.

The variables and contexts in which past research examined immigrant churches is vital to the understanding of patterns that will arise in this study's two Latino immigrant churches in Pennsylvania. The rural context, the multiethnic makeup of the churches, the unique modes of religious worship and immigrants' perceptions of their church communities and migration processes are all essential aspects of the way identities are constructed. We will examine each of these congregations in turn and then connect them to explain why these churches do not encourage transnationalism or political participation, and instead focus on daily coping mechanisms for their congregations.

Setting the Scene – Immigrants in Central Pennsylvania

Traditionally, Latino immigrants have lived in large immigrant receiving areas such as California, Texas, and New Mexico. Recently, however, an increase in the number of immigrants

as well as new policies and economic factors have spurred an internal migration of Latino immigrants from these traditional receiving areas to non-traditional receiving areas in the South, Midwest, and Northeast, and from large urban centers to rural towns (Kandel and Cromartie 2004, Barcus 2007, Cantu 1995, See Appendix A). These new receiving areas, especially rural towns, lack ethnic enclaves and established immigrant organizations found in larger urban areas, which are able to assist new immigrants in the migration and resettlement process (Logan, Zhang and Alba 2002). Therefore immigrants are forced, in a way, to start from scratch, building their own communities and organizations either with or without the help of the local communities that are receiving them (Woodrick, 2006). Because the trend of immigration to rural areas of the U.S. is on the rise, it is important to understand how immigrants negotiate their lives in communities that have never before received them; communities that themselves are often plagued with poverty, population loss, and aging populations (Fennelly and Leitner 2002, Adams 2002). Specifically, it is important to look at the way immigrants either follow or diverge from patterns of assimilation or transnational participation that have been observed in immigrants from traditional receiving areas.

Many areas of central Pennsylvania are now becoming homes to Latino immigrants for the first time. Indeed some areas are not only seeing communities of immigrants appear, they are receiving immigrants at some of the fastest rates in the country (See Appendix B). In 2006, for example, Luzerne County experienced the second highest growth rate of Latino immigrants out of all counties in the United States (Census 2006). I focus my research on Milton and Sunbury, small towns of 6,650 and 10,610, respectively. Both have shown noticeable growth in their Latino populations. According to the 2000 census, only 144 and 328 Latino inhabitants were recorded as living in Milton and Sunbury, making up 2.2% and 3.1% of the population (Census

2000). In the last decade, both towns have had considerable growth in their Latino population. The Latino populations are challenging to accurately count in rural areas for two reasons. First, and more broadly, undocumented immigrants are not counted in census data and can sometimes contribute to a significant portion of the growing Latino population nationwide. Second, census data is only collected and estimated every decade in small towns, unlike every five years in larger metropolitan areas. For these reasons the growth of the Latino populations in the areas of study is estimated by word of mouth, from pastors, store owners, local newspapers, and the observations of Latinos who were already settled in these areas.

For many communities in central Pennsylvania, the influx of Latino immigrants has been met with hostility and prejudice. Community actions range from using racist slurs and vandalizing areas where Latinos congregate to more institutional actions such as town ordinances that attempt to systematically force undocumented immigrants to leave. The prime example of such ordinances is in Hazleton, a small city in Luzerne County that attracted an immense amount of media attention around its proposed ordinance to instate stricter enforcement penalties on employers hiring illegal immigrants and landlords who provide housing to undocumented migrants. The ordinance was dismissed on the grounds that it violated the federal government's responsibility to regulate immigration, but it set the scene for a hostile environment towards all Latinos, legal or illegal, living in Hazleton. A similar ordinance, on a smaller scale, has been proposed but not enacted in Sunbury, one of the key research sites for this project. The local government in Milton has thought about proposing an ordinance focusing on illegal immigrants, but when the Hazleton ordinance failed in the courts Milton abandoned its efforts (Shaffer 2007). What these ordinances accomplish, if not their nominal goals, is to ostracize the Latino population. These ordinances and acts of racism represent underlying community fears about the

growing Latino population. They shape the Latino communities and how they build their lives in these rural towns. As we will see, these racist and fearful sentiments are largely influential in not only the construction of Latino church communities but the construction of Latino identities.

