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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

# Transforming self and society
# Pentecostal ethics of care and forms of social world-making in post-war San Salvador.

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Anthropology

by

Marisa L. Peeters

Committee in charge:

Professor Nancy Postero, Chair
Professor Joel Robbins, Co-Chair
Professor Thomas Csordas
Professor Germaine Hoston
Professor Elana Zilberg

2018

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The Dissertation of Marisa L. Peeters is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Co-chair

____________________________________________
Chair

University of California, San Diego

2018

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Myriam Peeters.
Though our lives unfolded in different worlds, my mother never ceased to be an inspiration and an example for me. She was one of the most hard-working people I have ever met.
She was strong, and she was brave.

Voor mama, omdat ik van je hou.

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Writing this dissertation, in itself a journey, at once enriching and challenging, was part of my life-long endeavor to find ways to express my love for learning. This started when I was still a young child, working my way through all the books of the small library near my home. I read anything I could find, learning about people from all walks of life, and all parts of the world. As an adult, I feel fortunate to have been able to grow intellectually in the context of a discipline that allows exactly for this: learning, and writing, and thinking about people from all walks of life, and all parts of the world. I owe thanks to my friend, Hans Luyckx, for introducing me to the study of anthropology when I was still a college student in Belgium. My husband, Todd Melnick, whom I first met in an Arabic-language class in my hometown of Leuven at the beginning of my university studies in anthropology, has considerably shaped the direction of my trajectory. Conversations with Todd compelled me to the study of religion. It was furthermore my marriage to Todd that brought me to the United States, where I could study with some of the people whose work had most inspired me during my anthropology studies in Belgium.

My PhD work at UCSD is deeply informed by the department's long-standing strength in psychological anthropology. Here I want to acknowledge Janis Jenkins and Thomas Csordas as mentors in introducing me to work on mental health and trauma. Moreover, by working under their supervision as a research assistant for the South West Youth Project, I gained valuable insight in how to collect and manage ethnographic research data. David Pedersen's expertise on El Salvador was helpful in preparing a fieldwork project there. More generally, I wish to thank all professors I took classes with. The course work in the first years of the program was instrumental in strengthening my intellectual acuity, in facilitating me to find my voice as a writer in the context of American academia, and, more generally, in helping me acculturate to

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In El Salvador there were countless people who welcomed me with warmth and kindness, and who helped me in my research. For the purposes of maintaining anonymity of those people who also feature in my dissertation, I will not list everyone I owe acknowledgments by name. The first two weeks I ever spent in El Salvador, in the summer of 2007, I spent with the Seventh-

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The support of my family and friends was especially important in seeing me through the writing of this dissertation. In Belgium, I first of all want to acknowledge my siblings Yasid and

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**ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION**

Transforming self and society
Pentecostal ethics of care and forms of social world-making in post-war San Salvador.

by

Marisa L. Peeters

Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology

University of California, San Diego, 2018

Professor Nancy Postero, Chair

Professor Joel Robbins, Co-Chair

This dissertation on the broader political implications of Pentecostal growth in Latin America, and El Salvador specifically, is based on fifteen months of ethnographic research in San Salvador. The main ethnographic research site is Misión Cristiana Elim, a cellular Pentecostal mega-church in San Salvador in the midst of a process of shifting to integral mission, transforming from a traditional Pentecostal church to one that embraces social justice concerns.

Starting analysis from religious categories, and adopting the broad definition of politics as "social world-making," I pose the question of what forms of social world-making are implied in a Pentecostal model for collective change that hinges on individual transformation through conversion. My argument pivots on two observations: (1) individual transformation, central in

Pentecostal cosmology cross-culturally, is typically conceived of as "moral self-work," and (2) the Pentecostal subject (as enacted in El Salvador) is intrinsically relational. Building on this, I posit that moral self-work following conversion is also intrinsically relational, expressing what I call "a Pentecostal ethics of care." By analyzing the latter, I argue, insight is gained in Pentecostal forms of social world-making.

This analysis reveals two overlapping, yet quite distinct Pentecostal forms of world-making, which I refer to respectively as "Church-Building" and "Kingdom-Building." On both models, social change is envisioned primarily as the incremental sum of numerous small individual changes. In "Kingdom-Building," however, individual Christians are called to denounce structural forms of injustice. Neither of these Pentecostal models of social world-making map fully onto neoliberalism, the hegemonic secular form of world-making in post-war El Salvador.

This study contributes to the anthropological understanding of Christian subjectivity, and to the debate on the political implications of Pentecostal/Charismatic Christian growth. Mapping the relationship between beliefs, subjectivities and forms of social action in El Salvador, this study also contributes to the growing scholarship on El Salvador.

**Chapter one:**

# Understanding the political ramifications of Pentecostal transformation in El Salvador: an introduction

## 1.1 Ethnographic vignette

On July 3, 2008, a bus, coming from the evening church service in Misión Cristiana Elim, a Charismatic Christian[1] mega-church in the metropolitan area of San Salvador, suddenly became trapped in a flash flood in the Colonia (neighborhood) of La Málaga when the river Acelhuate flooded. Of the thirty-two people on board, two people--a young man in his twenties and a sixteen-year-old boy--managed to climb out of the bus onto its roof. While the sixteen-year-old found his way to safety by jumping onto the roof of a nearby house, the other person stayed on top of the roof, trying to help others get out of the bus. The other passengers, however, who were for the most part elderly people and young women with children, did not find an easy way out of the bus, and engaged in prayer. Within only a few minutes, the entire bus became engulfed by the water and was dragged into the river. Except for the teenage boy, all passengers, including the young man who had stayed on the roof of the bus to help the other congregants, perished in the accident.

Death remains a common trope in post-war El Salvador (Moodie 2006). Flash floods and other natural disasters (including hurricanes, landslides, earthquakes[2]) are common, especially in

[1] In chapter three, I explain that the theology of Misión Cristiana Elim is a blend of Pentecostalism and Calvinism. Because I focus on the Charismatic Christian aspects of Elim, I also often refer to the church as "Pentecostal." This is a label that is also habitually used by members, and by some of the pastors.

[2] In terms of overall damage, and number of casualties particularly significant were the earthquake of October 10, 1986 (Durkin and Eeri 1987: 621), and the two earthquakes that struck the country in January and February of 2001 (Bommer et al. 2002: 389).

the rainy season. Moreover, steep murder rates and the prevalence in media reporting of such violent deaths normalize the anticipation of violence in everyday life (Moodie 2010). It therefore seems unlikely that the bus accident would have drawn a lot of attention if its passengers had not been returning from a religious service, and even more so, a service at an evangelical church. In the context of the recent proliferation of evangelical churches in historically Catholic El Salvador (IUDOP 2009), religion is a topic of significant polarization there. In the days after the accident, a few articles appeared in leading newspapers blaming the victims for their own demise. The main argument, reflected in headlines such as “prefirieron orar” (“they preferred to pray”), was that instead of trying to save themselves, the passengers prayed for divine intervention. It was further argued that this response was the direct outcome of the “passive doctrines” evangelical churches inculcate in their congregants. Counter to these accusations, the church’s leadership did more than calling for prayer in response to the accident. Mario Vega, the general pastor of the church, held a press conference in which he not only refuted claims that passengers did not want to rescue themselves, but also pointed to the responsibility of those government agencies in charge of public works and the environment for creating the circumstances that enabled the accident to happen. Despite warnings made in a 2005 report that the affected area was particularly vulnerable to flooding, Pastor Vega observed, government agencies had neglected to take the protective measures that were needed, leaving passers-by vulnerable to danger. Mario Vega’s words surprised many, within as well as outside the Elim church. In the view of some congregants, the pastor, by publicly pointing out the government’s negligence, was meddling with “matters of the world,” and, even worse, with the spiritually polluting domain of politics.

This ethnographic vignette about a bus accident that became imbued with political meanings touches on many of the central questions and themes in this dissertation on the

political impact of Pentecostal (and more broadly, Charismatic Christian) growth in El Salvador. First of all, it involves Misión Cristiana Elim, the church where I did the majority of my fieldwork, and that as such is the main ethnographic focus of this study. As one of the three biggest evangelical churches in El Salvador, the church does not need any introduction to local newspaper readers. The Elim church, a cellular mega-church situated on the outskirts of San Salvador, organizes bus transportation to and from various parts of the larger metropolitan area of the city to enable their members to more easily attend church services. Early on in my fieldwork there a pastor told me about this accident, pointing out that it had taken place on the bus route servicing Colonia Costa Rica, the neighborhood where I lived (and I did drive by the site of the accident each time I went to the church). I continued hearing about the accident throughout my fieldwork because several church editorials were devoted to the topic, and the church organizes an annual remembrance of the accident, known as "the tragedy of La Malaga," honoring the memory of the people involved.

More broadly, the vignette conjures the Salvadoran ethnographic context by evoking the polarization of the religious arena there in what continues to be a fraught political context. As elsewhere in Latin America (Drogus 2000) the rapid pluralization of the Salvadoran religious landscape has taken place in the wake of significant political and socio-economic changes. In the last few decades the Latin American region more broadly has been characterized by a transition towards democracy, with in its tow a steep increase in crime rates (Caldeira 2000, Holston 2008), and a shift to neoliberalism (Postero 2007). The intrinsically complex process of democratic transition (O'Donnell 1992) is furthermore complicated in El Salvador by the post-war context (Azpuru 2007: 16). Despite the creation of new spaces for political participation, the country continues to be a "nervous political world" (Zilberg 2007: 39). Stark socio-economic disparities

and rampant criminal violence continue to divide Salvadoran society, fueling a deep and pervasive sense of insecurity (Moodie 2010) as well as persistent emigration to the United States (Pedersen 2013). Currently, 1.2 million first-generation Salvadoran immigrants reside in the United States (Villacres 2013).[3]

Broadly defined, this dissertation investigates what the political implications are of such unprecedented evangelical growth in the context of El Salvador's complicated democratic transition. As the vignette shows, this question is both very pertinent and appears to lack a straightforward answer. The stance taken by the church leadership is clearly at odds with the newspapers' implied allegations that evangelicals are passive citizens, who only ever pray even when their own lives are at stake. The tensions between the journalists' perspective, the pastor's public statements and the mixed reception of the latter within the Elim community indicate that there is no easy label available when trying to capture Salvadoran evangelicals' political attitudes and behaviors (even when defining politics broadly). Rather than seeking to find such a label, this dissertation aims to lay bare those aspects of evangelicals' religious commitment that may affect their political attitudes and behaviors.

### 1.2 Dissertation research questions and arguments

Adopting a broad definition of politics, this dissertation explores the political implications of Pentecostal (and more broadly, Charismatic Christian) proliferation in El Salvador by starting analysis from religious rather than formal political concepts. Starting from the question of how Salvadoran Charismatic Christians, fueled by their beliefs, engage in practices that connote political commitment and belonging, I want to better understand the

[3] To put this in perspective, it is worth noting that the population of Salvadorans (living in El Salvador) consists of six million people.

implied Christian models for social and political change. My concern with politics then is not limited to the sphere of electoral or party politics, typically expressed, in the words of Alvarez et al. (1998), as "a set of specific activities (voting, campaigning, lobbying) that occur in clearly delimited institutional spaces such as parliaments and parties" (Alvarez et al. 1998: 10-11) In defining how I delimit "a broad take on politics," I first of all agree with Alvarez et al. who, in their research on Latin American social movements, call for a view of politics as "[encompassing] power struggles enacted in a wide range of spaces culturally defined as private, social, economic, cultural, and so on (ibidem). Ultimately I approach politics, following Postero et al., as "a critical practice of world making,…the making [of which] is a product of disagreement and difference" (Postero et al. forthcoming: 15).

The purpose, then, of starting my analysis from religious concepts is to capture the forms of world making as enacted by Salvadoran Charismatic Christians. Because of the recent infusion of integral mission, an evangelical contextual theology akin to liberation theology, into the Salvadoran religious field, I engage with how the incorporation of holistic mission affects Charismatic Christian forms of "world making" and implicitly Christian models for social and political change in El Salvador. Typically, in the social science literature on Latin American Pentecostalism, Pentecostals are depicted as apolitical and conservative. How, I ask then, is a religion that is traditionally pictured as primarily concerned with individual spiritual well-being compatible, if at all, with social justice engagements, in a vein similar to liberation theology?

Starting from the ethnographic observation that for Salvadoran Pentecostals any form of collective change hinges on individual change through conversion, I formulate a complex argument that hinges on two observations: (1) individual transformation, central in Pentecostal cosmology cross-culturally, is typically conceived of as "moral self-work," and described by my

Salvadoran informants in terms of “self-restraint,” and “responsibility,” and (2) the Pentecostal subject (as enacted in El Salvador) is intrinsically relational, due to the centrality of the believer’s relationship with God, and the need to reach beyond the self, reaching out to the “Other,” as part of this relationship with the deity. I argue that in order to effect faith, the Christian self needs to carefully balance out the dimensions of “I,” “God,” and “Other.” Building on this, I posit that moral self-work following conversion is also intrinsically relational, expressing what I call “a Pentecostal ethics of care.”

By comparing traditional and holistic Pentecostalism, I discern differences on two axes, shaping the scope and content of the ethics of care implied in Pentecostal post-conversion transformation: (1) the relative value attributed to the material vis-à-vis the spiritual; and (2) differences in the way the three dimensions of “I,” “God,” and “Other” undergirding the Pentecostal self are negotiated. An important difference between traditional and holistic Christianity, I show, lies in a different understanding of the value of the material, resulting in different understandings of what should be included in the responsibilities of “the Good Christian.” In the traditional view the soul has moral prevalence over the body, which, as the locus of sinful temptation, only produces positive moral value when these perceived sinful inclinations are inverted (e.g. the non-alcoholic body, the body dressed in Christian attire). In the holistic view, a unified rather than hierarchical view on body and soul is adopted based on the understanding that body and soul are both a reflection of the image of God, and as such both intrinsically valuable. The revaluation of the material is furthermore extended to all material aspects of God’s creation, including the environment and aspects of society. The implication is that not just spiritual needs but all needs of the human being, including physical needs and emotional needs, become evangelical responsibilities. Rather than focusing on saving souls by

engaging in evangelization, serving in the Church, engaging in prayer and Bible study and refraining from worldly activities and dress styles, an evangelical should be concerned with "saving the entire human being, and not just his or her soul."

By mapping the activities Christians engage in as an expression of "ethics of care for the other" according to the two axes identified above, I lay bare the implied Christian models for social and political change, and convey a nuanced image of the degrees of difference and overlap between both. While holistic mission calls on Christians to include secular domains as areas in which to make a difference as Christian, both forms of Christianity nevertheless centrally call on traditional Christian practices to express "care for the other," and create social change. Another point of overlap is that while holistic mission does create some space for engaging with structural forms of violence in society, both models nevertheless privilege the personal, and as such foment forms of social change that are the incremental sum of small individual changes. Again, differences in the value attributed to the material vis-à-vis the spiritual will shape how Christians should seek to affect individual change. For example, in the traditional model, such change is considered to come about when more people convert and start engaging in Pentecostal moral self-work. In the holistic model, such evangelization must go hand in hand with providing more individuals with the conditions of possibility to improve their own socio-economic situation. However, integral mission also posits that individual and structural sin are intrinsically enmeshed, calling on individual Christians to denounce structural forms of injustice.

My analysis also provides some tools to better understand Christian participation in Salvadoran politics (narrowly defined). Integral mission's call for individual Christians to participate in the secular domain as part of their Christian set of responsibilities also extends to the sphere of electoral politics. The only caveat here is that this domain is considered to be

particularly dangerous in terms of spiritual contamination. Protest marches often turn violent, and political parties constitute “dirty yet enticing” environments that require more self-restraint than is often feasibly possible in terms of maintaining spiritual health. The concern with spiritual pollution also entails that a Pentecostal in public office would not necessarily guarantee positive change since this would depend on his or her “spiritual cleanliness.” As a result, Christians are still often reluctant to participate. An analysis of “Pentecostal politics” that would only take into account formal political participation would likely confirm the picture of Pentecostals as politically inert, and not capture how Pentecostals’ practices around individual salvation are directly tied to broad social and political change in El Salvador.

### 1.3 Misión Cristiana Elim

The main ethnographic field site for this study is Misión Cristiana Elim. As I will explain at more length in chapter three, Elim is a Charismatic Christian cellular mega-church, espousing a blend of Pentecostalism and Calvinism. First established in 1977 in Ilopango (now part of the larger metropolitan area of San Salvador), the church has since developed into a transnational organization, incorporating churches in the Americas, Europe and Australia. The San Salvador location, where I did my fieldwork, not only serves approximately 100,000 members locally, but also operates as international headquarters. Operating its own media center, which includes two radio stations and a television station, the church yields influence outside the confines of its church buildings. This is even more so because the church’s general pastor regularly publishes editorials in a popular mainstream Salvadoran newspaper, as well as online, via the church’s website and social media.

Elim was a particularly productive field site for the pursuit of my research questions, given that the church was in the midst of a process of shifting to integral mission, transforming from "an inward-looking church" (viewed as "traditional" in the context of Salvadoran evangelicalism) to one that embraces social justice concerns. This enabled me to compare two different modes of being Charismatic Christian as they co-existed and stood in tension with one another within the same field site. This shift was the reason for why Salvadorans familiar with Elim would describe the church to me as especially conservative, particularly in terms of gender relations, or, alternatively, as very progressive. The latter then referred to the more recent involvement of the church, and the church's general leadership in particular, in public debates on some of the difficulties Salvadoran society continues to experience in the post-war era. My research was facilitated by the fact that the shift, still in flux, and perceived by a number of pastors and members as quite controversial, generated considerable debate within the church. The question of how a church oriented by Pentecostal teachings could engage with matters of social justice and still maintain its Pentecostal character was at the center of this.

Furthermore, Elim was also a productive field in terms of doing ethnographic fieldwork on religion in a large urban area, moreover one that, as I will show in chapter two, is at times quite difficult to navigate due to concerns with crime and violence. Because Elim is a cellular church with a large membership, it is embedded in neighborhoods across the larger metropolitan area. This meant that it was feasible for me to attend meetings and to get to know people all over San Salvador, ranging from some of the most impoverished and conflictive neighborhoods to some of the most prestigious parts of the city. Because the church organized services and other activities on a daily basis, as part of its mission to serve a large membership, there was ample

opportunity for me to participate in activities and conduct "participant observation," inherent in ethnographic research.

### 1.4 Fieldwork in San Salvador

This dissertation is based on approximately fifteen months of fieldwork I conducted in San Salvador during 2009 and 2010, followed up by an additional summer of fieldwork in 2011 (and preceded by pre-fieldwork in the summer of 2007). I started fieldwork with the Elim church in January 2010.

*Genesis of the project*

Initially, my dissertation project was one primarily driven by intellectual curiosity about the cultural experience of religion, rather than intimate familiarity with a field site. Interested in doing a study on evangelical religion and healing, I decided on El Salvador. While liberation theology was a notable presence there during the civil war (1980-1992), particularly embodied by archbishop Oscar Romero, who was murdered in the beginning of the civil war, it was evangelical religion, and Pentecostalism especially, that thrived. Recent polls estimate evangelical membership at about forty percent of the population (IUDOP 2009).

Planning for a project on religious healing and trauma, I first arrived in El Salvador in the summer of 2007 to conduct preliminary fieldwork. I soon learned, however, that a study focused on the past would not capture the prevailing sentiment that "it was now worse than the war." In people's perception, the post-war era was worse, not just because of the high murder rates, but also because violence was perceived as more random than before, kindling the fear that no one was safe (Moodie 2010).

After re-conceptualizing my study to focus on how evangelicals see their role in socio-political change, I returned to El Salvador in the fall of 2009. Though eager to start the project, my first fieldwork observations revolved around how contentious it can be to do research in a context of religious polarization. In the first months of my fieldwork, I visited as many churches as possible to get a sense of the differences, and the dynamics of the religious arena. I had to work on how to present myself, not used to greeting people with God Bless (cf. Harding 2000). I learned that I was making a statement by wearing either a skirt or pants to church. Being careful not to offend anyone, I usually went dressed in a skirt, until a young woman approached me about my attire, asking me if I had particularly conservative views. Visiting an Adventist church (the church of my husband's family), I felt more comfortable dressing how I would dress at home, and decided to put on pants, only to find myself in a thunderous sermon on the sin of women wearing pants.[4] Visiting churches of all denominations as part of my initial surveying of the field, I learned that it was not uncommon for evangelicals and Catholics to express prejudices vis-à-vis one another. For example, one woman, a Charismatic Catholic, warned me not to bother with visiting evangelical churches, because "[they] are not real churches." An older evangelical woman was even more forceful in telling me that "Catholics are of the devil." The biggest challenge in my first months of fieldwork was that I encountered difficulty obtaining formal permission to start research. I started the process in two different churches that I had visited a few times. In both churches, I had an initial meeting with a friendly assistant pastor who assured me he would be able to help, only to receive news two weeks later that my request to obtain a research permit was denied by the church leadership.

[4] North American Seventh-day Adventist churches are generally less "conservative" than Adventist churches in Latin America (Peeters 2003).

*Getting started*

Changing tactics, I decided to contact as many general pastors as possible to obtain consent (soon winning permission in three churches). One of the people I was able to set up an appointment with was Mario Vega, the pastor of Misión Cristiana Elim. Of course, I had heard of the Elim church. It was one of two Salvadoran-born evangelical mega-churches and one of the three most popular evangelical churches in the country. I had read some of the general pastor's weekly editorials in a mainstream newspaper. In a Christian NGO where I had started teaching classical Greek to a group of evangelical intellectuals I first learned that Mario Vega, Elim's general pastor, is referred to as "el maestro," or "the teacher," for being academically inclined. More generally, I learned, Mario Vega was generally well-regarded in San Salvador. One (Catholic) person described him as "a decent person." I had not yet visited the Elim church as part of my general survey, since Soyapango, the municipality where the main church building is located is one of the most dangerous municipalities in the larger metropolitan area of San Salvador. Because of the high rate of violence (in 2010 there were 66 murders per 100,000 inhabitants (UNODC 2011: 23)), this was definitely something worth considering, particularly because weekday church services generally go until after dark.

My meeting with Pastor Vega went well. He was friendly, and expressed interest in my research project. At the end of the meeting, he not only told me that I could start research in his church, but he also asked one of the other pastors to facilitate my research. This not only involved inviting me to church events, but also organizing transportation so I more easily could attend church meetings. Ultimately, I obtained research permits to do research in three locations, but I opted for Misión Cristiana Elim because it was particularly suited for ethnographic research

on my topic. At this point in my research, I became fully immersed in participant observation with Elim, and for the most part no longer spent time surveying other churches.

*Methodology*

The data for this dissertation was obtained using a range of methodologies, including participant observation, semi-structured and unstructured interviews and discourse analysis of sermons. I also surveyed Christian as well as mainstream media to see how evangelicals were represented in public discourse.

Participant observation--especially in the first few months greatly facilitated by the help I received from pastors with transportation--routinely involved attending church and weekly cell meetings. Befriending Maribel, one of the church members who had offered to drive me to church events, I most often attended church with her and her family on Mondays and Thursdays (the weekdays her district met). On Saturdays, I attended a cell meeting, and if invited, I also attended the organizational meetings held on a weekday to prepare for the cell meeting. For a few months, I attended Bible study (called CETI) on Sunday mornings. Once a month I attended a prayer session in the main church building to end violence in El Salvador. I also occasionally attended all-night prayer sessions ("vigilia") and joined other church events, when invited. For example, a few times I joined a group of professionals who engaged in outreach in local communities, organizing medical care and bringing basic food supplies. In an effort to give back to the church, I also taught Biblical Greek, and English, to a group of pastors and a group of professionals respectively. Additionally, I occasionally attended conferences at a Christian NGO (where I also taught Biblical Greek) as well as conferences organized by other evangelical bodies.

During the first half of my research with the Elim church I relied on the transportation that Pastor Josué and his team arranged for me. The pastor's help enabled me visit cell meetings in areas that otherwise would have been difficult to gain access to. For example, I frequently attended meetings in Apopa, the municipality served by Pastor Josué and his team. Because of the heavy gang presence in this municipality, attending meetings there would have been virtually impossible for me without the pastors and church members' help with introducing and accompanying me. During the second half of my fieldwork, however, I no longer rotated as much between cell meetings across the city but primarily attended a cell meeting close to my home in Colonia Miramonte.[5] The combination of both methods was particularly productive. While following Pastor Josué's team had opened doors for me, it had also primarily put me in touch with the most dedicated members and leaders. Moreover, Pastor Josué was known as the coordinating pastor who was most accepting of the recent shift in theological orientation. Attending the cell close to my home gave me an additional perspective. People attending were not particularly aware of the new teachings, and the cell leader, while very committed, was also open about the challenges of doing evangelical work. During the months I was there, I met the pastor serving this cell only once.

In addition to participant observation, I also focused on obtaining formal interviews with members and pastors of the Elim church, as well as with other evangelicals and a small sample of Catholics. Within the Elim church I conducted 50 semi-structured interviews with members as well as pastors. I formally interviewed six of the nine coordinating pastors, as well as the general pastor. The first part of the interview key included questions on the interviewee's conversion

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[5] The first months of my fieldwork in El Salvador I lived in Colonia Costa Rica (near the site of the bus accident in Colonia La Malaga), but I moved to Colonia Miramonte after several months to obtain a new perspective.

experience and experience in the church, whereas the second half focused more explicitly on what the interviewee identified as societal challenges and what the evangelical response should look like. I also conducted a set of life history interviews with six church members. For the most part, these interviews were unstructured. I paid attention to how conversion and church membership featured into the interviewees' retelling of their life narratives.

While I felt uncomfortable recording the church service while attending, since it made me feel disrespectful to the people around me experiencing spiritual gifts, I obtained recordings made for broadcast on the Elim radio and television channels. This includes a video recording of eight Sunday church services, a copy of 120 sermons on Genesis by Pastor Vega, and ten sermons on the topic of violence (delivered during monthly prayer sessions to stop violence). Additionally, I also procured copies of a radio show called *Foro Abierto* that is dedicated to the discussion of topics controversial within the community. One of the broadcasts I obtained is specifically on the topic of the bus accident and its aftermath.

Last, I followed mainstream media for references to evangelicals, and religion more broadly (and continued to do so after my fieldwork had ended). I also read Pastor Vega's weekly editorials in a mainstream newspaper, in which he discussed various topics on the role of the church and of evangelicals more broadly with regard to society and its challenges.

## 1.5 Literature

This project on evangelical politics in El Salvador was conceived in dialogue with the literature within the social sciences on the complex relationship between religion and politics in Latin America. Whereas during the seventies and eighties the focal point of research was the impact of progressive Catholicism, manifested by liberation theology and Catholic base

communities (CEBs) (Berryman 1994, Peterson 1997), in the 1990s, scholarly attention shifted to the significance of the rapid proliferation of evangelicalism (Stoll 1990, Martin 1990, Garrard-Burnett and Stoll 1993).

After providing a literature overview, I will outline how this project contributes to the debate on Pentecostal politics in Latin America. As I will show later in the dissertation, the theological changes in the Elim church can be interpreted as an evangelical response to liberation theology, supporting the view that the political impact of evangelical growth is best understood when viewed in the context of the overall religious field. Therefore, my overview includes a brief discussion of Catholic responses to evangelical growth in Latin America.

