Iglesia Cristiana Evangélica: Arriving in the Pipeline

David Cook-Martín, Grinnell College

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/dcookmartin/7/
RELIGION AND THE NEW IMMIGRANTS

Continuities and Adaptations in Immigrant Congregations

Helen Rose Ebaugh

and

Janet Saltzman Chafetz

AltaMira Press
A Division of Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
Walnut Creek • Lanham • New York • Oxford
Iglesia Cristiana Evangélica: Arriving in the Pipeline

David Cook

The lush fifteen acres of the Centro de Minesterios Familiares (CMF) extend over the flat Texas landscape like an oasis in the monotony of a suburban wilderness. The CMF property, site of Iglesia Cristiana Evangélica (ICE), sits at the gateway between Harris County and the rapidly developing suburbs farther southwest. The solid concrete and wrought iron fence makes it clear that one is entering a different place. A large billboard facing the two major streets bordering the property announces in Spanish and English: “Family Ministries Center/ A program of Hispanic Bible Fellowship and the Church of Christian Evangelism/With a Passion for God and Compassion for our Neighbor.” A group of forty members, almost all Argentines, are gathered on a warm spring day for an impromptu asado, the traditional South American meat barbecue. Were it not for an occasional English phrase uttered by one of the children, the scene could almost pass for a typical Sunday afternoon family gathering in Argentina. As the afternoon progresses, the young people strike up a volleyball game—the soccer fields are not yet ready—and the adults prepare the Argentine mate (a type of tea) gourds. Later, the men take advantage of the cool evening to work on constructing the pastoral house, joined by the young men who are done with their game. There is a strong sense of family and common purpose in the group’s conversations.

I. History & Membership Characteristics

Iglesia Cristiana Evangélica (ICE) was founded by a group of Argentine immigrants to Houston who were members of the Plymouth Brethren Church in Mendoza, Argentina, developed by missionaries in the early 1920s. Although overwhelmingly a Catholic country, Protestantism has been growing in Argentina since the early nineteenth century. In Argentina, the term “evangélico” is often used as a synonym for “Protestant,” irrespective of denomination, and usually carries negative connotations. The pioneer immigrant from Mendoza to Houston, Roberto Gomez, was a member of the Plymouth Brethren at home. He recalls being one of two Protestants in his high school class. He also has recollections of being yelled at as he walked around town. The Catholic priest preached from the pulpit against the Protestant heretics. Roberto remembers walking to church with a Bible hidden under his arm, hoping to escape detection by his neighbors. Many of the founding members of ICE have similar recollections.
Roberto immigrated to Houston in 1958, primarily in search of economic opportunity. In less than a decade, he rose from bus boy to restaurant owner, and he was quickly joined here by his brother, his parents, an aunt and uncle, several cousins, a friend and fiancée. Their immigration, in turn, led to that of other family and church members from Argentina. Most of the early immigrants were young males with family or church ties to Roberto. As his family members and friends arrived, he helped them find work and housing, and helped to educate them about the ways of their new country. These immigrants, in turn, did the same for subsequent arrivals. As the group increased, they began to hold their own religious services as a Plymouth Brethren congregation. In 1960, the small congregation incorporated under the name of Hispanic Bible Fellowship (HBF). It held services at a variety of places, originally in members’ homes, but after 1962 in a number of different churches. Following the Argentine Brethren tradition of referring to a congregation by its address, the congregation was known over the years as South Town, Calle Evans, Calle Moore, and Stafford Rd. This tradition was maintained until the mid-1980s, when the church was baptized with a descriptive name: Iglesia Cristiana Evangélica. This name served the congregation well in 1996, when the decision was made to sell the Stafford Rd. facility and to begin the construction of the Centro de Ministerios Familiares (CMF). The CMF, still under development, is a complex of church, recreational, and community facilities. Although many ICE families live within a 10- to 20-minute drive of the CMF site, previous locations were chosen primarily because of financial and structural considerations, and thus congregants commuted to them.

The initial facility (South Town) was a garage that the extended members of three families cleaned up and converted for use as a church. All had roots in Mendoza. An additional family from Mexico rounded out the membership. To this day, church leadership is dominated by members of these original Argentine families. The oldest member of the original congregation was Roberto, who was only 28. One of the other original members, only 18 at the time, recalled that,

Our parents were not the ones to start the process or maintain it. They had a part in it always, but it was [driven by] young blood. . . . As is generally the case, [immigrant] parents speak less English than their children, they know less about how to manage in the U.S. and so it was we, as children, who took the initiative.

A couple of members started an evangelistic Spanish-language radio program in 1965. It was the only Spanish radio station in Houston at the time and during the program they offered free Bibles that were later delivered in person. Several Mexican immigrant families were reached this way and incorporated into the mostly Argentine group.

As family members and friends continued to arrive from Argentina, the group increased in size and, in 1967, a small home was purchased on Evans Street, each family paying a portion of the mortgage. During this period, the group hosted several visitors from Argentina who encouraged them to pursue an aggressive ministry with the broader Hispanic population. In 1969, the congregation moved again to a church located just outside the central city in a predominantly African-American community (Moore Rd.). It was chosen because of price and physical facilities, and most members commuted a moderate distance from their homes within the central part of the city. The 1970s saw a phenomenal growth in the group (attendance was over 250 by 1980) and the facilities were expanded
twice. This period is remembered as a golden age in the development of the congregation. During the early 1970s, the congregation "commended" three key leaders to serve as missionaries, one family to Spain, one to Argentina, and one to Honduras, the latter two of which still continue their ministries. These years also saw the expansion of church ministries. A crisis hotline was developed and staffed by church members. The radio ministry increased to several hours of programming each day. The youth group grew considerably and became a center of church activity. The ladies' meeting became more established and its members began to minister to Latin Americans visiting the Texas Medical Center in Houston. At the same time, the congregation experienced a considerable increase in the size, diversity, and geographical distribution of its members.

By 1980 there was no room for further expansion of the facilities. In addition, the location did not allow for easy outreach to Hispanics and the residential concentration of members had changed significantly since the 1970s. By the early 1980s, most were moving out to the southwestern part of Houston. A smaller group had also developed in the southern and southeastern parts of town, known as the "South Town" congregation. In early 1981, a member of the American Plymouth Brethren group in Houston contacted HBF about a real estate opportunity in a southwestern suburb (Stafford Rd.). The building, a former funeral home, could easily be modified to meet a church's needs, and so the move was made. This left the problem of what to do with the South Town group, some of whom were meeting at the facilities of a Brethren church during the week, where the Anglo group had dwindled to just a handful. The Hispanic group was many times larger, which prompted an offer on the part of the Anglo congregation for the Hispanics to assume monthly payments for the property. The South Town Church, composed of about 70 people, thus got its start at about the same time as the Stafford Rd. facility, and continues today as an independent church that includes a couple of Argentine families but is composed mostly of Mexican families converted in the early years of HBF. At about this same time, the main body of HBF at Stafford Rd. began to receive an influx of Central American immigrants, a process lasting throughout the 1980s. The cultural and socioeconomic differences between them and the Argentines led to the formation of a new, predominantly Central American church in southwestern Houston. It currently numbers about 150 members. Yet another congregation split off from HBF, the result of a bitter doctrinal dispute that occurred when one of the original Argentine founding families became proponents of a charismatic movement within the church. This congregation is currently thriving, with over 500 members and a large structure located in southwestern Houston.