Research Methods

I identified two Latino churches in central Pennsylvania that entirely consist of Latino immigrants. Primera Iglesia Menonita, in Milton, is a Mennonite church, and Grace Evangelical, in Sunbury, is a Pentecostal church. I used two qualitative research methods to determine how the church environment and religion contributed to identity formation, especially around transnational participation and the migration process. First I conducted participant-observation at weekly church services, bible studies and church celebrations in addition to extra-curricular events such as baptisms, weddings, and local festivals. Participant-observation allowed me to experience group practices firsthand as well as observe behaviors and interactions between members of the church. I began participant-observation and informal interviews in spring 2006 and continued through fall 2007 and fall 2008. By recording and thematically organizing my fieldnotes I was able to understand recurring trends in group behavior and use this to complement interview material.

Apart from participant-observation I conducted in-depth interviews with members of each church. I carried out four formal interviews at each church. Because of differing worship patterns and through negotiations with church leaders, most of my formal interviews with members of Grace Evangelical in Sunbury were group interviews consisting of at least three individuals. At that church, I conducted informal interviews on an individual basis. All of my formal interviews at Primera Iglesia Menonita were individual interviews. The interviews were

carried out in English or in Spanish, according to the preference of the informants. Three of the four interviews at Primera Iglesia Menonita were conducted in English and all of the interviews at Grace Evangelical were carried out in Spanish. I translated the portions of the interviews that are used this paper. All formal interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. A standardized interview schedule was used for all interviews and interviews ran from between twenty minutes to an hour in length.

Latino Mennonites in Milton: a New Country, a New Religion

Primera Iglesia Menonita in Milton is now in its sixth year of existence. The proposal to establish a purely Latino Mennonite church was developed by the local Mennonite council, consisting of Mennonite church leaders from areas around Milton. The church leaders noticed a growing Latino population that they could not adequately serve because their churches did not provide services in Spanish. They knew that there was a Spanish Mennonite council in Lancaster, so they recruited two of its prominent members, Gloria and Richard, to plant a new, purely Latino church in Milton. Gloria and Richard, both from Puerto Rico, have been in the U.S. for more than twenty years and are both bilingual in English and Spanish, but they decided early on to carry out services in Spanish.

The church has grown in the last six years from just a few families to over 150 people attending Sunday services. About half of the church members are Puerto Rican. Gloria reports that there are more and more Mexicans and other nationalities such as Peruvians and Dominicans are represented as well. None of my informants were Mennonite before coming to Milton; their religious experiences ranged from no religious upbringing prior to their move to Milton, to traditional Mexican Catholicism, to a background in both Catholicism and Pentecostalism.

Their services do not follow the typical Mennonite archetype (Mennonite Church USA n.d.). Each Sunday the service begins with a time for “oración” or prayer. Members kneel on the ground and place their elbows on the pews to speak to God. Then the pastors lead the congregation in songs. Richard, the pastor, plays the guitar while two twin Peruvian girls play a drum set and a pair of congas. The congregation stands for what is usually an hour of singing, starting with slow worship songs and leading into a series of lively, rhythmic hymns that guide the congregation into passionate moments of clapping, dancing, and swaying. Occasionally during this time in the service a member will feel “taken by the Holy Spirit” and will burst into tears, shake their body, or shout praise to God. After the period of song, an offering is collected and the sermon begins. Gloria and Richard take turns with the hour long discourse, and occasionally a member of the church will give a sermon or there will be guest pastors from Mexico, Puerto Rico and other places who will speak to the congregation. After about three hours the services come to an end. Members of the church are invited to the front to “hear the Word of God.” Church leaders, including the pastors and other prominent long-time members, stand on the altar step and hold the head of one who wishes to “receive the Word of God” while a group of supporters stand behind the member in case he or she faints after receiving the Word. Fifteen to twenty members usually approach the altar at the end of the service, including men and women, young and old. The majority leave the altar crying. In almost two years of going to services I have witnessed almost all of the members of the church approach the altar at some point. When asked what the most important part of the service was for her, Gina, one of the members who often assists with the process, commented:

The last part [approaching the altar]...Especially the ones where they accept Jesus. That’s the best part. I think it’s the one that you see that they went through all the processes, praying and singing and listening to the Word understanding every single details and at the end they go to the front and ask for a prayer and

they are related to God like “I need you.” That’s the part that I really love the most. That’s the part that I really love.