*Pentecostal Politics: Democracy versus Authoritarianism*

Much of the literature within the social sciences on the political significance of evangelical churches, and of Pentecostal churches in particular, focuses on the possible contributions of Pentecostalism to democracy. The central debate pivots on the question of whether Pentecostalism instills an acceptance of authoritarianism or, rather, furthers democracy. Bastian (1993), reprising the argument made earlier by d'Epinay (1969), argues that the central role of the pastor in Pentecostalism fosters an acceptance of authoritarianism. Martin (1990), on the other hand, inspired by the early contribution of Willems (1967),[6] argues that Pentecostalism indirectly plays a politically modernizing role in the sense that the Pentecostals' withdrawal from the secular world into the church provides them with a "free space" in which they can introduce new social forms without challenging the secular world's elite. As Robbins aptly synthesizes:

[6] Whereas Willems argued in his work on Pentecostalism in Chile and Brazil that the religion's emphasis on egalitarianism implied a "symbolic subversion of the traditional order" (Willems 1967: 157, cited in Robbins 2004: 134) d'Epinay retorted, writing on Chile, that Pentecostalism's emphasis on the pastor's authority is reminiscent of the traditional order.

"Within this space, they experiment with voluntaristic and egalitarian social relations and develop new skills in leadership, literacy, public speaking, organization, and self-help" (Robbins 2004: 134). Martin's argument is in line with the observation that Pentecostalism furthers privatization (in his argument manifested as a withdrawal from secular life), but nevertheless, he does not see this as an impediment to the fostering of democracy.

Bastian and Martin's arguments have been reprised and further elaborated by a number of scholars working on the intersection of religion and politics in Latin America. In *Born Again in Brazil* (1997), Andrew Chesnut, focusing on the Assembly of God, Brazil's largest Pentecostal denomination, refers to the Pentecostal organizational model as "participatory authoritarianism, a modified form of clientelism, [which] preserves the privileges of the pastor-patron while increasing the status of the congregant-client" (Chesnut 1997: 171). In his contribution to Cleary and Stewart-Gambino's *Power, Politics, and Pentecostals in Latin America* (1997), Michael Dodson identifies more with Martin's than with Bastian's perspective in arguing that "the high degree of participation Pentecostal membership encourages is a necessary attribute of civil society" (Dodson 1997: 37). His argument is reminiscent of that of Martin when he states that "[p]oor people in Latin America are more likely to learn the 'principle of association' by [participation in the church's associational life] than through participating in elections…or engaging in the activities of conventional, secular interest groups" (ibidem: 34).[7]

While proponents of either side provide various arguments in support of their position, Brian Smith demonstrates in his 1998 book *Religious Politics in Latin America: Pentecostal vs.*

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[7] Amy Sherman's book *Soul of Development* (1997) is also in some respects in line with Martin's argument, even though her work focuses on the economic rather than the political implications of Pentecostalism since both Martin and Sherman argue that membership in the Pentecostal church facilitates initiation into "modernity." Sherman argues that the adoption of Pentecostal values helps converts to adapt to the local introduction of global capitalism.

*Catholic* that there is no conclusive evidence in favor of either perspective. With respect to the position supported by Martin and others, Smith points out that the possible small gains made by church communities towards the furthering of democracy are likely to be neutralized by the negative effects of the current macrostructural social conditions in Latin America. With regard to the opposite stance, Smith observes that even though there is some evidence of clientelism within Pentecostal politics, there is also evidence that Pentecostalism can provide a voice for the underprivileged.

*Pentecostal politics: Does Pentecostalism foster political conservatism or apolitical attitudes?*

A second line of questioning probing into the political consequences of the growth of Pentecostal churches is posed in terms of whether the religion's concern with the individual's spiritual well-being and the domestic sphere is likely to induce attitudes of political conservatism or lack of political involvement tout court. In some cases, these questions are underpinned by the view that Latin American Pentecostal churches "[are] largely funded and ideologically shaped by the North American new right" (Robbins 2004: 135), although upon the increasing indigenization of Pentecostalism in Latin America the latter view has generally become disregarded (Stoll 1990: 327, Steigenga 2001). Moreover, it is relevant to point out that the category of what constitutes political conservatism cannot necessarily be transposed from a North American to a Latin American context. As Bryan Froehle observes, based on his research on Pentecostalism in Venezuela, social issues that in North America mobilize so-called

conservatives, such as abortion and school prayer, are not likely to be relevant in the context of Latin America (Froehle 1997: 217).[8]

A number of studies have examined the claim that many members of Pentecostal churches tend to be apolitical. Writing from El Salvador, Philip Williams notes that studies of Pentecostals in Central America support the view that Pentecostals are unlikely to move from "symbolic protest to a more structural challenge of the traditional order," (Williams 1997: 180) a claim that seems to be countered by the new evangelical-inspired political parties Williams encountered during his research in El Salvador. Rowan Ireland's *Kingdoms Come*, based on more than 20 years of ethnographic research in Brazil, provides more sophisticated insight into the political beliefs and practices of Pentecostals.[9] He focuses on how religious affiliation shapes conceptualizations of citizenship[10] and he distinguishes between various types of citizens among Pentecostals. Important in this respect is the distinction he makes between *church crentes*, and *sectarian crentes*.[11] Whereas the first tend to be absorbed in church life and to "express themselves more through church dogma than through elaborated myths and images of Pentecostal belief" (Ireland 1991: 75), the latter tend not be churchgoers. In Ireland's view, there is some validation for the notion that Pentecostals who can be categorized as church crentes correspond to some extent to the stereotypical view of Pentecostals as apolitical and conservative. Church crentes, Ireland argues, are less likely to seek public solutions for private

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[8] Froehle adds that "[a]bortion is illegal, and [that] secular schools are emphatically preferred without public prayer, catechism, or anything that would give the nominally numerically stronger Catholic Church an advantage" (Froehle 1997: 217).

[9] Ireland's *Kingdoms Come* not only gives an analysis of Pentecostal political attitudes and practices, but also offers a comparative analysis of the relations of religion and politics among various religious group in a rural Brazilian town.

[10] It should be noted that he does not theorize the notion of citizenship, but simply takes it as a given.

[11] Ireland uses the word "crente" to refer to Pentecostals.

hardships and they are more likely to support government agendas, even if authoritarian. Sectarian Pentecostals, however, are more likely to develop critical political attitudes and to undertake public action to remedy private ills. Correspondingly, Ireland refers to church crentes as *abdicating citizens* and sectarian crentes as *critical citizens.* In a later article (Ireland 1997) he revises this dual typology of kinds of citizenship by adding a third category, that of the *pragmatic citizen*. The occurrence of the latter type of Pentecostal citizenship is quite recent, and is manifested in the form of one particular church, the *Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus*, which "offers a moralized version of the yuppie gambling ethic, an overnight flight to rapid enrichment" (Freston, cited in Ireland 1997: 128). This particular church "shows a frankly pragmatic relation to politics, characteristic of a business empire expanding on many fronts" (Ireland 1997: 129). Accordingly, pragmatic citizens are less inclined to undertake public action. Ireland's ethnographic analysis of religion and politics in Brazil illustrates that not all Pentecostals share the same political attitudes and beliefs. Even though a number of church members can be characterized as relatively apolitical, many Pentecostals are not particularly apolitical, and sometimes actually can be quite political. The findings of these ethnographic studies are corroborated by a number of quantitative studies.

In order to evaluate the possible correlation between Pentecostal membership and conservative political attitudes, it is helpful to look at voting patterns across national contexts. A number of studies suggest that Pentecostal members vote according to class membership, rather than religious affiliation (Robbins 2004: 135). Christian Smith and Ann Liesl Haas (1997) cite class as an explanation for why Nicaraguan evangelicals, as demonstrated by survey evidence gathered shortly after the 1990 presidential elections, were more supportive of the leftist Sandinista regime than the Catholic majority. Similarly, Smilde reports from Venezuela that

Venezuelan evangelicals were equally inclined to support Hugo Chávez in the 1998 elections as the larger population (Smilde 2002). Steigenga's quantitative study of political behavior among Pentecostals in Guatemala and Costa Rica confirms the observation that in a multivariate analysis the independent influence of religious affiliation is not necessarily salient, with the exception of "the negative effect that being [a Pentecostal] or mainstream Protestant [has] on the scores of moral correctness and on attitudes toward equal rights for women" (Steigenga 2001: 61). Steigenga does note, however, that religious *beliefs* as opposed to religious *affiliation* are relevant. He states that conservative religious views correspond with a "tendency to believe that the government should be obeyed in all circumstances," (ibidem) and also corresponded with a higher frequency of conservative attitudes toward the poor.

So far, no clear consensus has been reached on the extent to which Pentecostals participate in politics, or to what extent they may have conservative attitudes. However, the picture emerges of a spectrum of political attitudes among Pentecostals. As Stewart-Gambino and Wilson observe in the conclusion of their edited volume on the relationship between Pentecostalism and politics: "The [persistent stereotype…that Pentecostals are always and inherently apolitical] is both grounded in reality and wildly misleading" (Stewart-Gambino and Wilson 1997: 232). In Stewart-Gambino and Wilson's view, it is easier to interpret this apparent paradox when one keeps in mind that Pentecostals' primary reason to join the church is of religious and not political nature. Pentecostals might consider themselves apolitical in the sense that "their lives and social networks are committed to and built around their religious faith rather than other (particularly partisan) commitments" (ibidem: 233).

*Catholic responses to Pentecostalism: the rise and decline of liberation theology*

To accomplish a fuller understanding of the political implications of Pentecostalism it is helpful to take into account how its infusion in the Latin American religious field has affected other actors. Of particular interest in this perspective is the Catholic Church, which prior to the 1950s had a religious monopoly in the region, and which still is the biggest competitor to the booming Pentecostal and other evangelical churches.

The Catholic Church has played a role in Latin American politics since the conquest. As Daniel Levine puts it, "From the beginning, the Church as an institution has depended on the state, and, in turn, its symbols, beliefs, practices and persons have often helped to sanctify the existing political and social order" (Levine 1974: 497). It was not until the early sixties with the rise of "progressive Catholicism" that the Church as an institution expressed a responsibility to act on behalf of the underprivileged, which in some contexts involved critical opposition to authoritarian rule.[12]

Informed by microeconomic theory, Anthony Gill proposes in his book *Rendering Unto Caesar* (1998) that the Catholic Church's changing political stance is best understood as a response to Pentecostal growth. As Gill argues, internal restructuring was one of two prominent

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[12] A number of factors underpinned this dramatic shift in orientation among which "a growing awareness on the part of the Church of the increasing 'structural' poverty resulting from industrialization; an awakening to the rise in repression associated with authoritarian regimes; and reform within the international Church" (Gill 1998: 7). These factors, however, do not fully account for the differential attitudes of specific national Churches towards the regime in power. An analysis solely based on these factors does not sufficiently clarify, for example, what prompted the Chilean Church to oppose Pinochet's authoritarian rule, whereas its Argentine counterpart did not oppose the military regimes that came to power in the era of the 1960s and 1970s.

strategies (the other one being the elicitation of government support)[13] with which the Catholic Church sought to counter Pentecostal competition. Pentecostals gained most members from the poor sectors of society, in part as a result of a lack of pastoral care by the Catholic Church that had mostly been concerned with the political elite so as to secure patronage. The Catholic Church's adoption of a preferential option for the poor can at least in part be seen as an example of internal restructuring aimed at becoming more competitive in those sectors of society where Pentecostals were most successful. This is furthermore supported by the observation that Catholic episcopacies were more likely to oppose dictatorial regimes when dealing with higher rates of competition (Gill 1998: 4). For example, whereas the Catholic Church engaged in political opposition in countries like Brazil and Chile, it did not do so in Argentina, where Pentecostal growth was much slower.

For the most part, however, the church's increased social activism on behalf of the poor was not enough to counter Pentecostal success. A popular saying has it that whereas the Church opted for the poor, the poor opted for Pentecostalism. John Burdick tackles this apparent paradox in his ethnography *Looking for God in Brazil* (1993), based on more than a year of research among members of the local Catholic base community (CEB), the Assembly of God Church and Umbanda in a town in Rio's periphery. In his comparative approach, he focuses on demographic clusters informed by class, gender and age across all religious groups. At the core of Burdick's explanation for why the local CEB is less frequently attended than the Assembly of

[13] In the 1930s and 1940s the Catholic Church requested government regulation of the influx of foreign missionaries. The ability of the Catholic Church to pressure governments into supporting them declined considerably as Protestantism grew increasingly indigenous to Latin American societies in the latter half of the twentieth century. But the strategy of elicitation of government protection has not entirely subsided. Contemporary examples of government protection pertain to legislative issues such as registration laws and property rights, and involve distribution of government subsidies.

God Church or Umbanda, is the distinction he makes between the CEB on the one hand as a religion of continuity, and Umbanda and the Assembly of God church on the other hand as religions of discontinuity. Despite the base community's emphasis on social change, it "remains aloof from notions of radical rupture in the self, emphasizing instead continuity between religious and nonreligious roles and statuses" (Burdick 1993: 223). Concretely, this implies that CEB members cannot leave their non-religious social roles behind when participating in church activities, as a consequence of which societal hierarchies are transposed to the space of the church. Andrew Chesnut, deploying a micro-economic perspective, offers a complementary explanation (Chesnut 2003a). Referring to competing religions as "spiritual firms," he sets out to examine those religions that thrived most over the last fifty years in terms of their "products" and "marketing strategies" (Chesnut 2003a: 4). His attention to religious production reveals that Pentecostalism, Charismatic Catholicism and African-diaspora religions--the three most successful competitors in Latin America's religious free market--offer similar religious products. They are all pneumacentric in emphasis, with the distinction that adherents to African-diaspora religions, unlike Pentecostals and Charismatic Catholics, seek spiritual guidance from guias and orishas, rather than from the Holy Spirit. All three religious groups also share a related focus on faith healing. In Chesnut's view, the enormous popularity of the religious products common to the three religious groups accounts for their growing market share.[14] In this view progressive Catholicism failed to prosper because its religious products are not competitive in the free religious market. Both Burdick's and Chesnut's explanations imply that progressive Catholicism

[14] Chesnut argues that "[there is such] consumer demand for spirit-centered religion in the popular marketplace that pneumacentrism has become a standardized product among successful firms that attempt to distinguish themselves from the competition through marginal differentiation of pneumacentric goods and services." (Chesnut 2003a: 153) For example, consumer preferences for either Catholic Charismatism or Pentecostalism could be based on the fact that the first is "virgophilic," whereas the latter is "virgophobic" (Chesnut 2003a: 152).

failed to prosper because it did not meet the existential needs of the individual as well as Pentecostalism and other pneumacentric religions.

In El Salvador, liberation theology also failed to curb the growth of Pentecostal/evangelical churches, with recent polls indicating that as much as forty percent of the population has converted to an evangelical religion. In her book *Martyrdom and the Politics of Religion* (1997), Anna Peterson makes the case that progressive Catholic narratives of martyrdom allowed people to make sense of the violence of the Salvadoran civil war. David Stoll, however, observes that in El Salvador membership of evangelical churches increased as opposed to involvement in CEB's because the latter "carried a price which was too high for most" (Stoll 1990, cited in Peterson 1997: 164). Archbishop Romero's assassination in 1980 and the brutal murder in 1989 of six Jesuits, an employee and her daughter on the campus of the Universidad Centroamericana "José Simeón Cañas" (UCA), a prominent Catholic university in San Salvador, have become lasting images of the risks involved.

Even though there is no single explanation for the rise and decline of the progressive church, the case can definitely be made that Pentecostal competition was a prominent factor. The popularity of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (CCR), which [a]t the beginning of the twenty-first century… [is] the largest and most dynamic movement in the Latin American [Catholic] Church" (Chesnut 2003b: 55) furthermore demonstrates that the Catholic Church is sufficiently versatile in its responses to Pentecostal competition.

*Dissertation contributions*

As the first two sections of the above overview illustrate, evaluating the political impact of evangelical growth, and Pentecostal growth in particular, has not yielded any straightforward

results. There are no conclusive answers to the debates asking if Pentecostalism furthers democracy or if the religion's concern with the individual's spiritual well-being fosters apolitical or conservative attitudes. In response, scholars have been looking for new analytical angles to approach the topic, including proposals to assess how religious membership shapes political subjectivities (Smilde 2007) and informs various aspects that are at the core of democracy, such as 'citizenship' (Vásquez 1999), 'community' and 'civil society' (Vásquez and Williams 2005, Steigenga 2007).

By approaching the topic of Pentecostal politics via the lens of religious categories, rather than formal political categories this dissertation contributes to the reconfiguration of the debate. Implied is, as was outlined earlier a broadened interpretation of politics, situating the political in a broad range of spaces, spanning the public and private. Moreover, an approach rooted in religious categories furthermore takes seriously that, as Gambino and Wilson observe (1997: 233), Pentecostals convert for religious rather than political reasons and tend to organize their lives around their faith rather than partisan affiliations.

Jill Wightman's study of Pentecostal politics in Bolivia (2007) and Kevin O'Neill's ethnography of Christian citizenship in Guatemala (2010) are two examples of ethnographic approaches that start analysis from religious rather than political categories. Wightman argues that many Pentecostal Bolivians "perceive themselves as having a Christian mandate "to heal the nation" (sanar la nación)…the primary focus [of which] is proselytizing" (Wightman 2007: 245). In this view, social change becomes possible not by obtaining structural changes, but by "[reshaping] Bolivian society in their Christian image" (ibidem). Engaging with the Guatemalan folk category of Christian citizenship, O'Neill develops the claim that "neo-Pentecostal Christians in Guatemala City perform their citizenship through Christian practices…" Similar to

Jill Wightman's work on Bolivian Pentecostalism, O'Neill demonstrates that Guatemalan Pentecostals "shoulder the burden of Guatemala's salvation," which they set out to accomplish through prayer and fasting on behalf of Guatemala. In similar vein, my dissertation seeks to establish that Christians, fueled by their beliefs, can engage in practices that though in no means political in the more narrow understanding of the term, are nevertheless expressions of political belonging and commitment. Moreover, my dissertation seeks to lay bare why Christian Pentecostals, informed by their beliefs, might vary in political stance and behavior. By focusing on the ethics of care implied in practices of individual transformation I reveal two different yet overlapping tendencies in my field site, with potentially very different political implications. As such, I am able to provide an account of the attitudes and practices of Pentecostals vis-à-vis the social and political transformation of El Salvador that goes beyond conclusions asserting that Pentecostals are or are not apolitical. By focusing on a category that is central in Pentecostal cosmology cross-culturally, my approach can, moreover, be helpful in analyzing similar processes elsewhere.

Placing Salvadoran Pentecostalism in the context of larger phenomena in the Latin American religious arena, I show in chapter three that the theological innovations in the Elim church are influenced by "integral mission," a theological movement born in the seventies under the impetus of the Latin American Theological Fraternity (FTL), and particularly endorsed by theologians René Padilla and Samuel Escobar. The latter movement can be seen as an evangelical response to liberation theology. Given the contentiousness of the Salvadoran religious arena, implementing views that bear any resemblance to liberation theology, or any other feature of the Catholic church, is a tricky endeavor. Not surprisingly, during meetings of CETI that I attended--CETI is the bible study in which Elim members are exposed to the newer

teachings--the use of violence was explicitly denounced. As was pointed out earlier, the progressive church's association with violence and its implied risks (Stoll 1990) has been cited as a reason for its decline in El Salvador. While acknowledging similarities, the dissertation is primarily interested in how a religion focused on individual transformation and the implied notion of (radical) discontinuity within the self can offer the ground of possibility for political commitment bearing even a remote semblance to liberation theology. We saw earlier in a review of Burdick's work in Brazil that Pentecostal converts were drawn to the religion's promise for discontinuity with everyday identities, while CEB members could not leave their non-religious social roles behind when participating in church activities (Burdick 1993).

## 1.6 Dissertation outline

*Chapter two*

In light of the observation that violence is a central thread in Salvadoran history, the purpose of chapter two is to understand the construction of risk and violence in the neoliberal era, and how this compares with earlier periods in Salvadoran history. Starting my discussion with the liberal period at the end of the nineteenth century, I trace how throughout Salvadoran history constellations of class interests, state politics, ideology, and international intervention have generated specific forms of violence, and produced processes of legitimation and erasure of violence. In the neoliberal period violence is still omnipresent in Salvadoran experience and imaginaries. In accordance with neoliberal emphasis on individual responsibility and risk-taking, discourse focuses on intimate experiences of criminal violence, and the "responsibilization" of criminals (and gang members in particular) through zero-tolerance policies. By framing my

discussion in a larger historical context, I am able to point out what is specific about neoliberal construction of risk and violence, and how this construction sometimes breaks down.

*Chapter three*

In chapter three I introduce Misión Cristiana Elim, tracing the most significant transformations in the church's organizations and theological orientations. In the first part of the chapter I present a historical overview, based on church discourse. The church's self-narrative is one of successful expansion and careful internal management. The latter is described in terms of "orderliness." In the second part of the chapter, I focus on the church's shift to integral mission and examine how its budding openness to issues of social justice is compatible with a more traditional Pentecostal emphasis on individual spiritual well-being. I suggest this is possible by placing the personal in productive tension with the social.

*Chapters four and five*

In chapters four and five I develop the theoretical underpinnings of my argument. Defining politics as 'social world-making,' I ask the question what forms of social world-making are implied in a Pentecostal model for collective change that hinges on individual transformation. My argument pivots on two observations: (1) individual transformation, central in Pentecostal cosmology cross-culturally, is typically conceived of as "moral self-work," and (2) the Pentecostal subject (as enacted in El Salvador) is intrinsically relational. Building on this, I posit that moral self-work following conversion is also intrinsically relational, expressing what I call "a Pentecostal ethics of care." By analyzing the latter, I argue, insight is gained in Pentecostal forms of social world-making.

Chapter four

In chapter four, I ask how the Salvadoran context colors the experience of and discourse on moral self-work. By analyzing conversion testimonials, I show that self-work involves a tension between self-restraint and responsibility. While Salvadoran testimonials reflect similar themes as elsewhere in Latin America, there is particular emphasis on emotion work in the face of past or present encounters with violence. I also show that transformation through self-work is processual.

Chapter five

Engaging with recent debates on Christian personhood, I develop the view in chapter five that the Christian person in my field site is best described as a decentered, porous individual in a relationship of exchange with the deity. I argue that in order to best enact his or her faith, the believer needs to reach beyond the boundaries of self, reaching out to the 'other' in certain circumscribed ways. This implies that enacting a Christian self involves the negotiation of three dimensions, "I," "God," and "Other."

*Chapters six and seven*

In chapters six and seven I map out the activities the Christians in my field site engage in as expressions of care for the "Other." By examining how the range and scope of such activities differ for traditional and holistic oriented Christians respectively, I discern differences on two axes, shaping the scope and content of the ethics of care implied in Pentecostal post-conversion transformation: (1) the relative value attributed to the material vis-à-vis the spiritual; and (2) differences in how the three dimensions of "I," "God," and "Other" underlying the Pentecostal self are negotiated.

Chapter six

In chapter six, I engage with the practices of evangelization and "helping." Specifically, I examine how the revaluation of the material under the impetus of integral mission affects the range and scope of these practices.

Chapter seven

In chapter seven, I examine the practices of "prayer" and "denouncing." In this respect, I evaluate how the renegotiation of the dimensions of "I," "God' and "Other" (with holistic oriented Christians affording more weight to the dimension of "Other" than traditionalists) affects the scope of these practices. I show that in renegotiating these dimensions, the tension between "self-restraint" and "responsibility" implied in self-work sometimes becomes too difficult to manage. The fear is that too much emphasis on the dimension of "Other" (which in the holistic sense has come to include all material aspects of the Creation) makes it more difficult to maintain optimal balance between the "I" and "God" dimensions (rendered ethnographically in terms of "spiritual pollution").

*Chapter eight*

In chapter eight I conclude by comparing Christian forms of social world making (which I call "Church-building" and "Kingdom-Building" for the traditional and holistic models respectively) with neoliberalism, the most prevalent secular form of social-world making in post-war El Salvador.

# Chapter two:

## Of myth and counter myth: Violence as central thread in Salvadoran history

### 2.1 Introduction

Xiomara and I first met on a Saturday evening early in my fieldwork. Roberto, a church member from district nine, was going to pick me up at Doña Carmen's home to attend a cell meeting at the home of a physician in the upscale neighborhood of Escalon. In response to Pastor Josué's request for volunteers to facilitate me with my research, Roberto had offered to come all the way from Apopa, where he lived, to attend the cell meeting with me. Roberto brought his wife and granddaughter along. Getting into their car, I was warmly greeted by all three of them, and struck up an instant rapport with Xiomara, Roberto's friendly and outgoing teenage granddaughter. She almost immediately told me, while we were chatting in the back of the car on our way to the meeting, that she lived with her grandparents because her Mom had been a single mother who later established another family with someone else. The family did not usually attend any meetings in Escalon. On our way home, Evelia, Roberto's wife, commented on the *refrigerio* ("snack") we had been served at the end of the meeting. It is customary to end cell meetings with a snack to instill a sense of community, but Evelia was astonished that we had eaten tacos that evening. For *gente humilde* ("poor people") like them, she said, it was simply an unthinkable luxury to serve anyone such expensive food, let alone a well-attended cell group meeting.

After this first encounter with Roberto and his family, I saw them numerous times again, as they drove me around quite a bit in the first months of my fieldwork, mostly to attend meetings in Apopa. While I would have been able to attend the cell gathering in Escalon without

his help, it would have been quite hard to gain access to any events in Apopa without the help of Roberto or other local residents. Youth gangs control the neighborhoods there, making it unsafe for visitors to arrive alone, without being accompanied by someone who lives there. While visiting Apopa, I became friends with Xiomara. Once in a while we would meet up and spend the afternoon together in the popular mall Metrocentro.[15] I got to know her as a friendly, bubbly teenage girl who wanted to become a nurse. In my early thirties, I was the same age as her Mom, which, I felt, shaped the dynamic of our relationship, as she sometimes asked me for advice in private matters of her life.

A few months after my fieldwork had ended, I was invited to participate in a forum on evangelical religion and politics in San Salvador. Traveling to San Salvador for a mere four days, I made time to see Xiomara. She said she wanted to talk to me. We met at a coffee shop in Metrocentro. I knew that she now had a boyfriend and that she had stopped going to school. I did not know why. Sharing some pastries with me, she opened up about what was going on in her life. Her cousin had told lies about her in the neighborhood, she said. As a result, the local gang was convinced Xiomara was seeing someone with affiliations to the competing gang. One night she was walking home when a few neighborhood girls approached her. "Don't go home, Xiomara," the girls told her, "they are planning to kill you tonight." So she did not go home that night, or any night after that. She stayed with her birth father for a while, which was a temporary solution. She also could no longer go to school, because the gangs had infiltrated there as well.

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[15] In San Salvador, the shopping malls are places of consumption, but also of recreation and refuge. Families come here with their children because it is perceived as a safe space. In the words of Cecillia Rivas, "Shopping malls in San Salvador are private spaces with a public character, where visitors can consume and often seek a brief respite from the nation's street violence" (Rivas 2014: 130).

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Hearing this story, I was quite at a loss for words. I did not know what to do to help her, even more because I was only in El Salvador for one more day. She had told me that she was in touch about this with her local pastor, someone whom I had come to know and trust during my fieldwork with Elim. So, I called him later that day to see if he could tell me what should happen, or what I could do. Pastor Alberto was surprised Xiomara had confided in me. Referring to my presentation earlier that week for the forum, where it had been implied that I do not identify as Pentecostal, he said in a puzzled tone of voice: "So you are not part of this community, and yet you really do care about this." I found this comment absolutely jarring. Despite all the openness preached in the Elim church under the influence of holistic theology, Alberto, whom I considered to be a sincere and caring person as well as a very dedicated pastor, was still genuinely surprised that I would care about the fate of another human being, on account of not quite sharing the same religious beliefs. Pastor Alberto then told me that there was not much they could do to help. He was in the process of assisting the family (Xiomara and her grandparents) to relocate to a different neighborhood in Apopa. Going to the police with this story was absolutely out of the question, he said. It was simply too dangerous. Xiomara stayed safe, but she was never able to return to school, becoming one of El Salvador's many "ni-nis,"[16] adolescents who neither attend school nor have work (cfr. Calvo-Gonzalez and Lopez 2015: 63).