In short, during its Stafford Rd. years, one congregation became four. At its height in the early 1990s, HBF had over 350 people attending Sunday services at the Stafford site, renamed Iglesia Cristiana Evangélica. By the early 1990s, the leadership concluded that this location was too restrictive and began to search for a new facility that would allow for both growth in membership and a shift in ministries.

One of the original leaders began to push for a family ministries center, the CMF, and in 1996 the Stafford Rd. site was sold. A 15.5-acre tract was purchased in a far southwestern suburb, where ICE hopes to provide, in addition to a house of worship, a variety of family-oriented programs to non-members as well as members, in order to "take Christianity out on the streets." The planned building will be 25,000 square feet and the center will include a variety of recreational facilities. Although open to anyone, the primary focus
is the Hispanic Community. The ICE congregation now meets at a temporary location while the site is developed, although its active membership has declined to about 150 to 180 attendees at Sunday services.

In the 1990 census, the Houston Argentine population numbered about 2,200, a figure estimated by the Argentine Consulate to be about 5,000 in 1996. Argentines constitute half of the current church membership, about two-thirds of whom are immigrants and one-third members of the second or subsequent generations. The next largest group is composed of Mexican immigrants, who comprise 16% of the membership. Sixteen other nationalities are represented, the largest of which are Puerto Rican (5.6%), Honduran (5.6%), Salvadoran (5%), Colombian (3%), and Uruguayan (3%). The congregation has had limited success in recruiting Mexican-Americans, the largest Hispanic population in Houston. One of the leaders profiled the type of family that the church is most successful in recruiting:

They’ve been in the U.S. less than ten years, have two children, are white collar workers in their country of origin (although they may not be white collar workers here, they nevertheless have the same mindset), they are in the process of buying a home, they are very worried about their children, they don’t have a lot of family in Houston, he speaks English well, she has a more limited grasp of it, they have a car, they have papers.

Despite wide diversity in nationality, members share a common socio-economic status, understood in terms of home ownership and occupational (white collar) for entrepreneurial success.

Argentines in the U.S. are a generally well-educated population, especially members of the second generation. While 12% of the immigrant members of ICE did not complete high school and only 20% completed college, among their offspring over age 18, comparable percentages are 0 and 41. A majority of immigrants are white-collar workers (25%) or entrepreneurs (23% plus many of the 26% who are also professionals). Among the second generation, there are few entrepreneurs (8%) but many more professionals (46%) and white-collar workers (42%). In addition, 20% of first-generation Argentine members are now retired.

ICE is a young congregation, almost 65% of members being under 35 years of age. Argentine members do not vary significantly in age from the broader congregation, except that there are fewer children under 14 and more adults 55 and older. Males represent 53% of the entire congregation and of Argentine members. Finally, a surprisingly high proportion of the Argentine members are recent immigrants, some of whom have overstayed tourist visas. Nearly one in three has arrived in this country since 1990, a number slightly higher than that of the pioneer generation that arrived in the 1960s (29%), as well as those who arrived in the ’70s (24%) and ’80s (17%). This is partially a result of the loss of some of the early immigrants to the various congregations that split off from the church over the years.
II. Theology & Conversion

*Iglesia Cristiana Evangélica* is a Plymouth Brethren congregation. The primary traits of the Brethren include: belief in a remnant church; primacy of the Word of God and a literal Biblical interpretation; a New Testament church model with strong emphasis on lay participation and leadership; a rationalistic hermeneutic; and a strong evangelistic drive. There is no formal clergy; all adult male members equally enjoy the right to administer the sacraments and the authority to interpret the Bible in what is known as "the priesthood of believers." The theology emphasizes the importance of a personal relationship with Christ and the centrality of Scriptures. Its practices include baptism by immersion and the weekly celebration of communion. Baptism signifies a death to the "old man" and the birth of a new person, and must be done publicly so that it may serve as a testimony to all that a person is now a "Christian." For Brethren believers, there is a qualitative difference between someone who has simply "accepted the Lord" and someone who has also followed the commandment to be baptized. This distinction has practical implications: A person who is not baptized may not participate in the Lord's Supper or act publicly as a teacher. For males, baptism is a pre-requisite to exercising a leadership position. In effect, the baptized form the inner-circle of true believers. For children, who must also make a personal decision to "accept the Lord," baptism functions as a rite of passage. Many children of church members are baptized between the ages of 12 and 16, often as a precursor to participation in the youth group. Finally, the Brethren stress the importance of being separate from the world.

Although ICE affirms these doctrines, it has developed a somewhat more eclectic theology as a response to the conditions its membership experience in Houston. This eclecticism allows for a variety of individual positions on the same subject so long as the organizational structure, including the primacy of the elders, is not questioned and a commonly recognized language is used.

Two themes emerged during interviews with leadership and in sermons. The first is captured by the slogan: *con pasión por Dios y compasión por las almas* (with passion for God and compassion for souls). According to the CMF brochure, compassion has to do with preventing rather than curing social evils. This can be done by "helping build family togetherness, fostering education, providing role models worthy of imitation." The passion in the slogan concerns working hard to make the CMF a reality, which is not altogether consistent with the Brethren doctrine of separation from the world. A second theme mentioned by most leaders is being *Cristocentricos*, or Christ-centered. The CMF executive director best summarized what this means:

"We want to have the mindset of Christ and not of religion. Yes, there are some aspects of our theology that are immovable... but we want to open ourselves because in some instances we have been closed to things that were... customs and that we have discovered were really not theology... Anything that has to do with the lordship of our God, the fundamentals of our salvation, the way in which "man" accedes to salvation; these things are immovable. The form of the church, however, will change. The church is not an institution but a living organism..."
Christocentrism, as a theological and hermeneutical approach, allows a distinction to be made between practices/customs and theology, and thus contains the seed for adaptation to a new milieu. Cultural and social practices and customs change according to time, place, and circumstance, while theological fundamentals are immutable. An immigrant community may thus re-interpret these practices according to their new circumstances and the experience of leaving their country and coming to a new home.

Given the fact that a strong component of Brethren doctrine focuses on evangelism, missionary work and conversion are central priorities for ICE members, many of whom converted just prior to or after their migration to Houston. For immigrants from Argentina, conversion to evangelical Protestantism and becoming part of the Argentine community at the church are virtually synonymous. If one belongs to this church, one belongs to the largest network of Argentines in Houston.

The importance of social networks in the conversion process is captured by a statement made by a middle-aged woman, who immigrated in the early '90s: “Argentines lead to Argentines.” All of the immigrants interviewed who converted came to Houston because of a relative, a friend, a friend of a friend, or because of a specific resource found in Houston (e.g., the Medical Center). All had been at least nominally Catholic, and a third had attended Catholic schools in Argentina. Upon arrival in Houston, over half of the Argentine converts were acquainted with a church member (family or friend), whether or not they realized it. The rest generally met an Argentine church member at work or a soccer game within a year after arrival, and were invited to attend a service or social gathering. Another prime recruiting ground has been the restaurants owned by several pioneer immigrants from Argentina.

Most interviewees, particularly if they were not linked to a social network when they arrived, struggled to adapt and to deal with a completely new social situation. One man, who immigrated in the late '60s, commented on how the experience of leaving one's home community paved the way for religious change:

... your life suffers many changes. ... [As an immigrant] you are a field ready for cultivation because there is no opposition, there are no family members to oppose your changes. Your group of friends, your environment is not a negative; you don't have relatives, a work place and friends to oppose you. The English you understand is limited so the only thing you hear in your language is the gospel. For a good time it's all you hear in your own language.

