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CENTRAL AMERICAN SAINTS: THE FORMATION AND PRESERVATION OF
LATTER-DAY SAINT COMMUNITY AND IDENTITY IN EL SALVADOR
AND GUATEMALA, 1960–1992

by

Hovan T. Lawton

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

History

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2023

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ABSTRACT

Central American Saints: The Formation and Preservation of Latter-day Saint
Community and Identity in El Salvador and Guatemala, 1960–1992

by

Hovan Lawton, Master of Arts

Utah State University, 2023

Major Professor: Dr. Patrick Q. Mason
Department: History

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints first sent missionaries to El Salvador and Guatemala during the late 1940s. During the first years of Latter-day Saint presence in these nations, church membership grew slowly. However, by 1960, a significant population base of Latter-day Saints was accumulating in these countries. This allowed widespread and substantial Latter-day Saint community to develop in these two nations.

This thesis is a social history of the development of Latter-day Saint community and identity in El Salvador and Guatemala between 1960 and 1992. I argue that this community and identity, though closely connected to Latter-day Saint community and identity in the U.S., was also authentically and uniquely Central American.

The chapters of my thesis outline several key factors in the formation of this regional religious community and identity. I analyze how Latter-day Saint social events played a key role in creating local religious community, bound Latter-day Saints more tightly to their chosen religious identity, were educationally and socially enriching, and

fostered a sense of belonging among church members. I also consider how transnational group bus trips from Central America to the Mesa Arizona Temple connected Guatemalan and Salvadoran Latter-day Saints more fully to their religious identity and helped them feel a greater sense of inclusion in a worldwide church community. Finally, I look at how Central American Latter-day Saint community and identity were then tested by late twentieth-century civil war, as seen in a case study of the Latter-day Saints of San Miguel, El Salvador.

(138 pages)

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

Central American Saints: The Formation and Preservation of Latter-day Saint
Community and Identity in El Salvador and Guatemala, 1960–1992

Hovan Lawton

After World War II, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints grew dramatically throughout Latin America, with much of this growth happening after 1960. My thesis studies how the growing numbers of Latter-day Saints in Guatemala and El Salvador (between 1960 and 1992) developed strong and meaningful religious community and became more and more committed to their new Latter-day Saint identity. Being a Latter-day Saint in these two countries was similar in many ways to the experience of being a Latter-day Saint in the U.S., but there were also some important differences. My thesis considers what made the Salvadoran and Guatemalan Latter-day Saint community and identity of this time unique and also why this community and this identity were so meaningful to these people.

I talk about how church social activities helped make Central American Latter-day Saints more committed to their faith, were fun and educational, and helped local members feel like they belonged in their congregations. I also look at how taking part in group bus trips from Central America to the Latter-day Saint temple in Arizona helped them further strengthen their commitment to their Church and feel a greater sense of belonging in the worldwide Latter-day Saint community. Finally, I talk about how local Central American Latter-day Saints (specifically the Latter-day Saints of San Miguel, El Salvador) worked to preserve their prized religious community and identity when violent civil war broke out.

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I would like to express my gratitude to my professors at Utah State University who over the past two years have helped me further develop my skills as a historian. I am also thankful to my fellow members of the Mormon Studies Reading Group at USU, who were willing to read and give me feedback on chapter drafts as this thesis took shape. I am particularly grateful for good friends and fellow grad students who helped me to make it through challenging times in the program, especially Darrel Bishop, Diane Livingston, John McLawhorn, and McKall Ruell.

I also want to give special thanks to my thesis committee. In spite of his very hectic schedule, Dr. Patrick Mason was always willing to make time to meet with me, read chapter drafts, and provide valued encouragement and advice to me every step of the way during my time here at USU. I am deeply thankful to him for that. I am also grateful to Dr. James Sanders, who was not only a member of my thesis committee, but also the graduate program coordinator for the history department. I could always count on him to provide me with prompt and kind advice, information, and support as I carried out my graduate studies. I am thankful to Dr. Henri Dengah, who was willing to join my committee in spite of not knowing me and not being in my department. His willingness to work through the Institutional Review Board process with me made it possible to gather and use the valuable oral histories I have included in this thesis.

I am also thankful to all the people who were willing to let me interview them and share their memories and experiences of the history of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Central America. Without them, this thesis would not be possible. I

am particularly thankful to my maternal grandparents, Pedro and Albertina Flores. Their legacy of faith and dedication as early Latter-day Saints in eastern El Salvador, their deep and abiding love for me, and their willingness to share their memories and experiences played a crucial role in leading me to undertake this topic of research.

I am additionally grateful for the wonderful staff at the Church History Library in Salt Lake City, who always offered kindness and support in helping me find and giving me access to the treasures in the CHL's archives—especially the Temple Excursion Diaries of 1968–1972.

Finally, I am especially grateful to my parents, Jonathan and Jenny Lawton, as well as my brothers, Ethan and Elan. I have always had their constant support during my time as both an undergraduate and graduate student. My mother also played a crucial role in helping me do the networking necessary to gather the oral histories for this project. Furthermore, my parents have set an invaluable example to me through their love of learning and the sacrifices that they both have made for their own education. I gratefully stand on their shoulders as I have pursued my own studies.

Hovan T. Lawton

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

During the second half of the twentieth century, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints transitioned from being a faith that was mostly concentrated in the western U.S. to become a global church. This was in large part due to dramatic growth that occurred in Latin America. It took some time for Latter-day Saint missionary work (previously mainly focused on the United States, Canada, and northern Europe) to become widespread in Latin America.¹ Although Latter-day Saint missionaries began preaching in Mexico during the 1870s and in Brazil and Argentina during the 1920s, it was only after World War II that proselytization efforts spread throughout the rest of the region (over a century after the Church's initial establishment in 1830).²

Although growth was slow during the early years of Latter-day Saint presence, after 1960 “the Church’s numerical growth in Latin America has been phenomenal.” While in 1961 there were 45,578 Latter-day Saints in the region, by 2002 there were four

¹ Mark L. Grover, “The Maturing of the Oak: The Dynamics of LDS Growth in Latin America,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 38, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 95.

² Although a Latter-day Saint branch of U.S. military personnel in the Panama Canal Zone was established in 1941, missionary work in Panama did not begin until 1965. And though a Latter-day Saint mission president visited Paraguay in 1939, missionary work did not begin until later. “Facts and Statistics: Panama.” *Newsroom of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*.

<https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/facts-and-statistics/country/Panama>; “Country information: Paraguay,” *Church News*, 1 February 2010. <https://www.thechurchnews.com/2010/2/1/23228940/country-information-paraguay>.

There are various reasons for why missionary work did not spread earlier in Latin America. However, one of the most significant deterrents to proselyting efforts was the privileged legal status of the Catholic Church in many Latin American countries during the nineteenth century, which greatly restricted or outright prohibited missionary work by other churches. By the mid-twentieth century, many of these restrictions no longer existed. Henri Gooren, “The Dynamics of LDS Growth in Guatemala, 1948–1998,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 34, no. 3 & 4 (Fall-Winter 2001): 73; Grover, “The Maturing of the Oak,” 80–81.

Early twentieth-century interpretations of Latter-day Saint theology also played a role in delaying Latter-day Saint growth in Latin America, as discussed in Grover, “The Maturing of the Oak,” 81–85.

million, comprising over a third of the global church membership. Mark Grover has called this rapid expansion in Latin America “one of the most momentous events in the Church’s history,” marking what “might be considered the beginning of the Latin Americanization of a Church that had been almost exclusively a U.S./northern European church.”³

Scholars like Mark Grover, Henri Gooren, and David Knowlton have valuably analyzed this growth, giving attention to such topics as retention rates and reasons for conversion. However, rather than focus on these sorts of demographic questions, this thesis is a social history that studies the processes through which religious community and identity are developed and sustained. Rather than a “top-down” history focusing on the organizational history of the Church and its demographic growth, this is a “bottom-up” history of how everyday Latin American Latter-day Saints living on the ground created religious community. I specifically focus on the Latter-day Saints of El Salvador and Guatemala, who serve as a case study for wider processes of community formation taking place in Latin America.

This thesis seeks to understand how converts to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Guatemala and El Salvador created tight-knit religious communities and developed their own sense of Latter-day Saint identity. I argue that Salvadoran and Guatemalan Latter-day Saints of the late twentieth century established a form of Latter-day Saint religious community and identity that were strongly connected to Latter-day Saint community and identity in the United States yet also had their own unique flavor

³ Grover, “The Maturing of the Oak,” 79–80, 84–85; Henri Gooren, “Analyzing LDS Growth in Guatemala: Report from a Barrio,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 33, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 97.

that was authentically Central American. Local Latter-day Saints highly valued this religious community and identity they had developed and, when it came under threat from regional conflict, willingly chose to sacrifice other interests in order to preserve it.

Location and Time Frame of This Thesis

I have chosen to jointly study Guatemala and El Salvador for several reasons. First, by the end of the twentieth century, the Church had an unusually strong presence in these nations, with 1.3% of the national population in each country baptized as Latter-day Saints.⁴ Also, throughout much of the 1960s and 1970s, these two countries participated together in group trips to the Latter-day Saint temple in Mesa, Arizona, as well as regional youth conferences. Part of why they were paired with one another for these church events is because they jointly formed the Guatemala-El Salvador Mission from 1965–1976.⁵ Thus, they form a logical set of countries to study side-by-side during the second half of the twentieth century. Finally, on a personal level, I was attracted to this research because of my own heritage. My maternal grandparents were early converts to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in San Miguel, El Salvador, and my mother and her siblings grew up participating in the Salvadoran Latter-day Saint church community. I thus have a strong personal motivation to increase scholarly understanding of the Latter-day Saints of Central America.

The period stretching from 1947 (when Latter-day Saint missionaries first arrived

⁴ Other nations where baptized Latter-day Saints comprised a similar percentage of the national population were Chile (3.1%), Uruguay (2.1%), Honduras (1.3%), and Bolivia (1.3%). Gooren, “The Dynamics of LDS Growth in Guatemala,” 56, 73.

⁵ “Country information: Guatemala,” *Church News*, 29 January 2010.

<https://www.thechurchnews.com/2010/1/29/23229011/country-information-guatemala>.

in Central America) to 1960 is an important formative period that deserves further scholarly attention. However, since my main focus is on the formation of community and the cementing of identity among these Latter-day Saints, I do not give my attention in this thesis to the early years of the Church in these two countries. Rather, I start my investigation in 1960, when Latter-day Saint conversion rates began picking up. By the 1960s, the Church was present in enough regions within El Salvador and Guatemala and there was a sufficient population base of church members to allow the formation of substantial and widespread community across these two countries. My study ends in 1992, the year in which the Salvadoran Civil War (the focus of chapter four) ended. During this thirty-two-year period, small pockets of Salvadoran and Guatemalan Latter-day Saints that had been established during the late 1940s and 1950s were able to grow in number and strength, form meaningful and sturdy religious community, and grow ever more connected to their Latter-day Saint spiritual identity.

Literature Review

This thesis seeks to contribute to several fields of historical inquiry, including Mormon studies, Latin American-U.S. religious interchange, and the Salvadoran Civil War. Central America as a whole is a region that has been understudied by scholars of global Latter-day Saint history—in spite of the Church’s strength and success there. In the growing field of Latin American Latter-day Saint history, most literature deals with Mexico, with a significant amount of scholarship on South American Latter-day Saints as well (mostly on Brazil and Chile).⁶

⁶ Examples of important scholarship on Mexican Latter-day Saints include the work of LaMond Tullis and Elisa Eastwood Pulido (which will be further referenced later on in this introduction), as well as the many

These books and articles have been written by a varied group of political scientists, anthropologists, religious scholars, and historians. From the 1960s to the present, political scientist LaMond Tullis has been one of the most prolific in publishing on the Church of Jesus Christ in Latin America (mainly on Mexico). Historian Mark Grover has also published a great deal on this topic over the last several decades, making Brazil his principal focus.⁷ Elisa Eastwood Pulido's *The Spiritual Evolution of Margarito Bautista* (a biography of a Mexican Latter-day Saint schismatic leader) is a significant recent publication.⁸

However, in contrast to the significant works published on Mexico and South America, little scholarship has been done on Central American Latter-day Saints. This is in spite of Central America being one of the regions of Latin America with the most

books written by Fernando Gómez Páez. Two other significant works on Mexico are Agrícola Lozano Herrera, *Historia del Mormonismo en México* (Mexico City: Editorial Zarahemla, 1983); and Jason H. Dormady and Jared M. Tamez, eds., *Just South of Zion: The Mormons in Mexico and its Borderlands* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2015). For information on the Mexican American or Chicano Latter-day Saint experience, see Jorge Iber, *Hispanics in the Mormon Zion, 1912–1999* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2002); as well as Ignacio M. García, *Chicano While Mormon: Activism, War, and Keeping the Faith* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2015), which is an insightful memoir on this topic.

Mark Grover has written numerous academic articles on the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Brazil. Here are two examples of the scholarship others have done on Brazilian Latter-day Saints: Marcus H. Martins, “The Oak Tree Revisited: Brazilian LDS Leaders’ Insights on the Growth of the Church in Brazil,” PhD diss., Brigham Young University, 1996; and Nadia Fernanda Maia De Amorim, “Os Mormons Em Alagoas: Religiao e Relates Raciais” [The Mormons of Alagoas: Religion and Racial Relations], MA thesis, Universidade de Sao Paulo, 1981.

A few examples of scholarly works on Latter-day Saints in Chile are Rodolfo Antonio Acevedo Acevedo, “Los Mormones en Chile: 30 años de la Iglesia de Jesucristo de los Santos de los Últimos Días, 1956–1986,” MA thesis, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, 1989; Henri Gooren, “Comparing Mormon and Adventist Growth Patterns in Latin America: The Chilean Case,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 46, no. 3 (Fall 2013): 45–77; and Casey Paul Griffiths, Scott C. Esplin, Barbara Morgan, and E. Vance Randall, “Colegios Chilenos de los Santos de los Últimos Días’: The History of Latter-day Saint Schools in Chile,” *Journal of Mormon History* 40, no. 1 (2014): 97–134.

⁷ Grover also published the following monograph on a North American Latter-day Saint leader in Latin America named Elder A. Theodore Tuttle, who Grover argues had a significant influence on the upswing in Latter-day Saint conversions in Latin America during the 1960s: Mark L. Grover, *A Land of Promise and Prophecy: Elder A. Theodore Tuttle in South America, 1960–1965* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2008).

⁸ Elisa Eastwood Pulido, *The Spiritual Evolution of Margarito Bautista: Mexican Mormon Evangelizer, Polygamist Dissident, and Utopian Founder, 1878–1961* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

church members.⁹ Much of what *has* been written are academic articles by two anthropologists, Henri Gooren and Thomas Murphy. Both base much of their research on personal field work done in Central America.¹⁰

Although both Gooren and Murphy have produced valuable scholarship, the fact remains that their work only offers anthropological perspectives, which (by nature of the discipline) tends to focus most heavily on the present day. There remains a surprising lack of academic historical scholarship on Central American Latter-day Saints—scholarship which can expand our understanding of the dynamic growth of the Church by focusing on its change over time in the region. Even more glaringly, while there are a small handful of academic works on Guatemalan, Nicaraguan, and Costa Rican Latter-day Saints, there is not a single work of academic scholarship in existence that focuses on the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in El Salvador. Through my thesis, I hope to begin to fill this gap in the historiography and further the academic study of Latter-day Saints in Central America.

My analysis of Central American temple trips also significantly adds to the study

⁹ Gooren, “The Dynamics of LDS Growth in Guatemala,” 56.

¹⁰ Henri Gooren has written four articles on Central American Latter-day Saints and Thomas Murphy has written two: Gooren, “The Dynamics of LDS Growth in Guatemala”; Gooren, “Analyzing LDS Growth in Guatemala: Report from a Barrio”; Henri Gooren, “Latter-day Saints Under Siege: The Unique Experience of Nicaraguan Mormons,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 40, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 134–155; Henri Gooren, “The Mormons of the World: The Meaning of LDS Membership in Central America,” in *Revisiting Thomas F. O’Dea’s The Mormons: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Cardell K. Jacobson, John P. Hoffmann, and Tim B. Heaton (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 2008), 362–388; Thomas W. Murphy, “Reinventing Mormonism: Guatemala as a Harbinger of the Future?,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 29, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 177–192; Thomas W. Murphy, “Guatemalan Hot/Cold Medicine and Mormon Words of Wisdom: Intercultural Negotiation of Meaning,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 36, no. 2 (June 1997): 297–308. Gooren also wrote his master’s thesis on Latter-day Saints in Costa Rica: Henri Gooren, “De expanderende Mormoonse Kerk in Latijns Amerika: Schetsen uit een wijk i San Jose, Costa Rica (The Expanding Mormon Church in Latin America: Sketches from a Neighborhood in San Jose, Costa Rica)” (MA Thesis, Utrecht University, 1991). Besides the work of Gooren and Murphy, the only other academic scholarship that focuses on Central American Latter-day Saints is the following article, found in a volume of published symposium proceedings: Keith J. Wilson, “A Nation in a Day: The Church in Guatemala,” in *Out of Obscurity: The Church in the Twentieth Century, the 29th Annual Sidney B. Sperry Symposium* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2000).

of Latter-day Saint temple trips as a larger global phenomenon. For much of the twentieth century, Latter-day Saints all over the world participated in temple trips. Yet, in spite of the significance of these experiences in the global twentieth-century Latter-day Saint experience, there have been relatively few studies that offer more than brief mention of them.¹¹ John Thomas, Richard Cowan, and Walter Van Beek have each written articles that discuss temple trips in some degree of detail.¹² Van Beek and Cowan include lengthy subsections about temple trips in their articles and Thomas provides us with the rare article that is completely focused on temple trips. However, Van Beek and Thomas focus on European temple trips, which occur in a very different cultural context from the Latin American trips that I examine. And although Cowan devotes half of his article on the Arizona Temple to a discussion of Latin American temple trips, this still only skims the surface of a topic that is so important to the history of the Latin American Latter-day Saints. Furthermore, my chapter on temple trips is longer than any of these previous works, giving greater attention to the temple excursion experience than arguably has ever been offered before.

My work additionally builds upon past scholarship studying Latter-day Saint reactions to war. Although most of the work that has been done on this subject is very U.S.-centric, there nevertheless exist some global studies that set a precedent for my own work.¹³ For instance, several studies have been done on the experience of German Latter-

¹¹ Two recent examples of scholarship that include brief references to temple trips (including at most a few paragraphs on the topic) are: John Hilton III, "History of the Taipei Temple," *Journal of Mormon History* 43, no. 2 (April 2017): 174–175; and Amanda Buessecker, "Placing the Cardston Temple in Early Mormon Temple Architectural History" (MA thesis, Carleton University, 2020), 18.

¹² John C. Thomas, "A Gathering Place: Russian Week at the Stockholm Sweden Temple," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (2000), 67–89; Richard O. Cowan, "The Historic Arizona Temple," *Journal of Mormon History* 31, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 99–118; and Walter E. A. Van Beek, "The Temple and the Sacred: Dutch Temple Experiences," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 45, no. 4 (Winter 2012): 27–52.

¹³ Regarding scholarship on U.S. Latter-day Saints, Kenneth Alford has made a notable contribution to our

day Saints during World War II.¹⁴ Regarding Latin American Latter-day Saints specifically, some limited work has been done on Mexican Latter-day Saints during the Mexican Revolution.¹⁵ For example, LaMond Tullis has written about the struggle of Mexican Latter-day Saints to keep their religious community alive during the 1910s and 1920s, when U.S.-based leadership had little contact with the Mexican faithful due to the Mexican Revolution and the subsequent Cristero War.¹⁶

Building on Tullis's work, I analyze how another group of twentieth-century Latin American Latter-day Saints (the people of San Miguel) kept their community alive during a wartime period with greatly decreased U.S. support. There has only been one article written on Latter-day Saint experiences during Cold War Era Central American conflicts: Henri Gooren's *Dialogue* article on Latter-day Saints living in the aftermath of the 1979 Nicaraguan Revolution and under Sandinista rule.¹⁷ However, no scholarly work has been done on Latter-day Saints during the Salvadoran Civil War, which is a

understanding of Latter-day Saint participation in U.S. wars. Here are two of the books he's written: Kenneth L. Alford, ed., *Saints at War: The Gulf War, Afghanistan, and Iraq* (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center and Deseret Book, 2020) and Kenneth L. Alford, ed. *Civil War Saints* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center and Deseret Book, 2012).

¹⁴ For examples of scholarship on German Latter-day Saints, see Roger P. Minert, *In Harm's Way: East German Latter-day Saints in World War II* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2009); Roger P. Minert, *Under the Gun: West German and Austrian Latter-day Saints in World War II* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2011); and David Conley Nelson, *Moroni and the Swastika: Mormons in Nazi Germany* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015).

¹⁵ Both LaMond Tullis and Mark Grover have written about the execution of Rafael Monroy and Vicente Morales at the hands of Zapatistas during the Mexican Revolution: F. LaMond Tullis, *Martyrs in Mexico: A Mormon Story of Revolution and Redemption* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2018); Mark L. Grover, "Execution in Mexico: The deaths of Rafael Monroy and Vicente Morales," *BYU Studies* 35, no. 3 (1996): 6–28. Tullis gives particular attention to the long-term impact of those killings, both locally and in the Mexican Latter-day Saint community at large. Tullis's other book, *Mormons in Mexico: The Dynamics of Faith and Culture* (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 1987) includes some additional analysis of the Mexican Latter-day Saint experience during both the Mexican Revolution and the Cristero War.

¹⁶ Tullis, *Mormons In Mexico*, 96–127.

¹⁷ Henri Gooren, "Latter-day Saints Under Siege: The Unique Experience of Nicaraguan Mormons," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 40, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 134–155.

contribution that this thesis seeks to make.

I also build on past scholarship about transnational religious and cultural interchange between the U.S. and Latin America. Daniel Ramírez has studied how migrating twentieth-century Mexican Pentecostals moved back and forth between Pentecostal communities in both the United States and Mexico. This resulted in a closely connected transnational Mexican Pentecostal community that shared musical and religious goods back and forth with one another.¹⁸ Elaine Peña has studied transnational connections between the shrines of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Illinois and Mexico.¹⁹ Similarly, I look at how participation in these transnational temple journeys exposed Guatemalan and Salvadoran Latter-day Saints to new cultural influences and help bind the disparate U.S., Mexican, and Central American Latter-day Saint congregations into a more cohesive transnational community.

Finally, my thesis also adds to the existing historiography of the Salvadoran Civil War. The Salvadoran Civil War, which took place between 1980 and 1992, was an armed conflict between the right-wing Salvadoran military government and left-wing guerrilla revolutionary forces (known as the FMLN). In this country of five million people, geographically about the size of Massachusetts, 75,000 people were killed, over 350,000 were wounded, and about a million fled their homes. Many others were imprisoned, raped, or tortured.²⁰ According to a UN Truth Commission, government forces were responsible for 85% of these deaths.²¹ Military death squads regularly “disappeared”

¹⁸ Daniel Ramírez, *Migrating Faith: Pentecostalism in the United States and Mexico in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

¹⁹ Elaine Peña, *Performing Piety: Making Space Sacred with the Virgin of Guadalupe* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011).

²⁰ Ching, *Stories of Civil War in El Salvador*, 3.

²¹ “Truth Commission: El Salvador.” United States Institute of Peace, 1 July 1992. <https://www.usip.org/publications/1992/07/truth-commission-el-salvador>.

civilians, which meant kidnapping them, then killing them in secret. Reflecting the Cold War era, the US government gave substantial support to the military government and nations like the USSR, Nicaragua, and Cuba supported the leftist revolutionaries. The eastern part of the country (where San Miguel was located) received much of the worst violence of the war. This is largely because it was close to socialist Nicaragua, which gave substantial support to the revolutionaries.²²

Most scholars that have studied this conflict have come from the fields of political science and anthropology.²³ This makes sense, since these disciplines often tend to study contemporary or at least very recent events, like the Salvadoran Civil War. In recent years, historians have become increasingly involved in the academic analysis of the war, as seen with Molly Todd's and Joaquín Chávez's work on refugee activism and intellectual history, respectively.²⁴ Overall, however, the rigorous historical study of the Salvadoran Civil War has only just begun. In 2004, Aldo Lauria-Santiago and Leigh Binford declared that "El Salvador is Latin America's least researched nation-state" by scholars generally.²⁵ Although significant research has been undertaken since then, much remains to be done. My work seeks to help fill some of the gaps that exist in the current

²² Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 25 October 2022, interview in the author's possession.

²³ Examples of important political science works on the Salvadoran Civil War include Tommie Sue Montgomery, *Revolution in El Salvador: From Civil Strife to Civil Peace* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 1994); Hugh Byrne, *El Salvador's Civil War: A Study of Revolution* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1996) and Elisabeth Jean Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Perhaps the most influential anthropological study of the war is Leigh Binford, *The El Mozote Massacre: Anthropology and Human Rights* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1996).