More than just a story about personal hardship, Xiomara's narrative reflects the degree to which post-war El Salvador continues to be a "nervous political world." At the core of the story is the threat of violence. Similar to many Salvadorans Xiomara needs to negotiate living in a society that is marred by violence and insecurity. With current homicide rates approximating the

[16] According to a recent World Bank report, sixteen percent of all fifteen-to-eighteen year olds are neither working, nor in school. Furthermore, this involves a gender dimension, as there are three times more females than males who neither work nor study (Calvo-Gonzalez and Lopez 2015: 63).

level of states at war (according to 2015 indices, as high as 104.2 homicides per 100.000 inhabitants) (Daugherty 2016),[17] it is not surprising that violence is rated as the most pressing concern by the majority of Salvadorans (Calvo-Gonzalez and Lopez 2015: 27). As illustrated in Xiomara's story, this is often associated with youth gangs. In the current neoliberal moment, the latter are presented as the main source of violence and risk in Salvadoran public discourse (Hume 2007: 745).

Xiomara's experiences furthermore make visible how violence is imbricated with the country's long-standing history of socio-economic inequality. With forty percent of the Salvadoran population living in poverty, impoverished young people like Xiomara have limited opportunities. High rates of student attrition and unemployment provide incentives for her peers to become involved in criminal activity (Calvo-Gonzalez and Lopez 2015). Part of the large underbelly of Salvadoran society, Xiomara is particularly vulnerable to the effects of crime and violence. Sharing a small home with her grandparents in a conflictive neighborhood, she has limited resources to keep herself safe.

Social relationships in the neighborhood are undermined because of the erosion of trust, making it more difficult to negotiate insecurity and find a way to safety. Xiomara's assertions that her own cousin's lies brought her into this serious predicament echo the distrust of "orejas" or neighborhood spies in earlier periods of Salvadoran history (cf. Stanley 1996: 82). She cannot turn to the police, because they cannot be trusted. Reporting of crimes is rare in El Salvador because of the corruption and inefficiency of police institutions (Calvo-Gonzalez and Gomez 2015: 27). Impunity of criminals is high. Moreover, gangs continue to operate from the prisons,

[17] Since 2000 homicide rates in El Salvador have consistently been high enough to place the country in the top five of countries in terms of homicide rate.

which means that people who report crimes are vulnerable for retaliation even when the perpetrators are imprisoned (ibidem).

Hoping for a chance to join the Salvadoran diaspora, Xiomara would prefer to escape her social reality entirely by moving to the States. She does not, however, have the funds to pay for a coyote (human smuggler) nor does she have any personal contacts in the United States who could sponsor her in any meaningful way. Expressive of the observation that church institutions are among the most trusted actors in civil society (FUSADES 2005: 66), her church affiliation (and particularly her grandparents' active involvement) is her only connection to help her mitigate the personal danger she is in.

Stories like Xiomara's are common in El Salvador. Particularly stories about criminal violence circulate broadly both in everyday conversation as well as in the media (Moodie 2010). This reflects how despite the end of the war violence continues to preoccupy and affect Salvadorans. More than a pressing concern, it is, in the words of Bruno Moro, "the central thread" of social and political relations in El Salvador" (Hume 2004: 64). This has been the case throughout Salvadoran history, with violence centrally involved in state-society relations as well as characteristic of social relations within and between social classes (Alvarenga 1994: 151). Violence is a broad and elusive term, the content and meanings of which are context-dependent and vary across time and space (Hume 2004: 64). Power relations undergird what are considered legitimate and illegitimate uses of violence. In her discussion of the political processes of El Salvador's late nineteenth and early twentieth century history, Patricia Alvarenga shows how social relations produced certain types of violence, leading to a normalization of such behaviors in Salvadoran culture. She furthermore shows that power elites were in control of determining which expressions of violence were legitimate, which needed to be penalized (and how) and

which needed to be made invisible altogether (Alvarenga 1994: 30). Recent work on violence in El Salvador signals the presence of similar processes. Mo Hume, for example, contrasts the normalization and silencing of domestic violence with the public attention placed on criminal violence (Hume 2004).

As Reguillo points out, "[n]otions of fear and risk are socially constructed and updated according to the historical period, as are 'modes of response'" (Reguillo 2002: 192). The purpose of this chapter is to understand how the experience of and discourse on violence is given shape in the neoliberal era, and how this resonates with earlier periods in Salvadoran history. This is relevant in the context of the dissertation given that in order to assess the church's engagement with the central concern of violence, we first need to understand its more general portrayal in Salvadoran society. I will start my discussion by tracing the historical roots of the phenomenon, and its long-standing implication with the country's project of nation building. Specifically, I will start with the impact of agrarian reform in the late nineteenth century, which set in motion enduring patterns of inequality. I will also discuss the political impact of the 1932 massacre (referred to as "matanza") that cost the lives of thirty thousand people, the role of violence during the military dictatorships, and the events of the civil war. Going to the present moment, I will start with a sketch of the lived insecurity based on my fieldwork in San Salvador. Turning to discourse, I will engage with processes of legitimization and erasure that highlight certain types of violence and render others less visible.

## 2.2 Tracing the historical roots of violence

*Introduction*

The pervasive presence of violence throughout Salvadoran history can be traced to a complex interplay of class interests, state politics, ideology, and international intervention. This interplay was significantly shaped by the coffee-based agro-export agriculture that became dominant in El Salvador in the late nineteenth century. The reigning liberal ideology paved the way for significant land reforms that would gradually lead to stark socio-economic inequality (Lauria-Santiago 1999). Coffee elites were formally in power from the late nineteenth century until the thirties (Paige 1997). Although formal power then shifted to military dictatorships until the period of the civil war, the latter continued to guard the interests of the elites (Stanley 1996). Anti-communism provided the platform for measures of repression against the disenfranchised masses. The military's inability to beat the leftist rebels of the FMLN during the civil war despite extensive US aid, provided an incentive for the elite to return to formal politics by founding its own political party, called ARENA. The latter soon evolved from "an extreme-right, militaristic party" to "the political base of El Salvador's progressive capitalist sector" (Quan 2005: 280). More than the agrarian landholder faction of the elites, the agro-industrialists were motivated to negotiate an end to the civil war and to reform El Salvador according to neoliberal principles (Paige 1997). Examining how specific entanglements of class interests, politics and ideology in Salvadoran history produced violence and shaped notions of risk and fear, I will focus on three periods: the golden era of coffee from the 1880s to the early 1930s; the 1932 Matanza and its impact in the era of the military dictatorships; and, third, the civil war. I will not only focus on

the perpetration of violence, but also on the processes of legitimation and erasure that determine which types of violence were rendered normal and/or made to be (in)visible.

*The golden era of coffee (1880-1930)*

In this section I will explain how the agro-export industry gave rise to certain pervasive violence. I will show how the massive inequality that still plagues El Salvador can be traced to the process of proletarianization set in motion by the 1880s land reform. The repressive and coercive labor relations specific to coffee production in El Salvador contributed to the normalization of physical violence. The co-optation of civilian collaborators generated pervasive insecurity. Under the impetus of the 1885 Liberal Revolution the state shifted from more overt to more covert uses of physical punishment, further contributing to a widespread sense of insecurity.

During the colonial era and in the first years of the Salvadoran republic the main crop cultivated for international trade was indigo (Torres-Rivas 1993: 9). By the end of the nineteenth century coffee had become the most important Salvadoran export crop, which had repercussions for existing patterns of land distribution and use (Browning 1971). In mid-nineteenth century El Salvador, the communal lands managed by indigenous groups were among the most suitable lands for coffee production (Stanley 1996: 23). Under the impetus of liberal notions of private ownership as well as pressures by coffee growers, the government passed legislation to privatize the communal lands. This was to facilitate the cultivation of commercial crops, and most centrally, of coffee. The most notable changes took place during 1879 and 1882 when a series of laws were passed that affected the status of common lands, culminating in the 1881 abolition of

the communal lands and the 1882 abolition of the ejidal lands.[18] Even though the effects of the abolitions varied regionally, overall a small group of landowners was able to enlarge their estates by purchasing former common lands. The abolition of communal lands gradually set the stage for large-scale proletarianization. While, as Lauria-Santiago argues, "privatization increased the number of property owners and created a large, differentiated class of landowning peasants and farmers" (Lauria-Santiago 1999: 233) over time the smallest farmers were not able to compete with the elites. When the Salvadoran export economy intensified in the 1920s, a wealthy class of landowners and capitalist entrepreneurs emerged and at the same time a rapid process of proletarization was set in motion.

The transformation brought about by coffee production not only affected patterns of land distribution, but also fundamentally impacted labor relations (Alvarenga 1994: 2). Unlike indigo, coffee was labor intensive. The maintenance of the coffee plantation required labor forces year-round and additional labor was needed during harvest time (Browning 1971). In Guatemala and El Salvador, unlike Costa Rica, labor was coerced with repressive measures, including slavery (in Guatemala), compulsory wage labor and debt peonage[19] (Stanley 1996: 23). The state facilitated the coercion and constant surveillance of workers by passing laws that restrained the bargaining position of the workers.[20] Abusive work conditions were rampant with laborers hardly provided enough food to sustain themselves during the day (Alvarenga 1994: 82), and with sick workers not allowed to leave work (ibidem: 88).

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[18] Ejidal and communal lands were two different types of communal lands. Whereas the former was municipal property, the latter was ethnic communal property, belonging to either Indians or Ladinos (Browning 1971: 40).

[19] William Stanley points out that labor repressiveness persisted in those contexts where coffee production involved forced expropriation of communal lands (Stanley 1996: 23).

[20] The 1882 police laws were examples of this since they established police controls over workers (Alvarenga 1994: 34).

In her work on Salvadoran ethics during the glory days of coffee, Patricia Alvarenga argues that because of the coercive nature of labor relations the use of physical and verbal aggression became widespread to resolve conflict both within and across social classes. Landowners put together armed bands of workers to intimidate workers as well as personal enemies. Peasants similarly resorted to intimidation tactics to counter the exploitation imposed by estate administrators and head foremen (ibidem: 111). Engaging in petty theft and crime was furthermore a common resistance strategy to counter the effects of exploitation. Problems among workers also often led to violent (and often deadly) conflict (ibidem: 151). Female workers were particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse. According to Alvarenga, the widespread use of physical aggression led to a normalization of violence (and violent death) in Salvadoran culture. Citing a 1910 newspaper story in which the son of a landowner who threatened to kill an estate administrator is described as noble, she notes that "the threat of death was the daily bread of social relations [in 1910]" (ibidem: 116).

Under the impetus of liberal discourses on citizenship rights, state involvement in the widespread use of repression shifted from overt to more covert forms of repression (ibidem: 30). Removed from formal legislation, physical punishment and torture no longer took place in the form of public spectacles, but continued in more stealthy ways. In the words of Alvarenga, "the basements of prisons, recondite places in the countryside, streets and houses at midnight [were the] preferred spaces and times to hit, torture, and break down the doors of the houses of suspicious civilians" (ibidem). In practice, the liberal discourse on human rights was only applied to the upper strata of society (ibidem: 145). Similarly, only crimes perpetrated against members of the elite were efficiently investigated. This contributed to the mechanisms of covert repression, providing members of the oligarchy with impunity in "[cleansing] the countryside of

"dangerous" elements" (ibidem: 131). Covert forms of repression not only characterized state agents of violence, but modeled relations between social classes as well, with violent clashes frequently taking places in those spaces outside public surveillance (ibidem: 151). While peasants were significantly more vulnerable to violence than the higher classes, to a degree all social classes in the world of the hacienda became subjected to a constant feeling of insecurity (ibidem: 30).

Until the 1912 founding of the National Guard, a police institution with national presence, formal state institutions involved in the surveillance and repression of peasants were limited in scope. Under President Zaldivar (1876-1885), a national army had been established, but while it was effective in putting down popular uprisings, it was not equipped to conduct daily surveillance of the peasantry. The rural police's limited presence in the haciendas also curbed its ability to effectively do so. The state nevertheless maintained its authority in the countryside by co-opting civilian collaborators. As early as the 1870s peasants were appointed by alcaldes and landowners to be part of a civil patrol, tasked with disciplining members of their same social class. This was effective in maintaining social control because of the collaborators' presence "in the spaces where communal relations were expressed daily" (Alvarenga 1994: 207). It furthermore created division among the peasant class, since civil patrol members were allowed to enrich themselves at the expense of their peers. Civilian participation in surveillance moreover undermined social cohesiveness because any neighbor could seek to ingratiate him-or herself with the landowner by spreading gossip. This eroded the fabric of trust, and augmented the sense of insecurity. In later periods of Salvadoran history, civilian collaborators continued playing a role in surveillance, as was illustrated in the formation of the civilian paramilitary group ORDEN (National Democratic Organization) during the 1960s (Stanley 1996: 81). As part of ORDEN's

surveillance function, its members, recruited among tenant farmers and small landowners, were involved in spying on “possible subversives” (ibidem: 82).

*Matanza*

The violence that characterized social and political relations in El Salvador reached a catastrophic high point in January 1932. The peasant rebellion and repression that followed continue to be defining aspects of Salvadoran history. On the night from January 22 to 23, several thousand indigenous peasants, with marginal guidance from the Communist Party, engaged in an uprising in the western part of El Salvador. The response from General Martínez recently formed government was swift and brutal. The army, and especially the National Guard, targeted “anyone who looked Indian, dressed like a peasant, or carried a machete” (Stanley 1996: 41), as well as anyone suspected to be leftist. In sharp contrast with the approximately 95 casualties of the rebellion, government forces killed at least 25000 people in response. While most executions took place in the western part of the country, there were also casualties in San Salvador as well as other cities.

The uprising was the outcome of a number of factors, including the increasingly dire living circumstances of the peasantry, recent political tolerance of working class organization, continuing tensions between indigenous people and ladinos and growing communist influence. The 1920s expansion of coffee production intensified patterns of proletarianization. Towards the end of the decade large numbers of the peasantry were displaced and had become dependent on the coffee estates for their everyday survival (Paige 1997: 107). This made them particularly vulnerable for the effects of the 1929 Great Depression since coffee estates responded to dropping world market prices by laying off many of their workers and reducing wages. The

rebellion had also been facilitated by the recent political promotion of labor organizations. An early example is the formation of the 1917 "Liga Roja" (Red League). Although meant as "a means to [manipulate] the lower classes" (Anderson 1971: 22) it had unintended consequences. Indigenous people in particular gained relevant political experience in the League by using the space as a way to protect their claims to local power from Ladino competition (Alvarenga 1994: 269). President Pío Romero Bosque (1927-1931) in particular made a considerable effort towards opening the political system, denouncing abuse and publicly supporting human rights. However, this paradoxically ended up deepening societal polarization. It also provided an opportunity for the Communist Party to take over a number of labor federations. Although Bosque finally responded with repression, he did not succeed in stopping the growing popular movement. The latter, posing a considerable "challenge to the socio-economic status quo," particularly after 1929 (Stanley 1996: 45), would help set the stage for the 1932 rebellion.

The lasting political impact of the 1932 events, however, does not lie as much in the rebellion as in the violent repression that followed it. The loss of so many lives had long-term repressive effects. The Indian minority was most affected. Because executions had particularly targeted indigenous people, survivors publicly abandoned all ethnic practices that could identify them as indigenous, including language and dress. As a result, an entire ethnicity seemed to have disappeared from view, almost overnight. William Stanley points out that fear has persisted in that several decades later the inhabitants of the western region are still afraid to discuss the events or to even participate in opposition politics (ibidem: 42).

Perhaps more lasting were the effects of the discourses produced about the Matanza. Central in this regard is the perpetuation of the mythical images of "the Communist agitator and the fierce Indian" (Paige 1997: 125), rather than an acknowledgment of the root causes of the

revolt, and the repression that followed. In the official account of the events, as Paige points out, "the roles of victims and perpetrators" (ibidem: 104) is reversed, depicting middle class citizens becoming the victims of an angry mob of Indians and communists, defeated by "a heroic army" (ibidem). "A political culture of silence" was created by actively repressing alternative explanations (ibidem: 344). Silencing techniques included, for example, the physical removal of newspaper accounts from the libraries (ibidem: 343). By depicting the revolt as "communist" (Anderson 1971), despite limited involvement of the Salvadoran Communist Party (Ching 1998: 238), anti-communism became foundational in the Salvadoran national story (Alvarenga 1994: 354). The interests of both the military and the ruling elites were well served by this construction.

General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez, who had seized power in a military coup a few weeks before the massacres, was elected constitutional president shortly afterwards. This established the first in a series of military dictatorships for which anti-communism would serve as a platform to maintain legitimacy with the elites. This pattern started with Martínez 's orchestration and manipulation of the 1932 events. Evidence suggests that the general had in fact known of the uprising, but chose not to stop it from happening for political reasons. His disproportionate and prolonged use of brutal and random violence helped shape the perception that he had succeeded in successfully quelling a major threat to the elites' interests. In the words of William Stanley, "extreme repression helped create an impression of extreme danger" (ibidem: 53). Although the corporate military dictatorships that ruled El Salvador from 1948-1976 at times enforced reforms to appease the masses they then in turn routinely turned to repression to pacify the aggrieved elites, using anti-communism as a justification (ibidem).

The emphasis on Communist involvement in the official discourses on the 1932 uprising also benefited the elites more directly since it allowed them to deflect responsibility for the peasants' discontent underlying the events. Citing the July 1932 edition of the main Salvadoran coffee organization's journal, Jeffery Paige argues that the elite was willing to accept the existence of social classes, but saw this as a natural part of human existence. They were unwilling to acknowledge that the working classes were exploited. Instead, labor relations were characterized by "a benign paternalism between worker and landlord" (Paige 1997: 124). Rather than being the result of stark inequality, the rebellion was attributed to the influence of communist, mostly foreign, agitators. Altering existing social structures would only bring more upheaval. This official interpretation of the 1932 events created a historical precedent that continued to inform decisions of the elites on how to respond to working class discontent until the era of the civil war, preferring repression over reform (Stanley 1996: 260).

*The Civil War*

In the decades leading to the Civil War, inequality deepened as increasing landlessness and unemployment gave rise to "massive rural displacement" (Paige 1997: 30). The expansion of cotton, cattle and sugar after World War II caused landlessness to increase from 12 percent in 1961 to 41 percent, with lands previously available for tenant farmers now claimed for the new crops (Stanley 1996: 84). While agriculture expanded, the new crops, as well as an updated coffee system, were less labor-intensive. So, while more peasants had become dependent on wage labor, jobs had diminished (Paige 1997: 30), a situation that gave rise to a large group of impoverished people who had "no firm ties to the labor market, [nor] the institutions of property…" (ibidem). The 1969 war with Honduras, though only lasting a few days (from July

14 to July 18), further aggravated this pattern. Though nicknamed the Soccer War, because of taking place shortly after World Cup qualifying matches, the underlying reason was a Honduran land reform law targeting the large numbers of Salvadorans residing there. The War led to the return of 130000 Salvadoran immigrants, adding to the disenfranchised masses (Stanley 1996: 85). Moreover, Honduras' formal withdrawal from the Central American Common Market (CACM) in 1971 implied that El Salvador was no longer able to engage in overland trade with Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica. The economic malaise was further deepened by the 1970s Recession.

During the 1960s and early 1970s the growing unrest among the peasants fostered increased rural organizing. The Catholic Left played an important role in peasant organizing, particularly with the 1964 foundation of the Christian Peasant Federation (FECCAS) (Kincaid 1987: 482), which towards the end of the sixties morphed into a more radicalized organization.[21] Douglas Kincaid points out that despite internal differences, the membership of FECCAS increased to 5000 in 1975 because of the growing influence of liberation theology (ibidem: 483). The latter played an important role in consciousness-raising, especially in rural areas (Binford 2004: 105). Despite the fact that only the diocese in San Salvador endorsed liberation theology, progressive Catholicism became more embedded in rural than urban areas due to outreach by clergy at one of the seven peasant training centers across the nation, constituting an "army of lay peasant and worker catechists" (ibidem). In the 1970s, increased organizing also found expression in the formation of guerilla groups in both urban and rural areas. By the end of the

[21] FECCAS was supported by the Catholic Church, the Christian Democratic Party and the Latin American Social Christian labor organization (Kincaid 1987: 482), but became a separate entity in 1969 (Stanley 1996: 95).

decade, five guerilla groups were operative, "recruiting university and secondary school students in urban areas and campesinos in rural areas" (Wood 2003: 25).

The previous military dictatorships' strategy of balancing between "reform" and "repression" to appease opposing social classes now swayed towards the pole of repression. In 1976, President Molina (1972-1977) had to concede to pressures from a coalition of land elites and conservative factions of the military in abandoning a limited yet symbolically important project of land reform. Sectors of the military, in particular the intelligence and security services, operated as mercenaries for the elites (Stanley 1996: 257). Factions of the power elite supported the formation of paramilitary organizations, "drawing on veterans and reserve members of the military as well as patron-client networks of powerful agrarian elites" (Wood 2003: 26). In response to the increasingly random violence, with people uninvolved in resistance activities tortured and killed more civilians armed themselves (Stanley 1996: 116). In response to the increasing randomness of violence, with people not involved in guerilla activities being tortured and murdered, more civilians armed themselves, and more organizations of "workers, peasants, urban slum dwellers, and students" became open to radicalization (ibidem: 115).

After a reformist coup of young officers in 1979 was overturned by a group of more senior officers, violence deepened (Wood 2003: 26). Although the second junta enforced significant agrarian reform in the beginning of March, this measure failed to stop the descent into full-blown civil war. Polarization further increased when Archbishop Romero was assassinated later that month. The last hopes to counter radicalization dwindled when in November of that year six leaders of the more centrist Frente Democratico Revolucionario were murdered. In that same months four guerilla groups founded the FMLN (ibidem: 27).

The war violence, costing 75000 thousand lives, was the most intense during the first years of the war, and disproportionately targeted peasants. As Elizabeth Wood points out, of the 12,501 political murders registered by the human rights agency of the Archdiocese of San Salvador, 76 percent were peasants (ibidem). Violence declined after 1983 in part because of U.S. pressure. U.S. military and economic aid to the Salvadoran government was made conditional on the latter's human rights record (Wood 2003: 28).[22] Despite receiving over six billion dollars in aid from the United States (Quan 2005), government forces were not able to defeat the rebels. In 1989 the looming stalemate seemed to become unavoidable with the FMLN's successful and unprecedented offensive in San Salvador as well as other cities. Particularly intimidating for the elites was the FMLN's brief occupation of two of the capital city's most wealthy neighborhoods, in addition to also occupying a number of working class neighborhoods there. Responding with violence, the High Command of the army ordered one of the death squads to murder the Jesuits at the UCA. However, the images of the bodies of the six murdered priests, their housekeeper and her daughter damaged the Salvadoran government's international perception and brought to an end U.S. congressional support for continued aid to the Salvadoran government.

The offensive paved the pathway towards peace negotiations that would officially end the war in 1992. The agro-industrial faction of the elites in particular saw its interests best served by a compromise with the FMLN rather than further prolonging the war. Peace negotiations began

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[22] In his analysis of the impact of American aid on the Salvadoran economic and political structure Adán Quan argues that American aid was to be spent in accordance with USAID policies. Aid programs, as Quan explains, were "structured by four principal goals deemed essential for modernizing El Salvador: achieving economic and social stabilization, promoting economic recovery and growth, broadening the benefits of growth, and strengthening democratic institutions" (U.S. Agency for International Development 1988:7, cited in Quan 2005: 280).

in 1990 between the FMLN and ARENA under the auspices of the United Nations. ARENA was established in the early eighties by the ruling elites, and soon developed into the political base of the more progressive sectors of the elites. One of its main objectives was to reform El Salvador according to neoliberal principles. In 1992 the civil war finally reached an end when formal agreements were signed in Chapultepec, Mexico. The guerilla movement became a legitimate political party and now dominates the Salvadoran political scene together with ARENA. Both parties have demonstrated a willingness to participate within the framework of a multi-party democratic system.

While the civil war is unprecedented in Salvadoran history in terms of the establishment's inability to defeat the guerillas, despite the prolonged use of violence, it represents a culmination rather than a break with many of the themes present in earlier periods in Salvadoran history. Similar to the generalization of covert forms of state repression after the 1885 Liberal Revolution, much of the state violence was perpetrated in covert ways. Stanley describes how "often, the killers were "heavily armed men in civilian clothes," usually driving unmarked vehicles. Such "death squads" removed people from their homes, usually at night, and took them away" (Stanley 1996: 1). More than simply eliminating 'subversives' such practices served the purpose of intimidating others and generally inciting fear. Often victims were tortured before being killed. Severed heads and limbs were dumped in public places (ibidem). Moreover, the randomness of these atrocities, especially during the years leading up to the war and during its first years, increased the widespread feeling of insecurity. Insecurity was further increased by the co-optation of civilian collaborators, a mechanism of state control that, as Alvarenga argues, was present in El Salvador as early as the 1870s (Alvarenga 1994: 41). The most infamous example of this is ORDEN, discussed above. In its early years, ORDEN members were mainly

tasked with being spies, or *orejas* (Spanish for "ears"), in their communities, reporting on possible "subversives." Towards the end of the sixties ORDEN developed into a more full-fledged paramilitary organization (Stanley 1996: 82).

Similar to the 1932 events, alternative stories were constructed to explain the events of the civil war. Liberation psychologist Ignacio Martín-Baró, one of the priests assassinated at the UCA in November 1989, criticizes both sides in the conflict for distributing propaganda in which they depict the other as less than human, thereby contributing to a deepening of societal polarization. Making explicit that such narratives serve political purposes rather than present a truthful perspective, Martin-Baró refers to the official story, circulated by the government, as

> the institutionalized lie…which ignores crucial aspects of reality, distorts others, and even falsifies or invents still others. This official story is imposed by means of aggressive display of propaganda, which is backed up even by all the weight of the highest official positions (Martín-Baró 1989: 10).

The narrative is furthered by means of propaganda, as well as by the active silencing of those who make public elements that do not easily fit the story. Martin-Baró cites the example of Monseñor Rosa Chávez who was labeled "a criminal" for reporting a murder by the First Infantry Brigade (ibidem: 11). Similar labels are applied to refer to members of the FMLN, who are commonly referred to as "communists," "terrorists" or "subversives." In his interviews with elites, Paige noticed that by describing the FMLN guerillas in such terms rather than calling them rebels, the elites avoid having to acknowledge the validity of calls for substantial structural reform (Paige 1997: 204). It moreover helps them to hold on to the Salvadoran narrative as a story of progress, with "neoliberalism" as the newest mode of progress.

## 2.3 Post-war violence

*Neoliberal turn*

Post-war El Salvador, Sandy Smith-Nonini notes in her book on El Salvador's struggle for health rights, is "ranked second," according to the Wall Street Journal, "only to Chile for having the most open [i.e. "neoliberal"] economy in Latin America" (Smith-Nonini 2010: 237). While bolstered by four consecutive ARENA presidencies, starting with the 1989 election of Alfredo Cristiani, the Salvadoran neoliberal turn had been well underway before then. As mentioned in the previous section, the agro-industrial factions of the Salvadoran elite saw their interests best served by neoliberal reforms. Moreover, from the early to mid-eighties onwards, Washington-based international agencies wielded considerable leverage in favor of neoliberal restructuring. In the 1980s, the US Agency for International Development was particularly influential in shaping economic reform in El Salvador. In the 1990s, the agency's role diminished, while the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) in turn became more involved.