When asked what this decision would have signified in Argentina, he replied:

It would have been very, very costly. ... You have many things working against your making a decision of this nature. ... You come in through a pipe [referring to how the conversion process in the U.S. works]. By the time someone wanted to express their opposition, one had already been a believer 6 or 7 years.

These observations were particularly true of early immigrants, while those arriving since the mid-1980s have encountered a larger Argentine and Hispanic population. Later-arriving immigrants referred to a more gradual process of incorporation into the ICE network. In general, the existence of an Argentine evangelical network with a strong ethnic identity almost excludes the Catholic Church as an alternative, inasmuch as, according to Argentine Catholic church or as if they were shot about the religious a provider of ethnic or

In almost all cases their native Catholic received very negative some amusement:

Their relative reaction was i opponent, bec from the Baha U.S. [and] ...' she intended to the child in the advised by the it going to but did and even

Brethren theology it rejects the Catholic homes of study partic special arrange about religiously value

III. Congregations

The Plymouth Brethren structure, believing the gifts bestowed by God structure do not mix with to be “Biblical.” The and then named by ex life or until an increase deacons that preside of any kind, except the ... 

At present, the ones made by the Council minitude of financial and still has the Council ministerial area is he groups. For example, women, young coup
to Argentine Catholics and Catholic church leaders in Houston, there is no Catholic Argentine church or network. As one ICE leader put it, converts came into the community “as if they were shot down a pipe.” Regardless of how Argentine immigrants initially felt about the religious orientation of their friends or relatives, the congregation’s role as the provider of ethnic community presented a seemingly irresistible attraction.

In almost all cases, converts had to overcome an aversion to Protestantism rooted in their native Catholic culture, and if their families back home remained Catholic, they often received very negative reactions. One male convert remembered family reactions with some amusement:

Their relatives found out about their conversion about three years later. Their reaction was initially very negative. Maria’s mother was the most adamant opponent, because she was very Catholic. Maria’s mother asked permission from the Bishop in Jujuy to baptize Arturo and Maria’s first born here in the U.S. [and] . . . was granted permission to do this. She came and told them what she intended to do as if expecting a confrontation. They let her do it. She baptized the child in the bathtub. Maria and Arturo told her “that’s great.” They had been advised by the leaders of the church not to engage in a confrontation. How was it going to hurt to have water poured over the child? They respected what she did and eventually she also converted.

Brethren theology stresses that only God should be the object of religious veneration; it rejects the Catholic idea that material objects can be sacred. Indeed, during visits to the homes of study participants, I never observed home altars, crosses, other religious objects, or any special arrangements of objects. Respondents were almost offended by questions about religiously valuable objects or non-official religious practices.

III. Congregational Structure & Leadership

The Plymouth Brethren historically reject any semblance of hierarchical organizational structure, believing that the church is a charismatic community led by the Spirit using the gifts bestowed by God on the congregation. The consensus is that charisma and formal structure do not mix well. The Council of Elders is the only organizational structure thought to be “Biblical.” The Council consists of elders who are recognized by the congregation and then named by each other to this leadership role. In practice, these roles are filled for life or until an incumbent is removed by force majeure. The Council may also include deacons that preside over ministerial areas. The church currently has no paid employees of any kind, except for the CMF executive director.

At present, the organizational structure of ICE is being revamped. This decision was made by the Council of Elders in response to various circumstances, especially the magnitude of financial and human resources required by the CMF project. This new structure still has the Council of Elders at the top but is divided into multiple ministerial areas. Each ministerial area is headed by a coordinator (male or female) who oversees several work groups. For example, the Common Interests Group Coordinator oversees six work groups: women, young couples, young women, singles, teenagers, and children. Each group is led
by one person and is responsible for developing operational guidelines and a projected budget. Other organized church ministries include career group, social services, radio/T.V., prison, and bookstore. Two 501(c)(3), legally separate but related entities also exist: the Family Ministries Center and the Hispanic Bible Fellowship. The combined budgets of all work groups constitute the overall church budget. These changes are intended to elicit greater congregational participation, provide a clear budget development process, and cover areas of congregational functioning that are not being addressed currently, such as a church administration and record-keeping system that has been sorely lacking.

The Council of Elders is a group of five men between the ages of 48 and 80, all of whom are first-generation Argentine immigrants, and almost all of whom are charter members of the church. They meet every Monday evening and follow an informal agenda. The elders have ultimate decision-making power in all church matters, including administrative and financial issues. Generally the deacons (sometimes referred to as colaboradores or collaborators) also meet with the elders. Recently, the elders have started referring to themselves as pastors, which may be a small indicator of the influence of the larger American evangelical scene. When the congregation began in the early ’60s, the leadership style was informal and consensual and all male members participated. As the group became larger, making decisions became more difficult, and the Council of Elders (or los ancianos) developed and consolidated itself as the decision-making center for the congregation. Projects were generally discussed behind closed doors and decisions were presented to the congregation. Matters of discipline concerning members were also decided by the elders. Until recently, no aspect of the decision-making process was open to discussion. Females were excluded from participation in decisions along with members of other nationalities.

The magnitude of the CMF project is beginning to impact the leadership structure and decision-making process of ICE in small ways, although some members argue that this process has not changed enough. Elders now inform members of different church groups about various plans and projects in open sessions where they answer questions and receive feedback. For instance, although younger (aged 25 to 40) members had long been insisting on seeing budgets for both the CMF project and the church, the elders did not respond. Recently, one of the leaders finally did so, apologizing for not having done so before and explaining that the lack of a church office made financial reporting difficult. In the process of meeting with various groups in a responsive fashion, women for the first time openly contributed comments and suggestions to the church leadership. In closing one such meeting, one of the elders suggested that these meetings should take place at least every two months: “we [referring to the elders] are willing if you are.” The amount of information the elders provided, their willingness to respond to questions about church activities and decisions, and members’ willingness to ask about pending decisions are all indicators of a shift in the decision-making paradigm used by the elders, as was the participation of females in this process.

Elders have also begun to realize that the leadership should reflect the congregational make-up in terms of the diverse non-Argentine nationalities. Their strategy was to begin a men’s group in order to develop potential leaders among men from other Latin American nationalities and second-generation Argentines. There was also a very practical reason for this decision: The leadership felt that the CMF project had taxed their resources to the point of depletion and that they needed other members to take on some of their responsibilities. A second-generation man generation, an obvious to members on the official age

IV. Social

There is no denomination in the U.S. However, the Stewards focus on development. Christ resources for them Ministries provide congregations. The migrations to plan and choose to benefit always maintained the church maintains the Baptist church and congregations on active in the Prometheus. The Sunday school women at the church: pupils reach the ages and boys are instructed in joint instruction with providing care will be discussed.

Informal provision: gregational members

The help was and take us. The types of help are a car . . . . errands, be

Immigrant status are all available to businesses and find regularly after more families by putting on potential needs.
responsibilities. Nonetheless, the composition of the leadership, in terms of nationality and generation, remains unchanged to date. To my knowledge, no non-Argentine or second-generation Argentine has yet served in a leadership position, which is painfully obvious to members of both groups. Female participation in leadership is not even an issue on the official agenda.