²⁴ Molly Todd, *Beyond Displacement: Campesinos, Refugees, and Collective Action in the Salvadoran Civil War* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010); Joaquín M. Chávez, *Poets and Prophets of the Resistance: Intellectuals and the Origins of El Salvador's Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

²⁵ Aldo Lauria-Santiago and Leigh Binford, "Local History, Politics, and the State in El Salvador," in *Landscapes of Struggle: Politics, Society, and Community in El Salvador*, ed. Aldo Lauria-Santiago and Leigh Binford (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2004), 2.

civil war historiography. One particularly glaring gap is the fact that many segments of the wartime Salvadoran population are underrepresented in the current historiography.

To help address this problem, my research seeks to enrich the historical study of the war by contributing scholarship on one of these previously understudied wartime groups. As historian Erik Ching has observed, four groups of post-war Salvadorans have been particularly prolific in recording their personal memories of the war: guerrilla leaders, military officers, conservative urban elites, and lower-class supporters of the guerrillas.²⁶ All of these groups had clear partisan goals and agendas during the war and thus have a strong motivation to shape the post-war popular narrative of the conflict. However, Ching argues that there are also other “vast swaths of the population who lived through the war and potentially played important roles in it [that] are completely absent from the current conversation.”²⁷ One such “swath of the population” is the group of “Salvadorans over the years who remained politically neutral.”²⁸

Like many evangelicals, Latter-day Saints were generally less politically involved in the conflict than other Salvadoran religious groups were (particularly Catholic groups influenced by liberation theology).²⁹ Thus, through shedding light on the wartime experiences and perspectives of a less politically active group (the Latter-day Saints of

²⁶ Erik Ching, *Stories of Civil War in El Salvador: A Battle over Memory* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 10–12.

²⁷ Ching, *Stories of Civil War in El Salvador*, 255–256.

²⁸ Ching, *Stories of Civil War in El Salvador*, 256.

²⁹ Here are several examples of scholarly studies of Catholic responses to and involvement in the Salvadoran Civil War: Leigh Binford, *From Popular to Insurgent Intellectuals: Peasant Catechists in the Salvadoran Revolution* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2022); Joaquín M. Chávez, *Poets and Prophets of the Resistance: Intellectuals and the Origins of El Salvador's Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Peter M. Sánchez, *Priest Under Fire: Padre David Rodríguez, the Catholic Church, and El Salvador's Revolutionary Movement* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2015); Anna Lisa Peterson, *Martyrdom and the Politics of Religion: Progressive Catholicism in El Salvador's Civil War* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997). There are little to no studies on Evangelicals in the Salvadoran Civil War.

San Miguel), this thesis chapter can help fill the historiographical gap that Ching identified.

Sources

This thesis is mainly grounded in oral histories from Salvadoran and Guatemalan Latter-day Saints. I have collected some of these histories myself and others come from the collections of the Church History Library in Salt Lake City, Utah, operated by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I am donating these collected oral histories to the Church History Library (unless the interviewee did not consent for me to donate it), which will allow them to benefit future researchers of Latter-day Saint or Latin American history. Every one of the Church History Library oral histories is in Spanish and all but three of the oral histories that I personally collected are in Spanish.³⁰ Chapter Two also heavily relies upon a collection of daily logs from the 1968–1972 Guatemala-El Salvador Mission temple excursions (which are found in the Church History Library).

One challenge that I specifically faced in my research on the Salvadoran Civil War was the understandable reticence of some interviewees to discuss their memories of the conflict. Obviously, a war that caused so much death and destruction and resulted in so much displacement of populations would lead to lasting trauma among many. I empathize with and understand the reasons of some Salvadoran Latter-day Saints to not want to be interviewed about the war and I thus sought to only talk about it with those who were comfortable and willing to discuss their memories. I am very grateful for those who were willing and felt able to talk with me about this time in their lives, since it helps

³⁰ The interviews with Zithrely Belnap, Telhri Agardy, and Jenny Lawton are in English.

prevent the experiences and memories of this pivotal moment in Salvadoran history from being lost.

This thesis is certainly not a comprehensive study of the experiences of all Latter-day Saints living in all regions of El Salvador and Guatemala between 1960 and 1992. It would go beyond the purposes of this thesis for me to cover all of Guatemala and El Salvador and, beyond that, no work of history can claim to represent the perspective of every individual member of a population. For this study, I focus on the experiences of a select number of communities and individuals scattered across both these countries. I also tend to focus more on outlying towns and cities rather than on the national capitals of Guatemala City or San Salvador. Since most global histories of Latter-day Saints tend to focus on the main population centers of a country, I consider the wider lens of my thesis to be a significant strength.

One community that receives particular attention in this thesis is San Miguel, El Salvador. This is because the majority of the oral histories that I personally conducted for this project came from San Miguel and it is thus the material that I became most familiar with. Along with the oral histories from San Miguel, I also interviewed a few individuals from Sector El Codo, a small community located near Guatemala's Pacific Coast, a little south of the city of Retalhuleu. I combine these San Miguel and Sector El Codo interviews with additional oral histories of individuals from throughout Guatemala and El Salvador (found in the Church History Library in Salt Lake City, Utah), in order to gain a sampling of perspectives and experiences from throughout these two nations. However, more people and places could be included in future studies and further investigation will yield additional insight into Guatemalan and Salvadoran Latter-day Saint community

during the late twentieth century.

In writing this thesis, I am grateful for the efforts over many years of local Central American Latter-day Saints, as well as North American church history missionaries serving in Central America, in gathering and preserving Guatemalan and Salvadoran Latter-day Saint history. Although mine is one of the few extended works of academic scholarship on Central American Latter-day Saints, it is certainly not the first effort to recognize the value of Central American Latter-day Saint history. I am thankful for the many who have worked to collect the memories and experiences of the Central American Latter-day Saints.



Map of Guatemala, featuring locations that are important to this thesis.



Map of El Salvador, featuring locations that are important to this thesis.

A Word on Lamanite Identity

The topic of Latter-day Saint identity in Latin America has historically been connected to the concept of “Lamanite Identity,” or the idea that the native peoples of the Americas (as well as Latin Americans with indigenous ancestry) are descendants of “the Lamanites.” The Lamanites are an important group in the narrative of the Book of Mormon and are described in that text as descendants of ancient Israelites. The adoption of Lamanite identity is a complicated issue, since some view this identity as something positive and ennobling (giving individuals a Biblical, Israelite heritage), while others view it as something negative and degrading (connecting them to the divine curses that were placed upon many of the Lamanites in the Book of Mormon). Some of the

researchers who have analyzed Lamanite Identity among Latin American Latter-day Saints are John-Charles Duffy, Armand L. Mauss, Thomas W. Murphy, and Tyler Balli.³¹

Although Lamanite Identity is indeed an important part of the Latter-day Saint experience for many Latin Americans, it is not a topic I focus on in this master's thesis. There are two main reasons for this. First, the oral histories from the Church History Library which I use as source material rarely (if ever) bring up the topic of Lamanite Identity in describing Latter-day Saint experiences. Furthermore, the individuals who I personally interviewed for this project never brought up the topic of Lamanite Identity either. This could be because Lamanite Identity is not an important aspect of the personal experience of these particular individuals (although it certainly is for many other Latin American Latter-day Saints).

My second reason for not focusing on this topic is because, as I was performing my research, I was less interested in issues of Lamanite Identity and more interested in issues of social life, temple ritual, transnationalism, and wartime communities. For this reason, as I conducted oral histories, my questions to interviewees revolved around the latter subjects and not around Lamanite Identity (although, as already mentioned, my interviewees also did not bring up this topic themselves when discussing their personal experiences as Latter-day Saints). Thus, there is a lack of information on Lamanite Identity in my source material, which is why I do not analyze this subject in my thesis. Nevertheless, Lamanite Identity is a topic that I will likely examine in future research

³¹ John-Charles Duffy, "The Use of 'Lamanite' in Official LDS Discourse," *Journal of Mormon History* 34, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 118–167; Armand L. Mauss, *All Abraham's Children: Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003); Thomas W. Murphy, "Other Mormon Histories: Lamanite Subjectivity in Mexico," *Journal of Mormon History* 26, no. 2 (Fall 2000): 179–214; and Tyler Balli, "LDS Hispanic Americans and Lamanite Identity," *Religious Educator* 19, no. 3 (2018): 93–115.

projects.

Chapter Outline

This master's thesis is broken up into three chapters. Chapter One analyzes how church meetings and social activities served as a crucial venue in the formation of religious community and identity among Salvadoran and Guatemalan Latter-day Saints. During the 1960s and 1970s, there were many church gatherings held throughout the week in these countries, providing repeated and frequent opportunities for interaction among church members. This frequent interaction could forge strong and meaningful community bonds, making fellow congregation members feel like family. These church gatherings also provided valued opportunities for both spiritual and secular learning, as well as recreation and enjoyment. I also consider both positive and negative effects of the late twentieth-century church correlation program (a global administrative effort to systematize and standardize Latter-day Saint church programs) upon Guatemalan and Salvadoran religious community.

Then, in Chapter Two, I consider another important element in shaping local Latter-day Saint community and identity: the group bus trips from Central America to the Arizona Temple. I first talk about the theological significance of temple ordinances for Latter-day Saints and argue for why these temple trips should be considered religious pilgrimages. After discussing some of the hardships and challenges that these trips presented, I analyze the important role they played in helping increase many participants' commitment to their adopted Latter-day Saint religious identity. Also, I argue that participants gained a greater sense of transnational spiritual community through the

experience of meeting, traveling with, and staying with fellow believers from other nations during the journey. I additionally consider the cultural impact upon these groups as they traveled across new and unfamiliar countries. Finally, I consider the various ways in which trip participants and organizers understood the purpose or purposes of the temple trip.

After using the first two chapters to present various ways in which Guatemalan and Salvadoran Latter-day Saint community and identity were formed and cemented during these decades, I use Chapter Three to analyze how these community bonds and spiritual identity were tested by the disruptions of Cold War-era Central American civil wars. I choose to focus on the wartime experiences of Latter-day Saints in a single city—San Miguel, El Salvador—during a single civil conflict—the Salvadoran Civil War (1979–1992). The reduced geographic scope of this specific case study allows me to more closely and intimately understand how civil conflict shapes and alters religious community. San Miguel church members experienced harrowing physical threats and violence, and their religious community shrank due to people fleeing the country. I argue that in the face of such exigencies, the Latter-day Saints of San Miguel generally adopted the wartime approach of staying as uninvolved with the conflict as possible, while still giving their implicit allegiance to the state. This approach helped them to survive this trying period.

I then end with a short conclusion in which I briefly examine how Central American Latter-day Saint community has changed in the twenty-first century.

CHAPTER 2

“THEY WERE YOUR FAMILY”: BUILDING COMMUNITY THROUGH CHURCH
SOCIAL LIFE

During the late 1960s and the 1970s, the Latter-day Saints of San Miguel, El Salvador organized at least four or five group trips to the small coastal town of El Tamarindo, located in the southeastern part of the country. Around thirty people would pile into two pickup trucks and head for the beach. Their branch president, Pedro Flores, who had grown up near this fishing village, would sail out in a relative’s boat and catch fish for the group with his “atarraya” (a net). His two counselors in the presidency did not know how to fish, but they would still go out in the boat with him, helping pull fish out of the net and load them into buckets of water. Meanwhile, the other church members had made a cooking fire at the nearby house of Pedro’s nephew, Miguel. The group gutted the fish, cut slits into them, pressed salt into the openings, and used pans and oil brought from home to fry and eat the fresh fish with tortillas. Pedro had also brought along loudspeakers and, while they ate, they listened to a cassette tape of Mormon Tabernacle Choir music. They would spend a lot of the day there. Some would sit and talk, while others would go swim in the ocean. Pedro remembers that his mom (who lived in the town) was taken aback to see him come to the beach with such a large group of friends—almost all the branch would come along on these activities.³²

These were moments of joy for the San Miguel Latter-day Saints, through which they strengthened their relationships with one another. These branch beach trips are just

³² Pedro Flores Medina, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 19 March 2023, interview in the author’s possession.

one example of the many different kinds of social activities that were organized by Latter-day Saint congregations in Guatemala and El Salvador during the second half of the twentieth century. Such church social events played an important role in creating and sustaining Latter-day Saint community.

Community formation is a key benefit that many receive from religion. Thomas Tweed has argued that “religions are about... dwelling and crossing,” or “finding one’s place and moving through space.” According to Tweed, part of how religions help people “dwell” is by “position[ing] women and men in... social space,” “construct[ing] collective identity,” and telling them “you are this and you belong here.” This gives the faithful stability, a sense of purpose, and a sense of belonging in their lives. It provides them with a social and spiritual “home.”³³ This is what Latter-day Saint religion and religious community provided for many Guatemalan and Salvadoran Latter-day Saints.

Church social events mattered to them. Yes, they let people have fun, but they also did much more than that. These activities and meetings created community. They created spiritual family. They cemented those church members in their religious identity and community and also brought new people into that religious community and identity. Thus, social life and social activities were central elements of the Guatemalan and Salvadoran Latter-day Saint experience.

In this chapter, I describe and analyze Latter-day Saint social life in Guatemala and El Salvador between 1960 and 1992. I begin by acknowledging how the choice to join the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints could sometimes mean the end of participation in past communities. However, I then present the new community that these

³³ Thomas A. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 74–75, 177–178.

people would join and help create as Latter-day Saints. I outline some of the main church social events that Salvadoran and Guatemalan Latter-day Saints participated in, discuss benefits that they received from these activities (most importantly a vibrant sense of community), differentiate U.S. Latter-day Saint community from Guatemalan and Salvadoran Latter-day Saint community, acknowledge how community events could bind participants closer to their Latter-day Saint identity and faith, and discuss some ways in which community formation was impacted by the churchwide correlation project of the twentieth century.

The Communities and Relationships that New Converts Lost

The choice to be baptized in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was often a significant life decision that precipitated many changes in a person's life. One such change that some Latter-day Saint converts experienced was the loss of certain friendships and community connections. For example, Violeta López Escobar of western Guatemala was deeply connected to her Catholic community prior to her Latter-day Saint baptism. She sang in her church choir and the people she relied upon to help her in life were tied to the Catholic Church. After starting to receive lessons from Latter-day Saint missionaries, she felt that they were teaching her "cosas muy importantes" (very important things) that could benefit her children. Nevertheless, even though Violeta was the first in the family to be taught by the missionaries, her husband Felicito was baptized before she was. In fact, three years passed after her husband's baptism before she finally decided to be baptized herself.³⁴ Perhaps this wait was partly due to the difficulty of

³⁴ Felicito Rufino Rodríguez Rodríguez, interview by Clate and Carol Mask, Guatemala City, Guatemala, 9 April 2019, audio, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT.

leaving the relationships and community she enjoyed within the Catholic Church.

Of course, there were other converts who did not feel they had experienced meaningful religious community prior to becoming Latter-day Saints. For example, when José Armando Ventura Benavidez said he wanted to be baptized as a Latter-day Saint, his mother objected that he was leaving the Catholic Church, the church of their ancestors. He then countered by asking her how often the *cura* (Catholic priest) had cared enough to visit and interview her. From José's perspective, the family's experience with interpersonal connection and priestly ministrations within the Catholic Church had been lacking.³⁵ Thus, some new converts struggled with leaving behind a cherished past religious community, while others did not feel that their past faith had offered them much of a community at all.³⁶

Along with leaving past religious community, Latter-day Saint conversion could also sever connection to other forms of community. Before his baptism, Carlos René Romero of El Salvador played in a "trio" (a popular type of musical performing group in twentieth-century Latin America). However, he felt that being part of the "trio" had negatively influenced him to take on bad habits, like drinking and smoking (practices that

<https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/e8fc0b7f-5fa3-4caf-b634-41089045c899/0/0>; "New Temple Presidents," *Church News*, 26 February 2000. <https://www.thechurchnews.com/archives/2000-02-26/new-temple-presidents-157-120358>.

³⁵ José Armando Ventura Benavidez, interview by Lloyd and Alice Dunn, Ahuachapán, El Salvador, 12 December 2019, audio, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT. <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/record/ef33853a-2f50-4ac0-ac31-9b93a975830f/0?view=browse&lang=eng>.

³⁶ Of course, at least some Salvadoran and Guatemalan Latter-day Saints likely did not completely leave behind their former religious community, choosing instead to practice multiple religious traditions at the same time (which historically has been a fairly common practice in Latin America). However, in the oral histories I used for my research, interviewees did not mention any such syncretic religious practice—either because in their case they truly had completely abandoned any prior religious affiliations, or because they chose not to share information on syncretic religious practice with interviewers. The extent to which Central American Latter-day Saints do or do not practice multiple religious traditions at the same time is a topic deserving of further research.

were not in accordance with his new Latter-day Saint beliefs). So, after his baptism, he told his fellow band members that they needed to find another singer, because he would be leaving the “trío.” He separated himself completely from these old friends and this old lifestyle in order to fully commit to his new religion.³⁷

Description of Church Activities in Guatemala and El Salvador

Although Latter-day Saint conversion could sometimes separate people from valued community and relationships, joining this new church also gave them a new community. Church social activities played a key role in creating and strengthening that Latter-day Saint community throughout much of the second half of the twentieth century. There were a wealth of activities and events to participate in, all week long. On Sunday mornings, priesthood meetings for the men and Sunday School classes for both genders were held; then, in the late afternoon or early evening, they had sacrament meeting.³⁸ On a certain day of the week, the women went to Relief Society meeting and, on another day, the children would attend Primary classes.³⁹ Teenagers could take part in Boy Scout activities, sports, dances, and Seminary. There were also periodic talent nights, special holiday dinners, group outings, and more.

A particularly important church activity in Central America was Mutual night.

³⁷ Carlos René Romero, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 6 September 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

³⁸ See, for example, Chaparrastique Branch general minutes, 1970–1972, microfilm, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT; and Mario Berríos and Ester Abigail Rios Lazo de Berríos, interview by Hovan Lawton, 29 January 2023, in the author’s possession.

Sacrament meeting (called the “reunión sacramental” or just “el sacramental” in Spanish) theologically is the most important meeting of the entire week for Latter-day Saints. This is because it is where they weekly partake of the Lord’s Supper, an ordinance called “the sacrament” by Latter-day Saints. Secondly, the meeting also includes talks, hymns and prayers.

³⁹ Mario Berríos and Ester Abigail Rios Lazo de Berríos, interview by Hovan Lawton, 29 January 2023, in the author’s possession; Vilma Silva, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 24 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

Created in the U.S. as a weekly activity for teenaged Latter-day Saints, the name “Mutual” derives from the “Mutual Improvement Association” (or M.I.A.), which was the name of the Church’s youth program. Yet, in spite of Mutual’s origins as a youth activity night, in Central America it functioned as an activity night for the entire congregation, or, in the words of Graciela Bonilla Gálvez, “de cero años a cien” (from zero to a hundred years old).⁴⁰ In San Miguel, El Salvador, Mutual included classes for adults, classes for youth, and classes for children, after which everyone gathered back together to play group games.⁴¹ Although I am not certain if this exact structure was used throughout Guatemala and El Salvador, what is clear is that it was very common in these two countries for Mutual to be for everyone, of all ages.⁴² Due to the deeply inclusive nature of Mutual, it became a very important venue for community formation.

Church Activities: A Place to Learn New Things

An important aspect of church activities is that they could give Guatemalan and Salvadoran Latter-day Saints practical knowledge that was valuable in everyday life.

Vilma Silva remembers accompanying her mother Albertina Flores to local Relief

⁴⁰ Graciela B. Gálvez de Melgar, interview by Rigoberto Chen, Guatemala City, Guatemala, 24 July 2016, audio, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT.

<https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/record/0a8ea117-9fdd-4655-808d-5250e9a1f0fb/0?view=browse&lang=eng>.

⁴¹ Mario Berríos and Ester Abigail Rios Lazo de Berríos, interview by Hovan Lawton, 29 January 2023, in the author’s possession; Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 4 November 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

⁴² Graciela B. Gálvez de Melgar, interview by Rigoberto Chen, Guatemala City, Guatemala, 24 July 2016, audio, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT.

<https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/record/0a8ea117-9fdd-4655-808d-5250e9a1f0fb/0?view=browse&lang=eng>;

Julio Arturo Gómez and Ana Glavia Gómez, interview by Alice and Jerry Dunn, Ahuachapán, El Salvador, December 16, 2019, audio, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT. <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/record/e46e4db5-f49d-4903-be90-d2715b2b65b2/0?view=browse>; Mario Berríos and Ester Abigail Rios Lazo de Berríos, interview by Hovan Lawton, 29 January 2023, in the author’s possession; Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 4 November 2022, interview in the author’s possession;

Society meetings, where they learned “enseñanzas que le servían en la vida” (teachings that were useful to someone in their life). One week they might learn how to make some kind of food, like “atol” (a hot, creamy Salvadoran corn drink) or tamales. She says that they also learned how to care for clothing, purify water, and make soy milk. These classes were typically taught by senior missionary married couples from the U.S.⁴³

Vilma’s younger sister Jenny also came along to these Relief Society meetings and recalls enjoying listening in on the Relief Society lessons and specifically remembers getting to taste the soy milk that the women were making. She recollects that they also learned how to make soy meatballs, using the strained soy pulp that was left over after making the milk.⁴⁴ They later put into practice in their daily lives their newfound knowledge from Relief Society meetings. The ability to make soy milk and soy meatballs proved especially useful, providing them with a valuable source of food when they later passed through times of economic hardship (offering an alternate form of protein when they could not buy meat).⁴⁵ This is one way that Guatemalan and Salvadoran Latter-day Saints could learn valuable life skills through their participation in church activities.

Church activities could also sometimes be a way to learn about new and unfamiliar cultures. Dora Linares of Santa Ana, El Salvador recalls taking part in a church class called “refinamiento cultural,” or cultural refinement. The class was administered by following instructions found in one of the church manuals. Her favorite part of this program was learning more about geography and history, and, years later, she still remembers a particularly enjoyable class where they learned about a country in

⁴³ Vilma Silva, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 24 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

⁴⁴ Jenny Lawton, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 13 April 2023, interview in the author’s possession.

⁴⁵ Vilma Silva, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 24 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession; Jenny Lawton, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 13 April 2023, interview in the author’s possession.

Scandinavia.⁴⁶ They could also sometimes learn more about other cultures from the experiences of their fellow congregation members. For example, Dora Linares remembers on another occasion attending a church activity where a Latter-day Saint woman from Panama decorated a dress with traditional Panamanian designs and performed a Panamanian dance for them.⁴⁷

As might be expected, Guatemalan and Salvadoran Latter-day Saints were also introduced to certain elements of U.S. culture through their regular interaction with U.S. missionaries. For example, the missionaries in San Miguel, El Salvador introduced the local church members there to Halloween, or, as they called it, “Día de las Brujas” (Day of the Witches). San Miguel Latter-day Saints recall the missionaries putting on various Halloween activities, including a costume dance and “cuartos de terror” (or a haunted house). Vilma Silva remembers that this “Día de la Brujas” was something completely unfamiliar, since it was not a holiday that was celebrated in El Salvador. At least some San Miguel Latter-day Saints liked this new holiday, but it was mainly the U.S. missionaries who were encouraging it. For this reason, when the U.S. missionaries left at the start of the Salvadoran Civil War, the celebration of “Día de las Brujas” left with

⁴⁶ “Cultural Refinement” classes became a part of Relief Society in October 1966, replacing the earlier “Literature” classes. Although initially “Cultural Refinement” continued to focus on literature, the world culture and geography classes that Dora Linares enjoyed became the class’s focus later on. These classes were found in the Relief Society Courses of Study annual manuals. As an example, the 1974–1975 Relief Society Courses of Study manual included Cultural Refinement lessons on the following seven countries: Peru, the Netherlands, Samoa, Japan, Canada, Thailand, and Spain. Jill Mulvay Derr, Janath Russell Cannon, and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, *Women of Covenant: The Story of Relief Society* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1992), 332; *1974–1975 Relief Society Courses of Study* (Salt Lake City, UT: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1974), 254–334.

⁴⁷ Luis A. Linares and Dora L. Linares, interview by Thelma Caastro de Ixcot, El Salvador, 1 January 2014, audio, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT.
<https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/record/2f2a4519-4723-4037-9df9-5b057f80e5aa/0?view=browse&lang=eng>.

them.⁴⁸

These are all ways in which participation at church activities could be an opportunity to learn about other cultures. These social gatherings could also teach them other new things. In her small, rural Guatemalan community, Sandra Vásquez remembers that the missionaries would gather with the church members and teach them games. She specifically recalls playing a game where you needed to give the right answer before the time ran out and the ball you were holding (representing a potato) “burned” you. They also played musical chairs, as well as the telephone game.⁴⁹

Sandra also recalls that the missionaries had a movie projector that they would use to project movies onto a white sheet. These were church films about families, the next life, or Joseph Smith. She says that everyone, both adults and children, wanted to gather to watch these movies and play these games with the missionaries, since for them all of this was something new.⁵⁰ The opportunity to learn something new and interesting was exciting and a valuable incentive to attend church activities.