The sharp increase in El Salvador's external debt fostered more dependence on international lending institutions, with the country's foreign debt going up "890 percent between 1973 and 1983 from $106.7 million to over one billion dollars…and then [quintupling] to over $5 billion in the early 2000s" (Almeida 2008: 182). In the mid-eighties, the agenda of USAID (the most influential donor in El Salvador in the 1980s) shifted from supporting reforms requiring expanded state involvement (including the nationalization of the bank system, and of the export of coffee, sugar and cotton) to lobbying for neoliberal adjustments. Because the Duarte government (1984-1989) was not on board with USAID's shifting development plan, the

agency temporarily suspended aid and increased funding for civil society actors who supported neoliberal reform, with the Salvadoran Foundation for Economic and Social Development (FUSADES) as one of the main recipients. Established in 1983, FUSADES, which represented the interests of the private sector, and of the agricultural export industry in particular, soon developed into a neoliberal think tank. Instrumental in designing ARENA's socio-economic program in the latter end of the 1980s, several of its members joined Cristiani's government in 1989.[23]

Cristiani's 1989 election was followed by a series of neoliberal reforms, facilitated by agreements made with international lending institutions.[24] This included the discontinuation of the state monopoly on agricultural export products, the reduction of tariffs, and extensive privatization (including the banking system, sugar refineries, electricity distribution and telecommunication services, as well as part of the pension system). Efforts to privatize public health services, however, came to a halt in 2003 when various sectors in the population participated in mass protests, including a series of "white marches" (Almeida 2008, Smith-Nonini 2010). These protests constituted, as Paul Almeida states in his 2008 book, *Waves of Protest*, "the largest acts of mass defiance in post-civil war and newly democratized El Salvador" (Almeida 2008: 175). Other significant markers of the neoliberal shift are the adoption of the

[23] While ARENA is associated with furthering neoliberalism, itis worth pointing out that in its incipient stage (ARENA was founded in 1981) the party's rhetoric was predominantly anti-communist and nationalist (Van der Borgh 2000: 46)

[24] In 1991, the Salvadoran state received a structural adjustment loan from the World Bank, and in 1992 a loan from the Inter-American Development Bank. The remittances Salvadoran migrants send home, Garni and Weyher argue, facilitated this process, since they "provided foreign exchange reserves that enable elites to seek international loans" (2013b: 65).

dollar as national currency in 2001,[25] and the ratification and implementation of the Dominican Republic-Central American Free Trade agreement (DR-CAFTA) in 2004 and 2006 respectively. These policies facilitated, in the words of Garni and Weyher, "the transnationalization of Salvadoran capital and international investment in El Salvador's financial and service sectors" (Garni and Weyher 2013a: 628). The massive influx of remittances (going up from about $1 billion in 1994 (Van der Borgh 2000: 44) to more than $4.4 billion in 2015 (Ratha et al. 2016)), in conjunction with the privatization of the bank system, facilitated the rise of the financial sector, which, by 2007, had become the predominant economic sector.

While neoliberal reform enabled segments of the elites to "secure their position within the new transnational capitalist class of global capitalism" (Garni and Weyher 2013a: 628), for many sectors in Salvadoran society, it failed to translate into "a story of progress." El Salvador remains divided socio-economically. With high rates of un- and underemployment, about half of the population participates in the informal sector (ibidem). Rather than generating a self-sustaining economy (Wade 2008: 24), neoliberal reform produced new forms of precarity. Garni and Weyher point out that the significant erosion of jobs in agriculture because of tariff reductions--jeopardizing, in their estimate, 646,500 jobs--is not sufficiently offset by the creation of "a maximum of approximately 134,000 jobs in assembly manufacturing" (Garni and Weyher 2013a: 628). Moreover, work in the maquila industry is poorly remunerated (ibidem). Conditions of precarity are further complicated by the wave of post-war criminal violence. At least in part, the latter can be argued to have been propelled by neoliberalism as well. Elana Zilberg, for example, argues that both "informal and criminal economies actively exploited new zones of

[25] The influx of remittances following mass migration from Salvadorans, primarily to the United States, led to an appreciation of the colon, the Salvadoran currency prior to 2001 (Van der Borgh 2000: 44), which made Salvadoran export products more expensive.

ambiguity opened up by deregulation" (Zilberg 2011: 5). Extortion, a common criminal practice in post-war El Salvador, "[has become]," Zilberg suggests, "a fundamental means of survival in the neoliberal era" (ibidem). Furthermore, as discussed later in this chapter, the implementation of zero-tolerance strategies in response to crime is in sync with the neoliberal emphasis of individual responsibility (Garni and Weyher 2013a: 630). This overall fraught set of circumstances continues to fuel ongoing mass migration (Wade 2008: 24). Remittances in turn further contribute to the consolidation of the neoliberal project by strengthening the hegemony of finance and by providing those affected by neoliberal reforms with resources to counter the effects (Garni and Weyher 2013b: 65). Although the FMLN has held the presidency since 2009, this has not meaningfully altered the course of neoliberalism in El Salvador. Recently, the FMLN has been publicly called out for having a neoliberal agenda (Última Hora; October 20, 2017).

*Lived experience of insecurity in the neoliberal era*

Insecurity and normalization of violence characterized previous periods in Salvadoran history, but, as Ellen Moodie argues in her work on talk about violence in San Salvador, in the post-war period Salvadorans had to adopt a new kind of "Angstbereitschaft," Freud's term for readiness for anxiety (Moodie 2010). Because the violence of the post-war crime wave "felt like a different violence, less knowable" (ibidem: 4), Moodie's respondents were not quite sure how to respond to it. In an ethnographic vignette, Moodie describes how the experience of being mugged, losing a house-key and some money, was an unexpected and shocking event for one of her friends, because she had simply not anticipated what to do, or what to expect in this type of incident (ibidem: 49-50). When I first arrived for fieldwork in San Salvador, more than ten years after Moodie conducted the fieldwork her book is based on, it seemed that many Salvadorans did

have “the right kind of Angstbereitschaft.” Not only did several people explicitly tell me to anticipate violence, I was given explicit instruction on how to avoid such encounters, and what to do in case it should happen. Doña Carmen, my host mother, showed me how to hide my cell phone when taking the bus. My friend Jacqueline told me always to make sure your car windows are up when driving. And Wilmer was the first of several to explain to me why many people carry two cell phones: an old one to give to robbers, and a nicer one to keep yourself. People repeatedly reminded me that if anything should happen, I must always cooperate, and never refuse to hand over any belongings asked for.

Anticipating criminal violence was an embodied state for many of San Salvador’s residents. Other than the practices described above, people also told me that they were always highly vigilant while walking in the city, always aware of their surroundings. This embodied hypervigilance, as one of my friends commented, is hard to shake off even when outside El Salvador. The “right” kind of “angstbereitschaft” in the post-war moment then entails both the redefinition of violence as delinquent violence, and the development of habitual ways to anticipate and protect oneself against such violence. Whereas the adoption of this particular “readiness for anxiety” may allow my Salvadoran friends and informants to maneuver the city in a safer way, it nevertheless also facilitates and sustains a normalization of violence, which in its turn helps establish what Taussig refers to as a “culture of terror” (Taussig 1984).

To capture that post-war violence is perceived to be “less knowable” (Moodie 2010: 4), I prefer to use the term “culture of anxiety,” rather than “culture of terror.” Rollo May differentiates anxiety and fear(s) by arguing that, whereas the latter is a differentiated response to a specific, localized danger, anxiety lacks such a specific object, but is an undifferentiated response to threat (May 1977: 232-233). “Not-knowing” is at the core of the lived experience in

El Salvador, not only with regard to the anticipation of violence, but also, more generally, with regard to the vulnerability of one's life. Death was tangibly present in the social imaginary. It was quite common for me to hear people say that one does not know if they are going to come home again in the evening when they leave the house in the morning. The domestic worker of the house I was staying at, who was in his mid-thirties, once proudly told me that he had been able to put a down payment on a grave plot because "you never know with all the enemies." More than limited to the experience of individual people, the anxiety of 'not-knowing' was widespread. It was made especially palpable and contagious due to the constant circulation of crime stories both in the news (which tends to focus on presumed gang violence), and in everyday conversations. After hearing story after story about violent crime, and after being explicitly told by more than one person that hopefully God would keep me safe so that my husband would not have to live his life as a widower, an increasing awareness of the vulnerability of my life crept up on me too, notwithstanding the fact that during my entire stay in El Salvador I never experienced any physical violence. Even more, "not-knowing" became part of how to negotiate doing fieldwork, sometimes more explicitly so than other times.

One can argue that this widespread sense of insecurity is a normal psychological consequence for a society that has been exposed to high levels of violence throughout its history. The fact that in the post-war period this became oriented at the ever-present possibility of delinquent violence lurking in the streets is in part a response to the actual increase of crime-related homicides in El Salvador. To some extent hyperawareness of the phenomenon serves the function of keeping people safe. In a personal example, at one point in the fieldwork a man started following me in the church where I was doing fieldwork, keeping track of my routine and always showing up when I was supposed to be there (even at times his church district was not

meeting), only to finally approach me with the request to lend him $25,000. It was impossible to really know what the level of threat was in this case. The people I shared the story with agreed that this could range from fairly innocuous to potentially life-threatening. Maybe he was in dire need of this money, being threatened and extorted, which, as we saw in the previous section, is common in San Salvador, and thought that I (wealthy in his perception) was the solution to his problem. To keep safe, I assumed the worst, and informed a pastor of the situation, who addressed the man about the issue. While I continued the fieldwork, I was careful to from now on regularly switch up my routine.

*"Myths" on violence and insecurity in the neoliberal era*

Acknowledging that the rise of violent crime is a serious problem for Salvadorans when navigating everyday life, one can nevertheless argue that the incessant circulation of stories about crime, highlighting the latter as the main problem of Salvadoran society, is an expression specific to the post-war period of the mechanisms of silencing and myth that we have seen at work earlier in Salvadoran history. The crime stories that are circulating have an almost mythical quality in that they are most often based on rumors. Media accounts vilify gang members, representing them as the main sources of violence and risk in El Salvador, while rendering the larger context in which they operate invisible. The demonizing of youth gangs sometimes becomes very explicit. Elana Zilberg notes how "[t]he national newspaper El Diario de Hoy…refers to MS [Mara Salvatrucha] as la Mara Satanica (the Satanic gang), and further suggests that 18 stands for 666, the sign of the devil" (Zilberg 2007: 40). Political rhetoric also reflected the culpabilization of youth gangs. In his 2005 presidential address, ARENA president Antonio Saca identified gangs as the actors responsible for "fifty percent of murder and

"disorder" in the streets'" (Hume 2007: 741). The political dimension of gang violence accounts in the media became more visible when after the passing of the 2006 Super Mano Dura Plan by President Saca the ARENA-friendly media stopped reporting on the phenomenon, only to resume their reporting again when FMLN candidate Mauricio Funes won the 2009 presidential elections (Moodie 2010: 207-208).

Creating the "myth"--not understood as "lie but rather [as] distortion and inflexion"--(Zilberg 2011: 15) that gangs have become the main public enemy in the historical moment of the post-war "turn to democracy" serves the purpose of creating the scapegoat that is often necessary at the beginning of a new political system (Girard 1977, cited in Zilberg 2007: 44). Rather than furthering democracy though, the construction of such a binary opposition between the State and its citizens on the one hand and a common enemy on the other, "lend[s] itself to the deepening of an authoritarian "common sense," in which violence is seen as a necessary tool of the "good citizen" against those whom he/she considers the "scum" (lacra social) of society" (Cruz and Beltrán 2000: 5). The fomentation of insecurity about criminal violence then facilitates the generation of public approval for repressive measures. Pivotal examples are the 2003 "Plan Mano Dura" (the Iron Fist Plan; 2003), and the 2004 Super Mano Dura (Zilberg 2011: 46),[26] modeled after North American zero-tolerance policies. The Iron Fist strategies introduced, as Alisha Holland explains, "discretionary crimes,…laws that allow police to arrest suspected criminals on subjective evidence" (Holland 2013: 46), and reduced "procedural right guarantees for suspects"[27] (Holland 2013: 47). For Wacquant (cited in Garni and Weyher 2013a: 630), the

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[26] El Plan Super Mano Dura also included some preventive strategies, referred to as "Plan Mano Amiga" (Zilberg 2011)

[27] Holland states that Salvadoran zero-tolerance policies differ in this respect from their North American model in that the North American "on paper…maintain[s]…individual right protection and police oversight" (Holland 2013: 47).

subsequent increase in rates of imprisonment serve the expansion of the neoliberal project as it removes those "at the bottom who no longer fit, while sending a message to [others]" (ibidem). The FMLN, which has held the presidency since 2009, continued many of the same strategies (Holland 2013: 64).

When calling the construction of gangs as "common enemy of the people" an example of "myth," the question arises what aspects of social reality are minimized or even erased from view. One could argue that by foregrounding the role of gangs, the complex problem of violence is presented as more tractable. Even when exclusively defining violence in terms of the high homicide and extortion rates, it is a simplification to attribute this mainly to gangs. Statistics for 2009 show that less than one-third of all homicides and extortions were gang-related (Olate et al. 2012: 384). Zero-tolerance strategies such as the Iron Fist plans furthermore present a simplified solution to the problem. In line with "the neoliberal logics of deregulation and individual responsibility" (Zilberg 2011: 7), the focus of such measures is on the personal agency of individual people, abstracting from the larger set of constraints in which people's actions and decisions are embedded. In the case of gang violence, such measures fail to engage with the "multiple marginality" that characterizes the lives of many of the youth most at risk to become involved with gang violence (Olate et al. 2012: 385). Xiomara's story in the beginning of the chapter evoked the difficulties many young Salvadorans negotiate on a daily basis: the lack of educational opportunity, limited prospects of present and future employment, the absence of social support networks, and exposure to gangs in the immediate social environment. By casting the debate in terms of individual responsibility, attention is diverted away from the gaps in the post-war narrative of "neoliberal progress" with poor Salvadorans adversely affected by neoliberal structural policies (Silber 2004). The 2006 Anti-Terrorist Law has made erasure of

criticism of the new neoliberal regime even more poignant. Reminiscent of the civil war era when dissenters were called "subversives," the word "terrorist" has come to denote gang members, as well as political protesters. For example, in July 2007 sixty people were arrested in Suchitoto on terrorism charges. They had been demonstrating against the privatization of water on the day Tony Saca was scheduled to visit the town (Zilberg 2011:234). Elana Zilberg points out that by deploying the language of terrorism in reference to crime and leftist critique, ARENA "repackaged their internal enemies in terms of the [post 9/11] governing security paradigm of the United States" (ibidem: 17). This allowed El Salvador to once again be in the orbit of the United States "protection racket" (ibidem).

In a social context characterized by insecurity and a sense of "not-knowing" it is not surprising that the construction of delinquent violence as the main concern at times breaks down. The suspicion many Salvadorans feel for the people and institutions that make up their social reality also affects their perception of the stories that circulate. "Not-knowing" then also pertains to a person's faith in his or her own ability to determine what is true and what is only rumor. For example, when in 2010 gangs declared a three-day ban on bus transportation, paralyzing the country, many Salvadorans wondered about the underlying dimensions of the incident. Why, some of my friends wondered, did this national incident involving the buses and rumors about a national curfew, happen to take place while President Mauricio Funes was out of the country? So, while this incident served as the pinnacle of gang demonization in the media, at least some Salvadorans suspected there to be a more covert political dimension as well.

## 2.4 Concluding remarks

In this chapter, I discussed the construction of risk and violence in various periods of Salvadoran history. This discussion showed that although the post-war period in some ways announces a real break with the past, a number of parallels can nevertheless be drawn between the current era and previous periods. With some variation in content, violence and insecurity have been the central thread of social and political relations almost since the inception of the Republic. Alvarenga's analysis of the heyday of coffee showed that even deadly violence was a fairly normalized phenomenon. The post-war structures of feeling are characterized by pervasive disillusionment in response to the realization that the war failed to bring real change (Silber 2004; 2011), as well as anxiety and suspicion. While nothing new, in the neoliberal period the latter has been redirected at delinquent violence, a form of everyday violence, "the daily practices and expressions of [which] take place on a micro-interactional level" (Bourgois 2001: 8). The hyperawareness of certain types of criminal violence not only obscures from view the structural, political, and symbolic forms of violence in Salvadoran society, but also stands in contrast with the minimal attention for other types of everyday violence, domestic abuse in particular (Hume 2004). Despite changes in the legislation--since 1998 the Penal Code includes intra-family violence--and a number of awareness campaigns, Mo Hume argues, domestic violence continues to be viewed as a private affair (Hume 2004: 70).

The neoliberal construction of violence at points breaks down in that the forms of violence associated with previous periods, and the civil war in particular, continue to be part of the Salvadoran interpretative frame of reference (as well as set of practices). Documenting the anti-mining movement in Cabañas, Robin Broad and John Cavanagh (2015) report how local resistance against the Pacific Rim Mining Company's right to extract gold was met in ways

reminiscent of the civil war. One of Broad and Cavanagh's interviewees claimed that he had refused an offer from Pacific Rim to work for the company as an "oreja," spying on his friends for thirty dollars a week. Another person participating in the conversation chimed in, saying: "Now in our communities, you don't trust people you've trusted your entire life. That's one of the things the mining companies have done" (Broad and Cavanagh 2015: 173). In June 2009, Marcelo Rivera, one of the first community leaders in the anti-mining movement, was tortured and murdered in death squad style. Later that year two more activists were killed. Though the assassination of these environmental activists is fairly publicized, it provides nevertheless yet another illustration of how Salvadorans have to negotiate the "not known." Rumors have it that the Pacific Rim Company was involved in the murders but the crimes remained unsolved.

The central concern of violence will be engaged with in several of the next dissertation chapters. Many Salvadorans (Catholics and evangelicals alike) often invoke God to keep them safe, and in fieldwork I observed that religious beliefs helped people negotiate everyday insecurity. In the face of the ongoing normalization of violence in El Salvador, one can ask if religion, as a mode of response, complements the social construction of understandings of risk and violence or critically complicates it. Of course, as we saw in the introduction, religion, and particularly Pentecostal religion, is often depicted as a conservative social force in the Latin American context, more likely to maintain the status quo than to call for change. Because this is often based on stereotypes that do not fully conform to reality, a more nuanced view is called for. As Balán argues, in contexts such as the post-war context described in this paper, "fear is…itself as much a threat to democracy as violence itself (Balán 2002: 5, cited in Hume 2007: 743)." In this light, it can be pointed that the attenuation of anxiety by religious experience and membership can open up some--albeit limited--ways to overcome silencing and to counter the

erosion of solidarity.

In the course of this dissertation, I will explore how certain ways of being evangelical may actually critically complicate rather than further normalize the status quo. In the case of Elim, which espouses a more holistic approach to theology in most recent years, the mechanisms of myth and silencing are actively engaged with, particularly in sermons and other discourse produced by the church's General Pastor. Reminiscent of liberation theology, the view exists that the Christian church needs to be a prophetic voice, and take a critical stance against society's ills. Returning to the demonized figure of the gang member, in the space of the church the humanity of the youth involved in gangs is recaptured. In one sermon, the General Pastor said: "I don't say that gang members are angels, but they are human beings. They are mothers, and fathers, and some of them are here." Rather than someone to be eradicated, the gang member becomes a victim of the larger forces of inequality at work in Salvadoran society, and a creature of God in need of salvation.

# Chapter three:

## Becoming disciples of Christ: transforming the self and society with holistic mission

### 3.1. Introducing Misión Cristiana Elim

Following a number of seemingly random contacts, starting research in Elim ended up being quite fortuitous. Before my first meeting with Pastor Mario Vega, Elim's general pastor, my curiosity about this church had been spiked by a number of, some very conflicting, ethnographic observations. Pastor Vega's editorials in a mainstream newspaper on topics such as violence and other challenges facing Salvadoran society really spoke to my research topic. In informal conversations with people I met (for example, my taxi driver, and my host), I learned that Pastor Vega, unlike other well-known Salvadoran pastors, was not perceived as someone who sought the personal spot light. He was "decent," Carmen, my Catholic host, assured me. Perhaps most intriguingly, various evangelicals I got to know described Elim in seemingly contradictory ways, with some calling the church very conservative (for example for reportedly seating men and women separate), and others describing it as very progressive (for its public stance in favor of social justice). I later learned that these contradicting labels were because Elim was undergoing a paradigmatic shift in theological orientation, adopting a more holistic understanding of mission.

Ending up at Elim after following a series of sometimes seemingly random contacts, I soon determined that I could not have found a better place to do research. In the process of change, it represented two different models of being Christian. Later on, I reflected on the seeming randomness that had led to my study in Elim. Of course, from the perspective of the people I got to know there, this was not at all random. In their view, everything follows the plan

of God. There is no such thing as coincidence. From a more human perspective, I could point to my own tenacity in pursuing all these different leads (ultimately securing permission in various sites). But more importantly, there was the intellectual openness and hospitality of the general pastor. Although in charge of a transnational church network, and a well-known figure in Salvadoran society, he was the first general pastor to agree to meet with me in person. Known as someone with academic interests, he only inquired about my project and research affiliations before giving me research permission. Described by some of his pastors as a visionary, firmly established in his beliefs and his reading of the Bible, he seemed unlikely to feel challenged by the presence of a foreign ethnographer in his church community.[28]

In this chapter, I will introduce Elim, focusing on an overview of its history and its recent adoption of holistic mission. While the two parts deal with different topics, they both establish the importance of evangelism for Elim. While the church's historical self-narrative still reflects the more traditional objective of "saving souls and establishing churches," more recently the church has come to reinterpret evangelism as a more holistic endeavor, taking into account a wider set of human needs, including not only spiritual but also physical, and emotional needs. A central question I pose in the discussion of theology is if and how an orientation towards social justice is compatible with a more traditional Pentecostal focus on the spiritual focus on the well-being. I suggest that by placing the dimension of the personal in productive tension with the social, there is still a place for individual spiritual needs. Though Elim remains Pentecostal,[29] I will argue that the shift towards holistic mission, which hinges on the revaluation of the material,

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[28] I was denied permission in two churches before arriving at Elim, and I was told by some of my research contacts that this was because of the closed and suspicious mindset of some church leaders.

[29] The church's official doctrine identifies the church as a hybrid between Calvinism and Pentecostalism. I will discuss its Pentecostal aspects in the last section of the chapter.

affects the conceptualization of the Christian subject as well as the understanding of discontinuity, which is central in Pentecostal thought.

### 3.2 Misión Cristiana Elim: from small Guatemalan satellite to thriving Salvadoran transnational movement

*Introduction*

In this section I will depict a short overview of the history of the Elim church, as well as present a picture of the organizational structure of its Salvadoran headquarters. Based on information published by the church itself (via its website)[30] and a history of the church written by Joel Comiskey, North American missionary and author of Christian books, this overview captures a view of the church's public self-representation. Focus in this section is on those milestones that are highlighted in the church's official narrative of its history. The latter is primarily a story of astonishing evangelical success, measured in terms of material expansion. Emphasis is placed on the growing number of churches in El Salvador as well as abroad, the successful acquisition of church grounds in the San Salvador location, the quick proliferation of membership numbers and the purchase of various radio and television channels. Also highlighted in the church's story are two pivotal turning points in its history. The first is the mid-eighties adoption of the cellular model, following the example of the Korean mega-church led by Dr. Cho, and the second is the mid-nineties shift in leadership. Telling Elim's history from the perspective of a Christian missionary, Joel Comiskey for the most part emphasizes the same milestones as are identified in the official narrative published on Elim's website. He furthermore

[30] https://www.elim.org.sv/historia/

evokes the image of a church that stands out by its solid organizational machinery, describing this in terms of "orderliness." The latter image is commonly used in the Elim community to describe the church, with members describing Elim as distinctive in terms of its sense of "order," particularly with regard to how services are run, and how Gifts are experienced.[31] Comiskey describes how the church's day-to-day operations rely on volunteer labor of members, skillfully overseen in an intricate church hierarchy, as well as on the careful collection of statistical data on the functioning and expansion of individual cells (groups that meet at the homes of members) and on the collection of tithes and other money to help finance church operations.

*History*

Becoming transnational: In May 1977 Sergio Solórzano, a missionary from the Guatemalan church Elim, established a small daughter church in Colonia Santa Ana in Ilopango, a small town near San Salvador. The fledgling church was so small that at first only nine people were involved. The same month, Solórzano was officially appointed main pastor of the new church by the mother church's leadership. When six years later doctrinal differences gave rise to a break between both churches, Solórzano stayed on as the Salvadoran church's general pastor. Although now independent from its original mother church, the church maintained the same name.

From early on, the church's mission was not only to evangelize in the Ilopango area, but also to set up daughter churches elsewhere. In 1979 the first two daughter churches were formed, one in Zaragoza, about 20 kilometers south of San Salvador and the other one in Santa

[31] In Elim, the church service, as well as the time and space allotted to Gifts, is carefully supervised. People who have experiences that are particularly exuberant (e.g. falling on the floor, dancing) are admonished, or, if the person persists, escorted out.

Ana, the second largest city in the country. The number of daughter churches kept increasing, and by the mid-eighties there were already seventy offshoots. As early as 1984, daughter churches were soon established abroad as well, following the migration pattern of the Salvadoran diaspora. The first churches were established in Australia, Canada, Honduras, and the United States (Comiskey 2004: 29). Today there are Elim churches across the Americas--with satellite churches in Canada, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Peru and the United States--and in Europe--with churches in Belgium, Italy and Spain--as well as in Australia (www.elim.org.sv).

The heart of this transnational network has remained firmly established in El Salvador, with the Ilopango setting taking on the role of world headquarters, referred to as "La Central." During the civil war the town became absorbed into the larger metropolitan area of San Salvador, due to the capital's sudden population growth as a result of the massive migration from rural areas to the cities. The increasingly important role of the Elim mother church in Ilopango is reflected in the acquisition and expansion of church property in this location. While the first meetings took place in a small rented building, the church purchased two and half acres of land in the same town in 1985. Fourteen years later the church purchased another acre adjacent to its property to build a parking lot. Given that the Elim church espouses Pentecostalism as at least part of its doctrinal orientation, a set of beliefs originally born in the United States, the consolidation of Elim's San Salvador location as the headquarters of an expanding transnational movement provides a successful example of the "reverse flow" of religious phenomena (see Csordas 2009).

Following the Korean lead in becoming a cellular church: A major organizational change came about in the mid-eighties when the church adopted the cellular model. This is particularly

significant in the narrative of the church, since the rapid increase in membership is in large part attributed to this shift. As Comiskey points out, membership statistics are in fact based on cell meeting attendance rather than attendance of services in the main church building (Comiskey 2004: 33). Given that Elim's transformation into a cellular church was modeled on the organizational structure of a Korean mega-church, it was also the first incentive to establish relations with their Korean counterpart(s).

After the Korean War (1950-1953), evangelicalism, and particularly Pentecostalism, took off in South Korea (Kim 2006) and the country grew into a center of missionary activity, especially among non-Western countries (Kim 2007). In 1985, Elim pastors encountered Korean missionary outreach when they came across Dr. Cho's books, promoting the cellular model. Dr. Cho is the founder and senior pastor of the mega-church *Yoido Full Gospel Church* in Seoul, South Korea, which is credited with being the largest church in the world (Kim 2000). In 1986, Sergio Solórzano, still Elim's general pastor at the time, visited Dr. Cho's mega-church to learn the intricacies of how to best implement the cellular organizational structure. Ties with Korean Pentecostalism were later further embraced. In 2002 Dr. Cho visited El Salvador, and held a church service at Elim's 'La Central.' Two years later, Mario Vega, who had become Elim's general pastor in 1997, received an invitation to speak at another mega-church in Seoul, the Methodist church Kumnan. According to information on Elim's website, Kumnan, previously recognized as the world's second largest church, was now surpassed by Elim in terms of membership and wanted to publicly recognize this by inviting Mario Vega to speak in their church. A year later, ties with Korea were more firmly established when Dr. Cho invited Pastor Vega to be on the directive board of his "Church Growth International" Ministry.