IV. Social Services & Community Relations

There is no denominational organization or hierarchy that oversees Brethren churches in the U.S. However, various organizations are available to meet specific congregational needs. The Stewards Foundation makes grants and loans to local Brethren congregations for capital development. Christian Missions in Many Lands recruits missionaries, administers resources for them and informs Brethren churches about missionary work overseas. Interest Ministries provides church consulting services and publishes a magazine for Brethren congregations. The Messiah Project is a church planting organization that trains local congregations to plan and implement new church plants. Iglesia Cristiana Evangélica selectively chooses to benefit from the various resources offered by these organizations but has always maintained considerable independence from the U.S. denominational network. The church maintains closer ties to local Hispanic congregations, including a nearby Hispanic Baptist church and an Hispanic evangelical church, and collaborates with sister Brethren congregations on conferences and seminars. In addition, a number of male members are active in the Promise Keepers movement, a broad-scale evangelical men's movement oriented to a return to more traditional family and gender arrangements.

Sunday school instruction and social service provision are two arenas dominated by women at the church. Sunday school is taught primarily by younger women until their pupils reach the age of 8, after which boys and girls receive instruction in separate classes and boys are instructed by males. When Sunday school students reach age 13 they again have joint instruction, but generally by males. Social services, or activities having to do with providing care to those in need, are largely the province of the women's group and will be discussed more fully in a later section.

Informal provision of services, especially to new immigrants, is often done by congregational members as individuals, as one man recounted of his first days in Houston:

The help was, for example, well we didn't have a car so they would bring us and take us. They took me to work for about two weeks... everyday. Other types of help provided included helping you to get credit so that you could buy a car... signing loan applications, bringing us furniture, helping us to run errands, because of the language and things of that nature.

Immigrant status information and referral, support groups, and new immigrant education are all available regardless of nationality. Several old-time immigrants own small businesses and find employees through the church network. Baked goods are distributed regularly after morning services, provided by a local bakery that makes them available to families by putting them on an open table. Women in the congregation keep a close eye on potential needs. If a household is not able to buy food or clothing, an informal calling
chain discreetly asks congregational members for food stuffs and appropriate clothing. An informal church investment group offers free advice on how to manage one’s finances, and an elder, who is a C.P.A., offers tax advice. Two female therapists, who are members of the congregation, provide counseling and referrals. Another group of women visits Latin Americans who come to Houston’s medical center for treatment, providing emotional support, transportation, and outings for patients’ family members. Congregational members sometimes house new immigrants, and, in the community’s early years, more established members co-signed mortgages for newcomers.

The current lack of a facility makes it difficult for the church to provide formal social services. In the past, however, this was not the case. During the mid-1980s, the Stafford facilities were used during the week by a local community college to provide English as a Second Language courses. Many members attended these classes and some ESL students began attending church services. GED classes were also offered and, at the same time, the church sponsored regular parenting classes.

A central goal of Iglesia Cristiana Evangélica is to serve the broader Hispanic community, and this goal is a major motivator of the CMF project. The plans for the facility include volleyball and basketball courts, a soccer field, tennis courts, a picnic area, an indoor gym, meeting and classrooms, and, of course, a sanctuary. Planned activities include youth leadership development, parenting programs, marriage counseling, midnight athletic tournaments, GED, ESL, citizenship and computer classes, health fairs, AA meetings, and tutoring programs. The Center is touted as:

...a facility that will foster education, family values, and help to provide solutions before problems arise by sponsoring special programs where families and friends can spend quality time together, where sports activities will be sponsored and encouraged, and where role models can be provided. ... The Center will provide life-changing experiences in the present that will help families face the problems that could arise tomorrow. ... The Family Ministry Center wants to make a difference in the lives of those families—both parents and children—that take advantage of the facilities, by helping them build family togetherness, fostering education, providing role models worthy of imitation, using a preventive rather than a remedial approach [excerpt from the CMF promotional brochure in English].

The Spanish version of the brochure notes that several Hispanic businessmen, in conjunction with ICE, initiated the CMF project because of the “alarming trends in the Hispanic community portrayed by current statistics.” Although these trends or statistics are not specified, ICE leaders identified low educational attainment, high school drop-out rates, juvenile delinquency, low voter turnout, and family dissolution. These are not, by and large, problems confronted by current church members and their families.

The planned array of formal social services that will be offered when the CMF project is completed is impressive. However, the shared socioeconomic status that currently characterizes members contrasts sharply with that of the projected beneficiaries of many CMF programs. The people who would benefit most from midnight basketball, GED and ESL classes, and AA programs will not, in all likelihood, share the socioeconomic characteristics of current church members. Leaders express a desire to “take the youth off the streets and keep them away. I want to serve the members want to serve the Hispanics. The last the future.”

Argentina is itself nations, especially Argentina has in a result, Argentine may not include a national identity of Hispanic or Latino is distinctive in she often lost as they are. While a few go with their nation of bination.

I would like to say, I have someone who use the term is the Hispanic former Hispanic.

He continued to cite:
A few days after as a technician. Despite was resistant to have to throw them off a plane. A His wife expressed his Hispanic as a racial migration process. Well I consider say here. “The... is... the...the... and if I’m a...

She continued:
We all [people] in your country...
appropriate clothing. An

manage one’s finances, and

ists, who are members of

step of women visits Latin

providing emotional sup-

Congregational members

years, more established

ies to provide formal social

by mid-1980s, the Stafford

age to provide English as

sashes and some ESL stu-

offered and, at the same

broader Hispanic com-

The plans for the facility

courts, a picnic area, an

y. Planned activities in-

ge counseling, midnight

as, health fairs, AA meet-

help to provide

where families

activities will be

vided. . . . The

hat will help

Family Ministry

ies—both parents

g them build fami-

worthy of imita-

tion from the CMF

businessmen, in conjunc-

tion trends in the Hispanic

statistics are not speci-

dol drop-out rates, juve-

ne are not, by and large,

ic.

ld when the CMF project

ates that currently char-

acternaries of many CMF

basketball, GED and ESL

eeconomic character-

youth off the streets

and keep them away from drugs and alcohol.” It remains to be seen whether the congre-

gation will be able to accept such “troubled” youth. Moreover, although many of the leaders

want to serve the nearby working class community of Hispanics, other leaders and mem-

bers want to use the facility as a means of reaching a population of affluent, professional

Hispanics. The lack of consensus about CMF’s function may create substantial conflict in the

future.

V. Ethnic & Religious Identity

Argentina is itself a land of immigrants, about 80% of whom came from Mediterranean

nations, especially Italy. For the past several decades, and especially under Juan Perón,

Argentina has inculcated a secular nationalism in its youth through the public schools. As

a result, Argentine immigrants to Houston arrive with a strong Argentine identity which

may not include Catholicism as a defining characteristic. ICE provides a space where this

national identity can be maintained yet, at the same time, a context in which a broader,

Hispanic or Latino identity is gradually being forged. As Argentines, the immigrants’ Spanish

is distinctive in accent and word usage. Over time and generations, that distinctiveness is

often lost as they interact at work and church with Spanish-speakers from other nations.

While a few gradually broaden their ethnic identity, most Argentines continue to identify

with their nation of origin rather than with the broader label, as explained by one:

I would identify myself as Argentine. The “Hispanic” part . . . that term is one

that I have not yet assimilated. It’s a language . . . and no more. What about

someone who comes from Brazil, is he Hispanic? When I fill out a form I never

use the term Hispanic. . . . What about my wife, who is a descendant of Italians,

is she Hispanic? What of her other relatives who came to the U.S.? Are the

former Hispanics and the latter Americans? It doesn’t make sense.

He continued to cite instances of how his identity as an Argentine has served him well.

A few days after arriving in the U.S., he called a local laboratory to offer his services as

a technician. Despite his very limited English, he was able to get the job: “The laboratory

was resistant to having Mexicans or Blacks. I told them that I was Argentinean. That seemed

to throw them off and I was referred to the human resource person. I started the next day.”