Many of these rituals, from the modes of singing and praying to the altar ceremony at the end of the service, stray from typical Mennonite practices. One day Richard told me that they have faced criticism from other Mennonite leaders for their modes of worship and their weekend-long retreats. He explained that many of the leaders do not understand their practices because they have grown up in different cultures. Richard says that his priority is to serve his church in the way he feels is the best, and that this results in occasional complaints and negotiations from the Mennonite church elders. “These are so important,” Richard said about the retreats, “We reach so many people, bring them closer to God. We can’t just stop them because they are different.” And the idea that this church is reaching members in a way that they have never been reached before is reflected in many member’s narratives. Jose, a middle-aged Mexican immigrant, explains the differences between the traditional Catholicism he practiced in Mexico, and the form of worship at Primera Iglesia Menonita.

Y entonces claro que es diferente nuestra manera de adorar al señor: como le adoramos, como le servimos, como dios se muestra con nosotros. Y entonces pues hay diferencias porque antes he ido yo a una, como le decimos, a una estatua de que pues yo ni...y siempre... [He hesitates] pero ya hoy que ya conozco verdaderamente la realidad, la verdad. Ya se a donde obtener el consuelo.

Translated: And so yes clearly our manner of worshiping God is different: how we worship him, how we serve him, how he is manifested with us. And so there are differences because before I had gone to a, how we say it, to a statue that I never...and always...[he hesitates] but now today I truly know the reality, the truth. Now I know where to obtain comfort.

All of the people I spoke to, both formally and informally, reported that for the first time they felt touched by God in a way that they never had in the past, and that this church had changed their relationship with God.

The church also provided members with more than just spiritual healing. Gloria explained that one of her key roles as a pastor was to provide people with services outside of the church. These services included helping newcomers find jobs and housing, driving members to appointments, delivering food, clothing and bedding to members in need, and translating for many who do not speak English. A number of members who I spoke with also reported receiving these services at some point.

Primera Iglesia Menonita therefore provides members with many religious and social services that they could not receive in any other place. Their modes of worship are distinct from both traditional Mennonite practices and other religious experiences that my informants reported before coming to the United States. By delivering the services in Spanish, the community is closed to those who cannot speak or understand Spanish. The church is constructed to fit the needs of immigrants from diverse backgrounds by developing practices that are exclusive and meaningful to its members and have an impact on their religious and non-religious lives. These practices are so important to the pastors that even complaints from Mennonite elders do not persuade them to change their methods of worship.

Pentecostal Migrants in Sunbury: the Spread of Pennsylvania's Latino Evangelists

Grace Evangelical in Sunbury is now in its ninth year. It is one of a few outgrowths of a Latino Pentecostal church in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. The Harrisburg church recognized the growing Latino population in Sunbury and sent two of its prominent members, Lulita and Francisco, to pastor the church. Francisco explained that the church grew from just twenty people to over one hundred during the past nine years. Similar to Primera Iglesia Menonita,

around half of the members are from Puerto Rico and the other half are split among a variety of countries such as Mexico, the Dominican Republic, and Honduras.

The mother church in Harrisburg is bilingual, and the church in Sunbury continues this bilingual tradition. Some of the songs are displayed on a projection screen with both English and Spanish portions. In addition, there are translators available for any attendees that do not speak Spanish. All of the members I spoke with, however, prefer to speak Spanish. Many of them do not know how to speak English. No non-Latino members attended the church on a consistent basis in the time that I did my fieldwork. In addition, the pastor and his wife speak limited English and all of the sermons are in Spanish.

