

Latino churches are social service hubs

Yet their extensive efforts go largely unseen outside their communities.

by [Annelise Jolley](#) in the [May 2024](#) issue

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Eunice Moya (left) of Iglesia Misionera Cristo Vive, in McAllen, Texas (photo by Anastasia Waltschew)

The 5 p.m. mass on a recent Sunday found Isela Castro selling beef nachos at Our Lady of Guadalupe, a Jesuit parish in San Diego. Castro cooked the nachos in the parish kitchen while her husband, niece, and nephew ferried plates outside to hungry congregants. All told, the sale raised over \$600 to help fund the church's migrant ministry. Castro is the ministry's volunteer coordinator—herself a volunteer role—and organized the event to provide reusable water bottles for men staying at the shelter.

This kind of food sale isn't unusual for the historic parish, which is located in San Diego's Barrio Logan neighborhood, a locus of Mexican-American culture. "We have food all the time: tamales, *champurrado*, pozole, everything," Castro says. "People want to survive and they want to raise funds, and they cook with their heart."

Castro grew up in Barrio Logan in the '80s and '90s. "It was a different neighborhood in a different time—very dangerous, and scary," she says. "As a kid I wanted so badly to leave and never come back." But as an adult, she gravitated toward the church where her grandparents first took her to mass as a child. She was drawn, in part, by Our Lady of Guadalupe's emphasis on putting faith into action. In addition to the migrant ministry, people can access services from ESL classes to trauma recovery to immigration advocacy at the church. Castro says this community involvement inspires her and other parishioners.

"Those are the kinds of things that we want to be a part of. There are always opportunities to help out."

Five years ago, I traveled to South Texas to visit a small church near the McAllen-Reynosa border crossing. At the time, Iglesia Misionera Cristo Vive was a house church led by Hugo and Eunice Moya, both Mexican immigrants who had arrived in the United States several decades prior and planted roots along the border. They held services in Spanish under an awning erected in their driveway. Their town was home to taco shops and oversized agave plants, a place as Mexican as it was American.

During that visit, as I interviewed Hugo and learned about the church's ministries, I remember feeling awed and a little humbled. It was a modest church with modest means, a church formed by and for immigrants. The congregation had prayed for a building for over two decades, but its limited resources all flowed outward: any money brought in seemed to pour right back to the community. The congregation worked together to distribute food to neighbors and provide necessities for asylum seekers who waited at the border or in local shelters. With its limited amenities and outsized social services, Iglesia Misionera Cristo Vive looked nothing like any church I'd attended.

Hugo died in April 2021, in an accident at the site where Iglesia Misionera Cristo Vive had finally begun constructing a permanent home. His absence still reverberates through his family and congregation. But the church has continued to do what it always has: care for its neighbors with tangible, practical help. In the wake of Hugo's death, the church asked Eunice to take over the lead pastor role. "They were like, 'We don't want anybody else to lead us and to guide us,'" says Jenn Moya, Eunice and Hugo's eldest daughter.

Over the years, Iglesia Misionera Cristo Vive's community impact has grown even as its size has remained stable; the church counts around 50 members. "We're a small church," Jenn says. "We're serving not the masses, but the little masses." The food distribution ministry is open to all; anyone can pick up boxes of fresh produce without qualifications or documentation. At one distribution I attended, I noticed church members age seven to 70 pitching in to pack up cardboard boxes. Church members can also be found at the McAllen-Reynosa border crossing, handing out water bottles and hygiene kits or taking supplies like diapers and shoelaces to local migrant shelters.

When Hugo and Eunice arrived in the United States in 1993, their friends pushed them to move on, saying that the Rio Grande Valley offered little in the way of opportunity. But the Moyas felt that the border was where they were needed, so they stayed. Jenn says that her parents' vision wasn't necessarily to serve immigrants. "My parents' goal . . . was to serve the people, whoever that was—whether they're documented or undocumented." But because of the demographic of their community and its border location, Iglesia Misionera Cristo Vive has become a source of shelter and support to immigrants and asylum seekers alike.