Food and Music: Key Elements of Church Social Life

In many church social activities, food also served an important role in bringing people together. Jacobo Juárez recollects that there was always food, usually traditional Salvadoran dishes, at his congregation’s Talent Nights (“noches de talentos”).⁵¹ Iris Guillén says that each family would commit to bring food to church activities and she

⁴⁸ William Torres Rivera, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 30 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession; Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 4 November 2022, interview in the author’s possession; Vilma Silva, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 24 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

⁴⁹ Sandra Vásquez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 16 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

⁵⁰ Sandra Vásquez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 16 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

⁵¹ Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 4 November 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

particularly remembers the many tamales that they ate in her rural Guatemalan congregation.⁵²

Other church activities were completely centered on food, like special church dinners for Christmas, Father's Day or Mother's Day.⁵³ Dora Linares fondly remembers a regional cooking competition that she experienced. All the Relief Societies near Santa Ana, El Salvador took part and made delicious dishes, including sausage, sweets, caramel pastries, and a beautifully made *escabeche* (a traditional Salvadoran vegetable dish), which ended up winning the contest.⁵⁴ All across Guatemala and El Salvador, Latter-day Saints met with their local congregations to make and share food with one another. These meals helped join people together and were deeply impressed into the memory of many Salvadoran and Guatemalan Latter-day Saints.

Along with food, music also formed an important element of social activities. In San Miguel, El Salvador, a music group called the Trío Chaparrastique regularly played at church activities. A popular local band composed mostly of Latter-day Saints, they performed and recorded covers of “bolero” and Latin ballad music written by internationally well-known bands. There was also a church member there whose voice sounded a lot like the famous Mexican singer Vicente Fernández, which led his fellow congregation members to regularly request that he sing at church activities. Others would

⁵² Iris Guillén, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 27 October 2022, interview in the author's possession.

⁵³ Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 4 November 2022, interview in the author's possession; Luis A. Linares and Dora L. Linares, interview by Thelma Caastro de Ixcot, El Salvador, 1 January 2014, audio, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT.

<https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/record/2f2a4519-4723-4037-9df9-5b057f80e5aa/0?view=browse&lang=eng>.

⁵⁴ Luis A. Linares and Dora L. Linares, interview by Thelma Caastro de Ixcot, El Salvador, 1 January 2014, audio, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT.

<https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/record/2f2a4519-4723-4037-9df9-5b057f80e5aa/0?view=browse&lang=eng>; Josué A. Peña, “Santa Ana, la ciudad histórica El Salvador,” Central America Area Web Page, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Accessed 17 March 2023. <https://centroamerica.laiglesiadejesucristo.org/santa-ana-la-ciudad-historica-el-salvador>.

lip-synch “bolero” and Latin ballad music at activities.⁵⁵ In a rural coastal Guatemalan community called Sector El Codo, Latter-day Saint activities featured traditional Guatemalan folkloric dances, in which church members wearing traditional dress danced to Guatemalan marimba music, or perhaps an indigenous “son guatemalteco.”⁵⁶

However, it was not just traditional Central American or Spanish-language music that made it into church activities. As previously mentioned, branch president Pedro Flores of San Miguel, El Salvador, would play English-language Tabernacle Choir religious music at church gatherings.⁵⁷ Some years later, in the late seventies, many of the youth in San Miguel liked soft rock music from the U.S. and hired a rock band that only sung in English to perform at a church dance.⁵⁸ As would be expected in an ever-globalizing twentieth-century world, these Central American Latter-day Saints had diverse musical preferences, variously choosing to use regional folkloric music, internationally popular Latin music, and English language U.S. music in their activities. However, all of this music served the purpose of helping them have a good time and connect with each other.

Group Outings

Group outings were a particularly enjoyable kind of branch activity. I have already discussed the trips that San Miguel Latter-day Saints repeatedly took to the

⁵⁵ Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 4 November 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

⁵⁶ Iris Guillén, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 27 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

⁵⁷ Pedro Flores Medina, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 19 March 2023, interview in the author’s possession.

⁵⁸ William Torres Rivera, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 30 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

coastal town of El Tamarindo, El Salvador.⁵⁹ Another favorite destination for San Miguel congregations was Moncagua, a recreation area with swimming pools just outside San Miguel.⁶⁰

Through the Boy Scouts, the youth of San Miguel also had other opportunities for fun group outings. A national Boy Scouts association had been established in El Salvador in 1940 and (by at least the 1970s), the Church in San Miguel, like many Latter-day Saint congregations in the U.S., had become the sponsor of a local scout troop.⁶¹ On one occasion, they went camping on the property of a friend who had land in the countryside.

For another scout activity, they hiked to the top of Volcán Chaparrastique, the smoking volcano that overlooked the city of San Miguel. Fourteen or fifteen youth took part, including several girls who came along, too (even though the activity was mainly intended for boys). As they hiked, each of the young men had a notebook and was supposed to take notes about and analyze the plants and animals they saw along the

⁵⁹ Pedro Flores Medina, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 19 March 2023, interview in the author's possession.

⁶⁰ Jenny Lawton, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 13 April 2023, interview in the author's possession; Telhri Agardy, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 24 April 2023, interview in the author's possession. See also Emanuel Boquín, "Turicentro El Capulín, un lugar de gran belleza natural," *La Prensa Gráfica*, 22 October 2022. <https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Turicentro-El-Capulin-un-lugar-de-gran-belleza-natural-20221022-0013.html>.

⁶¹ John S. Wilson, *Scouting Round the World* (London: Blandford Press, 1959), 229; Pedro Flores Medina, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 19 March 2023, interview in the author's possession; Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 4 November 2022, interview in the author's possession. The Boy Scouts had also been established among Guatemalan Latter-day Saints by at least 1953 or 1954. Carlos H. Amado of Guatemala City remembered that around that time his family first started to attend Latter-day Saint church meetings. He recalls that, as a nine-year-old boy, the Church was not very appealing to him—until he learned about the Boy Scout program. Carlos Humberto Amado would later become the first Guatemalan general authority of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (serving in the Second Quorum of the Seventy from 1989 to 1992 and in the First Quorum of the Seventy from 1992 to 2014). "Elder Carlos H. Amado of the Second Quorum of the Seventy," *Ensign*, May 1989. <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1989/05/news-of-the-church/elder-carlos-h-amado-of-the-second-quorum-of-the-seventy?lang=eng>; "Elder Carlos H. Amado," General Authorities and General Officers, *Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*. <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/church/leader/carlos-h-amado?lang=eng>.

journey, like birds, butterflies, iguanas, and opossums.⁶² At the end of this “actividad de observación” (observation activity), each scout would give a report on what they seen.⁶³

After traversing a challenging, steep gravel trail, they reached the volcano’s crater. Zithrely Belnap, who took part in these activities as a girl, recalls seeing fire and smoke rise out of the crater and recalls that it smelled like rotten egg.⁶⁴ They had some activities up there and also cooked some yams using the steam and heat of the volcano.⁶⁵ People sang songs, told jokes, and talked about spiritual things. Zithrely remembers that the trip was a lot of fun and was a good experience that helped unify the youth together.⁶⁶

Church Sports

Sports were another important part of church social life for the youth—especially basketball. Jacobo Juárez from San Miguel said that, although soccer was the most popular sport among the population in general, basketball was the most popular among Latter-day Saint youth.⁶⁷ When the first San Miguel chapel was built in the early 1970s, it had an outdoor basketball court in the back and the youth loved to play there. They would have tournaments and games against other congregations, as well as against non-Latter-day Saint teams.⁶⁸

⁶² It is not clear whether or not the girls also had notebooks to write in on the hike, since the Boy Scout observation activity may have mainly been intended for the young men.

⁶³ Pedro Flores Medina, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 19 March 2023, interview in the author’s possession.

⁶⁴ Zithrely Belnap, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 20 March 2023, interview in the author’s possession.

⁶⁵ Zithrely Belnap, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 20 March 2023, interview in the author’s possession; Jenny Lawton, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 13 April 2023, interview in the author’s possession.

⁶⁶ Zithrely Belnap, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 20 March 2023, interview in the author’s possession.

⁶⁷ Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 4 November 2022, interview in the author’s possession. Although generally not as popular as soccer, basketball had existed in El Salvador since 1921. See Centro Cultural Salvadoreño Americano, “HISTORIA BASQUETBOL EL SALVADOR,” 13 October 2020, video, 5:31, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aSA_1BA0Ypo.

⁶⁸ Zithrely Belnap, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 20 March 2023, interview in the author’s possession.

Telhri Agardy remembered that the young men formed a team that played against other male basketball teams, while the young women formed a team that played against female teams. Telhri said that she and two of her sisters played on the girls' team and would travel out to nearby towns like Santiago de María and Jucuapa to play in regional tournaments against non-Latter-day Saint teams. She recalled that when one group of youth would go play, the other youth would go along to support them.⁶⁹ Jacobo remembers that one of their basketball teams was called “Los mormones” (The Mormons). He said that this team became fairly well-known in the community and that teenagers who were not church members would show up at the church, just to watch “Los mormones” play.⁷⁰

Basketball also played an important role in regional and international church youth events. William Torres remembers that basketball formed part of a national church youth conference that was held in San Salvador, El Salvador, and Zithrely Belnap recalls playing basketball when she and other Salvadoran youth traveled to Guatemala for a multi-nation youth conference.⁷¹ In fact, Gerardo Arana of Quetzaltenango, Guatemala says one of the main things he remembers from the 1968 group excursion to the Arizona Temple was that he had fun playing basketball in a Mesa, Arizona, church building with the other Central American youth.⁷² Multiple people that I interviewed who had been

⁶⁹ Telhri Agardy, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 24 April 2023, interview in the author's possession.

⁷⁰ Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 4 November 2022, interview in the author's possession. For more on how sports could increase public awareness of Latter-day Saints in Latin America, see Ryan A. Davis, “The Spirituality of Sport: Los Mormones In Argentina, 1938–1943,” *Journal of Mormon History* 47, no. 4 (October 2021): 22–51.

⁷¹ William Torres Rivera, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 30 October 2022, interview in the author's possession; Zithrely Belnap, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 20 March 2023, interview in the author's possession.

⁷² Gerardo E. Arana Flores and Blanca E. Barrios Escobar de Arana, interview by Clate W. Mask, Jr., Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, 2 October 2018, audio, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT. <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/record/18caf76c-af49-4993-8ef5-1ea36d515d34/0?view=browse&lang=eng>.

teenagers in the 1970s emphasized how much fun they had playing basketball during church activities and what good memories they had made there.⁷³

“The Church... *was* our social life”

Cooking classes. Live music. Games. Halloween parties. Beach trips. Basketball tournaments. These are just some of the many types of activities that could be found at a Salvadoran or Guatemalan Latter-day Saint church in the 1960s or 1970s. As Mario Berríos put it, the youth (and for that matter, Latter-day Saints in general) did not have any excuse to not go to the church. “Allí se le ofrecía todo” (Everything was offered there).⁷⁴

Many Central American church members took advantage of all these activities and spent a lot of their time with their brothers and sisters from church. Telhri Agardy recalls that “we were always at the church.”⁷⁵ Jenny Lawton remembers that the Church “would be... part of your life throughout the week. There’d be this thing here, this thing there... or some activity there, or a meeting over there.” She said: “Basically, the Church was a big part of our life... and that *was* our social life.”⁷⁶

As they spent so much time together, Central American Latter-day Saints drew close to one another. Zithrely Belnap recalls that through participation in youth activities, she and her fellow Latter-day Saints in San Miguel “felt united as a church and it gave us

⁷³ William Torres Rivera, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 30 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession; Zithrely Belnap, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 20 March 2023, interview in the author’s possession; Telhri Agardy, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 24 April 2023, interview in the author’s possession.

⁷⁴ Mario Berríos and Ester Abigail Rios Lazo de Berríos, interview by Hovan Lawton, 29 January 2023, in the author’s possession.

⁷⁵ Telhri Agardy, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 24 April 2023, interview in the author’s possession.

⁷⁶ Jenny Lawton, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 13 April 2023, interview in the author’s possession. The italicized emphasis on the word *was* is based on the interviewee’s intonation in the audio recording.

that sense of belonging, being one family all together.”⁷⁷ Her sister Jenny adds that “there was a lot of love for each other in the branch” and “you would know they were one of you.”⁷⁸ Iris Guillén similarly recalls that her small rural Guatemalan congregation felt “bien unida” (very united), “se sentían en familia” (they felt that they were with family), and that people received a lot of support from their religious community.⁷⁹

There were different ways in which this support could be manifested. Jenny Lawton remembers that “if you saw [other church members] around, you’d say hi to them, or if they were selling something, you’d go buy something from them to support them.”⁸⁰ Her sister Telhri similarly recalls that branch members would give of their time or money to serve church members who were in need.⁸¹ Albertina Flores remembers that after the church meetings ended each Sunday in San Miguel, the “hermanos” (brothers and sisters) would divide into groups to visit the homes of those who did not attend that week. Each “hermano” would bring a small gift for the person who had not made it to church, like a banana, a mango, or a “zapote” (a type of fruit). Albertina recollects an occasion when, for whatever reason, she did not make it to church and was visited by her fellow branch members. She says she could tell that they were not coming to reprimand or scold her, but rather out of sincere concern for her. She felt loved by her fellow Latter-day Saints and she knew that if she did not attend, she would be missed by them.⁸² Her reminiscence demonstrates the closeness, the love, the connection, and the belonging that could be found in Latter-day Saint community.

⁷⁷ Zithrely Belnap, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 20 March 2023, interview in the author’s possession.

⁷⁸ Jenny Lawton, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 13 April 2023, interview in the author’s possession.

⁷⁹ Iris Guillén, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 27 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

⁸⁰ Jenny Lawton, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 13 April 2023, interview in the author’s possession.

⁸¹ Telhri Agardy, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 24 April 2023, interview in the author’s possession.

⁸² Albertina Flores Medina, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 19 March 2023, interview in the author’s possession.

Distinctive Elements of Guatemalan and Salvadoran Church Community

In many ways, Latter-day Saint community in Guatemala and El Salvador in the second half of the twentieth century was quite similar to Latter-day Saint community in the western United States during this same period. After all, the basic templates for Latter-day Saint organizations and activities like Sunday School, Primary, Relief Society, church sports and youth dances had been formed in the U.S. (particularly the Intermountain West, the center of church strength) and then subsequently put into practice in Central America when the Church was established there. This would obviously result in many commonalities between western U.S. and Central American Latter-day Saint church organizations and social life.

However, there were also certain ways in which the nature of church community in these countries was distinct from its U.S. counterpart. One significant distinction stems from the difference in the Church's size in these two areas. Latter-day Saints had played a significant role in Euro-American settlement of the Intermountain West region (composed of much of Idaho, Wyoming, Utah, Nevada, and Arizona). As a result, during the late twentieth century, Latter-day Saints were a familiar and well-established group across much of this area (even forming the majority of the population in places like Utah and southeastern Idaho). In contrast, Latter-day Saint missionaries were barely arriving and starting to teach potential converts in the towns and cities of Guatemala and El Salvador during the middle-to-late twentieth century.

Thus, in contrast to the Church's well-established and familiar presence (and sometimes demographic dominance) in the U.S. West, it was a new, unfamiliar, small,

and often distrusted religious group in Guatemala and El Salvador during this same time period. Those who joined the Church in these countries at that time faced the stigma of leaving the culturally dominant Catholic Church and joining a U.S. based church that was seen by many as foreign and as a tool of the CIA and the U.S. government in spreading U.S. political and cultural imperialism across Latin America.⁸³

I argue that the Salvadoran and Guatemalan Latter-day Saints' situation as members of a small, distrusted minority church was a significant reason why their religious community was so vibrant. I argue that the fact that so few of their neighbors shared their religious beliefs and practices would have led these early Central American Latter-day Saints to draw closer to and spend more of their time with those that did share those beliefs. Through frequent and close interaction with their fellow members, they would be able to receive support in living their new religion and feel a valuable sense of camaraderie. I contend that this would have possibly led Guatemalan and Salvadoran Latter-day Saints to be even more motivated to build community than were Latter-day Saints in the Intermountain West (who did not face the same marginalization as their Central American fellow believers).

Another factor that would have made Guatemalan and Salvadoran congregations distinct from many U.S. Latter-day Saint congregations (most of which were English-speaking and comprised of people of Northern European descent) is the Hispanic cultural propensity toward sociability and interpersonal connection. In her book on Spanish-

⁸³ For descriptions of specifically Salvadoran distrust of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (as well as its missionaries and members), see Vilma Silva, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 24 October 2022, interview in the author's possession; and William Torres Rivera, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 30 October 2022, interview in the author's possession. For a more general discussion of the Church's connection in popular opinion to the CIA and the U.S. government, see Nathan B. Oman, "International Legal Experience and the Mormon Theology of the State, 1945–2012," in *Out of Obscurity: Mormonism Since 1945*, ed. Patrick Q. Mason and John G. Turner (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 23–25.

speaking Latter-day Saint congregations in the U.S., Jessie Embry quotes some U.S. Hispanic Latter-day Saints and their perceptions of differences between Anglo-American and Hispanic congregations. These Latin American members argue that one key difference is the degree of “socializing” that takes place at church. They characterize Anglo-American Latter-day Saints as arriving at the church building right before the meeting starts and leaving right when it ends. In contrast, Latin American Latter-day Saints tend to chat and socialize both before and after the meeting. For example, in the Spanish-speaking Cumorah Branch of Midvale, Utah, members would regularly spend 45 minutes at choir practice, then stay for three hours afterwards socializing.⁸⁴

These interviewees argue that this behavioral difference is a result of cultural distinctions between the U.S. and Latin America. For example, Enoc Q. Flores argues that “Americans are business-like” and “really like to take care of business and go.” He says that this behavior can be perceived by Hispanics as “very rude and very antisocial,” although he acknowledges that this is not the intention of Anglo-American members.⁸⁵

It is very common for Latin American Latter-day Saints to characterize people in the U.S. (including church members) as “frío” (or cold), meaning they do not see people in the U.S. as very warm or friendly.⁸⁶ One of the Central American Latter-day Saints I interviewed, Vilma Silva, grew up in San Miguel, El Salvador and now lives in the U.S. When comparing people in El Salvador to people in the U.S., she characterized Salvadorans as more “feliz” (happy) and people in the U.S. as more “fría” (cold),

⁸⁴ Jessie L. Embry, *“In His Own Language”*: Mormon Spanish Speaking Congregations in the United States (Provo, UT: Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, Brigham Young University, 1997), 80.

⁸⁵ Embry, *“In His Own Language,”* 80.

⁸⁶ Embry, *“In His Own Language,”* 81. The common Latin American perception of people in the U.S. as “frío” is also something that I have noticed in my own associations with Latin American Latter-day Saints, including during my time as a Latter-day Saint missionary in southern Chile.

commenting that “no se dan cuenta” (they don’t realize) when you are sick, nor do they visit you when you are sick.⁸⁷ A Guatemalan Latter-day Saint living in the U.S. named Víctor Rodríguez similarly laments about U.S. church members that “[e]ven if you live next door they never talk to you.”⁸⁸

Regardless of the degree to which the characterization is true in every case, I think it does reflect an actual distinction between U.S. culture and Latin American culture in general terms. I would argue that U.S. culture often prioritizes individualism and personal autonomy, while Latin American culture tends to prioritize community and interdependence. I propose that the Latin American cultural propensity towards heightened sociability and interpersonal warmth gives Latin American congregations (like those in Guatemala and El Salvador) at least somewhat of an advantage over English-speaking congregations when it comes to forming vibrant and meaningful religious community. This seems to be another way in which Central American Latter-day Saint community was distinct.

Finally, as mentioned earlier, another significant difference between U.S. Latter-day Saint community and Guatemalan and Salvadoran Latter-day Saint community is that Mutual was something the whole congregation was invited to, “de cero años a cien” (from zero to a hundred years old).⁸⁹ Being that these activities were for everyone of all ages, they helped to bind everyone of all ages closer together. It thus served as a very significant venue of Latter-day Saint community formation.

⁸⁷ Vilma Silva, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 24 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

⁸⁸ Embry, “*In His Own Language*,” 81.

⁸⁹ Graciela B. Gálvez de Melgar, interview by Rigoberto Chen, Guatemala City, Guatemala, 24 July 2016, audio, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT.

<https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/record/0a8ea117-9fdd-4655-808d-5250e9a1f0fb/0?view=browse&lang=eng>.

Church Activities as a Means of Strengthening Latter-day Saint Identity

Along with forming and strengthening Latter-day Saint community, church activities also often served to bind individual participants closer to their Latter-day Saint identity and increase their commitment to their faith. Zithrely Belnap of San Miguel, El Salvador remembers that even a seemingly secular activity like the aforementioned volcano hike included discussions of “spiritual things.” She argues that these “activities are to have fun, but at the same time to strengthen your spiritual side.” She believes that because she and others “grew up with this culture of the Church... [with] activities that, at the same time, [are] spiritual experiences, too,” it helped them to gain their own personal conviction that the teachings of the Church were true. She argues that the increased commitment to the Church obtained from these activities was an important factor in motivating many Latter-day Saint youth in her area to perform missionary service.⁹⁰ Graciela Bonilla Gálvez of Guatemala City likewise feels that participation in the Church’s programs and activities did a lot to shape her six children’s religious choices and helped lead to all of her sons serving as missionaries.⁹¹

Just as church activities could strengthen commitment to the faith among those who were already Latter-day Saints, these activities were also a means of attracting new people to the Church. Mario Berríos remembers that the first thing that attracted him to the Church was “las actividades de la juventud” (youth activities).⁹² Similarly, Graciela

⁹⁰ Zithrely Belnap, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 20 March 2023, interview in the author’s possession.

⁹¹ Graciela B. Gálvez de Melgar, interview by Rigoberto Chen, Guatemala City, Guatemala, 24 July 2016, audio, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT.

<https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/record/0a8ea117-9fdd-4655-808d-5250e9a1f0fb/0?view=browse&lang=eng>.

⁹² Mario Berríos and Ester Abigail Rios Lazo de Berríos, interview by Hovan Lawton, 29 January 2023, in the author’s possession.

Bonilla Gálvez first began interacting with the Church because she was interested in the activities that were offered there. She and her four sisters attended Mutual and “nos gustó” (we liked it). It was only after three weeks of going to Mutual activities that they started attending Sunday meetings, too.⁹³ Zithrely Belnap recalls that some of her non-Latter-day Saint cousins who had come along on the hike up the volcano later ended up choosing to join the Church.⁹⁴ Thus, interest in the Church’s social and recreational activities could later lead to a religious interest in the Church.

Change Comes to Central American Church Activities

As previously mentioned, Mutual activities in Guatemala and El Salvador were initially activity days for everyone in the congregation, not just for the youth as in the United States. However, with time, it was emphasized that only the youth should attend Mutual night, in order to be in accordance with standard church policy as outlined in the Church’s manuals. This standardization of Mutual occurred gradually in Guatemala and El Salvador, taking root in some locations long before it did in others. For example, in Graciela Bonilla Gálvez’s Guatemala City congregation, Mutual was made a youth-only activity around 1973 or 1974, while, in contrast, Jacobo Juárez remembers that this switch did not occur in San Miguel, El Salvador, until the 1980s.⁹⁵

⁹³ Graciela B. Gálvez de Melgar, interview by Rigoberto Chen, Guatemala City, Guatemala, 24 July 2016, audio, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT.

<https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/record/0a8ea117-9fdd-4655-808d-5250e9a1f0fb/0?view=browse&lang=eng>.

⁹⁴ Zithrely Belnap, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 20 March 2023, interview in the author’s possession.

⁹⁵ Graciela B. Gálvez de Melgar, interview by Rigoberto Chen, Guatemala City, Guatemala, 24 July 2016, audio, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT.

<https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/record/0a8ea117-9fdd-4655-808d-5250e9a1f0fb/0?view=browse&lang=eng>; Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 4 November 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

Perhaps one reason why Mutual was changed in Guatemala City before it was changed in San Miguel is because Guatemala City essentially operated as the Church’s headquarters in Central America and had

Graciela remembers that this was a very difficult change for her. As previously mentioned, Mutual had been her first introduction to church gatherings when she was investigating the Church, and her positive experience at Mutual had led her to start coming to Sunday worship meetings as well. The switch to youth-only Mutual occurred while she was serving as a missionary in the Central American Mission from 1973 to 1974. In her interview, she remembered that when she returned from that mission, “ya no podia ir yo a la Mutual” (I couldn’t go to Mutual anymore). Instead, she was invited to participate in the activities of a church single adult group. However, most of the young adults she had known before her mission were married by the time she came back, not leaving many people for her to meet with (certainly when compared to the number of people she would have interacted with at Mutual activities involving the whole congregation).⁹⁶ This seems to have weakened the sense of connection to community that she felt in her Guatemala City congregation.

This weakening of her connection to the church community was further compounded by the fact that her congregation had a new bishop who did not know her as well and often confused her with her sister, Silvia. She was also struggling to adjust to various changes in her immediate family: her father had died during her mission, her younger sister Sonia had gotten married without waiting for Graciela to return home, and another sister named Blanca Ida had stopped participating in the Church. Graciela

much more regular contact and interaction with regional church leaders from North America. It is possible that this more regular contact with North American regional leaders led to this earlier move to harmonize the Church’s Mutual program in the U.S. with its Mutual program in Guatemala, while this change took longer to implement in the more peripheral San Miguel.

⁹⁶ Graciela B. Gálvez de Melgar, interview by Rigoberto Chen, Guatemala City, Guatemala, 24 July 2016, audio, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT.