Overall the worship services at Grace Evangelical in Sunbury accurately represent traditional Pentecostal practices. A typical service at Grace Evangelical has both distinct and similar practices to Primera Iglesia Menonita in Milton. Both churches use some of the same worship songs during the service. The songs at Grace Evangelical, however, do not progress into lively upbeat music and thus the members refrain from the same clapping, dancing and swaying that are so prominent at the other church. At the end of the services, members are encouraged to approach the altar to “receive the Word of God”, similar to the practice at Primera Iglesia Menonita. Significantly fewer members approach the altar, usually fewer than ten. Members at Grace Evangelical are much more likely to be verbal during services, commonly inserting a “Gloria a Dios,” “Santo,” or “Ohhhh Dios,” into the pastor’s sermons.

The church offers a variety of opportunities for members to develop their faith. They hold weekly bible studies. Every year they hold a bible school that trains select members in specific biblical texts and culminates in a graduation at the end of the year. Many of my informants expressed that the services at the church were unlike any that they had received before. In

addition, the church helps many of its members by providing food, job assistance, and other needs.

Many members point to their pastors as spiritual leaders that helped them to forge a relationship with God unlike any they had before. At a bible study one morning, Maria, an elderly woman from Puerto Rico, explained to me what the pastors had done for her:

Ellos han sido más que pastores, ellos han sido mis padres espirituales. Ellos han sido mis amigos, mis padres verdaderos, no solamente para mi, para mis hijos, para mi hija. Tenemos una relación bien bonita. Aprendió mucho por ellos. Me ha enseñado un montón. ¡Cuando yo llegué aquí yo llegué y no sabía nada...nada...como lo que se hoy en día!

Translated: They have been more than pastors; they have been my spiritual parents. They have been my friends, my true parents, not only for me but for my children, for my daughter. We have a very beautiful relationship. I have learned a lot from them. They have taught me a ton. When I came here I came and I didn't know anything...anything...like what I know today.

This idea that the pastors made their religious experience better in this church than in any other church was reflected by many of my informants. Since both sets of pastors started these churches, they are essentially responsible for the construction of the cultures within the churches. They encourage their congregation to express their religious faiths in specific ways, and as we will see, these constructions of religious beliefs are essential to immigrant identities.

The Importance of Context in the Construction of Immigrants' Identities

During almost two years of participant-observation and three months of interviews, neither Grace Evangelical nor Primera Iglesia Menonita promote transnational identities or local political participation. Although the congregations represent two distinct denominations in different towns, neither of their responses align with comparative research on Latino immigrant church communities. Instead, both through sermons and extra-curricular practices, the churches

promote a relationship with God as a way to cope with the hardships of being immigrants and for many a way to cope with a difficult past. The identities that immigrants construct through church participation are neither assimilatory nor transnational; they focus instead on how to manage being in a foreign country on a day to day basis. It is then essential to look at the similarities between the two churches not only in religious aspects but also in the context of their church community and the community outside the church.

Sunbury and Milton are near to large manufacturing plants where many of the immigrants can find work. Although these towns are experiencing rapid growth of Latino immigrants due to the availability of employment, there are no organizations designed to specifically serve this immigrant population. As Gloria explained, it is rare to find service providers of any sort who speak Spanish. A Mexican grocery store was recently opened in Sunbury but Francisco, the pastor of Grace Evangelical, said that many of the non-Mexicans do not use it because “No comemos tortillas (Translated: We don’t eat tortillas).” No stores, services or recreation groups in Milton or Sunbury have the particular purpose of serving other Latinos. Many of the immigrants also report different levels of racism from the broader community. As touched on before, both Milton and Sunbury either have proposed or seriously considered proposing town ordinances that would make life as a Latino much more difficult. Informants have felt these anti-immigrant sentiments from the local community, and the churches often act as a refuge.

Because of the lack of community support, the churches have the responsibility of being the primary community organizations for hundreds of recent Latino immigrants who many times do not speak English and do not have enough financial support. Gloria explains,

This is how it goes: They hear that there is a church here that helps them with food, with clothing, and with furniture and spiritually with support. They can

come and stay with their families, they can get housing, and they can prosper here. So that's how we get a load of people coming in constantly. I have 2 or 3 families coming in every 6 months.