His wife expressed a complex mixture of a clear national identity, rejection of the term

Hispanic as a racial descriptor, and the embrace of a new identity forged through the im-

migration process:

Well I consider myself to be of the white race. I don’t consider myself, as they

say here, “Hispanic.” For example, my family comes from Europe. I am from

Italy. . . . I don’t think there is a Hispanic race. There is a White race, the Black

race, the Asian race, and “Hispanic” is an invention from here. I say White race

and if I’m asked, I’m American, because I’m a citizen. . . .

She continued:

We all [people in the congregation] feel a kinship because when you’ve left

your country you stop belonging to that country and start belonging to the world.
I think this is very positive for the congregation. People who have been raised in different countries bring something positive to the congregation. There are some that would like to preserve things from their country more. But I think that when you leave your country to come here you become a little of everything. . . .

She expressed a preference for the term Latin or Latin American as an indicator of regional provenance rather than as an ethnic handle. Other members consider themselves primarily Argentine, but also view themselves as members of the Latin American community. The second generation shows a preference for being identified as Argentines, while exhibiting some ambivalence about the term Hispanic, which has the connotation of belonging to a minority:

[In school] I was always being mistaken for a Mexican. I'm from an Argentine background and I think there is a difference. There are people that are from Mexico and others who are not. I think people are just proud of where they come from. Personally I felt that if I was going to be insulted for being Hispanic, I wanted to be insulted for [being] the right [kind of] Hispanic.

Iglesia Cristiana Evangélica provides a social space where Argentine immigrants meet and interact on a regular basis, and the outcome of these exchanges is that Argentine ethnicity is maintained and reproduced. These interactions use religious symbols, language, and organizational forms from the home country. They occur in Spanish and thus Spanish becomes the language of things divine. People who participate in this church network hear a distinctively Argentine Spanish and meet regularly to share Argentine food, news, and memories. Children are exposed to other Argentines, have an opportunity to use their Spanish, and learn Spanish in songs and Bible readings. Males meet to play or watch futbol (soccer) matches. They send letters and gifts to relatives in Argentina with fellow church members who travel. Second-generation Argentines, more at ease in the American environment than their parents but not completely reconciled to it, find a space where they feel at home. In brief, the religious community provides the catalyst for a meeting of Argentines and thus contributes to the maintenance and reproduction of Argentine ethnicity.

While the customs and practices of the congregation are clearly of Argentine origin and most Argentine congregants prefer this, both members and leaders realize that the increasing diversity of the congregation calls into question a definition of ethnicity that excludes non-Argentines. Thus, ethnicity at the church also includes an identity negotiated with the broader congregation and community that emphasizes common elements, such as the Spanish language, a Latin American heritage, shared activities that involve la familia (the family), and an organizational style that values close, intimate personal relationships. This identity does not exclude elements of “Argentineness,” but it goes beyond it and is more future-oriented. While the broader ethnic identity may be referred to as “Hispanic,” most congregants, particularly those of the first generation, use its Spanish counterpart, hispano, which avoids the racial connotations associated with the American usage of “Hispanic.”

The continued exclusion of non-Argentines from leadership roles is one component of tension within the congregation along lines of nationality. Language usage, social practices and closest cousins of immigrants. These are what they should be focused on. The future is here and it is also that of newcomers. The church network is not just for those who come in the future, it is for those who are here now, including the others and some others.

The church network also helps new immigrants by providing a social space where they can meet and interact on a regular basis. The outcome of these exchanges is that Argentine ethnicity is maintained and reproduced. These interactions use religious symbols, language, and organizational forms from the home country. They occur in Spanish and thus Spanish becomes the language of things divine. People who participate in this church network hear a distinctively Argentine Spanish and meet regularly to share Argentine food, news, and memories. Children are exposed to other Argentines, have an opportunity to use their Spanish, and learn Spanish in songs and Bible readings. Males meet to play or watch futbol (soccer) matches. They send letters and gifts to relatives in Argentina with fellow church members who travel. Second-generation Argentines, more at ease in the American environment than their parents but not completely reconciled to it, find a space where they feel at home. In brief, the religious community provides the catalyst for a meeting of Argentines and thus contributes to the maintenance and reproduction of Argentine ethnicity.

While the customs and practices of the congregation are clearly of Argentine origin and most Argentine congregants prefer this, both members and leaders realize that the increasing diversity of the congregation calls into question a definition of ethnicity that excludes non-Argentines. Thus, ethnicity at the church also includes an identity negotiated with the broader congregation and community that emphasizes common elements, such as the Spanish language, a Latin American heritage, shared activities that involve la familia (the family), and an organizational style that values close, intimate personal relationships. This identity does not exclude elements of “Argentineness,” but it goes beyond it and is more future-oriented. While the broader ethnic identity may be referred to as “Hispanic,” most congregants, particularly those of the first generation, use its Spanish counterpart, hispano, which avoids the racial connotations associated with the American usage of “Hispanic.”

The continued exclusion of non-Argentines from leadership roles is one component of tension within the congregation along lines of nationality. Language usage, social practices and closest cousins of immigrants. These are what they should be focused on. The future is here and it is also that of newcomers. The church network is not just for those who come in the future, it is for those who are here now, including the others and some others.
practices and customs, and the self-perception of many Argentines as being of European descent constitute other major areas of tension between Argentines and other nationality groups. These tensions are rarely addressed openly, but members have reflected on the damage that they could do to the congregation. The overt consensus is that the community should be inclusive of all Latin-American nationalities. The unspoken understanding, however, is that the community will consist primarily of upwardly mobile, middle-class members, or at least of people who share these aspirations. Shared aspirations and social class identity may continue to overshadow national differences.

VI. Incorporating Newcomers

Iglesia Cristiana Evangélica is a church whose membership is almost entirely comprised of immigrants, some more recent than others. More well-established immigrants define helping new arrivals as a duty. In the earlier discussion of conversion, it was clear that newcomers from Argentina are often involved in Houston-based kin, family, and friendship networks at the time of arrival and are almost automatically incorporated into the church through these network ties. Others meet fellow Argentines at work or soccer or seek out a community of Argentine immigrants and in this way become involved in the church network. When social services were discussed, it was apparent that church members informally provide substantial help to newcomers, from locating housing and jobs to providing transportation and legal and financial advice. In the past, and as part of its plans for the future, Iglesia Cristiana Evangélica provided more formal services to newcomers as well, including ESL and GED classes.

The church has tried especially hard to help immigrants with problems that pertain to their legal status. During the general amnesty for illegal immigrants in the late 1980s, church members wrote affidavits to help members and others gain legal status. Elders have counseled members about immigration policies. They have also referred numerous members to local immigration attorneys. Recently, the church co-sponsored a seminar on the 1996 changes in immigration law with an Hispanic Baptist church. A paralegal, who works for a local immigration law firm, reviewed the new provisions and what they would mean for immigrants who lack legal status. The seminar was poorly attended and the organizers speculated that the people who would most benefit were distrustful of who would be at the event. Apparently, one of the flyers gave the impression that the speaker worked for the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Some members have acted as sponsors for others and some have requested work visas for potential immigrants they knew.