<https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/record/0a8ea117-9fdd-4655-808d-5250e9a1f0fb/0?view=browse&lang=eng>.

remembers that this was “una época bien difícil para mí” (a very difficult time for me), to come back from her mission and find that so much was different, and she almost stopped participating in the Church.

However, just as the loss of a sense of community almost led her away from the Church, community connection helped her stay. Her good friend Enrique Falabella, another Latter-day Saint young adult, would always come by her house to bring her to church activities, telling her, “vos no te vas a inactivar, vas a seguir activa” (you’re not going to go inactive, you’re going to continue active in the Church). She recalls that Enrique “me ayudó muchísimo” (greatly helped me) at this time. Although she ultimately continued as an actively participating Latter-day Saint, the loss of “Mutual para todos” (Mutual for everyone) and the community it helped foster deeply impacted her.⁹⁷ It is possible that others who were similarly impacted did not continue their involvement in the Church.

Jacobo Juárez recalls that it was around the 1980s when Mutual became only for the youth in San Miguel, El Salvador. He says the change happened when “nuevos manuales” (new manuals) came to them. When asked how the change impacted the San Miguel Latter-day Saints, he said “sí, se lo lamentó” (yes, we were saddened by this), but there were so many other disruptions happening at that time because of the Salvadoran

⁹⁷ Enrique Rienzi Falabella would later become a General Authority Seventy of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the second Guatemalan ever called as a General Authority, after Carlos H. Amado), serving from 2007 to 2020. He is the son of Udine Falabella, who organized the first group excursion from Central America to the Mesa Arizona Temple in 1965. “Enrique R. Falabella,” General Authority Seventies, *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*. <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/learn/enrique-r-falabella?lang=eng>; Udine Falabella, “Una jornada de fe: Los milagros en la vida de un pionero en Guatemala que lideró el primer viaje oficial del área al Templo de Mesa, Arizona,” Central America Area Web Page, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed 2 November 2022. https://centroamerica.laiglesiadejesucristo.org/una-jornada-de-fe?lang=spa-gt&fbclid=IwAR1ybIjPMKNKdaRcJA_LYUhlDWxZh0rXr6TfIc3C2JSQojcSdwSkWLEJf1g.

Civil War (including a significant drop in Church attendance due to the violence), it did not make as large of an impact as it might have otherwise.⁹⁸ However, even years after the fact, Jacobo has heard a church patriarch in San Miguel “lamentando” (lamenting) the loss of the Mutual activities that were for everyone. Jacobo himself remembers the Mutual of earlier years with the following phrase: “[e]ra una alegría” (it was a joy).⁹⁹ Clearly, the change from a Mutual for everyone to a Mutual only for the youth had a significant impact on Guatemalan and Salvadoran Latter-day Saints. “Mutual para todos” had served as an important venue of community construction and Central American Latter-day Saints was affected by its absence.

The effort to standardize Church youth programs (like Mutual) worldwide was part of a larger twentieth century churchwide effort called “correlation.” Initiated in 1960, correlation sought to “correlate,” or unify and standardize, church curricula and programs across the Church. Although initially only intended to standardize church curriculum, it quickly expanded past that task and streamlined many church programs and organizations under the central authority of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.¹⁰⁰

One significant impetus for the project of correlation was the mounting difficulty of administering and maintaining the unity of an increasingly global church that was growing rapidly during the mid-to-late twentieth century. Matthew Bowman has argued

⁹⁸ More information on the impact of the Salvadoran Civil War on San Miguel Latter-day Saints can be found in Chapter 3.

⁹⁹ Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 4 November 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

¹⁰⁰ Matthew Bowman, *The Mormon People: The Making of an American Faith* (New York: Random House, 2012), 190–197.

The First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles are the two senior governing bodies of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The fifteen men in these two bodies are held by the faithful to be “prophets, seers, and revelators” who jointly lead and guide the Church in accordance with God’s will.

that correlation greatly succeeded in this regard, “ma[king] it possible for Mormonism to become a global religion.” He adds that an important way in which correlation benefited the worldwide church was through “streamlin[ing] programs that aided Mormons in other nations as they sought to root the church in their own communities.”¹⁰¹

This was certainly true in Guatemala and El Salvador. Thanks to correlation and its accompanying manuals and programs, newly established Salvadoran and Guatemalan congregations did not have to form their church programs from scratch. They had a ready-made template for their Sunday School classes, sacrament meetings, youth programs, children’s Primary classes, and Relief Society meetings—which formed the venue for their construction of vibrant religious community. The cultural refinement classes that Dora Linares so enjoyed in Santa Ana, El Salvador, and the “Los mormones” basketball team in San Miguel, El Salvador, were also products of correlation. The good that it did in helping religious institutions and social life to be so rapidly established in Central America should not be minimized.

Nevertheless, one of the unintended consequences of the efforts toward complete uniformity in church programs was the loss of some local activities and programs like “Mutual para todos,” which were meaningful and beneficial to Guatemalan and Salvadoran members. Others have similarly argued that “correlation’s administrative triumphs came at the cost of a certain degree of cultural vitality.”¹⁰² In the end, there were benefits yet also some costs of adopting a one-size-fits-all approach in all programs.

Another correlated church change that brought both benefits and costs to Central American Latter-day Saints was the 1980 worldwide establishment of the “three-hour

¹⁰¹ Bowman, *The Mormon People*, 190–197.

¹⁰² Bowman, *The Mormon People*, 197.

block,” which brought together sacrament meeting, Relief Society, male Priesthood quorum meetings, Primary, Sunday School, and some youth classes into a consolidated three-hour-long sequence of Sunday meetings.¹⁰³ Interestingly, at least some of the origins of the three-hour block can be traced to Guatemala. From 1976 to 1979, John Forres O’Donnal and his wife Carmen Gálvez de O’Donnal served as the leaders of the Church’s Guatemala Quetzaltenango Mission.¹⁰⁴ John observed that some Latter-day Saints living in the rural Guatemalan highlands lived far away from the church building and had to travel long distances to attend meetings. For example, one man had to travel six hours to get to the church. The sacrifices and challenges of these rural Guatemalan Latter-day Saints led the O’Donnals to establish “a simplified meeting system” that would make church attendance easier for those who lived “so far away that they can only make it in once a week.” The O’Donnals’ “simplified meeting” schedule of “Relief Society, Primary and Priesthood at the same time, then... Sunday School, followed by sacrament meeting” was adopted by the worldwide church in 1980.¹⁰⁵

Clearly, the three-hour block was very beneficial for Guatemalan highland people and allowed them to take part in more of the meetings of the Church. However, the very

¹⁰³ Bowman, *The Mormon People*, 196. The three-hour block was further condensed into a two-hour block in January 2019.

¹⁰⁴ The O’Donnals were foundationally important figures in the early history of the Church in Central America. Back in the 1940s, John had moved to Guatemala for work and, shortly afterwards, personally requested that Latter-day Saint leaders send missionaries to Guatemala. His Guatemalan wife Carmen later became the first Central American baptized as a Latter-day Saint. They both spent decades building up the Church in Guatemala. “Pioneers in Guatemala,” Global Histories: Guatemala, *Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*. <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/history/global-histories/guatemala/stories-of-faith/gt-01-pioneers-in-guatemala?lang=eng>; John Forres O’Donnal, *Pioneer in Guatemala: The Personal History of John Forres O’Donnal, Including the History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Guatemala* (Yorba Linda, CA: Shumway Family History Services, 1997), 61, 276.

¹⁰⁵ Jerry Johnston, “Teach Gospel of Simplicity, Service.” *Church News*, 30 June 1979, quoted in O’Donnal, *Pioneer in Guatemala*, 276; “Pioneers in Guatemala,” Global Histories: Guatemala, *Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*. <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/history/global-histories/guatemala/stories-of-faith/gt-01-pioneers-in-guatemala?lang=eng>.

thing that was advantageous for one group of Central American Latter-day Saints may have been less beneficial for another. As mentioned before, Jenny Lawton remembers that an important reason why the Church was such a significant part of her life was “because we had to go during the week... besides going to meetings on Sunday... it would be... part of your life throughout the week.”¹⁰⁶ Unlike the rural people of the western Guatemalan highlands, it did not require great sacrifice for Latter-day Saints in urban centers like San Miguel, El Salvador, to get to the church building. The time that they repeatedly spent at the Church throughout the week gave them more frequent contact with their fellow congregation members and made their community bonds stronger. However, through the twin changes of no longer gathering as an entire ward for Mutual and also having most of their meetings consolidated onto Sundays, they had many fewer opportunities during the week to meet with their fellow Latter-day Saints. This removed important means of building religious community in urban areas of Guatemala and El Salvador.¹⁰⁷

Finding New Family Through the Latter-day Saint Community

Throughout much of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, Latter-day Saint congregations

¹⁰⁶ Jenny Lawton, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 13 April 2023, interview in the author’s possession.

¹⁰⁷ Tina Hatch provides a U.S. perspective of how the implementation of the three-hour block affected community connections in Relief Society. She wrote: “For some women, the change increased Relief Society’s formality and decreased their sense of sociality within the organization. For the international membership, however, the change primarily facilitated participation and attendance for those who often traveled considerably longer distances to church than their Utah counterparts.” My argument adds further nuance to her analysis—while true that some non-U.S. women (like the people of the Guatemalan Highlands) were traveling long distances to attend to Relief Society meetings (and thus were able to participate in these meetings more fully after the implementation of the three-hour block), the experience of other non-U.S. women (like those of San Miguel) was likely quite similar to the Utah Relief Society sisters that Hatch mentions. For both Utah women and the urban women of San Miguel, El Salvador, the three-hour block surely led some to feel a “decreased sense of sociality within the organization.” Tina Hatch, “‘Changing Times Bring Changing Conditions’: Relief Society, 1960 to the Present,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 37, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 92.

in Guatemala and El Salvador were able to forge strong social bonds and a vibrant sense of community through Church social activities. For some, their fellow congregants became more than just acquaintances or even friends—they became family. They felt a priceless sense of belonging and love from the hermanos of their congregation. Furthermore, they became more closely tied to their faith and religious identity.

During this same time period, some of these Guatemalan and Salvadoran Latter-day Saints took part in arduous transnational bus journeys to receive holy sacraments in the Latter-day Saint temple in Mesa, Arizona. Many of those who took this journey became further bound to their Latter-day Saint identity and strengthened their sense of belonging in a much larger “family”—the global Latter-day Saint community. These temple trips and their impact on community and identity will be the topic of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3
LATTER-DAY PILGRIMAGE: TRANSNATIONAL GROUP “EXCURSIONS” TO
THE ARIZONA TEMPLE

Early in the morning of November 14, 1968, three buses traveled through the arid Chihuahuan Desert of northern Mexico. These buses held about a hundred Latter-day Saints from Guatemala and El Salvador, who were eagerly traveling to their church’s temple in Mesa, Arizona.¹⁰⁸ It was there that they hoped to receive the highest ordinances of their faith, including a marriage ceremony that they believed could bind them to their family members for all eternity. They had already traveled over 1500 miles since leaving Guatemala City five days earlier, but still had almost a thousand miles to go before reaching their destination.

However, as the three buses traveled through this vast desert, one of them suddenly slid off the road and rolled over two or three times, finally stopping in a ditch. The other two buses screeched to a halt and hurried to see what had happened. Many of them gathered together to fervently pray for the well-being of those in the crashed bus. They were happy to find out that no one had been killed. However, many were injured, with their Mexican driver (who had broken both his legs) having received the most serious injuries.

After spending several hours obtaining medical aid for the injured in the nearby

¹⁰⁸ This building was officially called “the Arizona Temple” throughout the twentieth century. It was only at the turn of the twenty-first century that it was officially renamed the “Mesa Arizona Temple” (in order to distinguish it from Arizona’s new second temple, which was then under construction in the town of Snowflake). Thus, throughout this chapter I will refer to the Mesa Arizona Temple as the “Arizona Temple,” which was this structure’s name throughout the time period that I am examining.

city of Jiménez (and with their driver staying at a hospital there), the travelers crowded into the two remaining buses and continued on their journey. The accident had been a harrowing experience, but it would not stop them from achieving their goal of reaching their temple in Mesa, Arizona. Some participants later looked back at that experience in Jiménez as a trial of faith that they had successfully overcome in order to receive desired spiritual blessings.¹⁰⁹

This experience in the Chihuahuan Desert demonstrates that the Guatemalan and Salvadoran bus trips to the Arizona Temple, undertaken by many Latter-day Saint faithful in the twentieth century, could be challenging and even hazardous journeys. However, these trips, regularly undertaken at great personal sacrifice, helped to bolster participants' commitment to their newfound faith, further develop their personal Latter-day Saint identity, and strengthen their sense of belonging in a large transnational church community.

The impact of these temple trips on Guatemalan and Salvadoran Latter-day Saint community and identity is the focus of this chapter. It gives a brief introduction to the doctrinal importance of temple rituals within Latter-day Saint theology, after which I analyze how the temple trips can be considered a form of pilgrimage. Next, I summarize the events and activities that temple trip participants typically experienced during their stay in Mesa, Arizona, as well as some of the challenges that participants faced as they undertook the journey. I then evaluate how the experience affected participants'

¹⁰⁹ Pedro Flores Medina, interview by Hovan Lawton, 25 September 2022, in the author's possession; James A. Lemmon, *Diary of the Temple Excursion*, 1968, Temple excursion experiences, 1968–1970, Guatemala-El Salvador Mission collection, 1965–1972, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, 1–5; “Chihuahuan Desert Ecosystem,” National Park Service, accessed 25 September 2022, <https://www.nps.gov/im/chdn/ecoregion.htm>.

commitment to their faith, how it helped Central American Latter-day Saints to feel included within a larger transnational spiritual community, and how it exposed participants to new and unfamiliar cultures.

Even though organized group temple trips from Guatemala and El Salvador to the Mesa Arizona Temple took place from 1965 to 1982, this chapter mainly looks at experiences from the 1965 trip and the 1968–1972 trips.¹¹⁰ This is because Udine Falabella (the organizer of the first 1965 trip) left detailed records about this first journey and the Guatemala-El Salvador Mission created copious daily journal entries chronicling each of the five trips held between 1968 and 1972. These were my richest and most detailed sources of information on the Guatemala-El Salvador temple trips. Thus, although I do include some oral history information about later trips, this chapter is mostly focused on the 1965 and 1968–1972 journeys.

As discussed in the introduction, there exists a very scant amount of academic scholarship on the Latter-day Saint temple trip experience (either in Latin America or its corresponding experiences anywhere in the world). Thus, beyond giving further insight into Central American Latter-day Saint community and identity, this study of the Guatemalan and Salvadoran temple trips also serves to advance scholarship on an

¹¹⁰ Some Central American Latter-day Saints took part in group trips to the Mesa Arizona Temple before 1965. However, they participated as individuals who joined groups that had been organized in Mexico and the U.S. Southwest. Although there were indeed earlier unsuccessful efforts to organize group temple trips from Central America, it was not until 1965 that church units in Guatemala were able to successfully organize and carry out their own temple trip. For examples of Guatemalan Latter-day Saints who took part in earlier Arizona temple trips, see “Guatemalan Saints Attend S. L. Temple,” *Deseret News*, 14 November 1951, Church section, 12, <https://newspapers.lib.utah.edu/details?id=25636608>; and George L. Scott, “Lamanites Fill Arizona Temple,” *Church News*, 7 November 1964, 15, <https://newspapers.lib.utah.edu/details?id=26261919>. A brief mention of repeated yet unsuccessful efforts to organize Central American temple trips before 1965 is found in Udine Falabella, *Excursion to the Arizona Temple*, 2009, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, 11. The reason that organized group trips to Mesa ended after 1982 is because the Mexico City Mexico Temple was completed in 1983 and the Guatemala City Guatemala Temple was completed in 1984, removing the need to go to the U.S. to receive temple ordinances.

important yet understudied aspect of the global Latter-day Saint experience.

The Theological Importance of Temple Rituals for Latter-day Saints

In order to comprehend why so many Salvadoran and Guatemalan Latter-day Saints chose to undertake such a costly and arduous transnational odyssey, we need to first understand the central role of sacraments in Latter-day Saint theology. Like Catholicism, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints teaches that there are certain fundamental sacraments (called “ordinances” in Latter-day Saint vernacular) that a person needs to receive in order to qualify for salvation.¹¹¹ For Latter-day Saints, the highest of these “saving ordinances” can only be received within temples. As with Solomon’s Temple in the Hebrew Bible, adherents believe that a temple is a nexus point between heaven and earth, a physical location where God’s presence resides. Unlike the chapels that Latter-day Saints use for a variety of purposes (ranging from Sabbath worship to recreational activities), contemporary temples are only used for the performance of sacred rituals.

There are three “saving ordinances” which can only be received in temples. The first is the “initiatory” (or preparatory) ordinance, also referred to as the washing and anointing. The second is the “endowment.” The third and highest ordinance is the “temple sealing,” which is a marriage ceremony that adherents believe connects (or “seals”) a husband and wife to one another and to their children for all eternity. Through these ordinances, Latter-day Saints enter into covenants with God that they will live their lives in accordance with divine commandments. The faithful believe that it is only

¹¹¹ Terry L. Givens, *Feeding the Flock: The Foundations of Mormon Thought: Church and Praxis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 57.

through making and keeping these solemn promises that they can gain “the power to fully access the gift of the atonement [of Jesus Christ] in such a way as to be fully and eternally integrated into the heavenly family.”¹¹² This is why Terry Givens has argued that “sacramentalism [is] the heart and soul of [contemporary] Mormon ecclesiology.”¹¹³

However, Latter-day Saints also recognize that there are many people who have lived and died without ever having the chance to receive the vital ordinances that provide full access to Christ’s salvific power. For this reason, living Latter-day Saints receive these rites on behalf of the dead, through standing in their place as proxies in the rituals. In particular, individual Latter-day Saints are expected to perform these rituals on behalf of their own deceased ancestors and relatives. Their theology holds that the departed dead are not forced to receive these ordinances but rather are free to choose whether to accept or reject the ritual that has been performed on their behalf. Through this practice, “Mormonism effects a unique theological synthesis between a Catholic-like necessity for ordinances and a Universalist-like refusal to make access to the gospel and its ordinances dependent upon birth in the right place, circumstance, and historical moment.”¹¹⁴

This sacramental work on behalf of the dead can only be performed within Latter-day Saint temples. Thus, the administration of “saving ordinances” for the living and the performance of these same rituals on behalf of the dead together constitute the twin purposes of the modern temple. Accordingly, the Guatemalan and Salvadoran Latter-day Saints who traveled to the Arizona Temple took part in both types of ritual activity, receiving ordinances for themselves as well as for the dead.

¹¹² Givens, *Feeding the Flock*, 149.

¹¹³ Givens, *Feeding the Flock*, 44.

¹¹⁴ Givens, *Feeding the Flock*, 59.

A Second Purpose of the Temple Excursions: Receiving Patriarchal Blessings

It is important to note that temple ordinances were not the only significant spiritual experiences that Guatemalans and Salvadorans participated in while at the Arizona Temple. Many excursion participants also received their “patriarchal blessings” there. For Latter-day Saints, patriarchal blessings are considered to be inspired statements that reveal “God’s personalized intentions” for an individual’s life and typically offer “blessings, cautions, and admonitions” to help the recipient fulfill God’s will and achieve their life’s mission.¹¹⁵ They are seen as modern-day equivalents of the biblical “practice of fathers making quasi-legal pronouncements over the heads of their sons.”¹¹⁶ However, rather than being bestowed by a person’s literal father, they are given by a specially-appointed person holding the priesthood office of “patriarch.” The experience of receiving a patriarchal blessing has come to function as a Latter-day Saint rite of passage and, as with participation in temple rituals, can bolster one’s commitment to the faith.¹¹⁷ The faithful see patriarchal blessings as personalized guidance from God for their unique life experiences and refer to them throughout their lives for direction and comfort.¹¹⁸

Since many temple trip participants came from places that lacked easy access to an authorized patriarch, they took advantage of being in Arizona (a Latter-day Saint center of strength) to receive their patriarchal blessing. For some, receiving their

¹¹⁵ Gary Shepherd and Gordon Shepherd, *Binding Earth and Heaven: Patriarchal Blessings in the Prophetic Development of Early Mormonism* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 8; Irene M. Bates, “Patriarchal Blessings and the Routinization of Charisma,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 26, no. 3 (Fall 1993): 1 (quoting David O. McKay, Stephen L. Richards, and J. Reuben Clark, Jr., Letter to all stake presidencies, 28 June 1957).

¹¹⁶ Shepherd and Shepherd, *Binding Earth and Heaven*, xi.

¹¹⁷ Bates, “Patriarchal Blessings and the Routinization of Charisma,” 25; Shepherd and Shepherd, *Binding Earth and Heaven*, 118–119.

¹¹⁸ Bates, “Patriarchal Blessings and the Routinization of Charisma,” 29.

patriarchal blessing was not a secondary reason for making the journey, but was actually the main reason for it. For example, a teenage Guatemalan girl named Graciela Bonilla Gálvez took part in the 1965 trip, even though she was too young to participate in the initiatory, endowment, or sealing rituals in the Arizona Temple.¹¹⁹ While it is true that she was able to participate in baptisms for the dead (and, in fact, did), this is was not what motivated her to make the journey to Arizona. What drove her to go on the trip was the opportunity to receive her patriarchal blessing.¹²⁰

In contrast, the Salvadoran excursionist Julio Arturo Gómez had never heard of patriarchal blessings before traveling to Arizona in January 1977. However, he felt deeply impacted by his blessing when he received it. Both he and his wife, Ana Glavia, were counseled by the patriarch to prepare themselves for the opportunity to teach the future children who would be born into their home. Julio laughed when he heard this, because he had been told by his doctor that he would not be able to have children. However, in what he and his wife considered to be a miracle, they had two children after all.¹²¹ This is just one example of how some temple trip participants felt their lives were deeply impacted by their patriarchal blessings. Receiving these blessings was an important part of the excursion experience.

¹¹⁹ Only adult Latter-day Saints can receive the initiatory and endowment rituals or participate in the marriage sealing ceremony.

¹²⁰ Graciela B. Gálvez de Melgar, interview by Rigoberto Chen, Guatemala City, Guatemala, 24 July 2016, audio, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT.

<https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/record/Oa8ea117-9fdd-4655-808d-5250e9a1f0fb/0?view=browse&lang=eng>

¹²¹ Julio Arturo Gómez and Ana Glavia Gómez, interview by Alice and Jerry Dunn, Ahuachapán, El Salvador, December 16, 2019, audio, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT.

<https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/record/e46e4db5-f49d-4903-be90-d2715b2b65b2/0?view=browse>
The January 1977 excursion that Julio and Ana Glavia joined had been organized in Costa Rica but included one Nicaraguan family and two Salvadoran families. It is not technically a Guatemala-El Salvador organized trip, but illustrates how at least one Salvadoran family was deeply impacted by the temple trip.

Temple Excursions as Pilgrimage

As mentioned earlier, twentieth-century Guatemalans and Salvadorans were not the only Latter-day Saints that traveled great distances to receive temple ordinances. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, hundreds of Arizonans over many decades traversed challenging wagon roads (retrospectively called “The Honeymoon Trail”) in order to receive the marriage sealing ritual in southwestern Utah’s St. George Temple.¹²² Starting in 1955, Latter-day Saints from across Europe traveled to the Swiss Temple to receive the “saving ordinances,” often using their summer vacations to make the trip.¹²³ Then, beginning in 1992, as the twentieth century was drawing to a close, the faithful in Manaus, Brazil (a city deep in the Amazon Rainforest) would travel three days by boat and three days by bus to get to the temple in São Paulo, Brazil, approximately 2500 miles away from their homes.¹²⁴ These are just a few examples of the many Latter-day Saints the world over who have sacrificed greatly to travel to distant temples. The Guatemalans and Salvadorans discussed in this chapter are part of this larger, global temple excursion tradition.

I argue that temple excursions should be considered a form of religious pilgrimage. Although Latter-day Saints are not often seen as a people that practice pilgrimage, several scholars have recently argued compellingly that the popular Latter-

¹²² Norma Baldwin Ricketts, ed, *Arizona’s Honeymoon Trail and Mormon Wagon Roads* (Mesa, AZ: Cox Printing Company, 2001), 9–16, 275–277. See also H. Dean Garrett, “Traveling the Honeymoon Trail—An Act of Love and Faith,” in *Regional Studies in Latter-day Saint Church History: Arizona*, ed. H. Dean Garrett and Clark V. Johnson (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 1989), 97–112.

¹²³ Dale Z. Kirby, “History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Switzerland” (MA thesis, Brigham Young University, 1971), 139–140.

¹²⁴ Scott Taylor, “The drive behind why Brazilian Saints traveled by bus and by boat for decades to attend the temple,” *Church News (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints)*, 30 July 2018. <https://www.thechurchnews.com/2018/7/30/23221402/by-bus-and-by-boat-behind-the-sacrifices-that-brazilian-saints-make-to-get-to-the-temple>. It was not until 2012 that a temple opened in Manaus, Brazil, removing the need for Manaus Latter-day Saints to undertake long journeys to attend the temple.

day Saint cultural practice of visiting church historic sites constitutes a form of pilgrimage.¹²⁵ However, there has been much less attention given to Latter-day Saint temple trips as a form of pilgrimage.¹²⁶ This is the topic that I examine here.

