Abstract

Immigration is radically shaping the makeup of the United States; however immigration today is radically different than in previous generations. Modern immigration is characterized by transnationalism, where more immigrants are maintaining connections with their homelands. These connections have both positive and negative impacts on both the United States and the immigrant’s countries of origin. El Salvador is one example of this trend. Financial remittances and gangs are representative of the way transnational migration affects a country of origin, like El Salvador, as well as the United States. The Church needs to adapt to this global trend and recognize its impact for mission and church growth in our time. Two indigenous churches in El Salvador demonstrate how the global church has spread beyond national borders through the impact of transnational migrants.

Key Words: El Salvador, transnationalism, immigration, migration, indigenous churches, remittances, gangs

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Salvadoran Immigrants: The Invisible Immigrant Community

When asked to name the top five countries of origin of the foreign-born population in the United States, most people could probably guess Mexico (with 11.739 million) as number one. China (with 1.930 million), the Philippines (with 1.701 million), and India (with 1.502 million) might be more difficult, but would not come as a great surprise. However, few people would guess that number five (at 1.104 million) is El Salvador, the smallest country in Central America and one of the smallest in the entire Western Hemisphere after the Caribbean Island nations. Even fewer could possibly guess the growing potential impact of this small nation on the Church in the United States. But this impact goes both ways. As Salvadoran immigrants impact the United States, their connection with El Salvador also dramatically impacts that nation as well.

There was a time, when immigration implied a permanent shift in cultural allegiance from the home country to the United States. Written contact was sparse and seldom continued past the first generation, and a return trip home was almost out of the question. With advances in communication, transportation, and technology this reality is no longer true (cf. Benitez 2006). Immigrants can read their hometown news on the internet in their native language, email friends and family daily if necessary, send financial support home through convenient wire-transfers, send digital photos and even return home on a yearly basis, or more often if necessary. Children of immigrants are frequently sent back to their parents’ home country to spend time with relatives and so family bonds are maintained and strengthened.

For Spanish-speaking immigrants, large urban ethnic communities, and the rapid growth of Spanish language media outlets such as Telemundo, Univisión, and Teletufura reduce the need to learn English and culturally adapt to a new and often hostile anti-immigrant environment. Ethnic restaurants, community organizations, ethnic stores, and churches provide for the necessities of life and important networking for the immigrant community. Spanish language newspapers, magazines, and books are increasingly available and financially affordable. The days of cultural absorption are over and a new day has dawned for immigrant communities, the new reality of the transnational immigrant community.

Immigrants from El Salvador have often remained unrecognized in the United States because of the overwhelming presence of immigrants from Mexico. Often Salvadorans are lumped into the same category with other Spanish-speaking immigrants and their unique contributions and cultural characteristics often go unnoticed. Like other Spanish-speaking immigrants, Salvadorans arrived from the 1970’s onward coming for reasons of political unrest and economic need. These immigrants have spread from urban
centers into more rural areas of the country, but have largely remained invisible to the larger society.

Transnationalism: The New Reality

Schiller, et. al. (1992:ix) notes,

> Immigrants are understood to be transmigrants when they develop and maintain multiple relations- familial, economic, social, organizational, religious, and political- that span borders. We came to understand that the multiplicity of migrants’ involvements in both the home and host societies is a central element of transnationalism. Transmigrants take actions, make decisions, and feel concerns within a field of social relations that links together their country of origin and their country or countries of settlement.

Transmigrants are a subgroup of immigrants. It includes immigrants who maintain contact with their home, usually by returning periodically. However, in their study of the Salvadoran community in the U.S., Miyares et al. (2003:75) argue “this transnational field can be entered vicariously through gifts, telecommunications, and particularly remittances, even when legal constraints prevent actual migrant circulation.” This indicates that people can be transnational without necessarily physically travelling between the home and host countries.

The growing economic and political influence of the transnational community is increasingly being recognized by the home country. DeLugan (2008) argues quite persuasively that El Salvador has been increasingly working to include transmigrants in the U.S. in the national psyche. She points out that the government of El Salvador is working hard to include hermanos lejanos (distant siblings) in the next census. The major newspapers of the country frequently report on the news in Departamento 15 (the fifteenth department- El Salvador geographically consists of fourteen departments, so the fifteenth is a reference to Salvadorans living abroad). The Salvadoran government has also invested in museums which meet the needs of returning Salvadorans to connect with their past. There are local cultural centers in El Salvador called Casas de Cultura, but in 1997 the government opened a Casa de Cultura in downtown Los Angeles, to help Salvadorans in L.A. maintain their cultural identity. Orozco (2007:25) remarks that the government of El Salvador also created, “a General Directorate within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to address the Salvadoran community living abroad (DGACE). The directorate, created in January 2000, has been the main official link between the government and the Salvadoran diaspora.” But in daily life transnationalism has both a positive and a negative face, which the following two examples will illustrate.
Positive Transnationalism: The Example of Remittances