The adoption of the cellular model is credited with the explosive growth that allows "La Central" to self-identify as the second largest church in the world. First, the reorganization brought the existing Elim members in San Salvador together under one 'roof' as the twenty-five small churches that at the time existed there were absorbed into La Central. The daughter churches in the area were replaced with a growing network of cells, meeting in the homes of individual members. Membership soon started increasing considerably, going up from 3000 in 1985 to 20,000 only three years later (Comiskey 2004: 32), with, according to Comiskey, 117,000 members in 2003 (ibidem).[32]

While these numbers are based on cell attendance (ibidem: 33), Elim's growth was made visible in the cityscape by its annual organization of mass evangelical events, attended by thousands of people. The evangelizing goal of these mass events went beyond reaching the people that were attending. By bringing together so many "countable bodies" the church wanted to create a powerful image of the "march onwards" of evangelicalism in El Salvador. When the first stadium used by Elim ("Estado Flor Blanca") reached its capacity of 43,000 and events had to be organized throughout the day so that all could attend, it was deemed a better strategy to hold events in multiple stadia at the same time:

> "Outsiders thought that this was a trick, that the same people had attended in the morning and the afternoon, and that it was not true that one church counted so many people. There was only one way to show the world that Elim continued to grow, and that was by using two stadia at the same time." (Elim website, translation MP)

[32] During my fieldwork in Elim's La Central in 2010 and 2011, I was not provided with official church statistics but was repeatedly told that membership consisted of approximately 100,000 people.

In 2000 a milestone was reached when five stadia were included (with two of these located elsewhere in the country), bringing together a total of 140,000 people. In order to maximize impact, the event was broadcast via the radio across Latin America.

Expansion via the media: Early on the media were embraced as medium of evangelization. Using radio broadcasts since its inception in 1977, the church established its first own station in 1986, named "Radio Restauración," with limited coverage. The story of the church venturing out into the domain of media is again a story of successful expansion and increasing presence. In 2002 coverage in San Salvador was increased with the purchase of radio frequency 98.1 FM, servicing the whole city. Two years later, the first steps to obtain media coverage in other parts of El Salvador were reached when Iglesia Elim in Santa Ana bought radio frequency 98.1 FM for the western province of Sonsonate. Efforts to increase media presence outside of the capital were consolidated in 2005 when the church purchased both a radio station (Radio 100.5FM) and a television channel (Channel 27) with full national coverage. Today, Elim's radio stations as well as television channel[33] are broadcast on the church's website (https://elim.org.sv), creating worldwide access to the church's mediatized message. Branching out into the use of social media, the church also has several Facebook pages, including an official page in name of the current general pastor. The page features, among others, reprints of the editorials that Pastor Vega writes for the well-known Salvadoran newspaper *La Prensa Gráfica*. Comiskey poignantly evokes the significance of the use of media for the growing church network in his observation that "the radio is part of Elim's DNA" (Comiskey 2004). As evangelizing tools the media increase Elim's visibility, as well as access to its message by

[33] Meanwhile the church owns three radio stations (*Gospel* at 98.1 FM; *La Estación de la Palabra* at 54 AM and *Radio Restauración* at 100.5FM) as well as one television channel (*27TV*).

literally bringing the church into people's living rooms, and by allowing them to hear sermons and church music when in transit. Moreover, people listening to the radio or watching TV at home are invited to share in the same spiritual experiences that are evoked in the space of the church. During one of the church services I attended during fieldwork, the pastor commented on a woman's miraculous recovery from cancer after listening to a prayer broadcast on one of Elim's radio stations as a powerful testimonial to the media's perceived power to "convey immediate religious experience" (Meyer 2009: 119). This example was even more striking because the woman had been in the United States when listening to the Salvadoran radio broadcast.

The use of mass media furthermore facilitates the day-to-day functioning of church operations, for example, announcing the times and places for church events. Comiskey relates how in the aftermath of the 2001 earthquakes the radio provided the only means of communication to let people know that it was not safe to congregate in the main church building for the Sunday service, and that small cell meetings would be held instead (Comiskey 2004: 133-134). From its perspective as growing transnational network, the church also benefits from mass media to help forge international presence and connectedness. For example, after the March 2016 terrorist attacks in Brussels, Belgium, where Elim has a daughter church, the church called for prayer for Belgium, and for any brothers or sisters that might have been involved. In addition, the church provided televised news updates on its website, featuring one of the brothers in Brussels. That solidarity for such a faraway place as Belgium was not per se self-evident was

witnessed by one of the responses in the comment section, asking why they should bother with prayer for Belgium when there was plenty of hardship in El Salvador.[34]

Shift in leadership: In 1995 an obstacle to the church's success story was posed when Sergio Solórzano, Elim's main leader since the church's inception in 1977, became involved in a personal scandal. As a result, one of the first decisions of the newly formed "Minister Council" ("concejo de ministros"), a governing body consisting of fifteen church leaders, was to ask pastor Sergio to take a break from his church duties. Sergio Solórzano, however, never returned to his position as Elim's general pastor and officially resigned two years later. Meanwhile, an interim pastor had been in charge of the church. In 1997, the Minister Council invited Mario Vega, at the time the main pastor of the Elim church in Santa Ana, to take on the position of Misión Cristiana Elim's general pastor.

Unlike Sergio Solórzano, a fervent preacher and charismatic leader, Pastor Vega, or, "hermano Mario" ("Brother Mario") as he is referred to in the congregation, is introverted and intellectual in orientation, with a modest demeanor. When interviewing the pastor, a journalist from the Salvadoran newspaper *El Faro* was struck by his lack of ostentatious display of status. "As Mario Vega walks in, dressed in an unassuming outfit and wearing a simple Casio watch, it is impossible not to right away notice the contrast with other well-known religious leaders in this country" (Portillo 2010). Mario's intellectual outlook is a characterizing feature of his personality and of his approach to his calling as pastor. In his rendering of Pastor Vega's life narrative, Comiskey traces Mario's love for books to early childhood. He conjures the image of a young child, who, unable to engage in the same activities as other children because of his struggles with poor health, found solace in reading (Comiskey 2004: 39-40). Mario's interest in

[34] The response that was posted by the website moderator was that Elim also engages in a monthly prayer session to stop violence in El Salvador.

books included the Bible. It was his intellectual curiosity about the Bible that ultimately led him to become evangelical. Similar to most other testimonials I encountered during fieldwork, Pastor Vega's conversion story (Portillo et al. 2010) begins with an account of personal crisis (he used drugs and had long hair), and includes a "social contingency element"[35] (Mario's cousin invited him to visit an evangelical church). But what makes Pastor Vega's narrative stand out from most others is that it all started with curiosity about a Bible passage he encountered on an evangelical leaflet. After looking up the passage in three different Bibles he determines that the evangelical rendering of the passage was more accurate than what he had been taught in his Catholic upbringing.

Typically described by others as very quiet,[36] Mario, who was involved with the Elim church since a few months after its inception in 1977, did not originally see his role in the church as that of pastor. But from the beginning, his intellectual aptitude and curiosity earned him a spot in Elim's inner circle. Early on, he wrote down the fledgling church's doctrines in a church manual. Invited to become a pastor, Mario ended up developing an instructional style of preaching, earning himself the nickname of "el maestro," (the "teacher").[37] Rather than engaging in fiery sermons, Pastor Vega tends to carefully dissect and explain Bible passages, spending time on each verse. He discusses entire Bible books with his congregation, dedicating several sermons to the same book. Mario Vega's careful study of the Bible is a significant factor in why he, more recently, has started reinterpreting the role of the evangelical church in society (personal interview), leading, as will be discussed later in this chapter, to a process of paradigmatic change in the Elim church.

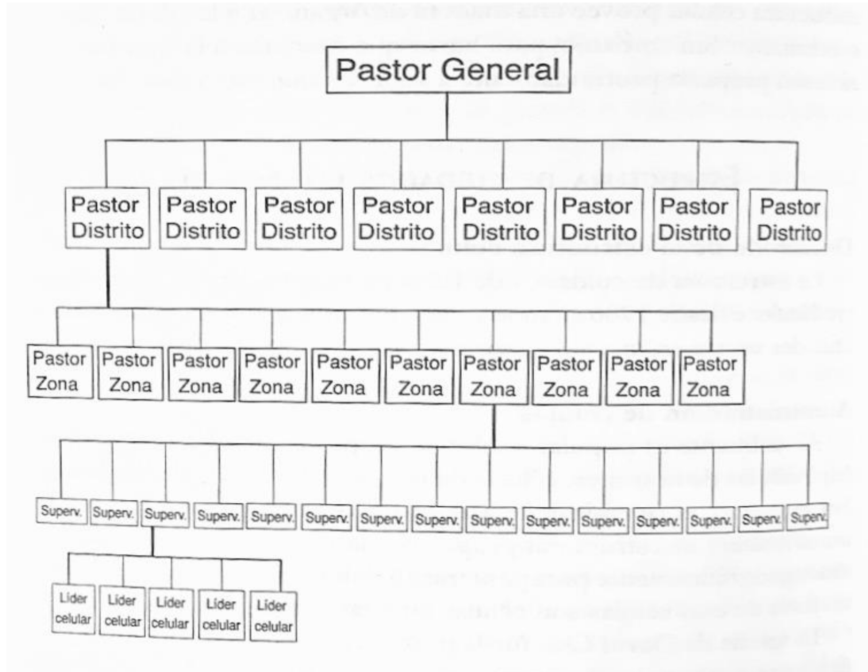
[35] This terminology is adopted from Gooren (2007).
[36] Based on personal observations during fieldwork.
[37] Fieldwork observation

*Organization: an "orderly" church*

After this overview, I will now briefly turn to a discussion of the day-to-day management of the mother church in San Salvador, informed by my own fieldwork observations, as well as by Joel Comiskey's book on the Elim church. Given that Comiskey is a North American evangelical, and missionary, who is on amicable terms with the church leadership, I am approaching his work as an example of church discourse. For Comiskey, Elim stands out because of the passion of its pastors and involved members, and, perhaps even more, because of the orderly way in which this passion is expressed. This "orderliness" is reflected in Elim's complex organization, as well as in the way church services are run, and in the way new members reorganize their lives before taking on any tasks in the church hierarchy.

Managing Elim's cellular system, involving thousands of people who meet in homes across San Salvador, is not per se the easiest feat. In order to do so, the Elim church relies on an intricate organizational system consisting of a hierarchy of pastors and lay workers and a regional division of the larger metropolitan area into nine districts (further subdivided into zones ("zonas") and sectors ("sectores"). In charge of each district is a coordinating pastor who supervises a team of assistant pastors, and who reports to the general pastor. The assistant pastors in turn oversee the work of the lay members who run the cellular system. Each cell meeting requires a "host" or "anfitrion," who makes his or her home available to hold the meetings, and a "leader," the member that is in charge of the cell group and leads meetings. "Leaders" report to their "supervisor," the lay member who oversees a group of cells and reports to one of the assistant pastors. The roles of leader and supervisor are unpaid positions that can be occupied by both male and female members.

Table 1: Church Hierarchy (Comiskey 2004: 102)




The central purpose of cell meetings is to achieve evangelical growth. Cell leaders are tasked with the mission to draw in new members. Once the cell counts fifteen members, the cell can be divided to form two smaller groups. To facilitate that all cells in this ever-growing network operate uniformly as part of the Elim community, procedures are in place to select, train and guide cell leaders and supervisors. Only those members who have been with the church for a minimum of six months and who have been baptized in the Spirit (i.e. have spoken in tongues) are eligible to become leader. Also, members who are living together without being married, a common occurrence in El Salvador, have to first obtain a formal marriage license. Referred to as "putting your situation in order," it reflects that cell leaders are expected to embody "orderliness" as Christian, and as representative of the church. For many, it is also an illustration that being Christian is not without challenge, given that the legal fees involved in obtaining a marriage license often pose a real obstacle. Before the member can take on the role of cell leader, he or she receives formal training in a four-week course (meeting once a week) on the function and

organization of the cell meetings. Beyond leading the weekly cell meeting, tasks of the cell leader include organizing a weekly planning meeting, doing evangelical outreach in the neighborhood, compiling statistical reports of cell attendance, and collecting money. Once appointed, the new cell leader is not left to his or her own devices. Expected to teach a Bible lesson in the meeting, leaders follow the lesson plans outlined in cell guides, published every three months by the church. Supervisors oversee the work of cell leaders, occasionally sitting in on cell meetings. The latter are in turn subject to selection and guidance procedures. The assistant pastor determines which leaders in his area are particularly suited to be supervisors. His choice is informed by how well cell leaders do in expanding their cell groups. Overseeing the work of the supervisors, the assistant pastor organizes a weekly meeting with all supervisors under his care.

Managing the cellular system is furthermore facilitated by the collection of statistical information. While training and supervising volunteer labor contributes to making sure all cell meetings are in sync, the collection of statistical data helps evaluate if weekly goals are being met. Each week, the cell leader fills out a form with information on attendance (of both members and "friends," or unconverted visitors), conversions, reconciliations of estranged members, baptisms, and baptisms in the Spirit, as well as on the money collected.[38] Both the host and cell leaders sign the form, before passing it on to their supervisor, who provides the assistant pastor with a synthesis of the information received. Next, the assistant pastor reports to the coordinating pastor, who then finally provides the general pastor with a summary of all statistical information collected in his district that week.

[38] Members are asked to make a general contribution as well as give money towards renting a bus to help facilitate transportation to church.

The theme of “orderliness,” evoked by the church’s solid organizational structure, is furthermore reflected in how church services are run. Cell leaders are invited to take on additional roles or “privilegios,” including that of “diacono.” The latter role involves making sure that church services are run smoothly and without any disturbance.[39] Diaconos not only participate in tasks such as collecting tithes during the service, but also monitor the behavior of the churchgoer, sanctioning visitors who are in some way or other “out of order.” While diaconos contribute to keeping the service a safe space (keeping an eye on people who might do harm to others), they also make explicit the implied code of conduct churchgoers have to comply with. For example, diaconos make sure no one crosses the threshold of the church during the opening prayer. They supervise how people dress, how people hold themselves during church worship and so on. During fieldwork, I was admonished twice: one time I was told to close my eyes during the worship part of the service (when some churchgoers experience gifts) and the other time I was told to adjust my skirt that had crept up a bit.

While the purpose of this section was to introduce the Elim church to the reader in a discussion of its history and organization, it also highlights the themes of “countable expansion” and “orderliness” implied in church discourse. As we will see later on in the dissertation, these themes come to inform some of the opinions and experiences of church members. For example, in response to the question of why they decided to choose Elim over other evangelical churches, members commonly pointed at Elim’s “orderliness” was a common answer. Recent changes with regard to the church dress code (commented on in chapter four) are described by one of the members I interviewed as a sign of encroaching disorder. Also, as will be discussed in later chapters, some members are critical of what they perceive as the emphasis on quantity of

[39] Other roles pertain to helping in the bookstore or with the media system.

conversion over quality since less opportunity is believed to be available to guide new members in their growth as Christians.

### 3.3 Holistic mission in El Salvador

*Introduction*

In the official church narrative two quite significant changes are mentioned: the adoption of a cellular system in the eighties and a switch in leadership in the nineties. When starting fieldwork, I soon learned that the church was in the midst of a third significant change. Under the impetus of the leadership, the church was undergoing a paradigmatic shift in terms of its theological outlook. While not abandoning Elim's core beliefs, a blend of Pentecostalism and Calvinism, the church leadership now espouses a holistic view of evangelicalism, akin to integral mission, a progressive theological movement born in South America in the seventies. Although evangelization is still a core mission of the church, the understanding of what is implied in that has shifted. While before, the focus was on the eternal salvation of souls, there is now also more attention to the needs in the here and now. Underpinning this changing perspective is a re-evaluation of the material in relation to the spiritual. Implied in this theological reorientation is a reinterpretation of the responsibilities of individual Christians, as well as the institution of the church. With regard to the latter, the most noticeable change in this respect is the view that the Church needs to take on the responsibility of being a prophetic voice, decrying the ills of society. As such, it is not surprising that some pastors and members have had difficulty accepting this quite radical rethinking of what is expected of them as Christians and church leaders. After a brief introduction to the larger movement of integral mission, I will turn to church discourse to

examine how this holistic understanding of evangelicalism is envisioned in the Salvadoran context, and Elim specifically. I will also examine if a theological vision that calls for Christian involvement in society is still compatible with a spiritual emphasis on individual well-being, as is typically associated with evangelical churches in Latin America.

*Misión Integral: evangelical perspective on liberation themes*

In December 1970 a group of evangelical theologians, meeting in Cochabamba, Bolivia, established the *Latin American Theological Fraternity* (FTL). In search of a contextual evangelical theology that would engage with social and political injustice in Latin America, while maintaining the central authority of the Scriptures, the early members of the Fraternity (among whom was the Salvadoran theologian Emilio Antonio Nuñez[40]) developed a holistic theology of mission, referred to as *Misión Integral*. This was a deliberate effort to move away from the predominant North American-inspired view that privileged individual salvation and the life in the hereafter (Clawson 2012: 791-792). In the FTL's perspective, God's purpose involves "reconciliation between God and humanity; …between people of different nations, of different genders and …between humanity and the creation" (Heaney 2008:154). Moreover, in their reading of the Bible, God created men as inseparable units of body and soul, without intending for a hierarchy of spirit over matter (Núñez, cited in Heaney 2008: 139). Following this interpretation, any mission true to the Bible should be holistic, affecting the spiritual and the material, the personal and the social, the private and the public. In the words of René Padilla,

[40] Other founding members were Samuel Escobar, René Padilla, Peter Savage, Pedro Arana, Orlando Costas and Rolando Gutierrez (Clawson 2012: 791). While the famous Protestant liberation theologian José Míguez Bonino was not involved with the FTL in its early stage, he is now engaged with as a "highly respected contributor to evangelical discussion" (Heaney 2008: 4).

one of the leading voices of Misión Integral, a holistic mission "crosses not only geographical frontiers but also cultural, racial, economic, social, and political boundaries with the objective of transforming human life in all its dimensions, according to the purpose of God, and to empower humanity to enjoy the fullness of life which God wishes to give" (Padilla 2003, cited in Heaney 2008: 239).

With the FTL formulating a contextual theology around the same time that Catholic (and liberal Protestant) liberationists were similarly looking for "a new way [of doing] theology" (Gutierrez [1988], cited in Heaney 2008: 75), both approaches share thematic commonality. Examples of shared liberation themes include the notion of God's Kingdom as "already" (witnessing to the deity's intervention in history) and "not yet;" structural sin; integral notions of liberation and salvation (i.e. reaching beyond the realm of the spiritual); a Christocentric approach; and a prophetic role for the Church in denouncing injustice (Heaney 2008). A central difference is that while both approaches seek to engage with the socio-political context, the evangelical contextual theologians seek to integrate the dimension of the personal in ways that the Catholic liberationists do not.

The centrality of the personal in the contextual evangelical approach and the way this stands in productive tension with the social (in terms of interpersonal relations, social structures, culture, and the environment) is perhaps best exemplified in the FTL's understanding of conversion. For Latin American evangelicals, individual conversion is central to any concept of mission (ibidem: 224). A necessary condition for salvation, conversion takes place when the individual accepts God and His call for repentance. In the FTL's view, it is both an event as well as an ongoing process of reshaping one's life in Christ's example (Costas 1989, cited in Heaney

2008: 144), and implies an unmistakable social dimension. In the words of FTL theologian Padilla,

> …[W]ithout repentance, there is no salvation…Salvation is man's return to God, but it is at the same time *also* man's return to his neighbor…Repentance is much more than a private affair between the individual and God. It is the complete reorientation of life in the world—among men—in response to the work of God in Jesus Christ (Padilla 1982, cited in Heaney 2008: 224).

Following from the FTL's perspective of sin as both personal and social, conversion as repentance furthermore implies a stance against social injustice. The reorientation of one's life in response to "authentic" conversion involves accepting the responsibility to enact "the ethics of God's Kingdom" (Escobar 1975, cited in Heaney 2008: 214). Individual Christians are tasked with changing society by demonstrating "a way of life that is new in family relations, business, citizenship, and every area of life" (ibidem 2008), and that is informed by the values of the Kingdom.

This holistic view also bears on those activities that in Latin America are more typically associated with Christian responsibilities, such as evangelical outreach and prayer. In a holistic approach, the evangelizing Christian is expected to be sensitive to the person's overall needs, and aware of how these needs are shaped by the larger socio-political context. For Samuel Escobar, any Christian engaging in evangelizing should say: "I care about your oppression. I am with you in your search for a way out, and I can show you a deeper and most decisive deliverance that may help you to find a better way out of your social and political oppression" (Escobar, cited in Heaney 2008). A similar shift in attitude is brought to the practice of prayer. Acknowledging that most people pray for God's intervention vis-à-vis concerns in their personal lives, René Padilla

advocates for, what he refers to as, “political prayer” that goes beyond individual concerns but engages instead with the problems and concerns of society (Padilla 2009: 58-60).[41]

The role of the church consists in announcing the Gospel in an integral way so as to transform individual people into agents of the Kingdom who then in turn establish a transformed church community. A contextual approach calls for a communication of the Gospel that underscores the pertinence of its message for contemporary society and the local cultural context. This involves taking a critical stance. To better serve people in all their needs, it is necessary to understand how those needs are curbed by societal structures and cultural constraints. Inspired by Christ, the Church is summoned to take on a prophetic voice, decrying society’s ills. For Padilla, the evangelical and the prophetic functions of the church are closely intertwined:

> The church is called here and now to be what God intends the whole of society to be. In its prophetic ministry, it lays open the evils that frustrate the purpose of God in society; in its evangelization it seeks to integrate men into that purpose of God the full realization of which is to take place in the kingdom to come. Consequently, wherever the church fails as a prophet it also fails as an evangelist (Padilla 1985, cited in Heaney 2008: 228).

Aware of the fraught Latin American context, the FTL acknowledges that this interpretation of mission requires courage and perseverance given that it almost inevitably implies conflict with those who seek to maintain the status quo (ibidem).

*Misión Integral in the Elim church*

Given Mario Vega’s intellectual openness, as well as commitment to the Bible, it is perhaps not surprising that under his leadership the church adopted a new direction. Although he was previously committed to a more traditional evangelical model, his careful reading of the

[41] Padilla sees prayer as a complement and not as a replacement for other types of action (possibly within the secular domain) that further the values of the Kingdom (justice, peace, reconciliation) (Padilla 2009: 58-60).

Bible as well as other works of theology persuaded him of the social relevance of the Gospel. While I only interacted personally with Pastor Vega on a handful of occasions, I was able to schedule a meeting with him in his church office for an interview. On the topic of which works influenced him, he commented:

> In this time, I was changing…in the beginning, there were books, well, in El Salvador there was only a bookstore with Christian materials and it did not have many books. There were some editorials from South America that published on themes of the church and society, some books of the Catholic Church that I could get hold of…, getting to know the Latin American Theological Fraternity was a great contribution to the maturation of my [changing] thoughts, but not only what was published by the FTL, also other editorials[42] (interview with Mario Vega; translation MP).

Here Pastor Vega acknowledges that the FTL influenced his reading of the Bible, but he does not cite them as the main shaping force of his changing thoughts, nor does he ever call Elim's new orientation an example of Misión Integral. Any explicit reference to this movement in this section and the rest of the dissertation is therefore based on my personal interpretation of the theological themes I discerned. Although I never heard anyone invoke the name of integral mission in the Elim church, it was explained to me over and over that the church now followed a more holistic approach. True to his reputation of "el maestro," the pastor shares his interpretation with others in careful analysis of various books of the Bible. Moreover, the holistic approach is taught in CETI, a series of Bible study classes. CETI consists of four modules, teaching Christian responsibilities in various areas of life (specifically church, family, work and society). I was told that CETI had been "banned" to Apopa, in district nine, rather than being offered in the main

[42] "En el tiempo he ido cambiando…….. al principio, eran libros….bueno al Salvador solo había una librería de materiales cristianos en el país y no traía muchos libros. Había algunas editoriales de Suramérica que publicaba temas de iglesia y sociedad, algunos libros católicos que pude tener, pero al llegar a San Salvador, el conocer lo que era la Fraternidad Teológica Latinoamericana fue una gran contribución a una maduración de ese pensamiento, y tener acceso a los libros que ellos publican, pero no sólo los que publica la Fraternidad Teológica sino que también de otras editoriales."

church building, for being too controversial. This hints at the fact that the holistic paradigm was not that easily accepted by everyone, with a number of people leaving the church. In this section, I examine how it stands in tension with the previously prevalent model, and how it is envisioned in the specific context of El Salvador. For this analysis, I turn to the General Pastor's series of sermons on the Book of Genesis,[43] as well as his editorials in the Salvadoran newspaper *La Prensa Grafica* (also published on the church's website).

Reaffirming the notion that for evangelicals mission starts with individual transformation through conversion, the dimension of the personal is foregrounded in both models circulating in Elim. Change is conceptualized first and foremost in terms of the individual's accepting of God. In the pastor's words, "[m]an can never feel fully realized if he does not have a real relationship with God." In both views, conversion results in the moral reshaping of the self, pivoting on notions of self-restraint and responsibility. But, especially in the newer view, this is conceptualized as a process. As Pastor Vega puts it, "transformation does not happen overnight, it is not the case that you convert today and that tomorrow you wake up as Christ." Implied is a shift in the understanding of agency. Rather than miraculously being changed by the deity, the converting individual engages in an ongoing and quite challenging process of moral self-fashioning.

While foregrounding the personal, Pastor Vega, similar to the FTL theologians, calls awareness to how the intimate should stand in productive tension with the social. He reminds his congregants that a genuine relationship with God implies an ethical obligation towards one neighbor, based on the belief that every human being is created in the image of God. Implied is the FTL's emphasis on the universality of mankind, rather than liberation theologians' call for an

[43] My analysis is based on 120 fully transcribed sermons on Genesis.

option for the poor. "It does not matter," Vega says, "if [your neighbor] is rich or poor, educated or illiterate." In the Salvadoran context of religious polarization, it is worth pointing out that non-evangelicals are also included in Pastor Vega's understanding of "neighbor." In one of the sermons in the Genesis series, Pastor Vega shared the story of how he was watching a documentary about a Christian organization that works with the rural poor, teaching them how to be self-sustaining. One of the impoverished families featured was Catholic. An evangelical who had been watching the documentary with Pastor Vega said that he did not think that this family should be the recipient of help. In response, the pastor told him that these people too are human beings, created in the image of God, and therefore worthy of help. Not doing so would be disparaging God. By reminding the congregants that loving God implies treating fellow human beings with dignity and respect, Pastor Vega responds to the concern that individual Christians may get too absorbed in the "I-You"-dimension of their relationship with God, focusing too much on hoped for benefits rather than responsibilities. "Ask not what God can do for you, but ask what you can do for [other people]," he admonishes. He moreover counters the view--previously prevalent in the Elim church--that Christian responsibility for the other primarily pertains to the spiritual salvation of his or her soul. This is clear in the example of the aforementioned impoverished Catholic family. For Pastor Vega, Christian care for this family should not be limited to evangelical outreach with no sensitivity to how this family's poverty undermines their ability to live a dignified life.

Invoking God's cultural command that man has to protect and cultivate the earth, the pastor furthermore explains that the Christian concept of care extends to all aspects of the

creation. Called to protect the earth, Christians[44] and the evangelical Church should take up a protagonist role in the preservation of the environment, rather than thinking that this is part of politics and therefore no concern of theirs. He asks his congregants:

> How many of you do not have problems of drinkable water? This is a problem that you are living because of the destruction of the environment…Perhaps you say: "Oh, I have a water tank at home." But, what about your neighbor? "Oh," you say, "but they are not Christians" But that is cruel, because they are human beings too.