As with many terms in religious studies (including the term “religion” itself), there is not a firm scholarly consensus on how to define a “pilgrimage.” However, many would agree on the following basic definition: a physical journey to a location considered holy which is undertaken as an act of religious devotion.¹²⁷ This description clearly applies to the Guatemalan and Salvadoran temple excursions, as well as to the larger Latter-day Saint temple excursion practice.

Being that the temple excursions so clearly fall into the category of religious pilgrimage, it is surprising that this terms “pilgrim” and “pilgrimage” are so rarely used by those who organized and participated in these trips. It is true that I have been able to find a few isolated examples of a Latter-day Saint temple trip being explicitly described as a “pilgrimage,” such as a 1933 pamphlet published by Latter-day Saints in San

¹²⁵ One book that provides a general study of this topic is Sara Patterson, *Pioneers in the Attic: Place and Memory Along the Mormon Trail* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020). David J. Howland, *Kirtland Temple: The Biography of a Shared Mormon Space* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014) specifically analyzes historic sites pilgrimage in Kirtland, Ohio, and Scott C. Esplin, *Return to the City of Joseph: Modern Mormonism’s Contest for the Soul of Nauvoo* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018) considers historic sites pilgrimage in Nauvoo, Illinois.

¹²⁶ Very few scholars have studied Latter-day Saint temple attendance as a form of pilgrimage. One article that made this argument (alongside a discussion of historic sites tourism as pilgrimage) is Lloyd E. Hudman and Richard H. Jackson, “Mormon pilgrimage and tourism,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 19, no. 1 (1992): 107–121.

The most recent academic scholarship to consider this topic is an award-winning student paper by C. William Campbell, a doctoral student at the University of Victoria. Campbell’s paper “argu[es] that pilgrimage is an integral aspect of regular LDS practice manifest in the form of temple attendance” and analyzes “the ways Latter-day Saints move across religious landscapes and the impact of those movements.” C. William Campbell wins 2021 Gordon and Gary Shepherd Graduate Student Paper Award,” Mormon Social Sciences Association, 21 February 2022, https://www.mormonsocialscience.org/2022/02/21/c-william-campbell-wins-2021-gordon-and-gary-shepherd-graduate-student-paper-award/?fbclid=IwAR2_7zf4kV1vh5dGP8jm0kxsA749NmRHlpguagXZjth001JHhIuAPnD9u8I.

¹²⁷ Robert H. Stoddard, “Defining and Classifying Pilgrimages,” in *Sacred Places, Sacred Spaces: The Geography of Pilgrimages*, eds. Robert H. Stoddard and Alan Morinis (Baton Rouge, LA: Geoscience Publications, 1997), 42–43, 49.

Francisco, California, advertising the upcoming “San Francisco Stake Pilgrimage to the Arizona Temple.”¹²⁸ However, these are rare exceptions to the general absence of this term in Latter-day Saint discussions of the trips. What explains the absence of such a well-known religious term to describe trips that seem to so obviously fit that term?

David Howland suggests that Latter-day Saints have historically distanced themselves from this word “due the term’s association with Catholic practices.” For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many Latter-day Saints held strong anti-Catholic sentiments, likely attributable to the Protestant background of many of those who joined the faith. This would have made an “association between their own practices and Catholic practices... deeply offensive.”¹²⁹ Beyond the term’s Catholic connotation (at least in the United States), Howland also argues that the term’s omission may reflect “an LDS tendency to desire that all things about their religion should be exceptional.”¹³⁰

In spite of the fact that “pilgrimage” was not a regularly used term by participants in these journeys, I argue that it can be helpful from a scholarly perspective to view and understand these journeys as pilgrimages and those who took part in them as pilgrims. I feel that using these terms can help direct our focus towards spiritual and social aspects of the trips that we might not pay as much attention to otherwise. For this reason, throughout the remainder of this chapter, I will frequently use the term “pilgrimage” to describe these journeys and I will also often use the term “pilgrim” to describe trip participants.

¹²⁸ “Itinerary: San Francisco Stake Pilgrimage to the Arizona Temple, Mesa, Arizona, Dec. 26 to Jan. 1, 1933–1934,” Americana Collection, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT. In fact, the “pilgrimage” is the most prominent word on the front page of the pamphlet, being rendered in large and bolded type.

¹²⁹ David J. Howlett, “Parallel Pilgrimage at Kirtland Temple: Cooperation and Contestation Among Mormon Denominations, 1965–2009” (Ph.D diss., University of Iowa, 2010), 18n47.

¹³⁰ Howlett, “Parallel Pilgrimage at Kirtland Temple,” 16.

Summary of a Typical Temple Trip Experience

Although each individual group pilgrimage from Central America to Mesa had unique elements that made it different from the others, there are nevertheless some characteristic features that can generally be found across all of them. The night before departing, Latter-day Saints from throughout Guatemala and El Salvador would gather at a chapel in Guatemala City. There could be as many as a hundred participants. From there, the group would travel towards the border with Mexico, picking up more people along the way. At the border, the travelers would switch from Guatemalan buses into Mexican buses. After crossing into Mexico, there were several routes north that the group might opt to take. However, one common route was from the border to Tapachula, from Tapachula to Veracruz, from Veracruz to Mexico City, from Mexico City to Torreón, and from Torreón to the U.S. border at Ciudad Juárez/El Paso.¹³¹ All along the journey through Mexico, the group would stay the night in local Latter-day Saint chapels. They would also often receive food and support from local Mexican Latter-day Saints along the way.¹³²

After crossing the border at El Paso, the group traveled to Mesa, Arizona. They were typically housed in the Mesa Inter-Stake Center, a large multipurpose building

¹³¹ This is the route that the first Guatemala-El Salvador temple trip took in 1965. Udine Falabella, “Una jornada de fe: Los milagros en la vida de un pionero en Guatemala que lideró el primer viaje oficial del área al Templo de Mesa, Arizona,” Central America Area Web Page, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed 2 November 2022. https://centroamerica.laiglesiadejesucristo.org/una-jornada-de-fe?lang=spa-gt&fbclid=IwAR1ybIjPMKNKdaRcJA_LYUhlDWxZh0rXr6Tflc3C2JSQojcSdwSkWLEJf1g

¹³² Central American ecclesiastical leaders sent form letters in advance to the Mexican congregations where they planned to stay the night along the way, asking the congregations to prepare to welcome the excursionists when they arrived. Alan Miner, Diary of the Guatemala-El Salvador Mission Temple Excursion for the year 1969, Temple excursion experiences, 1968–1970, Guatemala-El Salvador Mission collection, 1965–1972, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, 19.

about one city block from the temple.¹³³ The Inter-Stake Center contained a large basketball court, which would be filled with roll-out beds and divided by curtains to give the travelers privacy. The group would usually spend multiple days participating in temple rituals and receiving patriarchal blessings. In order to allow these pilgrims to more fully focus on the ordinances they had come to receive, local Arizona Latter-day Saints cooked meals for the group in the Inter-Stake Center's kitchen.

After completing the temple "ordinance work" and other things that they had come to do, the group would travel back down through Mexico. Just as on the way up, they slept in chapels along the way and received help and support from local Mexican Latter-day Saints. However, they may or may not have taken the same route as they had taken on the way up. Upon reaching Guatemala City, those from El Salvador and outlying parts of Guatemala would continue on to their homes.

Legal and Physical Challenges that Temple Trip Participants Faced

There were multiple legal hurdles that participants had to face in order to embark on this pilgrimage. They needed passports, as well as Mexican and U.S. visas, in order to take part in the trip. Central American participants were also required to receive certain vaccinations before they would be allowed to enter Mexico. These were all tasks that they needed to plan ahead for in order to make the trip.

Once on the trip, they regularly faced institutional corruption as they passed

¹³³ The Mesa Inter-Stake Center is a Latter-day Saint athletic facility and, unlike most Latter-day Saint buildings, is not typically used for religious meetings (except for an occasional church conference held on the indoor basketball court). Soon after it finished construction in 1955, it started being used as lodging for the temple excursions. See Stephen G. Williams, "Mesa Inter-Stake Center and Ellsworth Park," *Salt River Stories*, accessed December 7, 2022, <https://saltriverstories.org/items/show/201>; Richard O. Cowan, "The Historic Arizona Temple," *Journal of Mormon History* 31, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 111–113.

through Mexico. Central American temple trip groups were routinely and repeatedly stopped by Mexican police who requested that the group pay them money to be allowed to pass. In fact, the 1968 group was stopped seven times in one day by the police.¹³⁴ Not paying would mean that they would be held up by police and delayed in their journey. Being that they were on a tight schedule, the group leaders often paid the requested bribes.

Beyond legal requirements and governmental corruption, these travelers also faced other challenges along the journey. One of the most common physical challenges was the bus breaking down. It is not necessarily surprising that excursion buses would experience mechanical issues, considering the long distances that they were traveling and the dramatic variations in elevation and climate that the buses were experiencing.

The 1969 temple excursion faced a particularly large number of bus issues. While traveling through windy, 24-degree weather near Deming, New Mexico, the bus passengers began to hear “a faint little knocking [sound]... in the motor,” which “kept getting louder and louder,” until the bus broke down. They later learned that the drive shaft had broken, due to the drivers not having used antifreeze.¹³⁵ This shows how the large temperature swings and variations in climate along the journey could affect the operation of the buses.

Changes in elevation also took their toll on the buses. The 1969 trip first began having mechanical problems during the uphill drive from the coastal city of Veracruz, Mexico, to the mountain valleys of Mexico City.¹³⁶ The problems worsened during the

¹³⁴ Lemmon, *Diary of the Temple Excursion*, 3.

¹³⁵ Miner, *Diary of the Guatemala-El Salvador Mission Temple Excursion for the year 1969*, 43.

¹³⁶ Miner, *Diary of the Guatemala-El Salvador Mission Temple Excursion for the year 1969*, 37.

journey. On the way back, one bus experienced serious problems with its brakes while traveling by night along “windy mountainous” roads in the Mexican state of Sonora. At one point, the motor died while the bus was climbing a steep slope. Avoiding the semi-trucks that were rushing past them, the driver worked to carefully navigate the bus off the road to a place where it could turn around.¹³⁷ Both of these examples of bus issues were partly due to the steep terrain that the vehicle was navigating. While the 1969 group narrowly avoided getting into an accident on that mountain path in Sonora, other groups were not as fortunate, as demonstrated by the accident on the 1968 trip (which was described at the start of this chapter).

Even when the bus was working well, traveling conditions for the travelers were not always very comfortable. A Salvadoran man named Salvador Velázquez said the bus seats on his trip were not comfortable at all and he described the trip as physically hard and challenging.¹³⁸ When other buses in the caravan broke down, people would need to crowd into the remaining buses that worked. On the 1969 trip, this led some participants to loudly complain and some got in arguments with one another.¹³⁹

Crowded conditions and dramatic changes in temperature could also make illness more likely among trip participants. This also happened on the 1969 trip. After their bus broke down and they spent some time stranded in New Mexico in below-freezing conditions, the group was eventually able to successfully make it to the Arizona Temple. However, during their time in Mesa, a woman named Julia Mendoza contracted pneumonia and needed to stay longer than the rest of the group in Mesa, in order to

¹³⁷ Miner, *Diary of the Guatemala-El Salvador Mission Temple Excursion for the year 1969*, 49.

¹³⁸ Salvador Velázquez, *Reminiscence of the 1969 Temple Trip*, unpublished document.

¹³⁹ Miner, *Diary of the Guatemala-El Salvador Mission Temple Excursion for the year 1969*, 39, 51.

recover.¹⁴⁰ However, she would not be the only member of the group to experience serious illness. By the time the caravan got to Mexico City, seven people in one of the buses were very seriously sick. Three of them had pneumonia, three had bronchitis, and one man named Sergio Sosa had “double pneumonia with bronchitis.” A doctor who examined Sergio told the group that he did not think Sergio would live through the day. This made everyone “frantic,” but fortunately Sergio and the other six seriously ill people were able to recover.¹⁴¹ This is a particularly dramatic example of illness on the temple pilgrimage and most groups did not experience conditions this harrowing. However, the 1969 trip still clearly demonstrates the physical and bodily risks that participants might face on their pilgrimage to the Arizona Temple.

Deepening One’s Faith and Commitment Through the Temple Trip

Of course, along with these challenges, these pilgrims also received many benefits from the journey. The most obvious of these benefits were the religious ordinances and patriarchal blessings, which often brought great fulfillment and joy to trip participants. Also, for some participants, this pilgrimage served to increase their commitment to their faith and to their religious identity as Latter-day Saints. Decades after the fact, Graciela Bonilla Gálvez still remembered the deep and lasting spiritual impact that the 1965 excursion had on her as a teenager. She recalled the moment when the group arrived in Mesa and got their first look at the temple. As they stood outside of their buses and saw the temple beautifully lit up by night, they spontaneously began to sing together the hymn, “Te damos, Señor, nuestras gracias” (a title which literally translates as “We give

¹⁴⁰ Miner, *Diary of the Guatemala-El Salvador Mission Temple Excursion for the year 1969*, 47.

¹⁴¹ Miner, *Diary of the Guatemala-El Salvador Mission Temple Excursion for the year 1969*, 51.

thanks to thee, Lord”).¹⁴² Graciela remembers that this “beautiful” experience changed her. She committed in that moment that everything she did from that point on in her life would be centered on the temple and that she would one day marry a member of the Church in the temple.

She was further impacted by the events of the next day. As she arrived at the temple early the next morning to do baptisms for the dead, she saw the excitement of couples preparing to be “sealed” to one another. Graciela said that seeing these people’s happiness was “una experiencia bien bonita” (a very beautiful experience), which motivated her to take every chance she could to take part in future temple trips. In spite of the difficulty of the journey, she anxiously awaited the chance to do it all again. Up to that point, the journey had mainly been a fun and enjoyable group road trip for her, something new and exciting. However, after those experiences at the temple, things were different. *She* was now different. She was more firmly committed and tied to her chosen spiritual identity as a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.¹⁴³

Experiencing the Temple Ordinances

Graciela had been deeply impacted by the experience of arriving on the temple grounds and by seeing the excited anticipation of couples preparing to be sealed. But what about the temple ordinances themselves? How did temple trip participants react to these ceremonies, which were, of course, the main purpose for going to Mesa in the first

¹⁴² It is the Spanish translation of the English hymn, “We Thank Thee, O God, For A Prophet.”

¹⁴³ Graciela B. Gálvez de Melgar, interview by Rigoberto Chen, Guatemala City, Guatemala, 24 July 2016, audio, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT.

<https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/record/0a8ea117-9fdd-4655-808d-5250e9a1f0fb/0?view=browse&lang=eng>.

place?

Generally, these temple pilgrims seem to have had a very positive experience with the temple sealing ordinance. Ana Glavia Gómez of Ahuachapán, El Salvador, remembers that it was “muy hermoso” (very beautiful) when she was sealed in the temple to her husband, Julio. In fact, she says that when she attends other people’s sealings, she often thinks that hers was more beautiful. She especially appreciated that the “temple sealer” took the time to give them a lot of valuable advice on how to maintain a good marriage relationship.¹⁴⁴

The experience of having been sealed in the temple could also positively impact families in years to come. Graciela Bonilla Gálvez says that the knowledge that her children were “born in the covenant” (meaning they were born with the promise of being sealed to their parents for all eternity) gave her “confianza” (confidence). She felt that, in spite of problems that she saw among other youth, her children were going to “estar seguros” (be safe or secure) because of the sealing.¹⁴⁵

Zithrely Belnap had been a toddler when she traveled with her parents on the 1968 temple excursion and does not really remember much about the experience. However, she grew up knowing that her parents “had been sealed in the temple... and what a wonderful experience that was.” As a result, she “grew up wanting to be married, to be sealed in the temple” and was “all the time looking forward to that experience.” She says that this example of her parents had a stronger influence upon her than anything she

¹⁴⁴ Julio Arturo Gómez and Ana Glavia Gómez, interview by Alice and Jerry Dunn, Ahuachapán, El Salvador, December 16, 2019, audio, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT.

[https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/record/e46e4db5-f49d-4903-be90-d2715b2b65b2/0?view=browse.](https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/record/e46e4db5-f49d-4903-be90-d2715b2b65b2/0?view=browse)

¹⁴⁵ Graciela B. Gálvez de Melgar, interview by Rigoberto Chen, Guatemala City, Guatemala, 24 July 2016, audio, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT.

[https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/record/0a8ea117-9fdd-4655-808d-5250e9a1f0fb/0?view=browse&lang=eng.](https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/record/0a8ea117-9fdd-4655-808d-5250e9a1f0fb/0?view=browse&lang=eng)

was taught in church meetings about the temple.¹⁴⁶

Participants seem to have had a much more tempered reaction to the experience of performing baptisms for the dead. Although they mention that it occurred and often remember having participated in large numbers of baptisms, they usually only discuss this part of the temple experience in passing.¹⁴⁷ It does not seem to have generally left a deep emotional impact upon them. Perhaps this is because they were usually not being baptized on behalf of deceased family members and ancestors, but rather for people to whom they had no personal connection.¹⁴⁸ It is likely that if they had been performing ordinances on behalf of family, they would have had a stronger emotional response to the experience.¹⁴⁹

As far as the Endowment, participants' experiences were mixed. Some felt taken off guard by the newness of the ordinance. Elder César Cacuangó remembers that the endowment sessions were “algo sorprendente” (something surprising) for those who were experiencing them for the first time.¹⁵⁰ Pedro Flores remembers feeling like a startled deer, looking all around him, trying to understand this new and unfamiliar experience.¹⁵¹

For others, the ceremony did not match their prior expectations. Julio Gómez

¹⁴⁶ Zithrely Belnap, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 20 March 2023, interview in the author's possession.

¹⁴⁷ See, for example, Gerardo E. Arana Flores and Blanca E. Barrios Escobar de Arana, interview by Clate W. Mask, Jr., Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, 2 October 2018, audio, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT. <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/record/18caf76c-af49-4993-8ef5-1ea36d515d34/0?view=browse&lang=eng>.

¹⁴⁸ It took time for new Latter-day Saints in Central America to begin learning and doing genealogical work, so, for the first several years of the Guatemala-El Salvador temple trips, few if any participants performed temple ordinances for ancestors. Miner, *Diary of the Guatemala-El Salvador Mission Temple Excursion for the year 1969*, 17–21.

¹⁴⁹ As an exception to what seems to be the norm, Udine Falabella was a Guatemalan Latter-day Saint who was strongly motivated by baptisms for the dead—because he had a deep desire to have his deceased wife Leonor be baptized in the temple. Baptizing his wife and having their family be sealed were the twin motivations which led Udine to make so many sacrifices to organize the first Guatemala-El Salvador Temple Excursion in 1965. Falabella, *Excursion to the Arizona Temple*, 2009, 13.

¹⁵⁰ Cacuangó, *Diario de la Excursion Al Templo de la Mision Guatemala-El Salvador—1972*, 18.

¹⁵¹ Pedro Flores Medina, interview by Hovan Lawton, 13 April 2023, in the author's possession.

greatly enjoyed learning church doctrine and studying scripture, so he went into the endowment excitedly expecting to get an intensive course in doctrine and learn about such things as “el milenio” (the Millennium) or “el recogimiento de los santos” (the Gathering of Israel). In contrast, he describes his first experience with the Endowment by saying “nos pasaron muchas cosas bien raras” (many very strange things happened to us) and he felt “algo desilusionado” (somewhat disappointed) to not receive the deep doctrinal lesson he had been expecting.¹⁵²

Many temple trip participants seem to have felt underprepared for taking part in the Endowment ceremony. This is not to say that temple trip organizers never tried to prepare participants in advance for the journey. In preparation for the 1972 temple trip, missionaries would regularly visit potential participants in their homes and an Elder Lippincott beautifully “pintaba en palabras” (painted with words) the experience of the endowment session and the magnitude of the covenants that were made in the temple, which was appreciated by his listeners. There were also large meetings held that year in Guatemala City and San Salvador in which prospective participants were shown an instructional video on the Endowment to prepare them for the experience.¹⁵³

However, it seems that this kind of preparation was not always consistently given. Pedro Flores remembers that many people “no conocían mucho” (did not know very much) about the temple before going. People would understand that they would take part in something called the “Investidura” (Endowment) and that they would make

¹⁵² Julio Arturo Gómez and Ana Glavia Gómez, interview by Alice and Jerry Dunn, Ahuachapán, El Salvador, December 16, 2019, audio, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT. <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/record/e46e4db5-f49d-4903-be90-d2715b2b65b2/0?view=browse>.

¹⁵³ Cacuango, *Diario de la Excursion Al Templo de la Mision Guatemala-El Salvador—1972*, 6, 10.

“convenios sagrados” (sacred covenants), but not much else.¹⁵⁴ They would also be told that they needed to bring money to buy temple garments, but they might not really know why this religious clothing was significant.¹⁵⁵

In the end, it was not generally the endowment (a ritual that most did not really understand in advance) that was motivating people to sacrifice their time and money to go to the Arizona Temple. They were motivated by the promise of the sealing, an ordinance that they believed would allow them to be connected to their family “for time and all eternity.”¹⁵⁶ It was the promise of the temple sealing that motivated Udine Falabella to be baptized as a Latter-day Saint and then struggle against great challenges to organize the first successful Guatemala-El Salvador Temple Excursion in 1965.¹⁵⁷ The key motivational role that the temple sealing played likely helps explain why the sealing ended up being the most meaningful, emotionally significant part of the temple experience for many participants.

Overall, many participants seemed “complacidos” (pleased or satisfied) with the experience that they had had in the temple, including the Endowment.¹⁵⁸ Pedro Flores remembers that, in spite of initially feeling disoriented by the temple ordinances, he and his wife felt “más tranquilos” (more at peace) by the end. Although they did not understand everything they had experienced, he felt they understood “la mayor parte”

¹⁵⁴ Pedro Flores Medina, interview by Hovan Lawton, 13 April 2023, in the author’s possession.

¹⁵⁵ Pedro Flores Medina, interview by Hovan Lawton, 13 April 2023, in the author’s possession; Julio Arturo Gómez and Ana Glavia Gómez, interview by Alice and Jerry Dunn, Ahuachapán, El Salvador, December 16, 2019, audio, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT.

<https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/record/e46e4db5-f49d-4903-be90-d2715b2b65b2/0?view=browse>.

¹⁵⁶ Julio Arturo Gómez and Ana Glavia Gómez, interview by Alice and Jerry Dunn, Ahuachapán, El Salvador, December 16, 2019, audio, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT.

<https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/record/e46e4db5-f49d-4903-be90-d2715b2b65b2/0?view=browse>;

¹⁵⁷ Falabella, *Excursion to the Arizona Temple*, 2009, 11–13.

¹⁵⁸ Solano Castillo, *Diary of The Guatemala-El Salvador Mission Temple Excursion for the year 1971*, 17.

(most of it).¹⁵⁹ Elder César Cacuangó (a 1972 trip organizer who appears to be receiving these ordinances for the first time himself) summed up the day he received his endowment as having been “maravilloso” (wonderful) and “lleno de tantas experiencias que quedarán inmortalizadas en el recuerdo” (full of so many experiences that will remain immortalized in memory).¹⁶⁰

Nevertheless, in spite of their appreciation for these ordinances, when temple trip participants are interviewed years later, many give far more attention to the temple trip journey than to the temple ceremonies themselves.¹⁶¹ I think this is because the ordinances, though significant, were just one element of a multifaceted, multiple week transnational odyssey. This journey impacted them in a variety of additional ways beyond the reception of sacred ordinances.

A Greater Sense of Belonging in Their Transnational Religious Community

A key additional benefit of these temple trips is that they helped individuals feel a greater sense of connection and belonging within the transnational Latter-day Saint community. Some participants came from cities and towns with very few Latter-day Saints. However, on the journey they would spend multiple weeks in close interaction with fellow believers from throughout Guatemala and El Salvador. This could result in

¹⁵⁹ Pedro Flores Medina, interview by Hovan Lawton, 13 April 2023, in the author’s possession.

¹⁶⁰ Cacuangó, *Diario de la Excursion Al Templo de la Mision Guatemala-El Salvador—1972*, 19.

¹⁶¹ For example, see Felisa Zaldaña Ruiz, interview by Lloyd Dunn, Alice Dunn, and María Santos, Ahuachapán, El Salvador, December 16, 2019, audio, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT. <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/record/fe6cd311-e3fe-4d7b-a596-3469c5812c1a/0?view=summary&lang=eng>; Gerardo E. Arana Flores and Blanca E. Barrios Escobar de Arana, interview by Clate W. Mask, Jr., Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, 2 October 2018, audio, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT. <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/record/18caf76c-af49-4993-8ef5-1ea36d515d34/0?view=browse&lang=eng>; Felicito Rufino Rodríguez Rodríguez, interview by Clate and Carol Mask, Guatemala City, Guatemala, 9 April 2019, audio, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT. <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/e8fc0b7f-5fa3-4caf-b634-41089045c899/0/0>;

the formation of strong friendships between people who may not have met otherwise. Years after he traveled in the 1968 temple trip, Pedro Flores still remembered interacting with an indigenous Guatemalan Latter-day Saint from Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, who was also part of the temple trip group. They got along so well that this man invited Flores and his family to move to his hometown of Quetzaltenango, even offering to help Flores find a job there. Although Pedro Flores ended up choosing to remain in El Salvador, decades later he still remembered with fondness the friendliness of this fellow Latter-day Saint from Guatemala.¹⁶² This illustrates the way in which these experiences could facilitate transnational friendships and connections with fellow believers from different regions and countries.