Immigrants in the United States are a major bridge for economic development in other parts of the world. While people are El Salvador's principle export before coffee, sugar and rice, money sent home by Salvadorans in the form of remittances is the largest import totaling about $2.5 billion annually or 17.1% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The entire amount sent to El Salvador by the U.S. government through U.S. Aid in 2007 only totaled $24.9 million in comparison. While 57% of immigrants from El Salvador send money home, 22% of households in El Salvador receive remittances and use three quarters of the money for household expenses.

There are primarily two types of remittances, money sent from individuals to family members and money sent from social groups to their home communities. In an International Monetary Fund working paper on remittances and the Salvadoran economy, Cáceres and Saca (2006:23) write, “Certainly, remittances play an important role in Salvadoran economy. They support a high level of private consumption, financing imports of consumption goods and risky loan provision of the banking system. Moreover, the social benefits of remittances are important in terms of reducing poverty rates and increasing education rates.” The writers even note one study which found a family which received only $100 a month in remittances had a 56% less chance of a child leaving school than a family which received nothing in rural areas of the country. On the negative side the report notes that remittances can lead to higher interest rates and inflation.

This money primarily goes right into the local economy providing for basic needs of food, clothing, shelter, medicine, and education. This money meets the basic needs of people more than money from development or mission organizations. In this case, money goes directly to the people who need it and they decide how best to use the resources. Money flows directly into the local economy, stimulating jobs and businesses which would otherwise not exist. Family remittances often go towards the support of the local church as well, and community remittances flow from daughter congregations in the U.S. to aid growing mother churches and their programs.

Community based remittances have also had a major impact. Miyares (2003:80) studied the relationships between one such group of transmigrants in New Jersey from the same village in El Salvador, and she notes of the Salvadoran village, “This was the only village in the area with a high school. Remittance-based projects had included a medical clinic, although they had yet to recruit a doctor. The next project was to be a playground for the village’s children.” All of this was possible through transmigrants organizing based on their hometown communities and pooling resources, having fund raisers, and working together to make life better for their families back in
El Salvador. Burton and Gammage (2009) explore the complex dynamic of community remittances among Salvadoran transnationals in the Washington DC area, and they note that many of these organizations have religious connections as well.

While on the whole, remittances seem to be a positive result of transnationalism, there is a dark side as well in terms of national economies. Carling (2008) questions the sustainability of a national economy, such as El Salvador's which is based to a large part on remittances. Suddenly U.S. immigration policy becomes an issue for the global economy of many smaller nations and not just a strictly internal issue of border control. How the Church addresses the immigration issue can very likely impact the survival and well-being of families all over the globe who are connected to the United States through immigrant relatives and remittances.

Negative Transnationalism: The Problem of Gangs

Transnationalism is not always a positive factor for the home country. As welcome as the economic impact of remittances is for El Salvador, transnationalism has also brought the problem of gang warfare, which has become the single most important issue in El Salvador today.

In the 1970's the political situation in El Salvador began to unravel. Most of the power in the country was held by a handful of elite families and the government was run by military leaders. In 1977, the Roman Catholic Church appointed a relatively unknown priest, Oscar Romero as Archbishop. It was expected that this quiet scholar would maintain a careful moderate position and not challenge the status quo. But with the murder of his friend, Father Rutilio Grande, Archbishop Romero increasingly took a position in favor of the poorer classes. This would ultimately lead to his assassination in March of 1980 and a civil war which devastated El Salvador from 1981 to 1992. Caught between Marxist rebels and government controlled death squads over 70,000 people were killed and thousands fled the country, many finding refuge as undocumented immigrants in the United States, especially around Los Angeles.

The traumatized children of these refuges were caught in a system which did not recognize them as political refugees (the U.S. government refused to recognize the presence of death squads until long after the war and insisted the country was safe for the general population). Without support as legal refugees, these families found themselves both as undocumented immigrants and living in the violent poorer sections of Los Angeles. In order to survive, the children soon formed gangs to protect themselves. One of the most powerful and violent of these groups was the Marasalvachas (Salvadoran Army Ants), commonly known as MS13. As the gangs grew and the children aged they began to be noticed by the police.
When arrested, these gang members were found to be undocumented and were thus deported back to El Salvador. In El Salvador, they had no criminal record, so they were released. They also did not have any family, employment, or place to stay and so they reverted to what they knew—the gang structure. As Zilberg (2004:761) notes, “El Salvador is now host to a new social formation built on this puzzling relationship between space and identity. Deported Salvadoran immigrant gang youth—banished from the United States after spending the better part of their young lives in this country—are returned “home” to a place, where, in their memory, they have never been.” They belong neither to the U.S. nor to El Salvador, and so they represent the new transnationalism.