In giving concrete examples such as the above mentioned pervasive problem of lack of drinkable water the pastor shows how lack of care for the environment affects people's daily lives and is imbricated with structural injustice. Translating God's command to cultivate the earth to a more contemporary notion of labor, the pastor explains that all types of work, be it manual or intellectual, are ways to obey God. Salvadoran Christians should seek involvement in secular domains such as those of culture or politics, rather than shying away from them, with the intention of bringing change by enacting Christian ethics. This implies a radical departure from the previously prevalent notion in Elim that believers should primarily focus on their personal spiritual health. Church members, the pastor explains, "[need to] break with the logic that because Christ will come soon, [Christians] don't have any responsibility for the environment, or don't need to pursue education to participate in society." An integral approach to the Gospel then prescribes that Christians serve God both inside and outside the walls of the church building.

Translating his teachings to the contemporary Salvadoran context, the pastor engages with the pressing problem of violence, which, he says, "[has] become the main problem for Salvadorans, surpassing the economic difficulties of high unemployment and the institutional crisis" (Vega, May 9, 2013). Engaging with the notion that conversion implies moral

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[44] Pastor Vega clarifies that God called all human beings to protect the earth, but especially Christians.

transformation, characterized by a new sense of self-restraint and responsibility, Pastor Vega talks about the importance of anger management. In a discussion of how to navigate a cityscape with ubiquitous criminal violence, he states that while Christians (as well as other Salvadorans) may not be able to avoid encounters with violence, they do have a choice on how to respond. Pleading for the Christian ideal of a stance of non-violence, he nevertheless acknowledges that not everyone is going to be able or even willing to adopt this stance. This is a very personal decision, he points out, that every Christian needs to take for him- or herself, depending on "how much [he or she] really wants to resemble Christ." Putting this decision into everyday practice is obviously quite difficult since it requires the ongoing monitoring of one's emotions and behaviors.[45] "Walking through the streets of San Salvador, says the pastor, "is an excellent exercise for the soul." Not responding with violence not only helps prevent the escalation of violence and physical harm, but it also serves as an opportunity to preach the Word to others through the example of one's everyday behavior. The general pastor takes the notion of responsibility with respect to violence even a step further. When seeing any type of abuse, a Christian should ideally intervene. For example, in relation to domestic violence he tells his congregants that should they hear their neighbor abuse his wife, they should ideally go knock on that neighbor's door and ask him to discontinue the abuse. While the focus on anger management is not unique to the holistic approach, intervening in abuse is an example of the notion that Christians should not only announce the Good News but also denounce sin.

[45] Although this is difficult, it is not impossible, because some leeway is allowed for moments where the Christian is not able to restrain these negative emotions and behaviors. The pastor states that if you end up losing your patience and becoming angry, it does not mean that your decision to be non-violent has become void. The idea is to acknowledge your mistake and to move on from there.

In his newspaper editorials, Pastor Vega takes seriously the prophetic function of the church, offering critical analysis of the ills of Salvadoran society. Taking on the problem of gang violence, he holds a plea for a more comprehensive approach, privileging prevention rather than repression. He points at the failure of zero-tolerance plans like Mano Dura and Super Mano Dura to yield any meaningful improvements (Vega, February 13, 2013; March 1, 2013). Counter to the media's demonization of gang members, the pastor aims to recapture their humanity. Rather than primarily reading gang members' violence as the consequence of individual sin, he contextualizes their behavior by pointing at the shaping force of structural sin. He comments:

> You can't mitigate the problem of violence if you don't mitigate the roots that produce it. Thinking that [this problem] stems from the minds of a group of sinister gang leaders that need to be imprisoned or eliminated is [a failure to] understand the nature of the problem. Violence is produced by the profound conditions of exclusion that affect millions in this country (Vega, February 12, 2016)

He furthermore argues that in response to conditions such as poverty and familial disintegration vulnerable youth develop feelings of humiliation and, in search of an alternative way to find self-respect and appreciation, become implicated in gang life (Vega, December 13, 2012; January 2, 2013; January 10, 2013). In his view, churches play an important role in countering gang violence. First of all, gangs consider genuine conversion the only acceptable reason for abandoning the group without retaliation. Moreover, once in the church, former gang members have access to a new social network to help them rehabilitate (Vega, May 17, 2012). Reflecting the call for a broader interpretation of Christian responsibilities, Pastor Vega also sees a role for the church in prevention and reinsertion programs. He, however, stipulates that churches cannot do this alone (Vega, June 5, 2012), and that individual conversion, though an important factor of change, will never lead to a complete stop of violence if the underlying structural causes remain unaddressed (Vega, March 10, 2014).

In the volatile context of contemporary El Salvador, taking on the responsibility of being a prophetic voice can be quite risky. Citing the poet Gioconda Belli, the pastor says: “God says: Love your neighbor like yourself. In my country, the one who loves his neighbor jeopardizes his life (Vega, September 17, 2015). Pastor Vega is careful to point out that followers, while called to be agents of the Kingdom in all realms of life, should engage only in those activities that they are willing to do, and that they feel ready for. This is explicitly dealt with in his discussions of victimhood and forgiveness. An advocate of restorative justice, the pastor nevertheless affirms that nobody can force someone to forgive a perpetrator of violence because this always has to be a personal choice. He furthermore engages with the notion that some atrocities may be beyond the human capacity for forgiveness (Vega, November 1, 2013; November 28, 2013). While “authentic conversion” implies enacting the values of “forgiveness, reconciliation, love and appreciation for human life” (Vega, September 17, 2015), and accepting Christian responsibilities (holistically defined), how exactly to do that remains a personal choice. The subject implied is one endowed with free will, and therefore responsible for his own actions and decisions. In this respect, the pastor comments in one of his sermons on Genesis: “Many people ask me what we should do but it is not I who gives the recipe, you need to do it.” He then gives the example of a church member who started an initiative to clean up his local neighborhood. Another example, provided in an editorial, involves the story of the Honduran evangelical “Mama Luz,” who opened her home to gang members seeking reform through conversion. The main point of the story is that while Mama Luz was working with a number of constraints, she did what she could to make a difference (Vega, July 5, 2012).

The tension between the individual and the social plays out at different levels. While individual Christians are tasked with deciding for themselves if and how to be agents of the

Kingdom, this does not mean that they per se have to shoulder their responsibilities alone. First and foremost, they are supported in having a personal relationship with God. Secondly, the emphasis on personal agency does not imply that individuals should not engage in organized outreach or other relevant group activities. As will be discussed later in the dissertation, within the Elim church a group of professionals organizes free medical care on outreach trips to more rural areas. At the collective level of the church, monthly prayer sessions are organized, asking God to intervene in the pervasive violence. Moreover, the effects of integral conversion should extend beyond the personal level and ultimately affect society. Pastor Vega exhorts:

> If we are going to be evangelical spiritualists, without having understood the gospel in its entirety, then El Salvador will be the same, a little bit more hypocritical but if we live the gospel integrally we will make the Kingdom of God advance, [starting with] ourselves, rather than only having the numbers of evangelicals increase.

The shift to an evangelical model akin to the FTL's Misión Integral is an ongoing process in the Elim church and elsewhere in El Salvador. The reorientation towards the world leaves some members and pastors wondering if the dimension of personal spiritual well-being is not undermined by the inclusion of a social dimension outside the domain of the church. In the next section, I will take up this concern in a discussion of the Pentecostal dimension of the Elim church.

*Redefining Pentecostalism*

As soon as I started fieldwork, I heard rumors about how several of the pastors were discontent with the shift in focus. Integrating myself in the church, not only as a foreign anthropologist, but also as a Greek teacher, I was able to conduct interviews with almost all of the coordinating pastors. Typically, they would tell me that while the shift was controversial for

some, they themselves were fully on board with it. A little bit disappointed about what I perceived as self-censoring, I finally talked with a pastor who was open about finding it difficult to adjust to the new emphasis. “Is this church still Pentecostal?” he asked, almost whispering. Non-Pentecostal myself, I have to admit to feeling a little baffled at first by his doubts. Although a theological blend between Calvinism and Pentecostalism, the Elim church is much more tangibly Pentecostal than most of the other churches I visited in San Salvador. The first time I attended the church service, I was in fact quite overwhelmed by this spiritual dimension. Many of the congregants cry during the service. Initially mostly reading this as an expression of human suffering, I was especially moved by it. While not intending to offer a full discussion of all theological aspects that are part of Elim’s official doctrine, I will discuss its Pentecostal dimension as I observed it during fieldwork. This discussion will be framed by the four Christological themes Donald Dayton identifies as defining of Pentecostalism, namely “Christ as Savior, as Baptizer with the Holy Spirit, as Healer, and as Coming King” (Dayton 1987: 173). In my analysis of Gifts, I will pay special attention to the meanings people attribute to them in their own personal experience. I will furthermore argue that while all four themes identified by Dayton are still present in the Elim church, there is a distinct shift in how these themes are conceptualized.

I will first turn to a discussion of Baptism in the Holy Spirit as manifested during the church service since the spiritual gift of glossolalia, or speaking in tongues, is generally considered the most characteristic Pentecostal trait (Dayton 1987: 15). In Elim, the church service typically goes for two hours, with the first hour devoted to worship (“adoración”), and the second hour to the sermon. During worship the congregants sing popular Christian songs, led by a Christian music band. First, the songs are quite cheerful, but gradually the tone becomes

more solemn. Anyone present is expected to close their eyes, while congregants start speaking in tongues, with many of them crying. After about ten minutes worship comes to a climactic end when here and there someone in the crowd engages in prophecy. Facilitating that the entire congregation can hear it, one of the diaconos hands over a microphone to the person having the prophecy. Taking this message as coming directly from God, members individually determine what it means for them. In order to be able to take on "privilegios" in the church members need to have experienced glossolalia, as sign of having been baptized in the Spirit. The gift of prophecy, however, is much rarer, and is not a requirement to take on any roles in the church.

Gifts are spiritually as well as emotionally very meaningful, as many of the people I talked to explained to me. The act of crying in particular communicated an emotional dimension to me. Associating tears with sadness, I soon learned that during worship they implied the exact opposite. Crying was described as an expression of joy ("gozo") and happiness ("alegria") for experiencing the presence of God, while turning inward. Interviewees commonly described how they became less aware of their surroundings, focusing on the intimacy they felt with God. The union with God is perceived to have emotional effects. People commonly described how they would emerge from the experience feeling relieved of their everyday stresses and worries. One of my interviewees, a woman, comments:

> For me this moment is special…this moment is liberating. You say: "God, take my being," and you are freed of the burden you carry. You have the opportunity to put it in the hands of the Lord, to worship Him, to let you go what you have inside. For this reason, I have never had to look for the help of a pastor, because in this moment of worship I have always given my burdens to the Lord. That they see me cry, I don't care about that.

The personal encounter with God implied here suggests that during adoración the church becomes a hybrid space, at once public and private (cf Cucchiari 1990). The intimacy of the moment is carefully safeguarded by the diaconos, who supervise the space, making sure nobody

undermines its safety and "orderliness." While gifts are deeply personal, their manifestation in the church is also regulated by the implied normativity of how congregants are supposed to act and hold their bodies. For example, diaconos check to see if there are people who fail to close their eyes during worship, or if some people become too exuberant in their expressions.[46] The epithet of "Holy Rollers" sometimes used in reference to Pentecostals (Peeters 2003) definitely does not apply to Elim congregants. The crying never gets hysterical or too loud, people don't sway their bodies, or dance, and they definitely don't fall to the ground. One could argue that in the more recent holistic orientation there has been a slight shift in the underlying normative pattern in that there is more patience towards people who don't experience gifts. In one of my many conversations with Pastor Josué he told me how before members would be criticized for not crying in the church, meaning that their hearts were not susceptible, or that their way of life was not "clean." As was discussed in the previous section, transformation is now approached as a process rather than a miraculous intervention. So, if people are not ready yet to open their hearts, or if their life style is not transformed yet, they need to be given more time, rather than judged. Moreover, there is more of a sense that if pressured about experiencing gifts, which, if genuine, originate with the divine, people might respond by displaying emotions or actions that are human in origin.

The themes of "Christ the Saviour" (referring to conversion), "the Healer," and "the Coming King," are also still pervasively present in Elim, although slightly modified in emphasis. As was discussed in the previous section, conversion is of central importance in an evangelical understanding of mission, holistic or otherwise. The main difference is that while traditionally,

[46] This is based on a personal fieldwork observation. During the many church services, I attended, I always made sure to close my eyes. The one time I did not do so, someone approached me and admonished me to close my eyes.

transformation through conversion is seen as an event, it is now seen as both an initial event and an ongoing process. Transformation is seen as a dialectical encounter between the Divine and the human being, in which God reaches out, but in which the human also has the responsibility to actively answer that call, and to decide how to follow Christ. Also alluded to in the previous section is the shifting understanding of “Christ the Coming King.” The difference in this respect is the changed attitude with regard to how best to prepare for Christ’s Second Coming. Because the Kingdom is viewed to be both “not yet” and “already,” individual Christians are tasked with advancing it further, rather than withdrawing from the world. Moreover, it is brought up that nobody knows when Christ will come. Meanwhile Christians have to take responsibility for the well-being of their own lives, and express for others as well as for God’s creation. Last but not least, Elim’s followers still firmly believe in the possibility of miraculous healing, and continue to pray and hope for this. In an earlier section, the example was given of a woman, living in the United States, who fully recovered from cancer after listening to a pastor praying on an Elim radio channel. The shift persists in that there is a new acceptance of also seeking the care of a medical doctor, trained in the bio-medical tradition. Pastor Josué pointed this out to me in the very beginning of my stay with Elim, when he showed me a small clinic on the Elim premises during my initial orientation of the premises. This acceptance is also brought into testimonials of miraculous recoveries, in which the closing note often is that medical exams declared all disease gone.

### 3.4 Concluding thoughts

In the first part of this chapter, we got to know Elim in San Salvador as the well-organized headquarters of a growing transnational evangelical mission. For much of its four-

decade history, its main purpose was to "save souls and to establish more churches." As was discussed in the previous section, this involved a moral hierarchy of the spiritual over the material. References to materiality in the church's narrative of its history generally serve as reminder of evangelical success. For example, the countable bodies of the many people present during mass evangelical events signify the increasing number of "saved souls" in El Salvador. In the more holistic view, the body is no longer subservient to the soul. While evangelization is still a central goal, its scope becomes more comprehensive. In the words of Misión Integral theologian René Padilla, "there is no place for statistics on "how many souls die without Christ every minute" if they do not take into account how many of those who die are dying of hunger" (Padilla, cited in Heaney 2008: 225). For Latin American evangelicals, the body, as locus of sinful temptation, is a marker of individual sin. In the holistic approach, it moreover also serves as a signifier for structural sin. Evangelization then should respond to both dimensions of sin, and ultimately not only lead to individual liberation from sin but also that of society.

The revaluation of the material has ramifications for the conceptualization of Christian subjectivity. Called to further the ethics of the Kingdom, Christians should not solely look inward, focused on the self and on the life within the church. Holistically defined, conversion involves the reorientation of the self towards God, and, implied in this, a reorientation as well towards the other, and towards the creation in its entirety. This, as was discussed, redefines Christian responsibilities and invites Christians to take a stance against social injustice. Pastor Mario emphasized in his sermons on Genesis that this had to be a personal choice, and depended on how much one wanted to emulate Christ. This more outward orientation does not have to stand in contrast with a complementary emphasis on individual spiritual well-being. As we saw in the brief discussion of Pentecostal gifts, the personal experience of being touched by God

imbues the individual with spiritual and emotional benefits. The Christian subject that emerges in Elim's version of contextual theology is at once receptive and responsive to the Divine. In order to receive gifts, we saw that members are expected to "open their hearts," as well as "live a clean life." We also saw that before making any choice to become an agent of the Kingdom, one has to be receptive for God's call to repent (and convert).[47]

Implied in Elim's understanding of the Christian subject is a reconceptualization of the notion of discontinuity, a central concept in Pentecostalism cross-culturally. As will be discussed in the next chapter, Pentecostal conversion is generally conceptualized as radical rupture, with the effect of relocating the convert in space and time. Intuited in the fact that in Elim's contextual theology converts are asked to engage with society, and that change through conversion is in part attributed to human agency, is that transformation is conceptualized as more gradual.

Often referring to "authentic" conversion as motor of actual change for individual Salvadorans but also for the nation, Pastor Vega refers to the type of conversion that incorporates a holistic view on what it means to be Christian. Such authentic conversion, while built on a personal relationship with God, implies care for the other, as well as care for the creation. This is a continuing effort made in response to having accepted God in one's life. In the next chapters of this dissertation, I will examine how church discourse on authentic conversion plays out ethnographically.

[47] As was discussed, conversion is viewed as turning away from sin.

## Chapter four:

## It is not easy to be a Christian: Pentecostal transformation in El Salvador

### 4.1 Introduction

Brother Aaron is a particularly popular pastor in the Elim Church. Extraverted and funny, he often spices up his sermons with amusing anecdotes that make the congregants break out into loud laughter. Because of his lively style of preaching, Brother Aaron is particularly able to connect with the crowd. Not only is there always a lot of laughter, there are also usually about thirty to forty people who come forward at the end of the service to accept Christ. Imagine therefore my surprise when he told me, while sharing his testimonial with me, that before converting he had been very introverted and shy. I may even have laughed when he said it. He said that he had low self-esteem because he had grown up in an abusive household, with an aggressive and negligent father towards whom he felt hostility. But the turning point came when, on Saturday, October 28, 1979, at the age of sixteen, he became Born Again in the Elim church, where, as he says, he was welcomed with love. His conversion, Brother Aaron asserted, brought about profound transformation. He started talking and dressing differently, and wearing his hair in a different way. His inner life changed as well because instead of hatred, he now felt joy, happiness and peace. His lack of self-confidence was overcome and he turned into the extravert he is today. He is still far from perfect, he admits. He keeps on changing a little bit every day, but his life was fundamentally turned around the day he became Born Again.

While listening to Brother Aaron's testimonial I was touched by some of the deeply personal aspects of his life he was recounting, but nevertheless I was also struck by the similarities of his testimonial to that of many other Pentecostal converts in El Salvador and

elsewhere. As anthropologist Manuela Canton points out, testimonials are a standardized genre of discourse that serve a number of purposes other than just rendering a person's experience (Canton, cited in Gooren 2007: 57) As didactic stories they are instrumental in evangelization and socialization of new members of the group. Central to Pentecostal conversion narratives is the notion of individual transformation. Brother Aaron's story of accepting Christ is not only one of spiritual redemption, but also involves a number of effects in the here and now. The abuse he suffered by his biological relatives is countered by the love he receives from his brothers and sisters in Christ. Previously sad and shy he turns into a charismatic extravert.

During my fieldwork, I learned that for my informants individual transformation was not only personally significant but was also the only viable way to change El Salvador. Interpreting the country's ongoing struggles as the result of a larger cosmic battle, my informants shared the view that God would do His work by changing one individual at a time. Faced with the fact that despite Pentecostal growth indices of violence have not gone down, several interviewees told me that this is because some converts do not "properly" change. As a first step towards analyzing how individual transformation may foster social change, I will examine in this chapter what individual transformation looks like in El Salvador, and in the Elim church specifically. Accepting that Pentecostal transformation, though central in the religion's cosmology everywhere, is culturally malleable I want to establish the shaping force of the Salvadoran context. Prompted by the notion that for my informants some converts simply do not change in the way they are expected to, I will furthermore examine how the very notion of rupture is conceptualized (aiming to take into account the possible differences between discourse and everyday experience of Pentecostal transformation).

## 4.2 Literature

Individual transformation through conversion is a central aspect of Pentecostal cosmology across cultural settings (Robbins 2004). In the Pentecostal cosmological view, this transformative "rupture in the self" (Burdick 1993) takes place when the convert accepts God and turns from a creature of God into one of His children. It is an ontological change that is not only a necessary condition for eternal salvation, but, as we saw in Brother Aaron's testimonial, also is seen to have effects in the here and now. In conversion narratives a sharp distinction is made between the sinfulness and suffering of the pre-conversion past, and the superior moral quality of the post-conversion present (Birman 2007; Carozzi 2007). Transformation is conceived of in temporal as well as spatial terms as the convert is depicted to make a break with his pre-conversion past when crossing the threshold from "world" to "church." Newly adopted ascetic practices ("talking and dressing differently" for Brother Aaron) serve as tangible markers of membership in a new community (the "church"). They are examples of "work of the self on the self" (Marshall 2009: 129), practices of moral self-reform that, as Patricia Birman observes in Brazil, seek to "reveal another ethic…[contrasting] the believers as different from others" (Birman 2007: 118).

*Cultural adaptability*

While this general dualistic scheme of discontinuity is preserved across cultural contexts, the notion of transformation, as other core Pentecostal doctrines and beliefs (Robbins 2004), engages with and adapts to local cultures. As we have seen, the pre-conversion period is typically presented in terms of a personal crisis, involving problems such as poverty, illness, substance abuse, violence and insecurity. What makes up these "states of dis-ease" (Chesnut

1997), and how they are represented is colored by those problems and concerns that are locally most salient. For example, David Maxwell describes how in Zimbabwe images of protective walls and barriers feature centrally in sermons, reflecting the religion's engagement with Zimbabweans' insecurity in the face of precarious living conditions (Maxwell 2005). Writing from Zambia, Adriaan Van Klinken observes that the high incidence of HIV plays into the conversion narratives of Zambian young men. Many of Van Klinken's interviewees relate how Pentecostal conversion prompted them to abandon risky sexual behavior, with one of Van Klinken's interviewees likening being reborn to becoming a virgin again (Van Klinken 2012). In Central America, conversion of gang members, who are vilified and dehumanized in local media, is seen as the opportunity par excellence to witness to the transformative power of the Gospel (Brenneman 2012).

The Pentecostal impact on gender relations is another area where Pentecostalism engages with the local context. Adriaan van Klinken's earlier cited work on Zambian Pentecostalism shows how conversion offers young males an alternative rite of passage into manhood, with traditional rites of passage disappearing in Zambian urban settings. Van Klinken's interviewees emphasize how becoming Pentecostal made them more "responsible." Prompted to abandon risky sexual behavior and alcoholism, they became more involved in their family lives, and transitioned into the new role of household providers. The young men's emphasis on the importance of "responsibility" resonates with Zambian views of what is entailed in a mature stage of manhood. In Latin America, Pentecostal conversion allows men to distance themselves from the demands posed by the male prestige sphere. Abandoning behaviors associated with the latter, including promiscuous sexual behavior, alcoholism, drug abuse and gambling, features centrally in male accounts of transformation (Smilde 2007a, Chesnut 1997).

Pentecostalism's sometimes empowering impact on gender roles for women has been cited as a reason for why worldwide more women than men convert and become active members despite the religion's commitment to "Pauline notions of patriarchy" (Robbins 2004: 132). Based on her ethnographic fieldwork in Colombia, Elizabeth Brusco attributes the appeal of Pentecostalism for women to the observation that it counters machismo by aligning men's priorities with those of women and by encouraging men to take household responsibilities seriously (Brusco 1995). Moreover, women acquire new coping skills to deal with marital conflict. Not only can they attribute their husbands' vices to demonic forces, but by re-conceptualizing their primary obedience to God rather than to their husbands, they also feel more entitled to criticize their husbands' participation in the male prestige sphere (Burdick 1993; Griffith 1997; Mariz 1992). In Sicily, Salvatore Cucchiari argues that Pentecostal conversion allows women to overcome some of the constraints of the Sicilian patriarchal gender system. The latter is centrally organized around the concept of "honor." The reputation of men and their families is dependent on their perceived abilities to control their wives and daughters' behavior and sexual reputation. Women are mostly confined to the domestic sphere, and are expected to display modest behavior when in public and accept male authority. Because the church in Sicily operates as a hybrid space representing at once the male public sphere and the female domestic sphere, women are able to participate in church ministries without overly challenging prevailing Sicilian gender norms (Cucchiari 1990).[48]

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[48] Cucchiari shows that God is sometimes depicted in terms that in Sicily are only associated with women, and at other times in terms that correspond with Sicilian males. As such, in Sicilian terms the Pentecostal God is cross-gendered. Moreover, the Spirit is described in terms that only fit female gender imagery in Sicily. The church itself then becomes a hybrid space crossing the domestic and the public sphere.

Pentecostalism's cultural malleability furthermore becomes obvious in the observation that, depending on the local context, the rupture implied in conversion is depicted more in spatial or more in temporal terms. In Latin America spatial imagery prevails, opposing the "church" versus the "world," "a dangerous domain largely ruled by Satan and his minions" (Garrard-Burnett 2007: 227). For the convert, spatial reorientation not only implies a figurative embrace of "the church," but in many cases also brings about an actual reconfiguration of the convert's social networks (cf. Smilde 2007b). For example, Christine Kray reports from Yucatan, Mexico, how the adoption of ascetic practices by Pentecostals prevents them from participating in those social activities that typically bring the village together (Kray 2001). In Africa, Pentecostal rupture is more commonly depicted in temporal terms. Reflecting the importance of kinship relations in many African cultures, making a "break with the past" not only implies taking distance from one's personal past, but also from that of one's kin. Conversion then often involves taking distance from family (including one's ancestors, extended family, and, sometimes, even close relatives). It furthermore often entails the rejection of aspects of African traditions (Engelke 2010). In her study of Ghanaian Pentecostalism, Birgit Meyer (1998) describes the complexities of making such a break with the past. Conversion, she points out, does not automatically free individuals from ancestral curses, which according to Ghanaian belief systems can haunt families for generations. Even after conversion, he or she has to repeatedly renounce the ritual practices conducted by family members.

*Problematizing the notion of rupture*

Birgit Meyer's above discussion of Pentecostal transformation in Ghana problematizes the notion of rupture since she shows that converts continue to engage in rituals that

paradoxically force them to remember the past they broke with. While the notion of rupture is at the core of Pentecostal conversion stories, both the ethnographic record and anthropological analysis indicate that such rupture does not always preclude a degree of continuity with the past. In the case of my Salvadoran informants, the discrepancy between rising indices of violence and continuing Pentecostal growth fostered critical discourse on the nature of transformation and its effects in the here and now. Moreover, as I will show later in the chapter, the theological changes in the church furthermore gave rise to a changing understanding on the relationship between rupture and continuity.

The tension between rupture and continuity is reflected in anthropological analyses of Christianity's role in the transformation of societies and individual people, with some highlighting continuities (Cannell 2006), others focusing on discontinuity (Robbins 2007) and yet others seeking to reconcile these apparently opposing perspectives (Tomlinson 2014). Characterizing the two poles of the debate as either evolutionist (i.e. progress by gradual change) or episodic (i.e. progress by rupture) views on temporality in Christianity,[49] Matt Tomlinson lays out the debate by citing the work of Fenella Cannell and Joel Robbins, two leading voices in the anthropology of Christianity (Tomlinson 2014: 164). After observing that many of the foundational thinkers in the social sciences consider the birth of Christianity "an irreversible moment of transformation" (Cannell 2006, cited in Tomlinson 2014: 164), Cannell pleads for anthropologists to stop assuming that Christianity brings such irreversible change. For Tomlinson, this leans towards the evolutionist since it reflects "a core assumption that Christianity, like all cultural forms, necessarily has a degree of continuity with the past" (Tomlinson 2014: 164). Joel Robbins (2007) on the other hand argues that because of

[49] Tomlinson adopts this terminology from Ernest Gellner (Gellner 1964, cited in Tomlinson (2014: 164).

anthropology's preoccupation with continuity, the discipline fails to engage seriously with claims that Christianity brings about rupture. Tomlinson introduces the Kierkegaardian concept of repetition as an alternative approach to understand Christian transformation. Kierkegaard's notion of repetition, which he defines as "recollection forward" (Tomlinson 2014: 165), enables an analytical approach that captures "neither full continuity nor complete break but moments that both change contexts and transcend contexts as they are repeated onward into the future" (ibidem: 166). Matthew Engelke, writing about apostolics in Zimbabwe, also argues for a middle ground by pointing out that the languages of continuity and rupture are complementary rather than mutually exclusive (Engelke 2004; 2010). Not only because, according to Engelke, "church provides an intermediary space for members to move back and forth between the way of life they (wish to) leave behind and the one to which they aspire" (Engelke 2004: 106) but also because the rupture with one's tradition implied in conversion also involves re-alignment with Christian tradition (Engelke 2010). Further engaging with Engelke's notion of re-alignment, Girish Daswani argues that transformation needs to be analyzed in a way that takes into account "the situated ways in which rupture is realigned" (Daswani 2010: 468). Daswani makes the case that for the Pentecostals he worked with in England and Ghana transformation provides an ethical framework that allows them to carefully blend continuities and discontinuities, depending on their specific circumstances.