This is not to say that travelers from different regions always got along well with one another. As Elder Alan Miner (a U.S. missionary) worked to organize the 1969 trip, he discovered that some Latter-day Saints in the area of Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, harbored lingering resentment towards the Latter-day Saints from the national capital, Guatemala City. He recorded: “President Pérez [of Quetzaltenango] complained about the bad treatment the members of his district had had the year before from the members of the [Guatemala City] stake. *As there were a lot of Indian members that went, they got pushed around a lot.*”¹⁶³ This statement seems to imply that some indigenous Latter-day Saints in the Quetzaltenango area (located in the highlands of Western Guatemala, a region with a large indigenous Maya population) felt that their racial and cultural identity had led them to be mistreated by Latter-day Saints from the capital city (which, in

¹⁶² Pedro Flores Medina, interview by Hovan Lawton, 14 April 2023, in the author’s possession

¹⁶³ Miner, *Diary of the Guatemala-El Salvador Mission Temple Excursion for the year 1969*, 19. Italics added for emphasis.

contrast to the western highlands, has a more Mestizo population—meaning people of mixed European and Native ancestry). Maya peoples have a long history of experiencing discrimination and marginalization from other groups in Guatemala and it seems that, in this case, the effort to forge a common religious identity struggled to overcome existing racial and cultural tensions.¹⁶⁴ Nevertheless, as Pedro Flores’s friendship with an indigenous Guatemalan Latter-day Saint shows, in other cases the temple pilgrimages did succeed in forging bonds between Latter-day Saints from disparate areas, who shared a common quest of reaching the Arizona Temple.

Guatemalan and Salvadoran Latter-day Saints also forged transnational connections with the Mexican Latter-day Saints that they met along the way. As previously mentioned, Mexican Latter-day Saints welcomed and helped their fellow believers from Central America that were passing through their country. On the 1968 trip, for example, the travelers arrived later than expected at the chapel in Culiacán, Mexico. They had been delayed by bus problems and it took until 9pm for them to finally arrive. Nevertheless, members of the local congregation in Culiacán were still waiting for them and held “a special meeting” for the group.¹⁶⁵

Latter-day Saint congregations throughout Mexico, across many years, sacrificed of their time and means to provide food, lodging, and other aid for their fellow believers. However, the generosity and love of the Latter-day Saints of Torreón, Mexico, made an

¹⁶⁴ The native peoples of Guatemala have been described as “the poorest, most exploited, and most discriminated against sector of the Guatemalan population.” Although forming the majority of the national population, they “have been the object of continuous and massive discrimination.” During the Guatemalan Civil War (which stretched across much of the latter half of the twentieth century), they received the brunt of the national army’s violent counterinsurgency efforts, suffering “extensive massacres, scorched earth programs, and population displacements,” including the killing of entire villages. Robert M. Carmack, ed., *Harvest of Violence: The Maya Indians and the Guatemalan Crisis* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), ix–xvii, 6, 14.

¹⁶⁵ Lemmon, *Diary of the Temple Excursion*, 7.

especially strong impact on the Central Americans. On the very first Guatemala-El Salvador temple trip in 1965, the weary pilgrims were greeted by the Torreón Latter-day Saints with a sign proclaiming “Bienvenidos mormones de Guatemala” (Welcome Guatemalan Mormons).¹⁶⁶ The Latter-day Saints of this northern Mexican city regularly had food ready for the group to eat, and (at least in 1965 and 1970) also had a doctor on hand to look after any health needs of the tired travelers.¹⁶⁷ Even on two occasions when the Torreón Saints did not know that a temple trip group was coming, they still hurried to gather food when the Central Americans showed up on their doorstep (something not all Mexican congregations were willing to do).¹⁶⁸ As small gestures of gratitude for Torreón’s repeated kindness, one of the leaders of the 1970 group gifted the Torreón Saints “a typical oil painting he had painted” and the 1972 group waived the bus fare for two Torreón Latter-day Saints who wanted to travel to Mesa as well.¹⁶⁹

Elder Bradley Lunt Hill (a leader of the 1970 group) described Torreón’s hospitality in this way: “There is kind of an established thing between us and the Torreón Branch. They love to have us.... When we left it was with abrazos [hugs] and kisses. Torreón is a delightful place!”¹⁷⁰ These interactions between the people of Torreón and these Central American pilgrims could sometimes lead to enduring friendships that lasted

¹⁶⁶ Falabella, “Una jornada de fe.”

¹⁶⁷ Falabella, “Una jornada de fe”; Miner, *Diary of the Guatemala-El Salvador Mission Temple Excursion for the year 1969*, 39; Hill, *Diary of The Guatemala-El Salvador Mission Temple Excursion for the year 1970*, 73; César Cacuango, *Diario de la Excursion al Templo de la Mision Guatemala-El Salvador—1972*, Temple excursion experiences, 1971–1972, Guatemala-El Salvador Mission collection, 1965–1972, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, 75.

¹⁶⁸ Jorge A. Solano Castillo, *Diary of The Guatemala-El Salvador Mission Temple Excursion for the year 1971*, Temple excursion experiences, 1971–1972, Guatemala-El Salvador Mission collection, 1965–1972, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, 31; Cacuango, *Diario de la Excursion Al Templo de la Mision Guatemala-El Salvador—1972*, 81.

¹⁶⁹ Hill, *Diary of The Guatemala-El Salvador Mission Temple Excursion for the year 1970*, 73; Cacuango, *Diario de la Excursion Al Templo de la Mision Guatemala-El Salvador—1972*, 75.

¹⁷⁰ Hill, *Diary of The Guatemala-El Salvador Mission Temple Excursion for the year 1970*, 73.

for decades. In his oral history recorded decades after the fact, Pedro Flores had particularly strong memories of one Mexican Latter-day Saint—a 13- or 14-year-old teenager from Torreón named Xochil Mora Acosta, who helped the travelers buy supplies at a local grocery store.¹⁷¹ Mora Acosta was similarly remembered with fondness by a Salvadoran participant in the next year’s excursion, Salvador Velázquez.¹⁷² Both Velázquez and Flores remain in touch with Mora Acosta to this day, over fifty years after their respective temple trips. This clearly demonstrates the close connections and lasting friendships that the transnational temple pilgrimages could forge. It did not matter that the temple trip participants and these local Mexican members may have never previously met. It did not matter that many Mexicans and Central Americans feel a mutual animosity towards one another.¹⁷³ All that mattered was that they were *hermanos* (or brothers and sisters) in the same faith.¹⁷⁴ In this very striking case (and in contrast to the previously mentioned tension between indigenous and mestizo Guatemalans), shared membership in the global Latter-day Saint community transcended even the most longstanding divisions.¹⁷⁵

As has already been discussed, the pilgrims also received a warm welcome upon their arrival in Arizona. Local Latter-day Saints in Mesa prepared beds and cooked all their meals for them in the Inter-Stake Center. After taking part in the 1965 trip, Udine

¹⁷¹ Pedro Flores Medina, interview by Hovan Lawton, 25 September 2022, in the author’s possession.

¹⁷² Salvador Velázquez, Reminiscence of the 1969 Temple Trip, unpublished document.

¹⁷³ For a description of the Salvadoran-Mexican antagonism specifically (which can be particularly intense), see Marcos Villatoro, “The Mexican-Salvadoran Antagonism,” *Wall Street Journal*, 20 August 2019. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-mexican-salvadoran-antagonism-11566341308>; and Gustavo Arellano, “Why do Mexicans Hate Salvadorans?,” *LA Weekly*, 3 November 2009. <https://www.laweekly.com/why-do-mexicans-hate-salvadorans/>.

¹⁷⁴ Although technically meaning “brothers,” the Spanish word *hermanos* can also be used to collectively refer to a group of both men and women, brothers as well as sisters.

¹⁷⁵ For more on the concept of “imagined communities” of people who have never met, yet still consider themselves to be alike and part of the same larger community, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 2006).

Falabella (the leader of the group) lavishly praised the “brotherhood” and “greatness” of the Mesa Latter-day Saints. Falabella gratefully described them in idealized terms as spiritual brothers and sisters “who truly live the Gospel” and had “light in their countenances.” He said that the Arizonans had gone out of their way to provide the pilgrims with “every comfort,” declaring that their hosts had made the four days spent in Mesa “the most pleasant of our lives.”¹⁷⁶ Through their interactions with their fellow travelers, as well as their hosts in both Mexico and Arizona, temple trip participants felt loved and supported by fellow believers that they had never previously met. This would have further strengthened their sense of kinship and connection with the larger transnational Latter-day Saint community.

New Cultural Experiences: Introduction to New and Unfamiliar Foods

Participation in these temple pilgrimages also introduced individuals to unfamiliar cultures and cultural products. One of the elements of foreign culture that impacted these travelers was food. As mentioned earlier, Pedro Flores remembered that a teenager named Xochil Mora Acosta escorted him and a few other Central American Latter-day Saints to a Torreón store to buy supplies for the rest of their group. As Pedro shopped, this friendly Mexican teenager suggested that he buy jalapeño peppers and pork rinds. Although Pedro had never tried these Mexican foods before, he decided to get them.¹⁷⁷ When they got back to the rest of the group, he tried the peppers and was taken aback by how spicy they were. Nevertheless, although the jalapeños took some getting used to, this initial exposure to a new food led to a lifetime love of chile peppers. In fact, Pedro would

¹⁷⁶ Udine Falabella, “Y llegaron al templo...” *Liahona*, March 1966. The English translation is my own.

¹⁷⁷ Pedro Flores Medina, interview by Hovan Lawton, 25 September 2022, in the author’s possession.

later grow both serrano chile plants and jalapeño plants in pots inside his home.¹⁷⁸

It should be noted that Pedro’s experience of embracing a new foreign food is not necessarily representative of many other Central American Latter-day Saints. For example, when his wife Albertina tasted shrimp with a spicy Mexican mole sauce while passing through Mazatlán, Mexico, she chose to wash the sauce off rather than continue eating it.¹⁷⁹ Similarly, another Salvadoran named Mario Berríos (who traveled to Mesa in December 1976) ordered a plate called “barbacoa” at a restaurant in Mexico, thinking it would be “carne asada” (or grilled steak), since that is what “barbacoa” means in El Salvador. However, it turned out to be a large piece of meat drenched in spicy chile sauce, the very scent of which made his eyes water and his nose burn—so he, like Albertina with the spicy shrimp, refused to eat it.¹⁸⁰ The new foods that Albertina and Mario tried did not become important parts of their life, but were rather just elements of the journey that remained in their memory but not in their diet. However, Pedro’s experience shows the potential that the temple pilgrimage could have in deeply impacting the culinary choices and eating habits of a person for the rest of their life.

The Temple Trip as an “Excursion”

As previously mentioned, the most common term that trip organizers and participants used to describe their journey was “excursión al templo” (or, among native English speakers, “temple excursion”). Although I think the term “pilgrimage” better captures the spiritual significance of these journeys, the word “excursion” does describe

¹⁷⁸ Pedro Flores Medina. interview by Hovan Lawton, 14 April 2023, in the author’s possession.

¹⁷⁹ Pedro Flores Medina. interview by Hovan Lawton, 19 March 2023, in the author’s possession.

¹⁸⁰ Mario Berríos and Ester Abigail Rios Lazo de Berríos, interview by Hovan Lawton, 29 January 2023, in the author’s possession.

some elements of what these trips entailed. Interestingly, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, one meaning of the word “excursion” is “a pleasure-trip taken by a number of persons.”¹⁸¹ Although I do not think that these “excursions” were intended to be considered as “pleasure trips” (nor was “pleasure” their central purpose), there were indeed some touristic elements of the trips. Both the 1965 and 1968 groups took time to visit the beach while passing through Veracruz, Mexico, and some 1968 trip participants also went swimming in Mazatlán, Mexico.¹⁸² In 1965, some of the travelers were shown around the city of Mesa, Arizona by their local hosts.¹⁸³ Also, many participants in both 1968 and 1970 spent time sightseeing while in Mexico City.¹⁸⁴ It may have been the first time that many of these people had been to Mexico or the U.S., so it makes sense that some took advantage of the opportunity to explore and enjoy these new places. This is yet another way in which temple pilgrimage participants were exposed to the cultures of the locations through which they traveled.

Another definition of “excursion” is “[a] journey [or] expedition... from one’s home, or from any place with the intention of returning to it.”¹⁸⁵ Thus, implicit in the word “excursion” is the idea that it is not supposed to be a one-way trip, but rather that it is expected for participants to return to their place of origin at the end of that trip. This was indeed the expectation of the organizers of the temple excursion. From their perspective, the core purpose of the excursion was to receive sacred ordinances and patriarchal blessings. Although there might be some few other secondary benefits from

¹⁸¹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “excursion, n,” accessed 2 November 2022, <https://www-oed-com.dist.lib.usu.edu/view/Entry/65949?rskey=ouGgig&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>.

¹⁸² Falabella, “Una jornada de fe”; Lemmon, *Diary of the Temple Excursion*, 1968, 3, 7

¹⁸³ Falabella, “Una jornada de fe.”

¹⁸⁴ Lemmon, *Diary of the Temple Excursion*, 1968, 3; Hill, *Diary of The Guatemala-El Salvador Mission Temple Excursion for the year 1970*, 77.

¹⁸⁵ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “excursion, n.”

the journey (such as reconnecting in Arizona with former missionaries who had taught in Central America or obtaining clothing at low costs through the Church's thrift store, Deseret Industries), it was expected that participants' motivations for joining the "excursion" would be solely religious.¹⁸⁶ They were to receive their ordinances, then return home.

What the excursion was not supposed to be was a means for Central American Latter-day Saints to immigrate illegally to the United States. Trip organizers often made this emphatically clear as they traveled through Guatemala and El Salvador recruiting potential participants.¹⁸⁷ For example, in 1971, Elder Jorge Solano Castillo (the missionary in charge of organizing the trip that year) emphasized to a group of prospective participants "la importancia de... regresar de los Estados con la excursión" (the importance of returning from the U.S. with the rest of the group).¹⁸⁸

One reason why Elder Solano felt the need to preemptively dissuade prospective participants from trying to stay in the U.S. is because it was actually something that was attempted quite often. Elder Alan Miner reported that "[t]here are always problems of people wanting to stay in the U.S. after the temple excursion to visit or to work."¹⁸⁹ Sometimes trip organizers would learn before embarking that some individuals wanted to stay in the U.S.¹⁹⁰ In other cases, trip participants waited until they had already arrived in

¹⁸⁶ For descriptions of meetings with missionaries and shopping at Deseret Industries that took place during the stay in Mesa, see Miner, *Diary of the Guatemala-El Salvador Mission Temple Excursion for the year 1969*, 27, 45; Solano Castillo, *Diary of The Guatemala-El Salvador Mission Temple Excursion for the year 1971*, 16; and Cacuangó, *Diario de la Excursion Al Templo de la Mision Guatemala-El Salvador—1972*, 18.

¹⁸⁷ Pedro Flores Medina, interview by Hovan Lawton, 13 April 2023, in the author's possession.

¹⁸⁸ Solano Castillo, *Diary of The Guatemala-El Salvador Mission Temple Excursion for the year 1971*, 12.

¹⁸⁹ Alan Miner, *Temple Excursion Report*, circa 1968, 1970 December, Guatemala-El Salvador Mission collection, 1965–1972, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, 15.

¹⁹⁰ Miner, *Diary of the Guatemala-El Salvador Mission Temple Excursion for the year 1969*, 29.

the U.S. to let group leaders know about their plans. In 1970, Elder Hill “learned for the first time” after crossing the border in El Paso, Texas, that four or five single men from Guatemala “had intentions of remaining in the states.”¹⁹¹ In 1969, two men from El Salvador waited until the end of the group’s last day at the Arizona Temple to ask Elder Miner “if they could stay in the U.S. to work.”¹⁹² In all these cases, group leaders would allow people to stay if they could obtain the appropriate visa, but tell those without visas that they needed to go back to Central America with the group.

However, trip participants did not always obey the instructions of their leaders. In the case of the two Salvadoran men who asked at the last minute if they could stay in the U.S., neither had the required visa. Then, after Elder Miner denied their repeated requests to be allowed to remain, they slipped away and stayed anyway.¹⁹³ The individuals who stayed in the U.S. often had legitimate personal reasons for wanting to remain behind. In the 1960s and 1970s, most of El Salvador’s land was held by a very small number of rich families, leaving the majority of the population with little-to-no land to farm on. With the population rapidly growing and with “nowhere to put more people,” many had “few alternatives” to leaving the country in search of work.¹⁹⁴ The two Salvadorans in 1969 who stayed behind in Mesa had told the group’s leader that “they were poor” and that that was why they wanted so badly to stay in the U.S. to earn money.¹⁹⁵

Nevertheless, trip organizers also had important reasons for being so concerned

¹⁹¹ Hill, *Diary of The Guatemala-El Salvador Mission Temple Excursion for the year 1970*, 73.

¹⁹² Miner, *Diary of the Guatemala-El Salvador Mission Temple Excursion for the year 1969*, 46–47.

¹⁹³ Miner, *Diary of the Guatemala-El Salvador Mission Temple Excursion for the year 1969*, 46–47.

Around 3 or 4 people stayed behind the previous year as well (during the 1968 temple excursion). Pedro Flores Medina, interview by Hovan Lawton, 13 April 2023, in the author’s possession.

¹⁹⁴ Erik Ching, *Stories of Civil War in El Salvador: A Battle over Memory* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 25–26.

¹⁹⁵ Miner, *Diary of the Guatemala-El Salvador Mission Temple Excursion for the year 1969*, 46–47.

about people staying in the U.S. When temple excursionists overstayed their U.S. visas, it made it more difficult for participants on future trips to get visas. For example, organizers of the 1970 trip, who were seeking to obtain visas for church members, had to account to the U.S. Consulate for the two “escapees” from El Salvador who had stayed behind the previous year.¹⁹⁶ As Elder Alan Miner put it, “[t]oo many problems can arise if people are allowed to stay.”¹⁹⁷

Even visa issues unrelated to the temple excursions could cause problems for trip organizers. Sometime before 1970, a U.S. church member helped a Central American Latter-day Saint and her friends to get tourist visas “to tour for a few weeks” in the U.S. However, they ended up overstaying their visas. The fact that it had been a U.S. church member who had been involved with this situation made it more complicated for another U.S. church member (Elder Bradley Hill) to request visas for the temple trip participants in 1970.¹⁹⁸

This helps explain why trip organizers were so adamant about not letting excursionists stay in the U.S. The Church as an institution was focused on helping as many Central American members as possible receive temple ordinances in the United States and was willing to make financial sacrifices to do so. In a document created around 1969 to help future excursion organizers, Elder Alan Miner said trip leaders seeking visas should tell the Mexican Consulate that the Church was willing to “back up each member on the excursion with 100 dollars.”¹⁹⁹ After expending considerable effort and funds to help church members go to the temple, it is understandable that leaders did not want

¹⁹⁶ Hill, *Diary of The Guatemala-El Salvador Mission Temple Excursion for the year 1970*, 59.

¹⁹⁷ Miner, *Temple Excursion Report*, circa 1968, 1970 December, 15.

¹⁹⁸ Hill, *Diary of The Guatemala-El Salvador Mission Temple Excursion for the year 1970*, 63.

¹⁹⁹ Miner, *Temple Excursion Report*, circa 1968, 1970 December, 23.

participants to cause problems for the Church (and jeopardize future opportunities for Central American Latter-day Saints to attend the temple) by staying behind. This illustrates the conflict that existed between the real financial need of those who wanted to stay in the U.S. and the real institutional need of the Church and its leaders to maintain good relations with government officials so future excursionists could receive visas. It was a conflict between the needs of the individual and the needs of the group.

The different meanings of the word “excursion” thus help us understand various elements of what the temple excursion could offer to participants. Beyond the core goal of receiving religious ordinances, travelers were also able to experience new places and cultures. Additionally, some viewed the chance to resolve real financial need through working in the U.S. as another benefit of the trip.

This chapter has sought to give a basic overview of Latter-day Saint temple rituals and temple trips generally; analyze temple trips as a form of pilgrimage; outline common elements of the Central American trips; explore various challenges participants faced; and evaluate some of the principal spiritual, social, and cultural impacts of these pilgrimages on those involved. All of this information and analysis has been offered with the goal of furthering our understanding of how Salvadoran and Guatemalan Latter-day Saint community and identity were constructed. In the next chapter, we will turn our attention to how that community and identity were tested by the onslaught of a brutal and devastating conflict: the Salvadoran Civil War.

CHAPTER 4

PRESERVING THE COMMUNITY: THE EXPERIENCE OF THE SAN MIGUEL
LATTER-DAY SAINTS DURING THE SALVADORAN CIVIL WAR

In January 1981, guerrilla revolutionaries began their offensive against El Salvador's military government. That same year, another event occurred that would similarly be forever engrained in the memories of the Latter-day Saints of San Miguel, El Salvador. Silvino Arévalo was going about his normal work, cleaning the bathrooms of the San Miguel "stake center."²⁰⁰ A local Latter-day Saint leader, Silvino worked as the caretaker of this church on Roosevelt Street (the first Latter-day Saint house of worship ever built in San Miguel) and was known to be particularly careful and conscientious in his job.²⁰¹ This day of work likely did not feel different from any other. Besides Silvino, the only other people in the building were two church secretaries occupied with clerical business.

While Silvino and the secretaries were working, some people came to the front door of the chapel. Silvino walked to the door and opened it to see who was there. As soon as he opened the door, Silvino was shot dead by the people outside, who quickly jumped the fence and fled the scene of the murder. However, before the assassins could get away, they were seen by the two secretaries, who had rushed over to see what had

²⁰⁰ A "stake center" serves as the central building for a Latter-day Saint "stake" (a grouping of Latter-day Saint congregations). To use a Catholic comparison, a stake could be thought of analogous to a diocese, with a stake center thus serving a role somewhat analogous to a cathedral (as the central "seat" of that diocese).

²⁰¹ Silvino Arévalo had been called in January 1981 as the first counselor in the bishopric of the Occidental Ward, in the San Miguel El Salvador Stake. José Peña Urrutia, *Historia de la Iglesia De Jesucristo de Los Santos de los Ultimos Días En El Salvador* (N.p.: n.p., 2014), 266; William Torres Rivera, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 30 October 2022, interview in the author's possession; Telhri Agardy, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 24 April 2023, interview in the author's possession.

happened. Knowing he had been seen by the murderers and afraid he would be targeted next, one of the secretaries (a longtime church member and leader) immediately quit his job with the municipal government and fled the country. Similarly fearing for their safety, Silvino's wife and children also fled for their lives.²⁰²

Decades later, San Miguel Latter-day Saints tell conflicting stories regarding who Silvino's murderers were. One claims that the assassins belonged to the military government's death squads.²⁰³ Another counters that the killers were simply common criminals trying to rob Silvino of his paycheck, arguing that criminal activity shot up during the civil war, since the conflict kept the military government too busy to deal with delinquency.²⁰⁴ Although no one made this suggestion, it is also possible that this Latter-day Saint chapel had been targeted by leftists, due to the popular perception that Church members and missionaries were CIA operatives.²⁰⁵ However, what everyone can agree on is that Silvino's murder was a direct result of the chaos and instability brought about by the onslaught of violent civil war. Telhri Agardy remembers that "everyone was afraid" after Silvino's murder.²⁰⁶ In the words of Salvadoran Latter-day Saint Jacobo Juárez, "these were dangerous years."²⁰⁷

²⁰² Years later, Silvino's family would return to San Miguel. Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 25 October 2022, interview in the author's possession; Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 4 November 2022, interview in the author's possession; Telhri Agardy, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 24 April 2023, interview in the author's possession.

²⁰³ William Torres Rivera, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 13 November 2022, interview in the author's possession.

²⁰⁴ Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 25 October 2022, interview in the author's possession; Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 4 November 2022, interview in the author's possession.

²⁰⁵ The following interviews discuss the popular perception in El Salvador connecting Latter-day Saints with the CIA: Vilma Silva, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 24 October 2022, interview in the author's possession; William Torres Rivera, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 30 October 2022, interview in the author's possession. However, FMLN guerrillas seem least likely to have been the assassins, since they were not known to publicly kill noncombatants within cities in the way death squads and criminals would (as will be discussed later).

²⁰⁶ Telhri Agardy, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 24 April 2023, interview in the author's possession.

²⁰⁷ Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 25 October 2022, interview in the author's possession.