After living away from South Texas for 12 years, Jenn returned home following her father's death to support the church's grassroots ministry. Even after working for social service agencies, she's been surprised by the breadth of Iglesia Misionera Cristo Vive's community involvement. "It's taken the whole family to continue the ministry that my parents started 30 years ago," she says, speaking about her mother and six siblings. "I wish [my dad] were here and sitting in front of me so that I could tell him, 'I get it. And I'm sorry that I didn't do more while you were here, but I'm doing it now.'"

In 2022, Fuller Seminary's Centro Latino, the Brown Church Institute, and Urban Strategies released a groundbreaking study revealing that approximately 94 percent of Hispanic churches and faith-based organizations provide extensive social services. The research underlines what churches like Iglesia Misionera Cristo Vive and Our Lady of Guadalupe have long embodied: that the Latino church offers an essential social safety net for its members, and for Latino and immigrant communities at large.

The study notes that pastors and congregations serve as “first responders” in their communities. Robert Chao Romero, a historian, immigration lawyer, and one of the study’s authors, says that the term explains how Latino churches intuitively practice mutual aid. Say someone in the congregation lost a job: “We might not have a fancy 501(c)(3), but we’re just gonna call a friend who has a business and say, ‘Hey, can you hire this person?’” This first responder role was particularly evident during the pandemic, with its disproportionate impact on communities of color.

“When the social safety net was falling apart in many other places, Latino churches very organically stepped up and increased their spending on social services, increased their volunteer service hours,” says Romero. During the pandemic, Latino churches provided essential services related to housing, food distribution, pastoral counseling, public health activities, financial literacy, and immigration. Some churches gave upward of 50 percent of their budget. Not only that, but volunteering in Latino churches and faith-based organizations increased by more than half.

Romero says that this sense of responsibility for one another stems from an understanding of family that expands beyond the bounds of a nuclear family. Alexia Salvatierra, a Lutheran minister and dean of Fuller Seminary’s Centro Latino, reiterates this idea of familial interdependence: “We’re not helping the community; we are the community,” she says. “There is within Latino and Latina cultures a deep commitment to family; this is one of the values that’s most commonly recognized, even with all the differences between different Latino and Latina cultures. There’s a sense that the well-being of each of us and the well-being of all of us are wrapped up together.”

This sense of belonging also undergirds the mission of Our Lady of Guadalupe. “We don’t have a mission statement, but we do have a bumper sticker,” says Scott Santarosa, one of the parish priests. “And the bumper sticker says, ‘Nosotros Perteneceemos.’ *We belong.*” That’s the church’s vision, summed up in two words. Most parishioners are immigrants or first-generation citizens. Some are bilingual, but many are more comfortable in their first language, so all but one of the weekly masses are celebrated in Spanish.

Parishioners don’t need documents or IDs or tax brackets, adds Santarosa. The church is their home, no matter where they come from. And it’s a home that invites them not only to receive support but to extend it. It’s “a place where they really find refuge and solace and community—and a place that also then sends them out. It’s

not enough to just have a nice liturgy. We need to put our faith into action.”

In fall 2023, Santarosa received a call from the ACLU alerting him that a higher-than-usual number of migrants were due to arrive in San Diego and that they would likely seek support from churches. “That moves me, that they would migrate toward churches, because they would see in the church some sense of safety net,” he says. “That after all the conflicts and controversies of the church, they would see this is a place where they can go.”

As a parishioner, Isela Castro has noticed the gravitational pull that Our Lady of Guadalupe exerts. “The church is just iconic in Barrio Logan. It’s definitely somewhere where people feel safe and protected.” She adds that many parishioners are undocumented. Whether they’ve been in the States for two days or 20 years, the church seems to represent safety and shelter for those who might be hesitant to seek support elsewhere. When they opened the shelter for newly arrived migrants, one woman at the church recalled running across the border between Tijuana and San Diego years earlier. She told Isela, “I see myself in them.”