Since the mid-1960s, a women’s group, reunión de señoras, has served as a support group for new female arrivals who, unlike their male counterparts, do not usually have an employment-based social network. Especially in the early years of the community, they came from Argentina where it was uncommon for women to work outside the home and in Houston, at least initially, they continued the same pattern. The reunión de señoras provided a weekly occasion for women to meet, socialize, share experiences in the new country, and affirm their identity. Meetings were generally held during morning hours when children were at school and husbands at work. As meetings became an established institution, they became particularly crucial to new immigrants and an important source
of converts. While husbands worked, new female arrivals, suffering considerably from *desarrollo* (displacement, being uprooted), found a place where their language was spoken, where others had been through similar experiences, and where a piece of their homeland was re-created. They were welcomed whether or not they belonged to the church. Anna’s experience exemplified the work of this group. Upon arrival in Houston, she and her husband immediately contacted the church, and a few days later she attended the women’s group meeting. She had no transportation, so another group member gave her rides to group activities, to the grocery store, and to the bank. This group member helped Anna and her husband cash checks because they did not have an account, and eventually helped them open their own account. Ivanna provides another example of how the women’s group helps in the incorporation of new arrivals. When her sister arrived expecting a baby, the women’s group helped her access medical care, drove her to medical appointments, organized a baby shower, and was present throughout the birthing process.

The commitment to helping newcomers incorporate into the community exists in some tension with a commitment to retaining second-generation youth, revolving around language usage. The English-emphasis group argues that if the congregation wants to retain second-generation members and their potential spouses, services must incorporate or be primarily in English. This group encourages the use of such technological solutions to the language problem as the provision of simultaneous translation over headphones. The Spanish-only camp maintains that the congregation continues to minister chiefly to immigrants whose primary language is Spanish. While the English-emphasis camp proposes that youth services and Sunday school classes be held primarily in English, the Spanish-only group maintains that most youth understand Spanish and that the use of English would exclude more youth than it would include. If the congregation is to continue to minister to the Hispanic community, many of whom continue to be new arrivals, second-generation members should strive to learn the language. These diverse views reflect different visions of the congregation’s future. The Spanish-only proponents envision a ministry that continues to serve new arrivals along with established members. If the language is gone, a Spanish-only adherent might argue, “Is there much that distinguishes us from an American congregation?” English-emphasis proponents argue that language is not the only factor that makes Hispanic culture distinctive and, in any case, what is fundamentally important is the Lord’s work, not the preservation of culture.

**VII. Social Activities**

The members of ICE frequently meet for social activities, in one another’s homes and at the CMF site. *Asados* (barbecues) are common, often following Sunday morning services. In May 1997, I attended a pre-planned but not officially church-sponsored *asado* at the CMF, along with about 40 other people, all but one family Argentine. Traditionally Argentine cuts of meat were cooked over a traditional grill and served with a traditional sauce (*Chimichurri*). As they ate at a circle of picnic tables—among the first items built at the CMF site—people talked, told jokes, and traded recipes for side dishes. After eating, the youth headed for the volleyball court. Older people enjoyed a long talk, sipping *mates* (the national drink of Argentina) as the afternoon wore on. Throughout this and several other activities, I see dress their past immigrants in Spanish.

The CMF members. Lead nationality group and *fajitas*. Fun

The congregation was a single and/or youth, and sing every other month interests of each

When HBF was remained so that the day on the reel-to-reel Early immigrants tape player *listas* enjoyed a way of sermons were arranged to Argentine preacher's meeting, the origin place. These were format as those

The overall way. The women's home community, though, ironicaly, 19th century America's worship, preach community. Event to what one can the congregation’s look today, the homing in the mid-

If the home, the young imm leadership of the
activities I attended, the predominant language was Spanish. Occasionally, children address their parents in English, but receive a reply in Spanish. Adult second-generation immigrants often converse in English, but generally address first-generation immigrants in Spanish.

The CMF site is being developed by volunteer labor provided mostly by church members. Leaders, adult members, and youth work side-by-side to build their dream. Other nationality group members join their Argentine fellows, often sharing meals of tamales and fajitas. Fund-raisers and sporting competitions are held there as well.

The congregation also sponsors many other social activities for special interest groups: young couples meetings (ages 25 to 45), regular meetings for adolescents, a youth group, a singles and/or career group, and the women’s group discussed earlier. Adolescents, women, youth, and singles meet on a weekly or semi-monthly basis. The couples’ group meets every other month. The structure and content of meetings vary according to the needs and interests of each group.

VIII. Transnational Ties

When HBF was formed, its ties to the home church in Mendoza were strong and they remained so throughout the 1970s. During this period, there was significant doctrinal dependence on the home congregation. Visitors from Argentina or new immigrants would bring reel-to-reel tapes of sermons presented by pastors and missionaries in Mendoza. Early immigrants remember with some humor how the congregation would sit in front of a tape player listening to a machine as if it were a person. Preachers visiting from Argentina enjoyed a special status: Special conferences were scheduled during their visits, their sermons were taped and replayed later, and their counsel was highly valued. Visiting Argentine preachers were responsible for the development of a radio ministry, the first men’s meeting, the original Council of Elders, and the purchase of the first independent meeting place. These week-long conferences with special speakers followed very much the same format as those in Mendoza.

The overall organizational structure and liturgical practices of the congregation were direct imports from the sending community. The elders were organized in much the same way. The women’s group reflected the structure learned by female immigrants in their home communities. The Himnario (Hymnal) was imported and used in all services, although, ironically, many songs were translations from English made by early nineteenth-century American missionaries. Other church accessories, such as women’s veils and leather-bound Spanish Bibles, were brought from Argentina. The format of Sunday school, worship, preaching, and communion services was very similar to those in the sending community. Even the layout of the sanctuary and the arrangement of pews were very similar to what one could observe in the home congregation. ICE also re-created the home congregation’s pattern of lay leadership and volunteer support of all church needs.

If the home congregation was very influential in the church’s formative years, beginning in the mid-1970s the latter began to exert a strong influence in the home community. The young immigrants who left Argentina in the early 1960s had matured into the adult leadership of the church. They had fared well individually and in terms of their
congregation's growth and development. Several began to look for new challenges and their evangelistic zeal prompted three families to leave for missionary work in the mid-1970s, in Honduras, Spain, and in their original sending community in Argentina. Those who returned to Mendoza developed a 32-acre retreat camp, including eating, sleeping, and sports facilities, substantially supported by donations from ICE members. The Argentine church-of-origin for many ICE members has been revitalized because of this facility, as the camp has served to develop a new generation of enthusiastic young leaders. The camp also provides a space for the exchange of liturgical and ministerial resources. For example, many second-generation Argentines from Houston visit it, bringing songs and ideas from Houston and taking those from Argentina home. Many of the speakers who are well known on the camp circuit visit the U.S. for conference series. The camp also provides a meeting place for single second-generation Argentines seeking a mate.

Despite extensive contact between home and Houston congregations, differences between the two have developed as ICE accommodates to the new society in which its members find themselves. One clear difference between the Houston and Argentine congregations is the incorporation of church members in decision-making, thereby including females and members of almost any age. The Council of Elders in Argentina is very mindful of its ultimate decision-making powers and is unwilling to extend decision-making opportunities to the general congregation, particularly if the group includes women. Theological orientations of the congregations in the two countries also differ. While the home congregation zealously adheres to the religious doctrines originally taught them by Brethren missionaries, ICE has sought to interpret fundamental beliefs according to time and place. The new Center, for instance, would be defined in Argentina as too worldly. Native Argentineans would object to church involvement in social issues, to its providing athletic facilities, and to opening its facilities to all, regardless of religion. One ICE leader believes that these differences do indeed reflect the fact that it is an immigrant church:

...all of us bring some internal rebellion against being so closed off. When we were young everything was a sin: going to a swimming pool, going to the movies, everything was a sin. Some of these were considered serious enough for excommunication. I don't share that perspective. In those days I submitted, but nowadays we have to teach people to live in the world, not take them out of it. ...I think our church is teaching people how to live in the world. I think our leaders have a more balanced view.