They were years of chaos in which the Latter-day Saints of San Miguel (as well as their neighbors) lived in constant fear of being killed. They were years of isolation in which the Latter-day Saints of eastern El Salvador became largely cut off from the larger church and had to keep their community going on their own. They were years of separation and loss as some church members were killed and many, many others (including many stalwart pillars of the Latter-day Saint community) fled El Salvador for other, hopefully safer nations—and left their fellow church members in San Miguel with a fractured, shrunken community.

This chapter investigates the impact of Cold War era civil wars on the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints by looking at a specific subgroup of Central American Latter-day Saints: the church members of San Miguel, El Salvador. In a shift from the first two chapters, I am focusing on a single city, rather than discussing all of Guatemala and El Salvador, in order to gain a more intimate picture of the impact of war on Central American Latter-day Saints. I am focusing on San Miguel because it is the largest city in eastern El Salvador, a region that experienced much of the worst violence of the Salvadoran Civil War.²⁰⁸ It is thus a useful case study of how a religious community negotiates a very disruptive conflict that deeply impacts their lives.

I explore how the prolonged and deeply disruptive Salvadoran Civil War impacted and shaped preexisting Latter-day Saint community and identity in El Salvador in a different direction from Latter-day Saint communities that did not experience this sort of conflict. Specifically, I will argue that through the chaos of war and the flight of

²⁰⁸ William Torres Rivera, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 13 November 2022, interview in the author's possession; Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 25 October 2022, interview in the author's possession.

many stalwart Latter-day Saints into the transnational refugee diaspora the San Miguel Latter-day Saint community was deeply strained. In the face of numerical depletion and a deadly environment of conflict, the San Miguel Latter-day Saints that did not migrate generally chose to stay out of the war as much as possible, while also adopting a posture of allegiance to the military state—in spite of any personal political opinions—largely as a community act of self-preservation. They redoubled their efforts to build their religious community rather than getting involved in the strife. This communal choice helped allow the community to survive in spite of the chaotic crucible of war.

The War Approaches

In their interviews, multiple San Miguel Latter-day Saints said that the years immediately preceding the war had been times of prosperity and happiness for the Church.²⁰⁹ Nevertheless, one person remembers he could feel something impactful was coming, as if moving under the earth towards them.²¹⁰ Another said that the war was approaching “like a storm,” with conditions incrementally getting worse and worse.²¹¹ However, it seemed that most problems were happening in other parts of the country.²¹²

Nevertheless, before long, the tensions and the danger came to their city, too. The government’s efforts to crack down on revolutionaries began to seriously disrupt

²⁰⁹ Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 25 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession; William Torres Rivera, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 30 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

²¹⁰ William Torres Rivera, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 13 November 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

²¹¹ Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 25 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession. Of course, Jacobo and William made these comments in retrospect, after the war has already occurred and it is easier to see how preceding events helped lead to the conflict. It is hard to know if the connection between preceding events and the approaching war were as easy to see in the moment, as they were happening.

²¹² Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 25 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

everyday life. The youth were particularly affected, since (according to one church member) the government was especially prone to suspect that age group of being guerrillas.²¹³ Vilma Silva remembers that it was dangerous for teenagers to walk in the street to go to school or church, because they could be “disappeared” (meaning kidnapped, then killed in secret) by the military. Vilma’s sister Telhri remembers that this is exactly what happened to a 16- or 17-year-old young man from their congregation—he was picked up in the streets by the military and never seen again.²¹⁴

Due to these dangers, Vilma and Telhri’s father paid for a taxi to take them and their sisters to and from school. Vilma also remembers that people who wore blue jeans were more likely to be viewed as guerrillas by the government, which led some to change the very way they dressed for self-protection. Along with the danger of being “disappeared,” male teenagers and young adults faced the additional risk of being forcibly conscripted into the military while walking down the street. Vilma remembers that this led some mothers to keep their military-age sons hidden out of sight.²¹⁵

These dangers also affected church youth activities. The Boy Scout outings that Latter-day Saints held in the countryside began to be suspected of being guerrilla training meetings, which brought an end to these events.²¹⁶ Eventually, all youth activities were suspended because of the war.²¹⁷

The Deaths of Oswaldo Ordoño and Eva Julieta Amaya

²¹³ Vilma Silva, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 24 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

²¹⁴ Telhri Agardy, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 24 April 2023, interview in the author’s possession.

²¹⁵ Vilma Silva, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 24 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

²¹⁶ Vilma Silva, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 24 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

²¹⁷ William Torres Rivera, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 13 November 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

In the years preceding the war, most church members did not get directly involved in leftist political movements. According to William Torres, one of the few who did was Oswaldo Ordoño.²¹⁸ He was a tall, slender, dark-haired young man; a fellow church member remembered that “he was a nice guy.”²¹⁹ He also served as president of the local Latter-day Saint “hombres jóvenes” (Young Men) organization. Then he allegedly became involved in leftist politics and, around 1979, while participating in a political protest in the center of San Miguel, he was killed when military troops fired on the demonstrators.²²⁰

According to William Torres, another young Latter-day Saint named Eva Julieta Amaya also became involved with the Salvadoran left, leading some of her fellow congregation members to become concerned for her safety. William asserts that Eva’s sister, Cleopatra, asked other Latter-day Saints to help her pull Eva out of political activities. William further claims that three people came to Eva’s house and tried to persuade her to stop her activism, but that she firmly refused to listen to them.²²¹ This group effort to discourage a community member from getting involved in revolutionary activity clearly demonstrates the inclination against direct involvement in the conflict that existed among the San Miguel Latter-day Saints, which will be discussed in greater detail later on in this chapter.

In September 1979, Eva took part in a group trip to El Cuco beach on the Pacific

²¹⁸ William Torres Rivera, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 13 November 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

²¹⁹ Jenny Lawton, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 13 April 2023, interview in the author’s possession.

²²⁰ William Torres Rivera, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 13 November 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

²²¹ William Torres Rivera, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 13 November 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

Coast. Her father, also a Latter-day Saint, was driving the vehicle.²²² The purpose of this trip is not completely clear. According to Vilma Silva, this was a church-organized beach outing (although the majority of participants were not Latter-day Saints, but rather others who liked to participate in church activities).²²³ However, William Torres asserts that the vehicles held prospective guerrillas who were traveling to an insurgent training meeting near the beach.²²⁴ There is obviously a significant difference between a church beach excursion and a rebel training meeting. Depending on which account is correct, Eva's participation in the event takes on vastly different meanings. One depicts Eva as actively involved in her faith's social activities and the other portrays her as ever more deeply involved in insurgent activities. This discrepancy demonstrates the challenge that historians can face when seeking to reconstruct past events with scant or contradictory source material. What both interviewees can agree on, however, is that very few of the travelers were members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.²²⁵

As the group traveled through a hilly area, they were suddenly ambushed by government forces, who shot at the truck. Between twelve and seventeen people were killed (depending on who is telling the story), including Eva Julieta. The ambushed truck then began rolling towards a cliff, which would have killed the rest of the group that

²²² William Torres Rivera, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 13 November 2022, interview in the author's possession; Telhri Agardy, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 24 April 2023, interview in the author's possession; Vilma Silva, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 24 October 2022, interview in the author's possession.

²²³ Vilma Silva, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 24 October 2022, interview in the author's possession.

²²⁴ William Torres Rivera, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 13 November 2022, interview in the author's possession.

²²⁵ William Torres claims that there was only one truck in the group. William Torres Rivera, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 13 November 2022, interview in the author's possession.

Vilma Silva says that there were two trucks, but only the one in the front would be attacked in the ensuing violence. Vilma Silva, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 24 October 2022, interview in the author's possession.

hadn't died in the gunfire. However, Eva's father (who was mortally wounded) was able to stop the vehicle from rolling off the cliff before dying himself.²²⁶

The death of Eva (and, to a lesser degree, her father) deeply impacted the Latter-day Saints of San Miguel.²²⁷ While just three interviewees talked about Oswaldo Ordoño's death in their oral histories, five remembered Eva's.²²⁸ Perhaps Eva's death is more widely remembered because she died while participating in a church-organized event (according to Vilma's account), while Oswaldo died taking part in anti-government activity. Based on Vilma's recollection of events, Eva's death would have hit closer to home for the San Miguel Latter-day Saints, since it directly involved their religious community and, more specifically, the church social events that played such an important role in building and maintaining that community.

When Eva's funeral was held, it presented the San Miguel Latter-day Saints with a difficult dilemma. Some of them felt afraid to attend the funeral, since they worried that those who came to mourn Eva would be suspected of being leftist revolutionaries. According to William Torres, it was also dangerous for the Church as an institution to be involved in Eva's funeral. In fact, William claimed that involvement in the funeral could

²²⁶ According to Vilma Silva, Eva's father threw himself in front of the wheels to stop them from rolling. Alternately, William Torres says that Eva's father placed rocks in front of the wheels.

²²⁷ Perhaps part of the reason why Eva receives greater attention than her father in these narratives is because most of those I interviewed were teenagers when the war began and thus were Eva's peers.

²²⁸ Only William Torres Rivera, Telhri Agardy, and Jenny Lawton remembered Oswaldo's death, while Eva's death was remembered by Vilma Silva, Carlos René Romero, William Torres Rivera, Telhri Agardy, and Jenny Lawton.

William Torres Rivera, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 30 October 2022, interview in the author's possession; William Torres Rivera, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 13 November 2022, interview in the author's possession; Telhri Agardy, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 24 April 2023, interview in the author's possession; Vilma Silva, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 24 October 2022, interview in the author's possession; Carlos René Romero, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 22 September 2022, interview in the author's possession; Jenny Lawton, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 13 April 2023, interview in the author's possession.

affect the Church “al nivel nacional” (at the national level).²²⁹ Thus, even in the case of the funeral of a cherished community member, some felt that their personal safety as well as the well-being of the institutional Church required them to avoid anything that could make them seem partisan.

As a result, some Latter-day Saints promptly gave their condolences to Eva’s mother, but didn’t go to the funeral.²³⁰ However, others still chose to attend the funeral, in spite of the risks. William Torres remembers that he and a friend attended, even though his friend’s mother did not want them to.²³¹ Jenny Lawton (who was seven years old at the time of Eva’s death) remembers walking with her mother in the funeral procession. She remembers seeing the people around her crying. She felt a sense of fear and horror “that this could have happened to someone we knew, someone from the ward.” As they walked past the local military barracks, Jenny remembers noticing a lot of soldiers watching the procession and she felt afraid that at any moment these soldiers would shoot at them.²³² Even though she was a small child, these events had a big impact on her. These were “moments of chaos” for the San Miguel faithful, who felt very affected by the brutal killing of one of their own.²³³

Lester B. Whetten and Twentieth-Century Latter-day Saint Political Policy

²²⁹ William Torres Rivera, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 13 November 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

²³⁰ Vilma Silva, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 24 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

²³¹ William Torres Rivera, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 30 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession; William Torres Rivera, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 13 November 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

²³² Jenny Lawton, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 13 April 2023, interview in the author’s possession; Telhri Agardy also remembers that the military was watching them at Eva Julieta’s funeral. Telhri Agardy, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 24 April 2023, interview in the author’s possession.

²³³ William Torres Rivera, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 13 November 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

As the violence and tension increased, at least one senior church leader actively sought to discourage the Latter-day Saint youth of San Miguel from getting involved in leftist revolutionary activities. In September of 1979 (coincidentally on the same day that Eva Julieta died), a regional ecclesiastical leader named Lester B. Whetten held an unanticipated, “emergency” conference in San Miguel. Holding the title of “regional representative,” Elder Whetten was assigned by senior North American ecclesiastical leadership to oversee the Church in El Salvador.²³⁴ After showing the group a church film set during the Mexican Revolution—*And Should We Die (Aunque nos toque morir)*—Elder Whetten told his audience that he had personally grown up in the “Mormon Colonies” of northern Mexico and had experienced the Mexican Revolution firsthand. He discussed the dangers of revolutions and warned the Latter-day Saints there to be careful about taking part in any coming revolution in El Salvador.²³⁵

Whetten’s counsel to the San Miguel Latter-day Saints correlates well with the standard late twentieth-century political policy of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-

²³⁴ William Torres Rivera, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 30 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession; Urrutia, *Historia de la Iglesia*, 55; “Lester B. Whetten Dies at 84, Former Snow College Leader.” *Deseret News*, 7 December 1988. <https://www.deseret.com/1988/12/7/18786954/lester-b-whetten-dies-at-84-former-snow-college-leader>.

Scott Gibson, a missionary who worked in the Church’s El Salvador mission office, said that Elder Whetten had been assigned to El Salvador mainly to train local church leaders. Scott F. Gibson, Scott F. Gibson Mission Recordings, 1978–1979, Disc 3, audio, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah. A “regional representative” was a leadership position in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints during the late twentieth century. They acted as intermediaries between local leaders and the central church leadership in Salt Lake City, Utah. This church position was discontinued in 1995. Today, the “Area Authority Seventies” perform many of the responsibilities once carried out by regional representatives. See Gordon B. Hinckley, “This Work is Concerned with People,” *Ensign*, May 1995. <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1995/05/this-work-is-concerned-with-people?lang=eng> Like Latter-day Saint apostles and missionaries, regional representatives were addressed with the honorific title of “Elder” before their names (somewhat analogous to the use of honorifics like “Reverend” or “Father” in other Christian faiths).

²³⁵ William Torres Rivera, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 30 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession; William Torres Rivera, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 13 November 2022, interview in the author’s possession. *And Should We Die* was a 1966 church production that portrayed the dangers that both Anglo American and Mexican Latter-day Saints faced during the Mexican Revolution—including the 1915 killings of Rafael Monroy and Vicente Morales by a Zapatista firing squad.

day Saints. Although nineteenth century Latter-day Saint teachings are somewhat ambiguous on the matter, Latter-day Saint leaders since World War II have almost universally encouraged obedience and respect for one's government, citing the religion's Twelfth Article of Faith: "We believe in being subject to kings, presidents, rulers, and magistrates, in obeying, honoring, and sustaining the law." The Church's general policy has been to send missionaries and establish congregations in any nation that provides "the minimum legal conditions for living as a faithful member" (such as the ability to hold church meetings, pray, and participate in basic sacraments). Any government—no matter how unjust—that satisfies these conditions has generally received the obedience of Latter-day Saints. Nathan Oman has argued that this policy has been a defensive strategy to protect the members of an expanding and globalizing postwar church, who in some places are small minorities distrusted by "at-times hostile governments."²³⁶ As El Salvador entered its violent and disruptive civil war, Elder Whetten was simply applying the standard church position on revolution and revolt to the Salvadoran situation.

Through showing the film *And Should We Die*, Elder Whetten further drove home this antirevolutionary message. Beyond showing the violence that beset Latter-day Saints during the Mexican Revolution, this film portrays Mexican Latter-day Saints during the 1910s as committed noncombatants. They are depicted as loyal to their nation in general yet unwilling to join any of the warring factions. The characters' focus is on living their religion, not undertaking revolution. The themes of this 1966 film (which reflect the church's political position during the era in which this movie was made) obviously

²³⁶ Nathan B. Oman, "Civil Disobedience in Latter-day Saint Thought," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 3 (2021): 229–231, 233, 237–238.

correlate well with Elder Whetten’s warnings against revolutionary activity.²³⁷ This antirevolutionary message of government allegiance (which was likely also taught to them on other occasions) would have a deep impact on the San Miguel Latter-day Saints’ reaction to the civil war.

The War Begins

In the midst of the rising tensions and difficulties, the San Miguel Latter-day Saints experienced a brief moment of joy and celebration on January 11, 1981, when the San Miguel “District” became a “Stake.”²³⁸ However, that very same day, the guerrilla forces of the FMLN were also undertaking their first “Final Offensive.”²³⁹ Inspired by the Cuban Revolution of 1959 and Nicaragua’s Sandinista Revolution of 1979, this onslaught of simultaneous guerrilla attacks (which took place across the nation) sought to pull down El Salvador’s military government in one fell swoop. The guerrillas failed to topple the government and what was intended to be the “Final Offensive” instead became “the formal beginning of the civil war.”²⁴⁰

The outbreak of all-out war made the already difficult conditions in El Salvador even worse. Frustrated at the guerrillas’ ability to slip through their fingers, military

²³⁷ *And Should We Die*, directed by Wetzel Whitaker (Brigham Young University Motion Picture Studio, 1966), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZRqCCxaW5Kg>.

²³⁸ Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 25 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession; Urrutia, *Historia de la Iglesia*, 262–267. When the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints does not have much strength or membership in a given region, it is organized into small congregations called “branches,” which are in turn grouped into larger units called “districts.” However, once a certain level of church attendance and participation is achieved in that region, the branches are converted into “wards” and districts are converted into “stakes.” Thus, when a “district” becomes a “stake,” it signifies that the Church has gained substantial strength and maturity in a given location. This is why January 11, 1981 was such a moment of happiness and accomplishment for the San Miguel Latter-day Saints.

²³⁹ Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 25 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

²⁴⁰ Ching, *Stories of Civil War in El Salvador*, 41.

forces increasingly began to attack and kill fairly indiscriminately in regions with known guerrilla activity.²⁴¹ One church member called the military's activities "terrorism."²⁴² Jacobo Juárez remembered that no one was safe.²⁴³ William Torres said, "it was a very dark time."²⁴⁴

Adding to the increased threat of military violence was the aforementioned rise in crime that occurred at this same time. Someone tried to assault both local Latter-day Saint leader Carlos Hernández and the Méndez family in their homes. Carlos Hernández's sister was shot in the eye (requiring her to use an eyepatch afterwards), and her mother's health subsequently deteriorated from the emotional pain of seeing her daughter suffer.²⁴⁵ Latter-day Saint homes were broken into and their doors were banged on during the night. There was a great feeling of insecurity and many people felt threatened.²⁴⁶

This is what the Latter-day Saints of San Miguel lived through as the war's chaos and violence broke out in 1981. It was during this year that Silvino Arévalo was shot in the doorway of the San Miguel stake center. Years later, William Torres remembered Silvino as a good man who died needlessly and senselessly.²⁴⁷ As previously mentioned, one of the two secretaries in the chapel came face-to-face with the assassins and, fearing

²⁴¹ Ching, *Stories of Civil War in El Salvador*, 42–43.

²⁴² Vilma Silva, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 24 October 2022, interview in the author's possession.

²⁴³ Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 25 October 2022, interview in the author's possession.

²⁴⁴ William Torres Rivera, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 30 October 2022, interview in the author's possession.

²⁴⁵ Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 25 October 2022, interview in the author's possession.

²⁴⁶ Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 4 November 2022, interview in the author's possession.

²⁴⁷ William Torres Rivera, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 30 October 2022, interview in the author's possession.

for his own safety, fled the country.²⁴⁸

He was not the only Salvadoran Latter-day Saint to flee San Miguel in 1981. Carlos René Romero (who had been one of the very first Latter-day Saints baptized in San Miguel) became very worried when “communists” visited his sons’ school, promising that when they returned they would take two of his sons with them. Not wanting his sons to be recruited into the guerrilla forces, he quickly sent them out of the country to family in Houston, Texas. He, his wife, and two other children joined them there later.²⁴⁹

Another longtime Latter-day Saint family also fled the country that year after a neighbor stopped a passing army vehicle and told the officers that the “Mormons” in the neighborhood were guerrillas. One family member later felt they had been targeted because, as the only Latter-day Saints in the neighborhood, they were different from those around them. The soldiers came to their house, terrorized the family, and stole many things from them. Fearful for their lives, the family quickly headed for the capital and subsequently left the country.²⁵⁰

These are just a few of the many longtime, stalwart members of this religious community who fled for their lives during the opening stages of the Salvadoran Civil War. Jacobo Juárez later remembered that the departure of so many “pioneer families” caused local church attendance to drop significantly. In one extreme example, there was a

²⁴⁸ Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 4 November 2022, interview in the author’s possession; William Torres Rivera, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 13 November 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

²⁴⁹ Carlos René Romero, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 22 September 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

²⁵⁰ Vilma Silva, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 24 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

week when only three people came to church in one of the local congregations.²⁵¹

Adding to the difficulty of losing so many local Latter-day Saints, all the full-time missionaries had been pulled out of El Salvador in 1979 and 1980.²⁵² William Torres remembers feeling alone and even abandoned by church leaders at this time.²⁵³

A Path to Survival: Noninvolvement and Allegiance to Government

As they saw the civil war unfolding all around them and bringing so many dangers, upheavals and uncertainties, the Latter-day Saints of San Miguel were divided in their feelings towards the competing sides. One interviewee remembered feeling greater sympathy for the leftist revolutionaries than the government. She pointedly accused the military government of committing terrorism against their own people. She also candidly described the kidnappings, tortures, rapes, and massacres that the military government carried out, which she felt drove people towards the insurgency.²⁵⁴

In contrast, another interviewee remembered feeling afraid that a guerrilla victory would bring El Salvador under communist rule. In his interview, he asserted that people lose their freedom under communist governments. He said that, in socialist Nicaragua, those who spoke against the government were thrown in jail and that the Catholic Church

²⁵¹ Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 25 October 2022, interview in the author's possession.

²⁵² Urrutia, *Historia de la Iglesia*, 57–59, 62–63. During the first half of December 1979, all non-Latin American missionaries were reassigned to Guatemala and Costa Rica. Between December 1979 and January 1980, all other foreign missionaries were removed from the country. Although it was initially hoped that they would be able to stay, all Salvadoran missionaries also ended up being reassigned to other nations. It is not completely clear when the Salvadorans were relocated, but (based on two oral histories) it seems to have happened sometime in 1980 (Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 25 October 2022, interview in the author's possession; William Torres Rivera, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 13 November 2022, interview in the author's possession.).

²⁵³ William Torres Rivera, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 13 November 2022, interview in the author's possession.

²⁵⁴ Vilma Silva, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 24 October 2022, interview in the author's possession.

and its priests were persecuted. Concerned that similar things would happen in El Salvador, this man was more on the side of the military government.²⁵⁵

These two examples show that there existed widely diverging political views within the San Miguel Latter-day Saint community. Jacobo Juárez similarly remembers that certain community members held strong and obvious political opinions. He additionally said that most Latter-day Saints had personal preferences regarding which party should win at election time.

However, in spite of personal political opinions, Jacobo attests that very few community members became personally involved in political activism or the ongoing violent conflict.²⁵⁶ In fact, they actually went out of their way to avoid anything that could be seen as revolutionary political activity and encouraged others to do the same. This is clearly demonstrated by the alleged community efforts to persuade Eva Julieta to abstain from her political activism. It is also seen in the choice of some Latter-day Saints to not attend Eva's funeral, out of fear that even that could brand them as leftists.

Once the war began, Latter-day Saints generally tried to avoid serving as combatants on either side, while still showing allegiance to the state. Jacobo Juárez said he was only aware of one San Miguel Latter-day Saint who joined the guerrilla forces. As far as serving in the military, San Miguel Latter-day Saints often tried to show allegiance to their rulers while still striving to not be directly involved in the war. Jacobo remembered that when a church member was conscripted into the military, other local Latter-day Saints would sometime approach military officers and try to get their fellow

²⁵⁵ Carlos René Romero, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 22 September 2022, interview in the author's possession.

²⁵⁶ Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 25 October 2022, interview in the author's possession.

church member relieved of service. If their efforts failed and a church member could not be discharged, he would often give the required minimum year of military service and then return home.²⁵⁷

The San Miguel Latter-day Saints thus performed a careful political balancing act. They demonstrated their allegiance and respect for the existing government by not joining the insurgency and by giving military service when obligated. However, as much as possible, they only gave passive or implicit support to the existing state and generally resisted more active forms of support like voluntarily enlisting into the army.

Jacobo argued that this desire to not actively participate on either side of the conflict can be explained by the change in perspective that many San Miguel Latter-day Saints experienced after their religious conversion. According to Jacobo, now that their lives had been changed by the Gospel of Jesus Christ, their focus was on the things of God and not on “cosas del hombre” (or the “things of man”).²⁵⁸ In other words, he is arguing that the spiritual salvation and fulfillment that the Latter-day Saint message provided was more important and valuable to them than the societal improvement and achievement that revolution might provide.²⁵⁹ Beyond the internal spiritual fulfillment they felt they received, the San Miguel Latter-day Saints also received great fulfillment from the community fellowship of the Church. In fact, William Torres comments that participation in the Church’s many social activities (like religious meetings or sporting events) kept people busy and thus also kept many from getting directly involved in the

²⁵⁷ Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 25 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

²⁵⁸ Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 25 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

²⁵⁹ This is strikingly similar to the choice of many contemporary Salvadoran Protestants, who likewise tended to seek after “personal rather than societal salvation” during the civil war. Edwin Eloy Aguilar, et al. “Protestantism in El Salvador: Conventional Wisdom versus Survey Evidence.” *Latin American Research Review* 28, no. 2 (Jan 1993): 129.

war.²⁶⁰

Jacobo portrayed church members' aversion to direct involvement in the war as a politically neutral stance and argued that this "neutrality" continued to some degree even after the war ended. Discussing the "tiempos de paz" (or the period of peace), he said that Latter-day Saint church meetings were treated as politically neutral spaces. If someone started discussing their political views in Church meetings, they were told that the Church was politically neutral and thus not an appropriate place for such discussions.²⁶¹

Of course, the actions of the San Miguel Latter-day Saints correlate very well with the standard late twentieth-century Latter-day Saint policy of political neutrality and government allegiance."²⁶² In our interview, Jacobo described Latter-day Saints as people who support their "gobernantes" or rulers (echoing the 12th Article of Faith) and who give to Caesar what is Caesar's. He also claimed that many San Miguel Latter-day Saints disputed the FMLN's assertion that the insurgents were fighting for freedom, since, in Jacobo's words, Salvadorans already had the freedom to vote, leave the country, and practice their religion.²⁶³ This reflects the postwar Latter-day Saint practice of obeying governments that satisfy "the minimum legal conditions for living as a faithful member."²⁶⁴ All of this falls in line with the standard church policy of non-partisan

²⁶⁰ William Torres Rivera, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 13 November 2022, interview in the author's possession.