Today, the prisons in El Salvador are filled with gang members bearing tattoos obtained in the streets of Los Angeles. Statistics now point out that violence in El Salvador is at a higher rate than during the height of the civil war (cf. De Cesare 2009). The U.S. continues to deport gang members with little concern for the impact on Central American stability and safety. The Marasalvatruchas have now spread throughout Central America and Mexico, into most of the states in the United States and even into Europe. It has been labeled by some as the first international gang (cf. Campo-Flores et al. 2005). They are involved in all types of smuggling operations: drugs, weapons, and human immigrants.

While the gang becomes stronger in Central America as U.S. deportations increase, the gangs also grow locally as many children in El Salvador are growing up without the influence of parents who are working in the U.S. to send money home. Miyares et. al. (2003:79) note the psychological scarring which is occurring, “Most Salvadorans in the U.S. left family members in their country of birth. We interviewed people in El Salvador who do not understand why their adult children in the U.S. send gifts and remittances but have not visited in a decade. We also spoke to children being raised by grandparents and who only know their parents through gifts, remittances, and telephone calls.” Unfortunately, many of these children seeking for a sense of family and belonging are often easy recruits for the gangs. This, along with other stresses from transnational migration has had a negative impact on the traditional Salvadoran family structure (cf. Abreigo 2009a, 2009b).

The Marasalvatruchas are an example of negative transnationalism. They have taken the violence and crime they learned in the United States and taken it back to El Salvador, where it has combined with the military experience of a people who survived a brutal civil war. This combination has made them incredibly dangerous and very well organized—a militant gang with international connections who are easily able to cross cultural and political borders.
Transnationalism and the Church: *Elim* and the *Tabernaculo*

In the same year Archbishop Romero was appointed to lead the Roman Catholic Church, two indigenous Protestant churches sprang up in the midst of the political turmoil. Both churches began about a month apart with between seven and eleven members. Today, both of these churches are mega churches with incredible political and social influence in the country. Both are also excellent examples of how the Church in El Salvador is adapting to the transnational reality.

*Misión Cristiana Elim* is a Pentecostal Church founded in 1977 with seven members. While it struggled in its early years, it reached a crucial crossroads in 1985 when they encountered the cell church growth ideas of David Yonggi Cho of the Yoido Full Gospel Church in Korea (Comiskey 2006:35-36). The following year, under founding pastor, Sergio Sólorzano, the twenty-five churches of the organization decided to close and the pastors become zone pastors of one united cell system. By 1988, attendance at their cell meeting numbered 20,000.

In 1995 there was a crisis in their leadership. With both financial and sexual indiscretions by Pastor Sólorzano, the church leadership attempted to discipline the pastor, but in 1997 he left the church to found a new one. In a crucial move, the church leaders chose the zone pastor from Santa Ana, Mario Vega to lead *Elim*. The combination of the cell church model and the leadership of Pastor Vega have had powerful results. *Elim* began to try to meet together once a year in an annual rally, as opposed to just the individual cell meetings. The result has been simply staggering. Comiskey (2006:41) notes, “On November 8, 1998, *Elim* filled two stadiums simultaneously; on November 14, 1999, they filled three stadiums; and in November 2000, the church filled five stadiums with some 120,000 people attending events. In November 2002, *Elim* Church gathered more than 150,000 people spread over eight football fields.” *Elim* does not keep membership records, but does track weekly attendance in cells, however depending on how you calculate it, some list *Elim* as the second largest church in the world after Yoido Full Gospel Church.

*Elim* exhibits the characteristics of a transnational church in part because of it use of a Korean model adapted to the Salvadoran context. But it also is related to the same immigration dynamics which led to the gang problem. Because of the spread of refugees, *Elim* has now planted daughter churches in the United States, Central America, and even Europe.