The churches therefore have the responsibility to act as spiritual centers, networking agents, and social service providers. In this way, the churches become most centered on dealing with the day to day spiritual, physical, and financial needs of their members. How could they encourage members to strengthen ties with their home country, perhaps by sending remittances, when many of these immigrants are not financially stable in the United States? How could they encourage immigrants to learn English and become politically active, as found in the immigrant church communities studied by Jones-Correa and Leal (2001) and Ecklund (2005), when they are spending most of their energy bringing bags of food to their members or providing spiritual guidance to those who have lost their jobs? The day to day necessities take precedent over long-term transnational or assimilatory goals, and there are no other organizations with which the church can share these services. Indeed Levitt (2008) notes,

In contrast, members of stand-alone congregations, with few U.S. ties, are on their own. They have no one to help them map out the 'lay of the land' or to guide their initial forays into it. They gain few political tools by participating in faith communities because they do not know whom to reach out to, and few outsiders reach out to them (24).

A number of informants reported little religiosity before coming to their church in Milton or Sunbury, but since joining the church they described becoming deeply religious. For many, God is now the center of their identity, and most use a God-centered narrative to explain the hardships of their lives as immigrants. While many of the implications of these religious narratives are beyond the scope of this paper, they play a primary role in the construction of identity away from transnationalism and traditional assimilation patterns. All of the immigrants I spoke with told me that God brought them to the United States. This was apparent in one conversation when I made an error in assuming my informant's response.

Emily: ¿Pero como encontró esta iglesia?

José: Por medio de unos hermanos de aquí de esta iglesia, Mexicanos también.

Emily: ¡Que bueno! ¿Que suerte, si?

José: ¡No, es que Dios estaba en el asunto! Sin darme cuenta dios estaba en el asunto y me trajeron aquí, me gustó y gloria a dios. Y aquí estoy.

Translated:

Emily: But how did you find the church?

Jose: By way of some of the brothers of this church. Also Mexicans.

Emily: Wow, that's great! How lucky, right?

Jose: No, it's that God was involved! Without me even realizing it, God was involved and He brought me here, I liked it, and glory be to God. And here I am.

Many of my informants had similar migration narratives. In addition, when I asked informants if they planned on returning to their country of origin, many explained that if God wanted them to return, they would return. One implication of these faith-dialogues is that it places the past and future in God's hands. Their responsibility is to focus on day-to-day actions, and leave the rest up to God. This ideology is complemented by the churches' focus on day to day spiritual and physical needs.

Past research found that churches ability to link members to connect immigrants to other local organizations allowed them to encourage civic engagement and political participation among their congregations (Jones-Correa and Leal 2001). In communities that lack organizations to serve immigrants, it is almost impossible for churches to have this partnering role. There are few organizations through which immigrants can become politically or civically engaged. In addition, local responses to immigrants have been far from welcoming. Political participation and increased civic engagement is more difficult when it is not encouraged. Gloria attested to the fact that many people thought all Latinos were illegal Mexican immigrants. It is difficult to encourage political participation when there is a belief that many Latinos are not legal citizens.

Just as these churches do not encourage political participation, they also do not encourage transnational ties. According to the pastors, many religious practices, such as the bilingual songs

in Grace Evangelical and the altar ceremony in Primera Iglesia Menonita, are practices that their members have not experienced in their countries of origin. The milieu of practices constructed by each church cannot be traced back to a single Latin-American country or denomination. This disconnects church congregations in specific Latin American countries from these Latino churches in the United States. Where Levitt (2008), Hagan and Ebaugh (2003) , and Baia (1999) all found that churches connected their members transnationally through specific religious practices, Primera Iglesia Menonita and Grace Evangelical do not share enough practices with a specific country to maintain these transnational ties.