²⁶¹ Robert Putnam and David Campbell have observed that political neutrality is likewise "definitive of modern Mormons' worship experience" in the twenty-first century U.S., and that "little to no politics finds its way into the life of the congregation." In fact, a 2006 survey showed that U.S. Latter-day Saint congregations were less likely to have politically charged church sermons than were Catholic, Mainline Protestant, Evangelical Protestant, Black Protestant, or Jewish congregations. This demonstrates the continuation of Latter-day Saint apoliticism into the current century, as well as the policy's reach across national boundaries. Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 282–283, 323–324.

²⁶² Nathan B. Oman, "Civil Disobedience in Latter-day Saint Thought," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 3 (2021): 229–231, 233, 237–238.

²⁶³ Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 25 October 2022, interview in the author's possession.

²⁶⁴ Oman, "Civil Disobedience in Latter-day Saint Thought," 238.

government allegiance that was encouraged by U.S. ecclesiastical leaders.

Nevertheless, although support for the existing state could be a non-partisan stance in the United States (a country that was not in the midst of a civil war), it took on a very political and partisan meaning when applied in a country like El Salvador that was in the midst of a divisive civil conflict. Thus, although Jacobo argues that the San Miguel Latter-day Saints strived to be politically neutral, their posture was actually one of at least implicit support for the existing military state. They chose this political position in spite of the sympathies that some church members may have privately felt for the guerrilla cause. I argue that the San Miguel Latter-day Saints took this position for multiple reasons.

First, as already mentioned, Elder Lester B. Whetten (and likely other North American leaders and missionaries) had worked to instill the standard church policy of good citizenship and allegiance to one's rulers into the San Miguel Latter-day Saints.²⁶⁵ The respect that Salvadoran Latter-day Saints felt for their religious leaders and their belief in the teachings of the Church (including the 12th Article of Faith) would have been a strong motivating factor in leading them to follow Elder Whetten's counsel. Yet they were also surely influenced by their own recent experiences. The deaths of Eva Julieta, Oswaldo Ordoño, and Silvino Arévalo had shown how vulnerable their community members were in the face of the growing civil war. Also, many church members had non-Latter-day Saint relatives who were killed during the course of the war.²⁶⁶ This had

²⁶⁵ Urrutia, *Historia de la Iglesia*, 55; William Torres Rivera, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 30 October 2022, interview in the author's possession; William Torres Rivera, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 13 November 2022, interview in the author's possession.

²⁶⁶ Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 4 November 2022, interview in the author's possession; Vilma Silva, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 24 October 2022, interview in the author's possession.

painfully demonstrated to them the war's capacity to devastate and ravage lives.

For these reasons, I argue that the San Miguel Latter-day Saints chose to prioritize the preservation of their spiritual community over any personal political opinions (especially left-leaning ones). They had spent years building up this community and it provided them with meaningful spiritual strength, emotional support, and social belonging. They would not lightly give all of this up. Thus, in order to preserve the religious community that they so valued and had worked so hard to establish, it made sense to strategically prioritize the “things of God” over the “things of men,” as Jacobo put it.²⁶⁷

Latter-day Saint Interaction with the Guerrillas and the Military

It is worth taking a moment to look at how the FMLN and the Salvadoran government respectively responded to the San Miguel Latter-day Saints' political stance. FMLN insurgents would sometimes show up at church members' homes in San Miguel, asking for food and supplies yet also seeking to recruit people to the revolutionary cause. However, according to Jacobo, when the guerrillas saw pictures of Latter-day Saint temples on the wall and heard church members refuse to fight in the conflict, they would respond “Oh, you're *evangélicos*” and leave.

It is important to note that, in Latin America, the term *evangélico* is not precisely synonymous with the similar English term *evangelical*. In the U.S., the word *evangelical* usually denotes a “theological conservative who emphasizes the Bible, personal salvation, and evangelism.” In contrast, the term *evangélico* (especially when used by

²⁶⁷ Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 25 October 2022, interview in the author's possession.

Catholics) often “can refer to any non-Catholic Christian.” This means that Evangelical Christians, Mainline Protestants, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists, and Latter-day Saints are all considered *evangélicos* under this definition.²⁶⁸ This is in spite of the fact that many Latin American Evangelical Christians would resent being grouped together with faiths like Jehovah’s Witnesses and Latter-day Saints, whom many Evangelicals considered to be “false sects.” Nevertheless, it is understandable that, from a Catholic perspective, all non-Catholic churches could be uniformly considered “invaders” disrupting the status quo of traditionally Catholic Latin America.²⁶⁹

Perhaps this helps explain why some guerrillas considered a picture of a Latter-day Saint temple to be an identifying mark of *evangélicos*. Perhaps it is not that a Latter-day Saint temple necessarily resembles an Evangelical Christian temple, but rather that it does not resemble Catholic places of worship (particularly due to the absence of crosses on Latter-day Saint temples).²⁷⁰ Latter-day Saint temples may thus be *evangélico* by virtue of *not* being Catholic.

Importantly, in the eyes of many leftists and Catholics, these foreign *evangélico* “invaders” were specifically *U.S.* “invaders” seeking to advance U.S. foreign policy in Latin America. The argument went that the U.S. (and specifically the CIA) was funding evangelization efforts in order to pull Latin Americans away from Catholicism (and the

²⁶⁸ The loose popular definition of the term *evangélico* is clearly demonstrated by a 1983 Costa Rican survey, in which respondents said that the two *evangélico* denominations they were most familiar with were the Mormons and the Jehovah’s Witnesses—in spite of the fact that neither of these faiths would self-identify as *evangélico*. See Arturo Molina Saborío, “Imagen del Protestantismo en Costa Rica 1983.” San José, Costa Rica: Publicaciones IINDEF, 1984, 12, 16, quoted in Stoll, *Is Latin America Turning Protestant?*, 104.

²⁶⁹ Stoll, *Is Latin America Turning Protestant?*, 4–6, 19, 104.

²⁷⁰ David Scotchmer has observed that Guatemalan Mayan Protestants have “universally rejected” the iconography of the cross, seeing it as closely connected “to both traditional Mayan and Catholic rites.” The same may be true of Salvadoran *evangélicos*. David Scotchmer, “Symbols of Salvation: A Local Mayan Protestant Theology.” *Missiology: An International Review* 17, no. 3 (July 1989): 303.

Catholic ideas of liberation theology that ungirded many contemporary leftist movements) and towards the allegedly more conservative *evangélico* denominations—all in order to frustrate leftist revolution.²⁷¹ In her interview, Vilma Silva referenced these popular perceptions when she said that the FMLN insurgents thought that Latter-day Saints were connected to the CIA and thus accomplices in U.S. imperialist efforts in Latin America.²⁷²

Thus, the dismissive statement “oh, you’re *evangélicos*” (which Jacobo remembered hearing guerrillas say to Latter-day Saints) might contain the following implicit meaning: You’ve already been too “Americanized” by your U.S. religion, so we won’t waste our time trying to convince you to join our anti-imperialist movement. Nevertheless, in spite of any resentment or enmity that the guerrillas may have felt toward Latter-day Saints as *evangélicos*, I have not come across any clear evidence that they ever killed Latter-day Saints in San Miguel.²⁷³ Thus, tension seems to have existed between the San Miguel Latter-day Saints and guerrilla forces, but not violence.

As far as the relationship between the San Miguel Latter-day Saints and the Salvadoran military government, Jacobo remembers that there existed a “*respeto mutuo*” (mutual respect) between the government and the Latter-day Saints. Latter-day Saints sought to practice the respect for the state that the 12th Article of Faith encourages and to be dutiful citizens. In turn, the government viewed them as yet another *evangélico* group that would not cause problems for the government.²⁷⁴

²⁷¹ Stoll, *Is Latin America Turning Protestant?*, xiv–xv, 99; Leigh Binford, *From Popular to Insurgent Intellectuals: Peasant Catechists in the Salvadoran Revolution* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2023), 10, 148.

²⁷² Vilma Silva, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 24 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

²⁷³ See Vilma Silva, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 24 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

²⁷⁴ Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 25 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

However, beyond their public image as “*evangélicos*,” Jacobo says there was another important factor that helped the government look favorably upon Latter-day Saints—there were a large number of U.S. military and State Department employees in the country at that time who were North American Latter-day Saints. These included military advisors, a U.S. advisor to the legislature, and embassy workers, many of whom brought their families to El Salvador and attended a congregation in the capital city.²⁷⁵ It is worth asking whether the close connection between some U.S. church members and the Salvadoran government may have caused conflicted feelings for some Salvadoran Latter-day Saints—including perhaps some whose loved ones had been “disappeared” or killed by the military forces that U.S. Latter-day Saints were helping advise. On the other hand, Jacobo argues that the presence of so many U.S. Latter-day Saints supporting the Salvadoran government played an important role in raising the reputation of the Church in the government’s eyes.²⁷⁶ This likely helped keep many Salvadoran Latter-day Saints safe during the turbulence of the war, which was a clear advantage they received through their membership in a larger transnational religious community.

It should be noted that Latter-day Saints were not completely immune from governmental attacks. Vilma remembers that church members who were young or who were schoolteachers were still in great danger of being viewed as guerrillas by the military—not because they were Latter-day Saints, but because they belonged to certain demographics that the government tended to profile as revolutionaries.²⁷⁷ This is clearly illustrated by the killing of Eva Julieta, which was perpetrated by either military or

²⁷⁵ Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 25 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

²⁷⁶ Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 25 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

²⁷⁷ Vilma Silva, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 24 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

paramilitary forces against a group of youth traveling through the countryside. Nevertheless, for the most part, the Latter-day Saints of San Miguel were able to maintain a fairly good relationship with the Salvadoran military throughout the war, which demonstrates a success of their strategy of non-involvement and allegiance to government.

Maintaining and Strengthening Community in Times of Conflict

Like Jacobo mentioned, at the same time that the San Miguel Latter-day Saints abstained from involvement in the political “things of men,” they redoubled their efforts in “the things of God.” They worked together to maintain their spiritual community in spite of challenging times. Even though some weekday church activities were no longer being held, they still adamantly continued to hold their regular Sunday services throughout the conflict.²⁷⁸ On the few Sundays when they were not able to meet, it was not the war itself, but rather elections that stopped them. On Election Sunday, the streets were full of people, making it hard to get into the church building. For this reason, they would hold worship services in private homes on those days.²⁷⁹

This is not to say that the violence and instability of the war never got in the way of Sunday meetings. Throughout the conflict, the guerrillas would occasionally enter San Miguel by night and attack the local military barracks. While these attacks were usually over by the morning, on one or two occasions the guerrillas stayed in the city until late

²⁷⁸ William Torres Rivera, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 13 November 2022, interview in the author’s possession; Carlos René Romero, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 22 September 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

²⁷⁹ Jacobo remembers meeting at the Méndez family home during an election. Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 25 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

Sunday afternoon, which would cause meetings to be canceled for the day. However, this happened very infrequently.²⁸⁰

Other possible obstacles for church attendance were the periodic strikes of bus drivers in coordination with the guerrillas. While these strikes usually took place on weekdays, they could sometimes still affect church meetings. On these days, Latter-day Saints might need to walk several kilometers by foot to get to the church or, if they were traveling longer distances, the Church might charter a bus for its outlying members. Overall, though, Sunday church meetings generally continued unabated throughout the war, showing the Latter-day Saint determination to keep their community and their spirituality alive.²⁸¹

Missionary work also continued over the course of the war, even in the absence of the full-time missionaries. Throughout El Salvador, local Latter-day Saint men with the calling of “stake seventy” (many of whom were former full-time missionaries) directed missionary work during the conflict.²⁸² In San Miguel specifically, Edmundo Orellana (the stake mission leader and the president of the San Miguel Stake seventies quorum, who had previously been a missionary in Guatemala) led out in this work.²⁸³ Jacobo Juárez remembers Edmundo Orellana as a dynamic leader who had a great impact on the Latter-day Saint community in San Miguel.²⁸⁴ Other local leaders worked with him to select individuals to serve as “stake missionaries.” Many were teenagers and young

²⁸⁰ Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 25 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

²⁸¹ Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 25 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

²⁸² Urrutia, *Historia de la Iglesia*, 63.

²⁸³ When the San Miguel stake was organized in 1981, Edmundo Orellana had been set apart as the first stake seventy of the new San Miguel Stake. He was also made the President of Stake Missionary Work and the President of the Seventies Quorum. Urrutia, *Historia de la Iglesia*, 265; Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 25 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

²⁸⁴ Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 25 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

adults who had never been missionaries before. Either taking the bus or hitchhiking, these stake missionaries would travel on the weekends to surrounding towns like La Unión, Santa Rosa de Lima, Santiago de María, and Chinameca. Other local members in eastern El Salvador supported them by helping pay for their bus fares and letting the missionaries sleep in their houses or in local chapels. The cost of food was split between the Church and the missionaries themselves.²⁸⁵

Those who I interviewed remembered that it had been a sacrifice for them to take part in these missionary efforts. Many of them were very busy with work and school.²⁸⁶ It could also be dangerous for them to go out to the countryside on the weekend, due to the rising violence and danger. William Torres remembers not always knowing if he would make it back home safely when he went out to preach on Saturdays.²⁸⁷ Yet many youth and young adults still went out and did their best to keep missionary work going.²⁸⁸

Without the level of training that full-time missionaries received, these “stake missionaries” memorized the standard proselytization lessons and began visiting the people that the full-time missionaries had previously been working with. William Torres also remembers holding up signs in city parks and talking about Joseph Smith to those who walked by. Jacobo Juárez said stake missionary service prepared many young people to later be full-time missionaries. Through these efforts, missionary work continued even

²⁸⁵ Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 25 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession; William Torres Rivera, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 30 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession; William Torres Rivera, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 13 November 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

²⁸⁶ Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 25 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession; William Torres Rivera, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 30 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

²⁸⁷ William Torres Rivera, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 13 November 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

²⁸⁸ William Torres Rivera, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 30 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

in the difficult early period of the war. Although they did not baptize large numbers, the fact that they were able to at least do some degree of missionary work helped keep the Latter-day Saint community alive during a challenging time.²⁸⁹

A Gradual Return to Normalcy

By 1984, the violence and killings diminished. This is partly because the U.S., facing political pressure at home, told the Salvadoran government that if it did not decrease its widespread human rights violations and violent counterinsurgency measures, the U.S. would cut military aid. As the government decreased its counterinsurgency, the war entered a period of stalemate between 1984 and 1989.²⁹⁰

As hostilities decreased, conditions gradually began to return to normal for the San Miguel Latter-day Saints. Starting in 1983, full-time missionaries in Guatemala slowly began to be assigned to El Salvador. More and more missionaries arrived and, in October of 1984, the El Salvador Mission was reopened. Jacobo remembers that missionary efforts in San Miguel were greatly strengthened by the return of full-time missionaries and that baptisms increased. However, there would only be Latin American missionaries (and mainly Guatemalan missionaries) in El Salvador until the war's official end in 1992.²⁹¹

Yet San Miguel continued to be considered a relatively more dangerous area and

²⁸⁹ Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 25 October 2022, interview in the author's possession; William Torres Rivera, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 30 October 2022, interview in the author's possession; William Torres Rivera, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 13 November 2022, interview in the author's possession.

²⁹⁰ Ching, *Stories of Civil War in El Salvador*, 45, 47.

²⁹¹ Urrutia, *Historia de la Iglesia*, 63–64; Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 25 October 2022, interview in the author's possession; Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 4 November 2022, interview in the author's possession.

it took longer for things to return to normal there than in the western part of the country or the capital. While senior ecclesiastical leaders would regularly visit the faithful in the capital, they would not go to the east. Local leaders in the east believed that this was because Latter-day Saints in San Salvador would scare visiting authorities away from coming to them. According to Jacobo Juárez, Edgar Mendoza (president of the San Miguel Stake) pointedly told one visiting leader that the San Miguel leaders traveled to San Salvador to see this regional leader and the El Salvador mission president traveled to San Miguel, so why would the visiting leader not come to see them, too?²⁹² Jacobo reports that, soon after this, general church leaders began to visit San Miguel again.²⁹³ This was a big change for the San Miguel Latter-day Saints, who were taken aback that they were receiving visits from international leadership, like in the prewar days.²⁹⁴

One Last Wartime Ordeal: The “Second Final Offensive”

On November 11, 1989, the FMLN forces decided to make one final great push to overthrow the military government. This “Second Final Offensive” was a coordinated attack on all major urban centers of the country and had a much larger impact on San Miguel than the 1981 First Final Offensive had.²⁹⁵ Jacobo remembers that there had been

²⁹² Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 25 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

²⁹³ According to Jacobo, the first general church leader to come back to San Miguel was Elder Gene R. Cook (area president of Mexico and Central America). Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 25 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession. See also “Earthquake Brings Death, Injury to Members in San Salvador,” *Ensign*, December 1986, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1986/12/news-of-the-church/earthquake-brings-death-injury-to-members-in-san-salvador?lang=eng>.

In contrast, William remembers that the first senior church leader to visit was Elder Ángel Abrea. William Torres Rivera, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 13 November 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

²⁹⁴ Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 25 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession; William Torres Rivera, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 13 November 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

²⁹⁵ Ching, *Stories of Civil War in El Salvador*, 47; Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 25 October 2022, interview in the author’s possession.

some new baptisms on Saturday and, at the end of the day, the Latter-day Saints of San Miguel had gone peacefully to sleep. However, during the night, the guerrillas entered the city. They took over a section of the city where the Gavidia Ward (one of the five Latter-day Saint congregations in San Miguel) was located. Obviously, no church meetings were held that Sunday. Jacobo remembers that many Latter-day Saint men in the Gavidia Ward (in spite of their commitment to support the state and not get involved in the conflict) were forced by the guerrillas to build barricades and trenches to keep the military forces at bay. The FMLN held out for a week in San Miguel, after which the military pushed them out.²⁹⁶

The Gavidia Latter-day Saint church building had been severely damaged by the guerrillas, who had knocked some of its walls down, left bullet holes in the walls, and damaged the roof and cistern. It was also said that the guerrillas had buried some of their dead in an empty field next to the church. However, although thirteen Latter-day Saints died across the country during the Second Final Offensive, no Latter-day Saints in San Miguel lost their lives. Only one San Miguel Latter-day Saint was seriously injured (a young man named Luis who went to the hospital after receiving shrapnel in his leg).²⁹⁷

Many, however, had fled from their homes to seek shelter with church members or family. Others had sought refuge in the stake center on Roosevelt Street. Some brought their own food with them and others received aid from the Red Cross. Many were not able to return to their homes for about a month, because the military was searching all the

²⁹⁶ Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 25 October 2022, interview in the author's possession.

²⁹⁷ Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 25 October 2022, interview in the author's possession; Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 4 November 2022, interview in the author's possession; "13 Members Die in El Salvador Conflicts," *Ensign*, February 1990, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1990/02/news-of-the-church/13-members-die-in-el-salvador-conflicts?lang=eng>.

houses to find any remaining guerrillas. After this traumatic experience, it was hard for the Latter-day Saints of San Miguel to get back to normal.²⁹⁸

At this moment, the Latter-day Saint area presidency over Mexico and Central America stepped in to provide financial aid to the faithful in El Salvador. This money was used to buy food storage for members (so they could be prepared if the guerrillas were to return), as well as construction materials to repair members' homes. All members, whether or not they were actively participating in the Church, were offered help. Jacobo said that, in these very difficult times, he felt the Church was there for them. He said that this aid served to instill great loyalty to the church in many of the members who had been helped.²⁹⁹ This resulted in a further strengthening of their commitment to the Latter-day Saint community and identity they had sacrificed so much over the course of the war to preserve.

War's End

In 1992, peace accords were signed between the military and the FMLN, and war came to a close.³⁰⁰ In spite of the many challenges that they had faced, the Latter-day Saints of San Miguel had been able to band together, continue church meetings and missionary work, and hold out for the day when the violence and chaos would end. They had largely subordinated any personal political inclinations to the survival strategy of respect for government and avoidance of direct military involvement, a strategy adopted in response to general church policy and also to protect church members and preserve

²⁹⁸ Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 25 October 2022, interview in the author's possession; Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 4 November 2022, interview in the author's possession.

²⁹⁹ Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 25 October 2022, interview in the author's possession.

³⁰⁰ Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 25 October 2022, interview in the author's possession.

their community. And, as a result, their spiritual community, forged over the preceding two decades, was able to survive into the future.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

In the present day, Jacobo Juárez attests that religious community connections are still important to the Latter-day Saints living in San Miguel, El Salvador.³⁰¹ However, the nature of that community has evolved. Multiple longtime members remember that, back in the 1960s and 1970s, the San Miguel Latter-day Saints would generally drop what they were doing and take part in whatever church activities the branch organized, no matter if they were being held on a weekday or a weekend.³⁰² In contrast, Jacobo Juárez says that if church leaders in San Miguel today try to organize an activity during the week, church members generally say it is too difficult to come on weekdays and request that the activity be moved to a Saturday.³⁰³ Thus, unlike in earlier years, it seems that local members' social life no longer revolves around the Church; now, church activities have become just one of multiple elements in their social life.

It seems that this weakening of local church social life is at least partially a result of the elimination in the 1970s and 1980s of many church weekday activities (as discussed in Chapter Two). It is possible that when weekday activities went away, church members began filling their time with other commitments and events outside of their religious community. Now, it appears that personal schedules have filled up to the degree that it is difficult to meet during the week at all.³⁰⁴ The days have passed when the

³⁰¹ Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 4 November 2022, interview in the author's possession.

³⁰² Pedro Flores Medina, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 19 March 2023, interview in the author's possession; Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 4 November 2022, interview in the author's possession.

³⁰³ Jacobo Juárez, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 4 November 2022, interview in the author's possession.

³⁰⁴ Of course, another reason for why it is more "difficult" for San Miguel church members to gather together on weeknights could be the rise in violence that occurred with the onslaught of the Salvadoran

Church community was “part of your life throughout the week”—the days when Jenny Lawton could say that “the Church...*was* our social life.”³⁰⁵

Other changes have come to local church community through the growth of Latter-day Saint church membership in Central America. As previously discussed, church congregations were often quite small during the early days of the Church in the region. As they have grown larger, it is arguably much harder for the entire branch to gather together frequently for unifying activities, like the beach trip to El Tamarindo mentioned in Chapter Two. In some ways, it could be said that these communities become the victims of their own success, since as they grow ever larger, it is often increasingly difficult to continue to form the kind of close, interpersonal bonds that previously existed in small, tight-knit church congregations.

Nevertheless, many of those who were a part of the small, tight-knit church congregations of past decades still continue to feel a strong sense of community connection to one another today. In the case of the Latter-day Saints of San Miguel, El Salvador, many of those who were part of the Church during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s continue to feel a deep sense of connection to their fellow early church members. In spite of the fact that many San Miguel Latter-day Saints moved away to the United States and Canada during the civil war, a lot of them still try to stay in contact with each other in spite of the distance separating them.

Several years ago, some early San Miguel church members formed a Facebook group called “PIONEROS SUD DE SAN MIGUEL” (LDS Pioneers of San Miguel),

Civil War and which continued with the postwar rise of gang violence. The weakening of local religious social life is likely the result of a variety of factors.

³⁰⁵ Jenny Lawton, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 13 April 2023, interview in the author’s possession. The italicized emphasis on the word *was* is based on the interviewee’s intonation in the audio recording.

through which they could keep in touch, share photos and memories of past times together, and inform each other of the passing of fellow early church members. The efforts of early San Miguel Latter-day Saints to stay connected to one another demonstrates that the social ties they established decades ago remain strong even many years later. Zithrely Belnap similarly attests that some of the people she met many years ago through church youth activities in San Miguel are still her friends today, and that they still fondly “remember those times” that they had together.³⁰⁶ All of this demonstrates the deep emotional resonance and lasting significance of the religious community and identity that Central American Latter-day Saints forged in the late twentieth century.

Over the short period of several decades, Guatemalan and Salvadoran Latter-day Saints had established a religious community and identity that was obviously a part of the larger culture of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints but also had its own unique elements that set it apart as distinct. They found meaning and belonging in tight-knit local religious congregations that provided spiritual, emotional, and social sustenance for community members. Yet those who had traveled to the United States on temple excursions in particular could feel a strong connection and meaningful sense of belonging in a larger community as well, which encompassed the global church membership. Their allegiance to both local and global Latter-day Saint community was tested by violent civil war but, at least in the example of the case study of San Miguel, they doggedly worked to hold tightly to the religious community and identity that had come to mean so much to them.

³⁰⁶ Zithrely Belnap, interviewed by Hovan Lawton, 20 March 2023, interview in the author’s possession.

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