There are also logistical reasons why immigrants turn first to churches for support. During her tenure at a social services agency, Jenn Moya saw firsthand the level of documentation required for people to access basic support. For those who live in the United States without papers, going to a church presents fewer barriers than seeking support from an agency or nonprofit. Most people who attend Iglesia Misionera Cristo Vive or live in the surrounding area are immigrants, Moya says. “Some of them are here unlawfully. Some of them have been here for many decades and still don’t have documentation. And a lot of agencies when providing social services require [them] to show an ID.” Proof of income or proof of residence is an automatic closed door for many living in the Rio Grande Valley—so they turn to churches like Iglesia Misionera Cristo Vive.

Years ago, when Hugo and Eunice Moya launched the food distribution ministry, they called their daughter to ask for advice. Jenn worked for the Salvation Army at the time, and her parents wondered if they should require people to show proof of need before receiving food. Jenn said no. “And my dad’s like, ‘That’s what I thought too. I don’t want anybody to feel like they can’t come because they make too much money, or because they don’t make too much money, or because they don’t have documents, or because they do have documents.’”

Romero believes another explanation for people's willingness to turn to churches before other entities is that churches are embedded in the social fabric of Latino communities. "It's hard to describe to an outsider how important faith is to our community, for most people," he says. "Lives for Latino immigrants can be so hard. Day by day, we have to trust in God. God is as real to us as if you cut off my finger." He contrasts the embedded nature of a local church to a nonprofit. The nonprofit might offer essential services in a community, but it lacks the organic connections of a church. And in the case of government agencies, people may feel distrust because of experiences of discrimination or media outlets' anti-immigrant rhetoric. They'd rather walk up the street to church.

Despite their outsized contributions to the social safety net, the role of Latino churches goes largely unseen. Their critical contributions, the study notes, "are even less known to the government and the general public than that of white congregations." But as White church membership declines, the Latino church's importance to the social safety net becomes even more pronounced.

Romero remembers coming across an article several years ago lamenting the decline of organized religion in the United States and the holes it would leave in the social safety net. And yet the data collected in 2020 indicates that, in the case of Latino churches, the opposite is happening. "The Latino church is thriving, and immigrant churches in general—Asian, African, Latino churches—that's where the explosive nature of church growth is," he says. "There's a limited narrative in Christian media circles that says, 'Oh, the church is collapsing, what are we going to do?'"

"I get really tired of how invisible we are. We're just consistently invisible," says Salvatierra. And contributions that are invisible, she adds, are not funded or supported. "If you want to nurture anything positive, you need to celebrate it and support it. And you're not going to do either if it's invisible."

This invisibility has consequences. For one thing, the study reveals a severe deficit of government funding allocated to Latino churches. "If traditional denominations and the federal government and Congress get ahold of this data," says Romero, "then there can be so many creative partnership opportunities to strengthen the social safety net." Not to mention, he adds, that most of the social services provided by these churches are funded loaves-and-fishes style—with donations and nacho sales and prayers for provision. "This is what they're able to do on a shoestring

budget. Can you imagine if the funding is there?”

But non-Latino churches and faith-based organizations miss out too; after all, it's hard to learn from examples that get overlooked. Salvatierra believes that the Latino church's distinct approach to ministry and service is something that society at large could learn from and emulate, “precisely because we're not doing it *for* people, we're doing it *with* people.” The Latino church in the United States models a shift from a direct services approach to a more respectful way of doing ministry, she says, one that organically follows a community development model. It's an approach to ministry that views community members as whole people, not just people in need. “And that makes not only a more dignified way of doing the work, a more respectful way of doing the work, [but] it also allows you to do more work—because you double the amount of resources when you see the people in the community as resources.”

What's missing when the essential contributions of the Latino church go unrecognized? “The future,” says Romero.

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