Even if church practices in either Primera Iglesia Menonita or Grace Evangelical had replicated practices of churches in Latin America, the multiethnic nature of the church communities prevents this relationship from becoming meaningful within the U.S. churches. Although both churches have more Puerto Ricans than any other Latino ethnic group, still nearly fifty percent of their churches are made up of a combination of many other ethnic groups. Promoting transnational ties to one home country, as found by Levitt (2008), is possible when the church has one dominant ethnic group. This becomes increasingly more difficult when a church has four, five, six or more ethnicities among its members. Again, because these church congregations are the only Latino community groups available and because the total number of Latinos in Milton and Sunbury is too few to have a church for each different ethnic group, the churches are naturally transformed into multinational communities.

The construction of these multinational communities is central to understanding the identities that are promoted and produced by pastors and members. Instead of reinforcing individual ties to immigrants' home countries, the churches promote larger pan-Latino identities. The fundamental common denominator of this pan-Latino identity is the Spanish language.

Spanish allows members of different nations to connect with each other on a level that they cannot connect with most Americans. Because each ethnic group has its own distinct culture, the congregational rituals that are unique to the Mennonite and the Pentecostal church are central to the solidarity and identity formed by immigrants. These practices are new to all groups of immigrants and therefore all members can take equal ownership in them.

Conclusion

Scholarship on the influx of immigrants from Latin America has recently begun to examine the ways in which Latino immigrant churches influence the identity choices of new migrants. Does church participation encourage greater transnational participation in home countries or does it incorporate immigrants into American political systems? Do churches reinforce national identities, assimilatory American identities, or pan-Latino identities? Scholars have argued, in turn, that church membership can promote many distinct immigrant identities both in the United States and in immigrants' home communities. Understanding the contexts of church communities is essential in order to evaluate the identities that churches promote. The broader community where the immigrants live, the particular community that is constructed within the church, and the group of immigrants that come to live in a particular community and participate within a given church are all crucial contextual variables that determine immigrant identity ascriptions. This paper has examined a case study of two Latino immigrant churches in central Pennsylvania. Immigrants participating in these church communities construct a pan-ethnic Latino identity, using a religious-based narrative to explain the contours of their past and possibly future migration. Their identity ascription is fundamentally defined by coping with day-to-day needs. This identity is reinforced by the churches and the larger community. The towns of

Milton and Sunbury are receiving Latino immigrants for the first time and responding to them with actual or hypothetical anti-immigrant ordinances. Many of my informants reported instances of racism while living in these towns. Neither of the towns have organizations that are specifically designed to meet the needs of these growing immigrant populations; particularly, organizations do not provide services in Spanish. Immigrants then turn to church organizations to meet both their spiritual and service needs. Churches are forced to spend significant efforts on the day-to-day struggle faced by immigrants. There is little space for these churches to promote transnational relationships or civic engagement.

As we continue identify the roles that Latino immigrant churches play in constructing immigrant identities in the United States, we must not forget the importance of context. We cannot label immigrant churches as promoters of a single type of immigrant movement. Instead, this study shows that churches may promote a variety of identities among their members. And as immigrants continue to change and to relocate, their churches will continue to foster the identities that spawn from these changing contexts.