Also in 1977, about one month apart from the founding of *Elim*, Dr. Edgar López Bertrand (more popularly known as Hermano Toby) founded the *Tabernaculo Bíblico Bautista “Amigos de Israel”* with thirteen people. While this church proclaims to be Baptist, others list it as Neo-Charismatic. It is completely independent from any Baptist group in the United States. In
over 38 years, *Hermano* Toby claims to have founded 420 churches in El Salvador and 22 in other countries, all from his impressive ministry complex in a wealthy neighborhood of San Salvador, the capital of El Salvador, at an operating cost of $33,000.00 a day (Galenas 2008:17-21).

*Hermano* Toby was born in El Salvador, but he studied for the ministry at Temple University in Chattanooga, Tennessee. He spent quite a bit of time in the United States before returning to El Salvador, and his church clearly indicates a familiarity with U.S. patterns of mega churches. Jahnel (2008:52) notes that *Hermano* Toby received early financial support from Gordon Robertson, director of the Christian Broadcasting Network, and that the *Tabernaculo*’s prominent national television station, Canal 25 was initially financed by Paul Crouch of Trinity Broadcasting Network.

Currently the main branch of the *Tabernaculo* boasts a membership of around 80,000 with 18 full time pastors. Pastor Jorge Aguirre (personal communication, Dec. 29, 2009), the pastor in charge of the *Tabernaculo*’s ministries outlined the twelve major ministries of the church. These include: a children’s shelter, drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs, food programs for the elderly without family, a program which feeds 2,400 homeless every week, 42 doctors and dentists who serve free of charge in poor areas, 72 lawyers who give free legal advice, a program teaching 125 women how to sew, literacy programs, hospital visitation teams, an orphanage for children with Down’s Syndrome, and two different prison ministries. These prison ministry teams aim to help solve El Salvador’s gang problem.

Both churches have many similarities. Both are active in social outreach, but maintain the centrality of evangelism in their ministries. While politically Pastor Vega and *Elim* are more closely aligned to the liberal politicians and their focus on the needs of the poorer classes in society, and *Hermano* Toby and the *Tabernaculo* is more closely associated with the conservative party and the rising middle class, both are very concerned about the gang issue and how it is effecting Salvadoran society.

*Elim* has established prison ministries which include helping set up cells in prisons and raise up leaders who can be reintegrated by the church after they are released. When asked about social ministries in *Elim*, Mario Vega (personal communication, Jan. 11, 2010) replied that “social ministry is the mission of the church.” Pastor Vega indicated that their approach was frequently more informal since it was based on the cell structure of the church. Needs of members should be taken care of by other members of the same cell, but this involvement was considered a crucial part of what it means to be a part of a cell. *Elim* is also working to incorporate cells for children and youth to provide a family structure in the church which can undermine the draw of the gangs later in their lives. The *Tabernaculo* besides offering drug and alcohol rehabilitation and basic prison ministries, also
has a prison ministry which aims to reach people as soon as possible after they are arrested with a small personal care package to begin a relationship which will hopefully lead to redemption through this stressful time. The Church is making inroads on the gang problem in El Salvador. Brenneman (2009:18) discusses some of these successes as former gang members are finding redemption and salvation through similar outreach programs, and key to this success he notes that “In Central America, evangelicals are among the few willing to take the risks associated with offering gang members a second chance.” These types of ministries are transnational answers to transnational problems.

Much more research needs to be done on transnationalism and the Salvadoran church. How do people, ideas, and financial assistance move through the formal and informal network of churches and pastors in the United States and El Salvador? Does financial support primarily flow from daughter churches in the United States, or does it move in both directions? Do theological ideas move to daughter churches from El Salvador through internet, video and audio tapes, books, or through guest preachers? How do daughter churches help recent immigrants from El Salvador settle in the United States? Do they use their networks to help people find housing, jobs, and other opportunities? How can transnational ministries operate to help solve the gang problems for both the home and host country? These and many further questions need to be raised to help understand how transnationalism affects religious belief and faith.

The Challenges of Transnationalism and the Church

What does all of this mean for the Church today? Before the current influx of Spanish-speaking immigrants, scholarship on migration held that the religion of immigrants would decline as they were acculturated to life in the U.S. Mol (1971:68) wrote, “When the migrant has discovered that the old world interpretation of reality is less relevant and the new world interpretation has not been adopted yet, religious practices are likely to be much less observed.” So far, nothing could be further from the truth. Immigrant communities maintain vibrant communities of faith in their host country because it gives them meaning and a framework in which to interpret their experience. As we recognize this new reality, we can see that the growth and impact of the transnational immigrant community will have a significant influence on how we do ministry into the twenty-first century (cf. Kokot, et. al. 2004). Menjivar (1999:589) states that:

For those who find themselves part of increasingly more encompassing global population movements, religion provides a unique way both to make sense of their predicament and to bridge new realities with experiences in their homelands. For
migrants, religious participation offers not just a way to express and interpret their individual interests and to remain connected to their origin communities; it also provides a link to churches and religious organizations that maintain an active collective engagement by creating and shaping transnational spaces.