Ties between members of ICE and people in the home community are extensive and technologically mediated. The interviews conducted for this study abound in references to phone communications, videos, cassettes, fax machines, e-mail, internet, and air travel. For example, a recent immigrant and convert recalled how her aunt sent literature, cassettes, and videos from Houston, speaking to her family about her newfound faith. The convert telling the story said that her entire family was very moved by the message conveyed through these media, and they all converted. Several other converts shared stories of relatives converting during visits to the U.S. or during their visits to Argentina, resulting in the incorporation of these relatives into Argentine congregations. Videos also constitute an important medium of information about ICE-supported work being done in Argentina. For example, during a recent morning worship service, a professionally produced, promotional video played on the screen to assure the congregation of the ongoing events and a simultaneous translation was provided. Historically, women were covering as a sign of respect to the men. Veils on the head and shoulders were worn in America until recently. The church, the practice was abolished in 1970, but less than 10% of female members still wear them. The tradition is exercised much the same way, with deference to the men's role. Women are present, not able to speak, but able to request hymns, or to provide public instruction.

Ties to the home congregation are normally maintained through the use of printed materials. Every time a new church is established, a copy of all materials is sent to the home congregation, to help new churches in their efforts. The one space where women can give sermons, lead
promotional video about an Argentine camp was shown, depicting how it serves as a meeting ground for youth, couples, pastors, and general church membership. It was feedback meant to assure the congregation that its investments were warranted. Information about upcoming events and travelers circulates with amazing speed between the two communities via faxes and telephone calls. News of weddings, births, deaths, and illnesses is known almost simultaneously in Argentina and Houston. When one of the patriarchs of the Argentine Brethren community died, many immigrants heard the news before their co-religionists in Argentina, enabling them to improvise a memorial during the morning worship service in Houston. Faxes are also used to conduct business between congregations, such as arranging for special speakers; a recent six-week seminar at ICE, given by a Spanish Brethren theologian, was entirely organized via fax messages.

IX. The Role of Women

Historically, women at Iglesia Cristiana Evangélica were required to wear a veil or head covering as a sign of their recognition of and submission to men's God-given authority over them. Veils are made of see-through materials that are elaborately embroidered, cover the head and shoulders, and look very similar to those worn by Catholic women in Latin America until recently. While at one time the use of a veil was almost uniform at the church, the practice has become increasingly less common and, at recent services, less than 10% of female attendants were observed wearing them. The waning use of veils provides an apt metaphor for changing gender roles at the church.

The traditional concept of "life-under-the-veil" essentially means that women can exercise much the same roles and carry out the same activities as men, but only as long as men are not present, implying that church roles and activities are performed by women with deference to men. Men preside over all public meetings where members of both genders are present. Women do not pray in general gatherings, administer the sacraments, request hymns, or read Scripture passages at communion. Nor do they participate in providing public instruction.

The tradition of female submission, enforced by church doctrine and exercised informally within the family, is also internalized in the consciousness of Argentine women, as one recounted concerning female attempts to participate in a seminar:

    Every time the instructor asked a question or asked that a passage be read I struggled to respond, but a man always spoke up before I did. I guess it's hard to change after so many years of not speaking up in public. Even the younger women who tried to read a passage were always beat by a male. Olivia tried to do this several times, but they always spoke out first. We want to participate more, but they don't always let us and we have not been used to speaking in public.

The one space where women can do anything that men do in other spaces—except administer the sacrament—is the reunión de señoras or ladies' meeting. This is a place where women can speak uncensored by males in the congregation, where they can pray, give sermons, lead singing, and participate in leadership roles. The lack of male presence
in the group does not mean, however, that the group escapes male control. Most wives of elders are also de facto leaders of the ladies' group. Over the years, the reunión became increasingly organized until it came to be known as LIFE (Liga Femenil Evangélica or Female Evangelical League). LIFE is overseen by a coordinating committee and has a formal chairwoman, although there is still a tendency for elders' wives to exercise an authoritative role. In recent years, the ladies' group has met less frequently and seems to have focused on special events. This may coincide with an aging leadership and a change in the occupational status of more recent arrivals and second-generation women. Several of the second-generation women interviewed for this study indicated they attend non-gender-specific activities at other congregations or the church's college and career group. Recent immigrant female arrivals attend a weekly Bible study/support group on Wednesday evenings since most work during the day and on Saturdays when LIFE meets. In both cases, women now find spaces where they can exercise roles and carry out activities very similar to those of men.

In general, the status of Argentine women at the Iglesia Cristiana Evangélica—in terms of education, occupation, and income—has improved relative to the home country. However, this assertion needs to be qualified. While some of the women who arrived after the mid-1960s had been employed in Argentina in white collar or artisan positions, most worked at home when they came to the United States. A limited knowledge of English, lack of transportation, and little awareness of how things worked in this country contributed to their isolation. Recent immigrant women have entered the labor force in Houston in greater numbers, where they receive higher salaries than they would have in Argentina. Women who immigrated in the 1980s came from an Argentina plagued by hyper-inflation, high unemployment, and underemployment, where prospects for young members of the middle class lagged behind their expectations. They often arrived in Houston as young couples who expected both adult family members to be employed outside the home in order to make the immigration project work.

Second-generation women attend college at the same rate as men, attain higher educational levels than their mothers, and are more likely to work outside the home. Although second-generation women are much more assertive of their individual rights than their mothers, the continued emphasis on their role as primary caretakers for children and the elderly may place them at the center of a struggle between differing expectations: the professional working woman vs. the mother who is primarily responsible for her family.

Positive changes in the status of women are associated with changing gender roles and relations at the church. Women are coming out from under the veil. Women who are active in the workforce, who are used to making decisions, and who have attained high levels of education assume that they will enjoy greater participation in the church. Changes in how women perceive themselves and their role in the congregation coincide with the leadership's perception that it can no longer alone attend to the many congregational needs. Second-generation male members, although still steeped in a tradition of male dominance, may be more willing than their fathers to accept women in a variety of roles previously reserved for men.

Two recent events suggest a re-evaluation of the role of women in the congregation. First, a Spanish theologian, who taught a six-week seminar, affirmed on various occasions a more androgynous view, focusing on the interdependence of the sexes in life and in the religious community. This arrangement, even if the congregation's emphasis would not be on the congregation's role in the religious community itself, many women could see their roles change. Many women also felt that their children were becoming more bi-ethnic, more comfortable with both Spanish and English, and more likely to succeed financially. They believed their children would be more successful in the future if the children could become bilingual and there was a push by some members, who feel that the children need to succeed financially, that family values (or lack thereof) is a key factor in the children's future success. Although most students speak English, once they become successful, they realize the importance of their Spanish background. The prospects for the future are bright. The children of the second generation in the Hispanic community are studied and they are being equipped for success in American society. The children's future success is a concern that the congregation takes seriously. It is important to note that the Hispanic community values education highly and is committed to the education of its children.
religious community. His wife modeled self-confidence, competence, and strong leadership abilities. This Spanish couple challenged the congregation to examine its gender arrangements, even suggesting that women serve the Sacraments. The respect that the congregation and elders had for him opened the door to reflection about matters that previously would not have been considered. The second event concerns proposed changes in the congregation's organizational structure. Although the male-only Council of Elders remains in charge, different ministerial areas are to be headed by coordinators of either sex, exercising a role similar to that of deacons.