### 4.3 Four testimonials

In this section, I will render the testimonials of four engaged church members whom I call (using pseudonyms) Yesenia, Willian, Evangelina and Rogelio. The stories of these four people are particularly helpful in developing the arguments of this chapter and the dissertation

more generally because the themes they evoke in their stories reoccur in many of the testimonials I collected. Using a blended methodology of participant observation, and different types of interviews, I chose these four people because I got to know them while doing participant observation, and was able to do several interviews with them. Because they are people who will feature more prominently in the dissertation, especially Evangelina and Rogelio, rendering their testimonials also serves the purpose of introducing them for later chapters. Although I chose to depict the stories of two men and two women, it is the case in the Elim church, as in many other Pentecostal settings, that the overall membership counts more women than men. The testimonials do reflect that the majority of members are less educated and relatively impoverished ("gente humilde"). Rogelio represents the professionals that, though a minority, also attend the church.

*Evangelina*

Evangelina, a long-term and devout member of the Elim church, is a single mother of three who works as a housemaid. She converted to evangelical Christianity when she was a teenager, in response to evangelical outreach in her high school, and joined the Elim church about twenty-two years ago. She was a member of CETI, and she is aware of and very sympathetic to some of the recent theological changes in the Elim church. The central focus in her conversion narrative is on how her relationship with God helped her to negotiate the hardships in her life, and helped turn around the negative emotions she experienced as a result of these harsh life experiences.

Evangelina grew up in Cuscatlan, where her parents were actively involved in the Catholic church. Evangelina's early life was very positive. She grew up in a loving and socio-economically stable home environment. All of this came to a dramatic end when Evangelina's

parents were killed in the civil war because they were accused of supporting the FMLN. Evangelina recalls how soldiers came to her home one day when she was thirteen and took her mother with them, whom she never heard from ever again. The next day they came back and killed her father. Next, Evangelina and her five siblings went to live with her grandmother. A year later Evangelina moved to San Salvador to live with an uncle, who she came to regard as a father. Tragically, her uncle passed away when Evangelina was still in high school as the result of an accident in his home. Without her uncle's financial support, she was no longer able to continue her formal education. She got married not too long after, but divorced her husband because he was an abusive alcoholic who did not support the family economically.

Shortly after the loss of her uncle, Evangelina converted to evangelical Christianity in response to evangelical outreach in her high school. In her narrative, Evangelina attributes this change in her life to God's agency rather than her own. She comments:

> This is where I got to know the Lord, because of loneliness and because of everything I had had to go through. This is also when my uncle died. I remember that the Lord arrived in those moments that I most needed Him. It was not I who went to look for Him, but He who came to look for me, because He knew how much I needed Him at that moment.

The biggest change that her conversion and the intimate relationship with God that it implied brought about in the life of the here and now was that she learned to let go of the strong emotions of hatred and bitterness she felt at the loss of her parents and the subsequent hardships she had to live through. This was a very gradual process, she explains. The first thing that made it possible for her to start this process, she says, was knowing that in Jesus Christ there was someone who had such pure love for people that he gave his own life. In years of prayer, of engaging with the church's teachings, and, more recently, of writing poetry, Evangelina learned that she had two options: either to become embittered by her life experiences, or to learn from them and to move

on. Evangelina not only learned to let go of her negative emotions, but she also learned to better understand them. She realized that part of the anger was directed at her parents, who she blamed for what had happened to them. Evangelina again attributes the agency for her emotional change to God. She says that it was God who took her hatred away and taught her to love. She learned to forgive her parents, and, more generally, she also learned to be more tolerant of other people's differences in perspective. Altogether Evangelina's process of post-conversion change took at least ten years.

*Willian*

Hermano Willian is a young man in his twenties, who recently got married. I got to know him and his wife because we attended the same cell meetings. Willian is a very dedicated Christian, who, though raised in a Catholic household, converted as a teenager. Due to time constraints, he only attends church on Sundays, but he attends the cell meetings every week as well, and is preparing to become a cell leader. He spends a lot of time reading about and reflecting on what it means to be a Christian. His narrative of transformation focuses on gradual emotional changes. He also emphasizes how being a Christian affects all aspects of his life.

Willian describes his early life in terms of emotional hardship. While he does not mention socio-economic difficulties, he considered his upbringing to be quite difficult. At the root of this is his relationship with his older brother and his parents. His brother often engaged in illicit activities. Even though Willian was generally not involved, his parents, and especially his mother, would nevertheless punish him harshly. Tensions with his brother eventually lead to a permanent falling-out. He never got to express any affection towards his parents, because they--his father especially--discouraged such expressions. Willian describes himself as having become

an angry person. For example, he would sometimes tell his mother that he hoped she would die soon.

Converting to evangelical Christianity was a slow process that spanned several years. Willian first encountered the Elim church when he was about twelve years old. He was on the bus, when someone persuaded him to attend an outreach event in a large stadium. While this did not lead to Willian's conversion, it is significant in his narrative, because, he says, this left a "first seed." A few years later, his grandmother invited him to attend a meeting at the church of the Apostles and Prophets (an evangelical church). Willian accepted God here, but, he emphasizes, he accepted God and not the specific teachings and ways of conduct of the Apostolic and Prophetic church. He was particularly bothered by this church's strict emphasis on how people should dress. The problem with this, in Willian's view, was that this was superficial, and more about human convention than religion.

His relationship with God triggered a very gradual process of change. First, he quit smoking. Willian, however, asserts that letting go of behaviors like smoking and drinking are not per se examples of the profound change being in a relationship with God can bring about since, in his view, this does not have to indicate a genuine change in the person. What is much more challenging, in his view, is letting go of those negative traits that govern one's emotional life, and that are ingrained in one's character. While he has become more honest, and less selfish, Willian keeps struggling with anger, even after years of having converted, but little by little, "God continues to mold his life." Prayer, worship and reading the Bible are essential in building the relationship with God, but his Christian beliefs and the changes brought about by them affect all realms of his life, and particularly guide him to exert self-restraint in conflict situations.

*Yesenia*

Yesenia is an uneducated woman in her mid-thirties who works low-paying working-class jobs to make ends meet. She is the single mother of two daughters. She became evangelical seventeen years ago but only became an active church leader about five years ago. She attended the CETI meetings. The central theme in Yesenia's testimonial is a search for love and internal peace, after an unhappy childhood and an abusive marriage. She turned to God for emotional refuge. Becoming Christian did not offer any easy solutions to the hardships in her life, but it did provide her with some strategies to counter her husband's abuse until he eventually left for the United States. Over time, she testifies, she has become a less angry person and a more patient mother.

Yesenia was born in the countryside in San Miguel. Because her parents separated early on, she lived in various households while growing up. First, she spent a few years with her maternal grandmother, together with two of her four siblings and some cousins. At the age of eight her father invited her to come live with him and the family he had with his new partner. When Yesenia turned twelve at her own initiative she moved back to her maternal grandmother, and a year later she went to live with her mother in San Salvador. While Yesenia moved around as a child, she never found a place to live where she felt beloved and where she was treated well. Her grandmother gave her arduous tasks and preferred her other grandchildren. At her father's home her stepmother put her to work in even more dire circumstances without providing her with basic care. Yesenia routinely had to leave at four in the morning and walk an hour without breakfast to the nearest river to wash clothes, exposing her to the violence of the civil war. One day, she witnessed a man being burned alive on her way to the river. Yesenia's mother also did not express a lot of care towards her, often calling her bad names. Seeking to fill the emotional

void left by an unhappy childhood, Yesenia left her mother's home at age 16 with a boyfriend. Romantic love, however, also failed to bring happiness or peace. Her boyfriend, and father of her first daughter, left her for someone else. Three years later she met her husband, but he turned out to be a violent alcoholic. After witnessing the murder of a friend, her husband fled to the United States and left Yesenia to fend for herself as a single mother.

While dealing with domestic abuse, Yesenia decided to go to church to seek emotional refuge with God. She had heard evangelicals comment that if abandoned by your mother and father, God offers solace, and wondered if this could be true. Yesenia was not really religious at the time. Her father had read her the Bible as a child, and living with her mother, she had been curious about the lively evangelical churches nearby. But before becoming Christian, she says, she knew of God but did not really know who He was. Yesenia decides to attend the Elim church, to her husband's great dismay. He accused her of going there to find other men. The day she accepted God, her husband beat her very badly.

For a long time, conversion did not meaningfully change Yesenia's everyday life. She felt that her prayers were not being answered. Discouraged she would sometimes stop going to church for a while, but would always return, continuing to feel the need to seek refuge in God. Her domestic problems persisted until about ten years later, when her husband fled El Salvador. Yesenia interpreted these events in relation to her repeated prayers to God to either change her husband, or take him far away. Gradually Yesenia's relationship with God became more profound. A significant turning point came about two years after her husband had left, when Yesenia believed she heard God's voice speaking directly to her. She now came to realize that "her journey as a Christian had been one of thorns rather than roses," because she had not been living Christianity in a genuine way. Going to church had been a refuge for her, she said, "like

someone seeking shelter from the rain." But she did not act as a Christian, getting into fights with her husband after going home from church.

After her experience of hearing God's voice, she asked for His guidance to show her how to serve Him best. Her church experience changed when she became a very active member, taking up various roles. She also attended CETI where she learned more about what it meant to be a Christian. She, for example, came to understand that Christians should not be violent at home. Yesenia feels that now that her faith has matured, she notices more effects in the here and now. Taking on church roles has made her a more self-disciplined person. For the first time in her life she feels inner peace. She puts this as "being able to eat your beans in peace, without having to worry about conflicts with others." She makes a very deliberate effort to manage anger, asking God to give her patience and self-control. Though not perfect, she says, she has gradually become a less angry person, and a more patient mother.

*Rogelio*

Rogelio is a lawyer in his mid-thirties. His narrative is a bit different from those of the other people featured because he grew up in the Elim church, but left as a teenager. When his mother, who was a very active member, passed away, he rejoined the church. His renewed "compromise" with God revolves around "putting his life in order." Part of this is making amends with his estranged father. Rogelio has become a very involved church member. He organizes free weddings, and has put together a group of volunteers who provide free legal counsel in the church, and who go on trips to provide food and free medical care to churches outside the San Salvador metropolitan area.

Rogelio was born and raised in Soyapango. While his father engaged in a career in politics, his mother worked as a seamstress in a factory. Rogelio's parents separated when he was six years old, after which he had very little contact with his father. For the next two years after his parents' separation, Rogelio and his older sister lived with his maternal relatives in the countryside in Chalatenango during which time his mother converted and started attending the fledgling Elim church. His mother became a devout Christian and an actively involved church member. Rogelio reports that she was able to perform miraculous healings.

From the ages of eight to sixteen Rogelio attended church with his mother, but he found church life too restrictive. Under the earlier teachings of the church, he says, members were encouraged to primarily focus on spiritual activities such as prayer, and church attendance in preparation of the imminent Second Coming of Christ and not invest time in secular activities (including education). As a teenager, Rogelio became so rebellious that his mother was asked not to bring him to church anymore. For example, one time he rode his bike into the church building during the church service.

For the next few years, Rogelio was in the "world." But, he says, he never fully relinquishes his relationship with God. He continued to have this "little chip in his heart." This, he explains, kept him, for example, from using drugs or drinking alcohol. Rogelio attended law school. Although he did not have a good relationship with his father, he used the latter's connections to land his first job. He had his first child with his future wife, without being married.

At the death of his mother, Rogelio was compelled to return to church and to renew his relationship with God. He suspected that his mother might have bargained with God so that he would return to the church. This suspicion was strengthened when, upon his return to church, one

of his mother's friends approached him and exclaimed: "You are the one we have been waiting for." It turns out that his name was at the top of a prayer list for the children of church members who abandoned the faith.

Rogelio's renewed relationship with God brought about real change in his life, he says, since it provided him with the impetus to "put his life in order." He got married to his partner, with whom he already had a daughter. Moreover, he sought out his father to renew contact. For years, he had felt at odds with his estranged father. But after telling his father how he felt abandoned by him, the two established a much closer rapport. As a Christian, Rogelio says, you have to put your principles into practice. You cannot call yourself a Christian, he asserts, if you are not even at peace with your own father.

Following in his mother's footsteps, Rogelio became an involved church member, first as cell leader, then as supervisor. Next, he became active in social outreach, seeking to serve people's spiritual as well as material needs. With the shift in theological emphasis in the Elim church, there is now more openness towards such outreach. He says that rather than complaining about what the church does not do, it is better to ask yourself "what can I do for the church." He obtained permission from leadership to organize free legal counsel, and to organize weddings free of charge. In addition, he brought together a group of "professionals" who engage in outreach trips to provide people with free medical care and basic food items. This outreach, he explains, is a way for him to serve God. Comparing God to a creditor who has blessed his life, he wants to repay God by helping other people. "The debt I have with Him," he says, "I repay with the people ["la gente"]." This type of outreach alleviates material needs, while at the same time serving as evangelical outreach.

### 4.4 Pentecostal transformation in El Salvador: space, gender, violence and emotions

Similar to testimonials elsewhere, the Salvadoran accounts I collected (both formally and informally) centrally involve the notion of rupture, presented as a break with pre-conversion sin and suffering. As in other Latin American settings, this is most saliently expressed in terms of spatial imagery. By adopting ascetic practices, such as the refraining from alcohol and sexual relations outside marriage, and modest hair and dress style, converts indicate that they are now part of "the church," as opposed to the "world." These new "bodily habits" (Birman 2007) not only offer a tangible reminder that the convert is no longer "in the world," but they also play a role in the reconfiguration of the convert's social networks. For example, Irma, the host of the cell I regularly attended, preferred not to participate in any after-work activities with her colleagues since they would be drinking then. Especially for women, clothing functions as a strong visual marker of Pentecostal membership. Salvadoran fashions for women (bold make-up, manicured nails, jewelry and tight jeans) are particularly at odds with evangelical notions of modest attire. Not surprisingly, both "in the world" and "in the church" Pentecostal women undergo peer pressure about their attire. Maria, Willian's wife, told me that she was pressured both at home and at work not to abide by Pentecostal dress norms. Her father, a Catholic, was adamant about her not wearing skirts. He feared that men would be staring at her legs. At work, Maria was asked to wear make-up, since it was viewed as more professional. In the church community, the opposite takes place, as women are encouraged to adjust to the evangelical dress code. One time when Mirna, the cell leader, came to pick me up to go to our weekly meeting, she exclaimed with a loud sigh that she had made a serious mistake. Because the hot weather had been bothering her, she had decided to cut her hair short. Upon seeing Mirna's new hairstyle, her

cell supervisor sharply reprimanded her, saying that short hair for women was not biblical. "Ai," sighed Mirna, "it is not easy to be a Christian" ("cuesta ser Cristiana").

The spatial dimension of transformation is perhaps most powerfully evoked in the case of gang members who convert to Pentecostalism. Their testimonials of crossing the threshold from "world" to "church" typically depict leaving behind a life of crime. This may furthermore be symbolically expressed by the removal of tattoos that represent gang membership.[50] The fact that spatial ramifications of conversion also bear on everyday life (as witnessed, for example, in the reconfiguration of the convert's social networks (cf. Smilde 2007b)) is also most palpably illustrated in the case of former gang members. In many cases, conversion is the only way to leave a gang without retaliation (Brenneman 2012). In some cases, it can also facilitate actual movement through space for former gang members. Milton, a young man who used to be involved in gangs, told me that it was very hard for him to leave his neighborhood ("colonia") because of the police stationed in his neighborhood. They would often harass him when trying to go anywhere, particularly because he was still covered in tattoos. One time, Milton said, the police singled him out on his way back from church, but stopped when Milton's fellow church members pleaded on his behalf. After conversion, Milton generally felt more confident navigating the streets, believing God would keep him safe from violence he was entangled in because of his past as a gang member.

Pentecostalism's effects on gender in El Salvador reverberate with what has been reported elsewhere in Latin America. Converts are expected to break with behaviors associated with the male prestige sphere, such as smoking, drinking, and having extra-marital sexual

[50] Tattoo removal may not always be feasible. In an article, published in 2004, Elana Zilberg points out that the options for tattoo removal in El Salvador were limited due to limited access, and poor quality of techniques used (Zilberg 2004: 778).

relations (cf. Santos 2012; Thornton 2016). Rogelio attributes his not drinking and smoking during his years outside the church to having a "chip [of God] in his heart." Not engaging in extra-marital relations also extends to living with someone while not being married. As part of his post-conversion project of "putting his life in order," Rogelio married his domestic partner and mother to his child. Moreover, one of his main projects in the church consists of organizing weddings without charge, which he characterizes as "evangelical outreach," because people who live together without being formally married cannot take up any "privilegio" in the church.

Rogelio's emphasis on needing to "put his life in order," by, among other things, legally marrying his domestic partner shows how conversion aligns men's priorities more closely with those of women. Yesenia's story shows how becoming Pentecostal provided her with new coping skills in the face of marital conflict. By considering her primary allegiance to lie with God rather than with her husband, Yesenia justified disobeying her husband when he forbade her to continue going to church. While Pentecostal conversion can potentially align the priorities of both partners, especially when both are Pentecostals, this sometimes falls short. For example, one of the women I befriended in the Elim church was living together with her partner (a non-practicing Catholic) with whom she had two children. Because of her partner's refusal to get legally married, she could not become more involved in church activities.

Again, similar to testimonials recorded in other cultural settings, Salvadoran conversion stories most often start with a story of personal crisis. In the words of Rogelio, "the majority of people come to church when they are not doing well, when they are already destroyed. Church is for the sick, for the unemployed, for the disillusioned." As the stories of Yesenia, Willian, Evangelina and Rogelio show, the testimonials of most church members are permeated with significant hardship. Commonly cited problems include domestic abuse, emotional problems,

physical illness of the self or of a close family member, poverty and unemployment. But what really stands out in Salvadoran accounts of crisis and post-conversion transformation is an outspoken emphasis on violence and on responding to violence by managing one's emotions. Despite the end of the war, violence continues to be one of the more pressing problems in Salvadoran society. While structural violence is often the backdrop of testimonials (as we see in Yesenia's story), narratives often turn to violence on a micro-level, situated within the family and within the self. Not coincidentally all four conversion stories, as well as the ethnographic vignette at the beginning of the chapter, feature a degree of domestic abuse. Rogelio reports having a loving mother, but an absentee father. Yesenia was shipped from household to household while growing up and felt unloved everywhere. Aaron and Willian's fathers, though present, were abusive. Willian also had a bad relationship with his mother. Not being provided with basic needs, enduring verbal, physical or (less frequently reported) sexual abuse, or simply not feeling beloved at home are common themes. While Evangelina's story centrally revolves around violence inflicted in the civil war, her story of healing involves coming to understand that she blamed her mother and father for what happened.

Experiences with violence are understood to lead to a series of negative emotions including anger ("enojo"), hatred ("odio") and bitterness ["amargura"/ "rencor"]. As Brother Aaron puts it:

> For the majority of us, maybe you will find exceptions, but in El Salvador there is a lot of emotional hardship. Why? Because of the culture of abuse, of machismo. Then, apart from culture, the war has made people very tough, insensitive. There is no education, no awareness. Never an "I love you," never any expressions of love or care, which show that the war has made us very hard. And then thirdly, this country has suffered a lot from earthquakes, mudslides and poverty. The brothers and sisters have had to deal with all of this.

In church discourse, negative emotions such as "anger" and "hatred" are contrasted with "love," with the former relegated to the realm of the world and the latter to the church. In this view, it is only truly possible to let go of negative emotions by becoming Pentecostal and finding peace in Christ. Ideally converts should not only not express such emotions, but simply not have them. This is implied in the notion that because God can see what is in your heart, the seat of emotion for Pentecostals (cf. Robbins et al. 2014) it is impossible to keep anything hidden from Him. As stated in a church booklet: "If [Pentecostals] conceal negative emotions that [they] hold towards another person in [their] heart[s], God will consider [them] the equivalent of murderers" (unpublished church booklet). Emotional transformation may pertain overcoming a feeling of "emptiness," which some converts report to have happened immediately upon conversion. One interviewee reported how when converting he felt relieved of an emotional burden he had been carrying. Reflecting Salvadoran Pentecostalism's engagement with the local context of violence, emotional change most often pertains to the management of emotions in the face of past and present conflict.

Anger management is a recurrent trope in many of the narratives I collected. It was not uncommon for members to tell me that they used to be angry or even violent people before conversion, getting into conflicts at home or in public spaces (at work, on the bus, in the street). In some cases, members would tell me that they felt instantly changed upon conversion. One interviewee claimed that the morning after his conversion his colleagues noticed right away that something was different, since he was no longer crude in his manners and language. Most often, however, members described how their ability to respond peacefully to conflict took time, and, implied in their narratives was how this required sustained work of the self on the self that involved self-restraint and self-examination. For example, Hermana Ada, a very friendly and

gregarious sister I had gotten to know on a retreat told me how in the past she was very aggressive "in her way of speaking, thinking and treating her fellow human being ["el projimo"]." One time she spent two weeks in jail for beating up a woman who had bothered one of her children. Now she no longer responds like that, she says. For example, in the past she would have yelled at people pushing her on the bus, but now she restrains herself. She is able to do this, she says, because of the inner peace and rest she obtained for the first time in her life after becoming evangelical. It was however a slow process of gradually altering her behavior, "of no longer hitting people, no longer getting enraged, and no longer saying bad words." While Hermana Ada presents her own violent behavior in the past, others depict this as an ongoing struggle, positing "exterior" changes versus "interior" changes. Hermana Alma, a school teacher, told me that she did not have too much difficulty abandoning pants, and earrings but that at one point she needed to tell herself: "Okay, you have let go of the external, now you need to work on the internal." Being easily irritated with others (in her own self-description), she continuously monitors her own feelings towards others, and asks God for guidance and strength with specific instances. If her feelings of irritation towards someone persist, then she looks for a solution while trying not to turn to conflict. She, however, has not stopped viewing herself as an irritable person but engages in work on the self to minimize expressions of this.

Anger management often goes hand in hand with managing emotions involving past experiences with violence. Willian, for example, attributes his struggles with anger to his upbringing. Evangelina's story offers a powerful example of how evangelical membership and beliefs also engage with emotional trauma. She describes the trauma she experienced with regard to the early loss of her parents in terms of feeling 'hatred' and 'bitterness:'

> To be honest…when they killed my parents, the only thing I felt was hatred, the desire to take revenge, to kill those who had caused my parents' deaths…Despite

> that I was only thirteen years old…I wanted vengeance, but God changed all of this. He took away my hatred, my bitterness, He makes us love people, love our enemies and also understand the situation better.

Evangelina's words echo church discourse in that she contrasts the love of God with her own feelings of hatred. For her, evangelical transformation very much coincided with healing from trauma. Rather than a "miracle cure," she describes healing through conversion as a process that spanned at least a decade. Through prayer and inspired by church discourse, Evangelina very gradually learns to interpret the emotions involved in her trauma, and to take distance from them. She attributes agency to God. In prayer, a space, Evangelina says, to seek God's help, she repeatedly asked Him to lift her feelings of hatred. In response, He taught her to re-interpret her emotions: "God revealed to me that I did not feel hatred towards them [perpetrators of violence against her parents], but rather towards my parents, and I started asking God that He help me forgive them." This hatred, Evangelina further came to understand, stemmed from feelings of abandonment. At some level, she blamed her parents for what happened because she felt that her father must have known that his involvement with the syndicate implied significant risk. Church discourse also provides a significant source of inspiration for Evangelina, as well as her participation in CETI. She learned in church that despite a life of suffering, [emotional] change is possible. She is particularly inspired by teachings on Jesus' life and death. For her, Jesus was someone who "always acted just and with compassion…someone who never desired to ruin others, but always wanted us to live without bitterness." After a little over two decades of being evangelical, Evangelina feels that she has been able to let go of most of her emotions of trauma. When people see her, she says, they would never guess the amount of suffering she has encountered in her life, since she is often cheerful and friendly. Nevertheless, Evangelina is still left with unanswered questions and contacted an NGO to help her find her mother's remains.

### 4.5 Pentecostal transformation in the Elim church

While in the previous section I showed how the Salvadoran context colors notions of Pentecostal transformation, I will in this section provide ethnographic evidence on how changes in theological stance also affect the notion of transformation. In terms of spatial imagery, I argue that while in both theological views circulating in the Elim church transformation implies the embodiment of a different ethic, separating the convert from the "world," in the newer view this ethic is expressed differently, embodying a changing relationship between "world" and "church." Adopting Tomlinson's terminology of "episodic" versus "evolutionist" (Tomlinson 2014), I argue that, temporally, the changing view becomes more accepting of "evolutionist" change. In terms of ethnographic evidence, I will look at changing attitudes towards clothes, and changing understandings of where Pentecostals need to set a good example.

In El Salvador, both male and female converts are expected to adhere to a Pentecostal dress code. In the Elim church, this means wearing a tidy button-up shirt for men, and for women it generally means no make-up, skirts rather than trousers, and no jewelry. Eliseo, an active church member I got to know when taking CETI classes, explained to me that for him, wearing a nice shirt with long sleeves is very important. He dresses like that even when going to the market to sell products. For him, it is not only an expression of his membership in the Elim church but also of his relationship with God, and the responsibilities he sees as part of that. Eliseo relates to me a conversation he had with someone from a different church: "Why are you always dressed in long sleeves, he asked me (I sell products at the market). I answered that it was because I am from the Elim church, and that I wear dress shirts with long sleeves because I am always ready to evangelize." He then goes on to tell me that dressing poorly is a sign of

irreverence towards God since it is not taking seriously that Pentecostals are always infused with the Holy Spirit, in all aspects of everyday life.

Eliseo's comments indicate that while adopting a modest dress code serves as a visual reminder of Pentecostal membership and commitment, it also signals how "conservative" a particular person or group of people are. While Eliseo's example illustrates that this also applies to men, women's attire, as was already indicated earlier, is subject to more peer pressure in both "church" and "world." Most particularly, women's use of pants serves as a barometer to gauge how "conservative" someone is, going from never wearing them as most conservative, to sometimes wearing them in secular settings to wearing them even to church. In the Elim church, many women still adhere to the traditional "Elim look," a simple shirt with a skirt and flat, preferably closed-toe shoes. Some women, especially younger women, feel confident to attend church, dressed in pants. This practice is definitely controversial, with some people complaining that this undermines "orderliness" in the church. Nevertheless, women are not explicitly sanctioned for doing so. As we learned in chapter three, "diaconos" monitor churchgoers' conduct in church, and would not hesitate to show someone the door if they felt they needed to.

How does women's use of pants reflect the changing attitudes and beliefs in the Elim church, and how does this bear on individual transformation? Pastor Vega explicitly addressed the issue of appropriate Pentecostal dress styles in one of his sermons. Engaging with the notion that the Bible is situated in a particular cultural context, he explained that while it is essential for believers to follow Biblical guidance it is sometimes productive to translate this guidance to the current cultural context. So, with regard to dress styles, the main thing to take from the Bible is the importance of dressing modestly. What this means exactly may be different in contemporary El Salvador than it was in earlier contexts. This stance breaks with--or at least intends to modify-

-a form of legalism that is still very much present in the Elim church. We can think back for example to Hermana Mirna's "mistake" of cutting her hair short. While a modified stance on legalism is not urging believers not to embody 'another ethic,' different from that of the world, it is open to expressing that difference while still acknowledging the common ground of a shared cultural context.