In concluding, I will mention four possible ways the transnational nature of immigrant communities like the Salvadoran community will impact the Church in North America.

First, we must change our approaches from a monolingual, monocultural method of ministry to an approach which seriously works to reach and include immigrants in our areas. Transnational people maintain ties with their home communities and their native language. While they may also learn English, often their hearts are in their homeland, with their families. The Church today needs to recognize this reality and allow transmigrants the opportunity to worship in the language of their heart. Just because they live in the United States does not mean they have abandoned their cultural roots and connections. As Spanish-speaking immigrants are currently moving from urban to rural areas, even rural churches will need to be trained to start and lead Spanish language ministries.

Second, we will need to reevaluate how we do theological education. In the Global South, there is a tremendous need for pastoral training and theological education. Even traditional Pentecostal groups, like Misión Cristiana Elim, have been reaching out to small local seminaries seeking ways to improve the spreading of sound doctrine (Peña, personal communication, January 7, 2010). Hermano Toby was trained in the U.S. and returned to El Salvador to lead a very successful ministry, but this is an expensive pattern to follow. We should find ways to train transmigrants for ministry since many of them ultimately desire to return home, and do not see their life in the United States as a permanent condition. But even more importantly, with their connections, trained transmigrants make the ideal teachers for education in the Global South. They already know the culture and the language. They already have a heart for the people. They already have a foot in both worlds and with a minimal investment in training in the U.S., they would be perfectly equipped to train local church leaders in the countries of their birth. The need for Spanish-language degree programs such as those offered at Fuller Theological Seminary is becoming more vital for the growth of the Church, both in the U.S. and in mission to the Church in the Latin America.⁶

Third, mission will need to become more of a two-way street. Immigrant communities in the United States are already participating in reverse missions. Misión Cristiana Elim has founded thirty-eight churches in the United States
and the *Tabernáculo Bíblico Bautista “Amigos de Israel”* has planted eight churches in the United States. It is vital that the Church in the United States learn how to partner with transnationals both to help churches in other countries financially and educationally, and to find ways to more effectively reach immigrants in our local communities. Transnationals form a vital bridge between cultures and communities. Transmigrants operate in the margins of two worlds, but that is precisely what makes them valuable cross-cultural communicators. Churches in the United States should not feel threatened by these new transnational churches. They bring a greater vision of the Kingdom of God and a new vitality which can enrich our churches.

Fourth, we will need to find ways to hear the voices of theologians from the Global South. As long as publishing is dominated by theologians and companies in the Global North, the influence and wisdom of successful pastors like Mario Vega and Edgar Lopez Bertrand will be lost. Rather than focusing on translating popular theologians from the United States into other languages, we need to work on finding successful ministers and ministries in other parts of the world and translate their ideas into English and make them more widely available in Spanish as well. These leaders know how to best reach the immigrants in our communities and we need to learn from them. Many of these leaders are already known among the transnational community and once again this community can provide an excellent source of translators to bridge the language and communication gaps which might otherwise exist. The Church needs to reconsider its role in publishing and distributing materials needed in the Global South as an integral part of its mission.

On a final note, while international communism has largely failed to meet global concerns, it does not mean that all Marxist critique of the Capitalist system is invalid. The Church needs to recognize that the current immigration issues in the United States are often a direct result of years of oppressive global capitalism rooted in United States businesses practices. In Latin America a quick review of the history of chocolate, coffee, sugar, bananas, and clothing manufacturing reveal a dark history of social and political control fueled by greed. A Christian ethic of “doing unto others as you would have them do unto you” is desperately needed especially as we enter the age of the transnational church, and such a theology would be greatly welcomed by our brothers and sisters in El Salvador. This is the type of theology which can emerge from successful ministry and partnership with transmigrants who can bridge the communication gap and help the Church flourish to truly represent the Kingdom of God to the entire world.
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Endnotes


2 The total number of Salvadorans living in the United States is estimated at 2.5 million more than one third of the number living in El Salvador itself. From Marketplace at http://marketplace.publicradio.org/features/onehome/chinameca_remitances.shtml.


5 The intentional homicide rate in El Salvador was 56.4-57.5 people per 100,000 in 2004, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime at http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/IHS-rates-05012009.pdf. Out of 198 countries, El Salvador ranked as one of the most dangerous countries in the world, at a slightly higher homicide rate than Colombia.

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