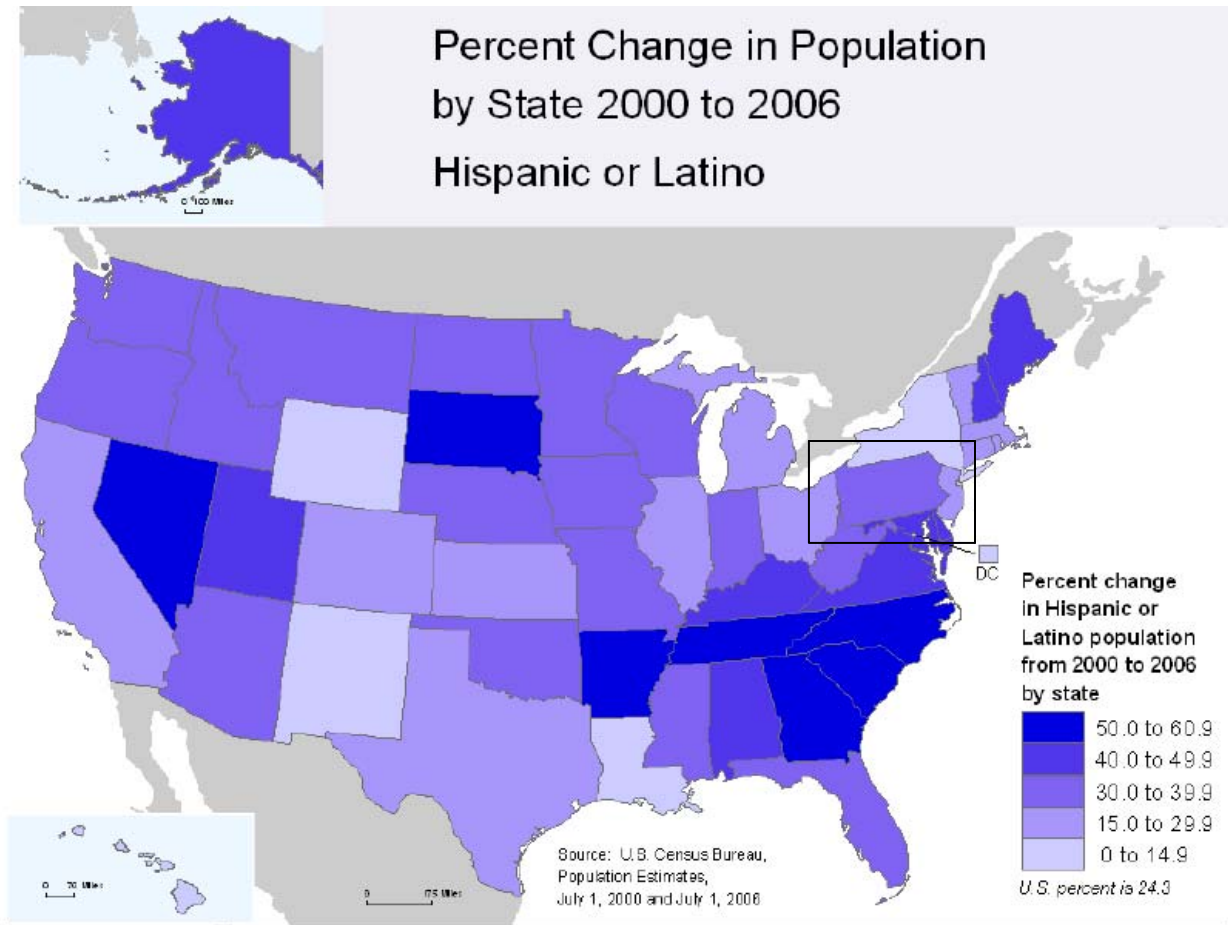
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Appendix A – Projected Change in the Hispanic or Latino Population



Source: Census Bureau. 2006. "Hispanics in the United States." Accessed November 8th, 2008 (www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hispanic/files/Internet_Hispanic_in_US_2006.ppt)

Appendix B: Projected Change in the Hispanic or Latino Population in Pennsylvania 1980-2006

Hispanic Population 1980



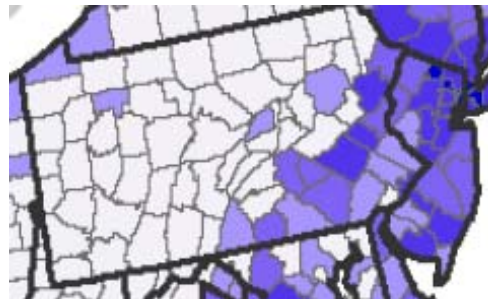
Hispanic population 1990



Hispanic Population 2000



Hispanic Population 2006



Hispanic or Latino population as a percent of total population by county



Source: Census Bureau. 2006. "Hispanics in the United States." Accessed November 8th, 2008 (www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hispanic/files/Internet_Hispanic_in_US_2006.ppt)