X. The Second Generation

*Iglesia Cristiana Evangélica* places a heavy emphasis on the family as both a fundamental religious and Hispanic value. Immigrants are, therefore, especially concerned with the second generation, worried that they may succumb to “American values” that include family dissolution, and that they may experience “a serious identity problem.” They are also concerned that their children learn Spanish, and the church, including Sunday school, is viewed as a major vehicle to accomplish this. Finally, most would prefer that their children marry an Argentine, or at least another Latin American.

Many aspects of the new land are revered, but there is a general perception on the part of both generations that Americans are not good role models in the area of family. Sermons frequently allude to increasing divorce rates in the U.S., sexual promiscuity, extra-marital affairs, homosexuality, reversal of “Biblical” gender roles, and difficult inter-generational relationships. Thus, while the second generation is encouraged to do well in school and to succeed financially, it is discouraged from assuming what are perceived to be prevailing family values (or lack thereof). This creates a degree of distress for second-generation members, who feel that doing well in school and succeeding professionally require a lifestyle contrary to the values promoted within the church.

Although most second-generation children learn Spanish at home before they learn English, once they begin attending school they become proficient in, and show a preference for, English as the language for peer communication. When they learn to read, they are asked in Sunday school to read Bible passages and to memorize scriptural portions in Spanish. The prospect of losing communication with their children prompts parents to emphasize the use of Spanish in the church context. As members of the second generation become adults, they show a tendency to want their children to learn Spanish. Although they see themselves as full-fledged Americans, they have often reaped the benefits of being bilingual and there is a concern that children will lose touch with their roots. Second-generation Argentines bring their children to church primarily for religious reasons, but hope that their children will learn or maintain their Spanish. First-generation grandparents are alarmed by the prospect that they will not be able to communicate with their grandchildren or young members of the congregation, and encourage them to attend Sunday school and services for purposes of language acquisition. Some leaders have expressed a concern that the congregation will not survive and will not be able to maintain a ministry to the Hispanic community if the Spanish language is lost by younger generations.
Concern for Spanish fluency among children is enhanced by second-generation marriage patterns. Less than five members of the second generation have failed to marry within the Argentine, or at least Hispanic, community. Thus, both partners share a concern over transmitting the language, despite the fact that they typically speak English at home. Grandparents and first-generation caretakers play a fundamental role in transmitting Spanish. There is a general aversion to commercial childcare arrangements within the community and grandparents or other immigrants often provide this service. For example, approximately 10 families from the congregation pay one female immigrant to care for their children in her home (not all at once), where she teaches them Bible stories and songs in Spanish. The primary caretakers for most of these same children are their grandparents, and thus the children are exposed to Spanish on a daily basis.

There is a general perception on the part of immigrants that their children are not always clear about their identity. The second generation may not be clear about their ethnic identity (Argentine or Hispanic or American), but they seem to agree that they have roots in both Argentina and the U.S. The congregation provides a safe place for them to renew their sense of belonging to another culture while remaining within the broader American culture. Immigrant parents are not quite sure how to help their children deal with their double identity and often see the tensions exclusively in terms of language use. The congregation exerts great pressure to incorporate second-generation members in the fold, but is not much inclined to help them become part of the broader culture. While second-generation Argentines no doubt struggle to live within two worlds, particularly as pre-teens and adolescents, I found that they projected a very clear vision of where they came from and where they are headed. Their familiarity with both an ethnic, church-based identity and the broader American world shapes their perceptions of leadership and the future of their community. Overall, second-generation members agree that they should somehow go beyond what their parents had envisioned for themselves.

When asked about challenges facing the second generation, members of this group mentioned the maintenance and expansion of what their parents had accomplished, family dissolution, conflicts between parents and their children, figuring out one's cultural identity ("I was born here, but I was raised in their [parents'] way"), culturally related conflicts with parents (e.g., adult children wanting to go to school outside of Houston and encountering parental opposition), and striking a "working balance" between generations and with the other ethnic groups incorporated into the church. A common theme was defining oneself in contrast to the first generation, manifested in comments made by 19-year-old Sarah and 25-year-old Manuel:

[Sarah] The second generation is going to feel more comfortable and open with a diversity of people. I think we're so much more open to it because we were born to it; we interact with different people every day at work and we're used to it and the older generation isn't. I know my mom, when we were going to school, would always tell people that I was the only Hispanic in my class and it was a big deal for her.

[Manuel] The second generation is more aware of resources available to them. For example, if my Dad is planning a trip to Padre Island, he'll sit down with a map and try to map a way the night before. Whereas I'll say: "Hey Dad, we're members of the AAA, why don't you call their 1-800 number and tell them
Second-generation members are particularly emphatic in explaining how they approach project-planning, problem-solving, and decision-making in a manner very different from the first generation, especially in matters relating to the CMF. Take, for example, Juan’s observations about generational differences:

We approach things differently. I would use the youth group leadership as an example. . . . We compare ourselves to the elders, who are all first generation. . . . We have a more . . . business aspect. Not about money, but about how we do things here in the U.S. And we’re . . . don’t get me wrong, they are flexible, but we’re very flexible to understand today’s youth and today’s problems. We are more aware. . . . The older generation is “let’s get over there, let’s work hard. . . . We’ll sweat it out and we’ll build it eventually.” Our generation is “if I’m inclined to write grants, I shouldn’t be there working.” . . . The American mentality and the Argentinean mentality are very different. I see kids my age come up from there and they have a different attitude towards life.

Manuel had a similar appreciation of inter-generational differences:

The younger generation needs to step into leadership roles. The congregation will not grow with the current approach and mindset. . . . the CMF will have to be staffed. Achieving these goals will require a paradigm shift. The older generation is not thinking this way. They are still thinking that needs will be met by volunteers. But what about quality and commitment? These things can’t be achieved by volunteers. The youth group directors see things in these terms. They’ve discussed this extensively after meetings and over coffee.

In short, second generation members subscribe to a more professional, less voluntaristic model of the church, one that encourages efficiency and productivity.

The second generation is poised to produce considerable change in the church when it finally achieves leadership roles. In the last section it became clear that second-generation women are beginning to assume roles heretofore reserved for men. Here it has become clear that the second generation has plans to reorganize the ways by which church business is conducted. An overtaxed, aging leadership appears to be gradually acceding to these pressures.

XI. Conclusion

_Iglesia Cristiana Evangélica_ has served, and continues to serve, Argentine immigrants well, by replicating the cultural aspects of home, providing a warm and welcoming social network, and offering an array of services to ease their settlement. Those who arrive in Houston not already affiliated with the Brethren often find these attractions irresistible and
convert, but even when they don’t they remain welcomed. Spiritually, culturally, socially, and materially, the church provides an extended family that enables immigrants to thrive in their new home.

However, after thirty years of maintaining and reproducing Argentine culture, the congregation is now at a critical juncture. Will it continue to serve primarily Argentine immigrants and their descendants? Will it focus its efforts on all Latin American immigrants? Will it eventually disappear as second and subsequent generation members incorporate into other congregations? As the congregation pursues the ambitious Center for Family Ministries project, these questions become central. The shifts towards emphasizing Hispanic ethnicity (at least rhetorically), second-generation retention, and, to a limited degree, gender equality, seem like clear indicators of the congregation’s future direction. The continued lack of diversity within the leadership structure, however, and the obvious Argentine ambiance are important qualifiers of future trends. Clearly, ICE is in a time of transition, the outcome of which remains uncertain.