Following from this is the notion that certain behaviors and attitudes are in accordance with the Bible, and others are closer to following man-made convention, an attitude that many interviewees referred to as being "religioso" rather than genuinely religious. It is a convention for women to wear skirts, but they can also be dressed modestly in pants. In his testimonial, rendered in the beginning of the chapter, Willian explicitly engages with this as one of the reasons for why he left the church in which he accepted God. Recalling an incident in which a man was asked to leave the church for wearing a hat, he laments that that person was denied the opportunity to have the "Holy Spirit work on him," because of (in Willian's opinion) a fairly trivial convention. In contrast, Willian observes, Elim's General Pastor once commented on a similar situation (pertaining to a woman wearing make-up to church), maintaining that the best response was to let this woman be, so that transformation could take place. So, returning to the topic of pants, even if one believes that it is more fitting for women to wear skirts rather than pants, it is, for those who are sympathetic to Pastor Vega's views, not worth alienating them over this issue. Instead, they should be given the time to realize that skirts are a much better choice. The observation that converts (and visitors) are given time to grow with regard to some issues rather than being expected to change instantly has clear implications for the conceptualization of individual transformation. While rupture is always radical in the Pentecostal view in that it

brings about an ontological change, there is new openness to the notion that to accomplish real change in the here and now, the convert may need time and effort.

When asked what sets the Elim church apart from other Pentecostal churches, Pastor Josué points at exactly this changing understanding of transformation:

> Pentecostals make the mistake to think that change takes place automatically [upon conversion] and is complete when someone accepts God. But the convert needs to take responsibility. There is a common problem that when people accept, they start attending church and otherwise forget the responsibilities the Bible asks from them.

So, for Josué, the convert does not only need more time to accomplish (complete) transformation but also needs to accept some authorship for change, rather than only relying on the Divine. The way Josué talks about "responsibility" implies not only a changing understanding of the temporal dimensions of transformation, but of its spatial dimensions as well. Importantly he points out that regular church attendance is not enough as expression of Christian responsibility. The view that being a good Christian is more than serving in church, but involves "Living the Word" in all aspects of life, inside the church as well as elsewhere, is one that is at the crux of the changing views in the Elim church. As one of my interviewees (a professional involved in Rogelio's group) puts it: "We lock ourselves up in our little bubble, …we believe that being a church is walking around with the Bible under our arm, going to church on Sundays and singing and serving as diacono, or another privilegio." In the Elim church, this implies quite a radical shift, since in the recent past churchgoers were instructed that only those non-secular activities were what really mattered for their spiritual health. As Rogelio indicated in his testimonial, being involved in the church is a goal in and of itself for many people. At one point, Rogelio himself got caught up in competing with others over who had more

privilegios in church, seeing his responsibilities as a form of distinction, reflecting the quality of his relationship with God.

What exactly is entailed in "Living the Word" will be engaged with in more detail in the latter chapters of the dissertation. As was intimated earlier, at the core is a changing relationship between "church" and "world." Returning to the notion that Pentecostals embody a different ethic, in the Elim church two models of such an ethic circulate. One emphasizes distance from "the world," the other emphasizes that being part of the church implies taking on a set of responsibilities in the secular world as well. This can be accomplished with small or less small gestures, which may be different for each person. For Eliseo, this is making sure he is always dressed in long sleeves, so that he feels ready to evangelize others even when he is selling products on the market. For Rogelio, this is organizing free medical and legal assistance and putting together events in which he marries churchgoers for no charge. Evangelina would like to organize a cleaning day in her colonia to show her neighbors that Pentecostals care about more than prayer, and worship in church.

### 4.6 Concluding remarks

In this chapter I have established that Pentecostal transformation, though a core concept of the religion's cosmology across cultural contexts, is to an extent malleable. While Pentecostal transformation exhibits many of the same features in El Salvador as elsewhere in Latin America, it engages with the high incidence of violence in Salvadoran society. In testimonials converts often highlight the emotional consequences of violence, and of domestic violence in particular. I moreover showed that the shifting theological stance in the Elim church also shapes notions of transformation, giving rise to a changing "Pentecostal ethic."

As we saw, Pentecostal transformation involves significant work of the self on the self. The changes in life style and the inner monitoring of emotions are challenging, and require continued self-examination and restraint. Every so often I would hear someone say that it is not easy to be a Christian ("cuesta ser cristiano"). The notion that change is gradual is explicitly engaged with since the theological shift in the Elim church. This furthermore opened up the discussion about what "real change" entails, and what responsibilities need to be taken up as expression of such a process. The latter is what I refer to in this dissertation as "the ethics of care" implied in the post-conversion process.

How Pentecostal work of the self on the self as expression of responsibility affects not just the individual convert, but also his or her environment, and ultimately the country is something that has become a topic of discussion among at least some Pentecostals. When asked why indices of violence have not gone down despite significant Pentecostal growth, some of my interviewees pointed at the larger cosmic battle that is being played out in their country. Yet, often enough, interviewees pointed out that too many Pentecostals failed to take up their responsibilities. For some, the explanation was that too much emphasis was placed on "quantity" of numbers in evangelizing (converting as many souls as possible as fast as possible) and not enough on the actual "quality" of change. In this perspective, insufficient time was devoted to guiding new converts on their journey of becoming Pentecostal. Others, responsive to the changing theological stance, saw part of the problem with too many churchgoers being "religiosos." The latter are described as people who go through the motions in church, but do not (sufficiently) change their personal conduct outside of the walls of the church building. They might be hung up not wearing pants (if a woman), and jewelry but never spend time with their children, or, even worse, "be a sweetheart [dulce] in church, but go home to yell at their

children." For Evangelina, the word "religioso" refers to the type of people who see their relationship with God as primarily serving their existential needs, people who she describes as thinking: "I need God, so I come to church to talk to Him." For Evangelina, they focus on the vertical dimension of the relationship with God ("God and me"), and fail to see the horizontal dimension implied in that same relationship ("my neighbor and me").

The importance of Evangelina's comment for this dissertation is not per se that she believes that some churchgoers are only there for their own existential needs. As we learned, personal crisis is indeed part[51] of what drives many people to church. In her testimonial, Yesenia said that for years church was a refuge for her, until finally it started taking on other meanings. Evangelina's comment is significant for the argument of this dissertation, in that she identifies that while the relationship with God is the driving force for any Pentecostal, it also implies a horizontal dimension. Understanding how that horizontal dimension is envisioned, helps us understand the ethics of care involved in the conversion process.

[51] In many testimonials interviewees identified a confluence of events that prompted them to go to church. This mostly always involved one or more elements of personal crisis, but also often involved an element of social contingency (Gooren 2007). For example, Evangelina accepted God in response to evangelical outreach right at the time her uncle passed away.

## Chapter five:

## Decentered individuals in exchange with God: an analysis of Christian subjectivities in the Elim church

### 5.1 Waiting for God's sign

One day, Yesenia, the working class single mother of two daughters introduced in the previous chapter, started receiving threatening phone calls ordering her to pay an exorbitant amount of money. In El Salvador, as we saw in chapter two, extortion is very common. Her callers threatened that they would kill Yesenia as well as her daughters if she failed to comply. They made it clear that they had quite accurate information about who her daughters were and what their daily routine looked like. Distrusting her neighbors, Yesenia suspected they had been the ones to leak the details of her personal life and that of her daughters to the people blackmailing her. Unable to pay, and reluctant to move neighborhoods, Yesenia conferred with her daughters on what they should do. They told her they did not want to move either. Before making any final decision on what to do, Yesenia decided that she would turn to God for guidance, and she asked Him in prayer to give her a sign if she needed to move. She never discerned any sign, and felt encouraged to stay. The next time she got a phone call threatening her, she made it clear that she would not be making any payments. When the caller responded, asking her if that meant her daughters were worth nothing to her, she invoked her faith, saying: "Of course they are, they are worth the Blood of Christ. If you hurt us, then it is because God gives you permission. But you do not control my life. If I am killed, then I know where I am going [in the Hereafter], but look at the state of your life.'" Though the callers ended up backing off and not following through with their threats, Yesenia had been well aware that her strategy

had been quite risky. Taking comfort in the notion that her relationship with God would if not keep her safe than guarantee her individual salvation, Yesenia nevertheless felt very worried for her daughters. Even though she herself was in an intimate relationship with God, this would not per se help her daughters, she said, emphasizing that this relationship is deeply personal.

Yesenia's story, similar to Xiomara's in chapter two, shows how the post-war social fabric continues to be fractured. Yesenia does not trust her own neighbors who she believes to be involved in her predicament. Rather than contacting the authorities when she first receives a threatening phone call, she decided to rely on her own judgment on how to navigate the problem. Yesenia's story confirms Ellen Moodie's sense that the responsibility for the negotiation of risk in the post-war moment lies with the individual, rather than with the collective of the state (Moodie 2010: 173). What is entailed in such individual risk assessment is however complicated by Yesenia's religious orientation. As a faithful Pentecostal, she is in an intimate relationship with God. This is something that is relevant outside of the realm of the church, and informs aspects of her everyday life. As with other believers, as Horton et al. point out, for Yesenia God is part of her "intimate social network, a close confidant who provides companionship, guidance and comfort" (Horton et al. 2012). When Yesenia was blackmailed she did not take the decision on how to navigate this entirely by herself. In addition to consulting her daughters, she turned to God. Her relationship with God helped her make a decision about what to do, but it also helped her regain a sense of certainty and control. As she made explicit when finally confronting her blackmailers, her trust in God implies a belief that nothing happens unless He allows for it. While she does not know what the outcome will be in terms of her and her daughters' physical safety, she does know that the ultimate control of her faith lies with God and not with her blackmailers.

Yesenia's story provides insight into how faith helps Christians navigate El Salvador's culture of anxiety, but it also gives us an example of what Christian personhood may look like in El Salvador. Unlike a secular self, Yesenia is in an intimate relationship with God, both in and outside of the church. This helps counter the eroding effects of anxiety on core aspects of the person, including the ability to feel in control of one's personal safety, and it also increases confidence in one's ability to determine what is true and what is only rumor. It is furthermore suggested that this relationship implies a degree of exchange. Yesenia believes and this guarantees eternal salvation. She also makes clear that there are limits to this exchange: it applies only to her and not to her children. Her discussion of looking for God's sign and making a decision based on that suggests that she trusts God, but it also leaves room for personal agency: in the end, it is Yesenia and not God who takes a decision on how to respond to the blackmail. Emerging from this picture is a Christian subject that while in communication with other people as well as with God, is a separate entity. While in a relationship with God, the deity is nevertheless external to Yesenia. Otherwise she would not have to look for signs outside of herself. Also, while in charge of her daughters' well-being and safety, Yesenia cannot guarantee their salvation. It is dependent on the personal religious commitment of each and every one of them.

Engaging with the recent discussion within the anthropology of Christianity on the nature of Christian personhood, I will closely examine Salvadoran Christian subjectivities in this chapter. After presenting an overview of the recent debate on the topic, I will further examine what is involved in the relationship with God. Finally, I will analyze how the changing orientation towards the material affects conceptualizations of self in the Elim church. While in some ways "solipsistic selves" (cf. Coleman 2015), I will show how the orientation towards God

includes a set of responsibilities that require this solipsistic self to reach beyond its own boundaries, and that this varies depending on how the relation with the material is envisioned.

## 5.2 Are Christians individuals or dividuals? The Mosko-Robbins debate on Christian personhood

In the previous chapter, we discussed how individual transformation through conversion is a central aspect of Pentecostal cosmology across cultural settings (Robbins 2004b), bringing about a "rupture in the self" (Burdick 1993). It follows then from the emphasis on the individual that Pentecostal conversion fosters an individualistic structure of personhood. The latter has been the consensus view in the growing field of anthropology of Christianity (Robbins 2015). Particularly influential in establishing this ethnographically is Joel Robbins' work on the Urapmin in Papua New Guinea (2004a) and Webb Keane's on the (Calvinist) missionary encounter in Indonesia (2007). Positing a "Protestant Semiotic Ideology," Keane argues that the Calvinist valorization of sincere and spontaneous speech, conveying the inner subjective states of individual people, reflects and reinforces individualism. In his analysis of Urapmin conversion, Robbins shows how the Christian notion of individual salvation introduces individualism in a society that was previously governed by relational modes of self. Casting his analysis in terms of Dumont's approach to value systems, Robbins argues that this does not imply that these more traditional modes have fully disappeared--the relational mode continues to organize aspects of Urapmin social life--but rather that individualism has now become the paramount value (Robbins 2015). The primacy of Christianity is reflected in the Urapmin's self-identification as "sinners," casting their perceived failure at successfully navigating both value systems in Christian rather than traditional terms.

Accepting this implied structure of personhood, ethnographers have engaged with how the introduction of individualism bears on the notion of Pentecostal rupture. In cultural contexts where relational modes of personhood are more prevalent, ethnographers comment on how conversion brings about separation from kin or community, or note how converts continue to find ways to preserve some connection with traditional modes of personhood. Christine Kray reports from a predominantly Catholic village in Yucatan, Mexico, that Pentecostal personhood is at odds with the more relational-oriented notion of self, implied in the traditional Catholic beliefs and practices. For example, Pentecostal asceticism prevents local converts from participating in any of the social activities that typically bring the village together. The discrepancies between both co-existing notions cause tensions in the community and alienate Pentecostals from the rest of the community. Carolyn Chen, in her study of Taiwanese immigrants to the United States (2005), observes that young women's conversion to Pentecostalism emancipates them from the demands of traditional Taiwanese kinship systems. One of her respondents describes how, upon becoming "God's daughter," she felt, for the first time in twenty years, empowered to speak up to her demanding mother-in-law as she finally felt she had become "her own person" (Chen 2005: 345). Complicating the view of Pentecostal conversion as radical rupture is the observation that what it means to be a Pentecostal individual often remains informed by local notions. In her study of Ghanaian Pentecostals, Birgit Meyer equally shows how Pentecostalism brings about a more individualistic notion of self, as converts become more independent from family, including living relatives and ancestors. In the Ghanaian context, breaking with the past implies not only a break with the individual's past but also with that of his or her ancestors. However, conversion does not automatically free individuals from ancestral curses, which according to Ghanaian belief systems can haunt families for generations.

He or she has to repeatedly renounce the ritual practices conducted by family members. As Meyer points out, such rituals force converts to continuously remember the past with which they broke. Because this process of remembrance implies that Pentecostal converts never fully break with their intricate web of kinship relations, the meaning of individual is clearly informed by the local context. Also writing from Ghana, Girish Daswani further complicates the view that local converts make a complete break with the past, positing that rather than fully embracing individualism, converts continue to alternate between individual and more locally salient dividual (i.e the view that people are composed of detachable parts) notions of personhood. While Ghanaian Pentecostals do enter an individualistic relationship with God, Daswani argues, they also remain embedded in a web of family relations. Rather than making a full break with previous relationships, they selectively decide which relationships of the past can remain part of their Christian lives. Daswani describes the Pentecostals in his fieldsite as ethical subjects who, on a day-to-day basis, have to make pragmatic choices on how to negotiate the "[ongoing] tension between individual desires for rupture and dividual affective relations" (Daswani 2011: 257). While accounts such as Daswani's show that at least in some ethnographic contexts traditional modes of personhood remain significant, with converts alternating between new and traditional modes, these accounts nevertheless accept that the implied structure of personhood in Pentecostalism, and Christianity more generally, is that of individualism. Moreover, as Robbins showed in his discussion of the Urapmin the co-existence of competing models is not incompatible with a reading of individualism as the paramount value.

In his 2010 article *Partible Penitents* Mark Mosko adopted a sharply dissenting voice, arguing that Christian personhood is in fact an instantiation of dividualism. In developing this argument, Mosko, who works with the North Mekeo in Papua New Guinea, engaged a

distinction commonly made in the "New Melanesian Ethnography" between the Melanesian dividual person and the Western bounded individual. The term "dividual" gained traction among Melanesianists following Marilynn Strathern's use of the concept in her influential work *The Gender of the Gift*' (1988).[52] "For Strathern," Mosko recapitulates (in a later article), "particular or single dividuals are composite beings constituted of the gift contributions of the detached elements of other persons" (Mosko 2015: 366). Rather than being conceptualized as having an indivisible core, people are considered partible, an assemblage of detachable parts. Moreover, these parts are exchanged among people, implying that the composite constitution of single dividuals is changeable throughout life, and that social life is governed by the "elicitive exchange" of these transactable parts (Mosko 2010). An example of this is the exchange between a mother and her child over the child's lifetime. For the North Mekeo, Mosko observes, the mother's gift of menstrual blood during the gestation of the child is reciprocated later when the child is expected to give the mother "analogous parts…acquired from still other persons" (Mosko 2010: 218). Rather than accepting that the introduction of Christianity introduced a radically new form of personhood, namely that of the Western bounded possessive individual, Mosko argues that Christianity was easily adopted because of its implied commonalities with local notions. This involved, Mosko states, "the conversion of one dividualist form of personhood, agency, and sociality into another" (Mosko 2010: 232). Mosko posits his argument in very stark terms, claiming that other ethnographers working in the area have simply misunderstood the nature of Christian personhood in Melanesia and possibly elsewhere. What is perceived as individualism, he says, is only an isolated part of a larger and encompassing dividual process of exchange between believers and spiritual entities, including God and the

[52] The concept was first introduced in anthropology by McKim Marriott (1976).

devil. For Mosko, God's Grace, Will and Word are detachable and become "intimately attached to the vital parts of [believers'] total personal being--e.g., their hearts or souls" (Mosko 2015: 370). Believers then in turn reciprocate with "gift offerings to become attached to God's person (e.g., with confessions of sin, prayers, songs of praise, tithes, glorifications, good works)" (ibidem).

Mosko's argument has received considerable opposition. For Joel Robbins, whose work on the Urapmin was among the Melanesian ethnographies Mosko engaged with, his argument is an example of "continuity thinking." It is in line with the trend Robbins discerns within anthropology to "[see] change as a process whereby people incorporate anything new they encounter into their old understandings, and thus reproduce their traditions even as they may open them to incremental transformations" (Robbins 2010: 242; see also Robbins 2007). Robbins moreover takes issue with Mosko's implied stance on cultural change, as it does not engage with what local people themselves have to say about what they experience as change and novelty (Robbins 2010). Illustrating this with the example of the Urapmin, Robbins states that while the Urapmin may not have changed as much as they claim because of the introduction of Christianity, the fact that they assert they have is something to engage with ethnographically (Robbins 2010).

Mosko's article, an earlier version of which was the recipient of the 2008 Curl Essay prize, though controversial, was nevertheless quite influential, kindling real debate among anthropologists of Christianity. For Jon Bialecki (2015a) the significance of this discussion potentially extends more broadly. Accepting that the forms of subjectivity implied in Christianity, and particularly in its Pentecostal forms, may not fully map onto the notion of individualism typically associated with modernity, the worldwide growth of Pentecostalism, a

relatively recent expression of Christianity, may significantly complicate the narrative of modernity. Citing Birgit Meyer's work on the Pentecostal Public Sphere in Ghana (with Pentecostal social forms shaping traditional religious institutions), Bialecki maintains that the effects of these forms of subjectivity are likely to extend beyond the immediate circle of believers.

Although Mosko's approach remains quite singular, his work nevertheless opened a space for debate on the significance of the antinomy of individualism versus dividualism in the ethnographic understanding of Christian subjectivity. This consists of a number of careful analyses of how converts relate themselves to competing modes of self. Examples of this are the earlier cited work of Girish Daswani on Ghanaian Pentecostal women (see also, Daswani 2015), and Aparecida Vilaça's work with the Wari' in Amazonia (2011). The Wari' maintain dividual relationships with both human beings and animals. Because these relationships involve the possibility of shifting perspectives, the risk inherent in the latter relationship is that humans can be turned into animal prey. In Vilaça's analysis, Wari' are drawn to Christianity precisely because its implied individualism means that believers are no longer at risk of being turned into prey. This adopted form of personhood however only fully turns into that of "bounded" individualism after death. In the Wari' concept of Heaven, they are no longer part of any social fabric.

Other contributions to the debate offer sophisticated interpretations of the specificities of Christian individualism in relation to its secular counterpart (Bialecki 2015a; Chua 2015; Coleman 2015). Formulating a theoretical argument on how individualisms and dividualisms stand in relation to one another, Jon Bialecki operates from a notion of subjectivity as process. Building on the arguments of Vilaca and Daswani, among others, he observes that the modes of

personhood under discussion form a dyadic rather than a strict binary opposition. The relationship between apparently opposing modes should be "measured in degrees, or even co-existence" (Bialecki 2015a). Bialecki furthermore observes that "interpenetrations" of constituting elements of this dyadic occur at various temporal levels. Going back to the conceptualization of subjectivity as process, it follows that the modes of subjectivity characterizing various stages or moments in this process may be different from the envisioned "telos" or actual outcome. Bialecki offers examples from the Vineyard in Southern California. For instance, members of the Vineyard believe in demonic possession. Demonic deliverance allows a temporarily dividuated person to reach the telos of autonomous individual. A similar sense of the entwinement of individual and dividual modes of self is present in Coleman's discussion of the subjectivity fostered in the Swedish prosperity church *The Word of Life*. While the overarching form of subjectivity present is that of individualism, this involves, in Coleman's words, "[a] striking combination of solipsism--the construction of a spiritual reality that is only validated through personal ambition--and the need to reach out beyond the self in order to constitute effective faith" (Coleman 2015: 306). While there is a core self, it needs to be both open to belief and to reaching out to others (by evangelizing as well as offering gifts of money and time) in order to receive God's abundance. Though offset against another mode of individualism, underpinning Swedish society, the personhood associated with the Christian Prosperity church is nevertheless perceived as quite distinct, referred to by critics as decidedly un-Swedish (ibidem: 308). Liana Chua, who works with the Bidayuh in North Borneo holds another plea for a processual approach on Christian personhood, looking at the interplay of dividualism and individualism on different temporal scales (Chua 2015).

## 5.3 Christian personhood in El Salvador

*Introduction*

The ethnographic observation at the heart of the arguments developed in this dissertation is the notion that God will change El Salvador one soul at a time. This implies that individual souls are distinct from one another, and that the conversion of one does not per se bear on the conversion of another. As Yesenia puts it in the opening vignette, accepting Christ guarantees her individual salvation but not that of her loved ones. Christians then are individuals when viewed in relation to other people. This ethnographic observation furthermore implies that individual Christians bring change for the collective because God is working through them. Unlike "bounded" secular selves, Christians are, to a degree "porous selves." As the below discussion will show, responding to God's call requires a sense of openness, of willingness. This is most obvious in the experience of gifts. Only those people who arrive with an "open heart," according to informants, are likely to be touched by the deity. In testimonials church members describe their relationship as a back-and-forth with God reaching out and the believer responding. While accepting God in conversion grants eternal salvation, Christians are tasked with the responsibility to live a life that is worthy and expressive of being in communion with the deity. This is commonly described with the image of cleanliness. "El viene por una iglesia santa, sin mancha, sin arruga" [God will come for a church that is holy and without stains or wrinkles] is a common phrase among Salvadoran Christians (in Elim as well as in other Christian communities). As I will show in the final section of this section, the holistic and traditional understandings of the Gospel circulating in Elim have different emphases in their interpretation of what it means to be clean. Nevertheless, in both views this involves a degree of responsibility

towards "the other." Undergirding this notion that a Christian is tasked with responsibilities, is a notion of exchange between believer and deity, the effects of which are not limited to the hereafter but affect the here and now as well. These effects are perhaps most immediate in the experiential intimacy with the deity when receiving gifts, but also manifest in everyday life. As will be discussed, blessings offered by God include health and safety. God is commonly depicted as a protector, as well as someone who gives love but who also is feared. Being in communion with the deity fulfills (some of) the individual's existential needs. However, similar to what was described by Coleman and Chua, in order to fully express being in communion with God, the individual needs to reach beyond him or herself, and engage in communion with "the other."

In the remainder of this chapter I will more closely examine various components of the individual's relationship with the deity. Doing so, I will establish the centrality that the relationship with God holds in the life world of the Christian, and how this operates as a guiding principle with ramifications beyond life in the church. Engaging with the debate on Christian personhood, I argue that while the Pentecostal Christians I worked with are individuals, because of their relationship with the deity their personhood differs from that of the "Western secular bounded self." I depict them as porous, decentered selves in relation to the deity, a relationship that I argue to have dividual dimensions. Moreover, I argue that in order to engage in the exchange underpinning the relationship with the deity, individual Christians have to reach beyond their own boundaries in certain circumscribed ways, affecting the "other," as well as "society." I furthermore develop the argument that the scope of this "reaching beyond" is influenced by the recent theological shift. Because of the shifting attitude towards the "material," the understanding of how "church" should relate to "world" is changing, which also implies a shift in the conceptualization of Christian responsibilities.

I will start my analysis with a brief discussion of how conversion in El Salvador generally involves a new relational orientation towards the deity than a first-time belief. Next, I will discuss the dialectical back-and forth between the Christian and God, showing that Christians in some ways are "decentered selves," responding to the deity's call. I will focus in particular on conversion as well as on the experience of gifts. Next, I will turn to the relationship of exchange between deity and Christian.

*Conversion as new relational orientation*

While conversion is the moment when the "reborn" evangelical starts a new relationship with God as one of His children, for most evangelical converts in El Salvador this is not the first time they adopt a belief in God. According to a 2014 Pew Research survey, 95% of those Salvadorans who are not affiliated with any religious institution profess to believe in God. This is reflected in the cityscape in San Salvador where religious slogans are ubiquitous in public spaces, covering the windows of buses, as well as graffiti on walls. Moreover, for evangelicals and Catholics alike references to God permeate everyday speech. Common expressions are "Primero Dios" (Spanish for "God Willing"), as well as, a phrase from Proverbs, "Uno Propone, y Dios dispone" ("One plans, but God decides").[53] The reality of supernatural entities, including God, is even acknowledged by gang members. In one of his biweekly editorials Pastor Vega explains that gang members, following the honor code, see God as the only authority outside of the gang to whom they owe respect, for which reason they accept conversion as the only valid reason to leave the gang. In Pastor Vega's words:

[53] Proverbios 16: 1-3, Nueva Versión Internacional (NVI).

> God, nicknamed the “Colochon,”[54] is profoundly respected, not in the sense that they follow his ethical commands…but in accepting the transformation He can bring about in their group members. When the Colochon intervenes in the life of one of the group, the honor code requires that that person is left in peace…The group only verifies the authenticity of the conversion (Vega, January 2013).

While for most Salvadorans who convert to Pentecostal forms of evangelical Christianity (mostly from a Catholic background) conversion does not imply a new belief in God, but rather a new relational orientation with the deity, involving a new experiential dimension as well as a form of exchange between believer and God. Willian’s wife, Maria, a recent convert in her early twenties, describes the difference as follows: “I was [involved] in the Catholic church since I was a little girl, and yet nobody ever told me that God existed, that God would hear me if I talk to Him.” She furthermore asserts that “God is real,” meaning that He is real in a very tangible way. Belief in God, for Pentecostal Christians like Maria, revolves around a personalized, and intimate, encounter with the deity. This is particularly so in the ritualized event of accepting God in conversion as well as in the receipt the Gifts of the Spirit. Both are described as forms of dividual exchange.

*Christians as porous and decentered selves in ritualized contexts*

Analyzing testimonials of conversion, I will show how Christians depict themselves as “porous selves” in relation to God. I borrow the term “porous” from Charles Taylor’s work the Secular Age in which he draws a distinction between “porous” versus “buffered” selves. Taylor sees the latter self as characteristic of the secular age of modernity, and the former as typical of “the earlier enchanted world” (Taylor 2007). Unlike buffered selves, their porous counterparts do not have a firm boundary between inner and outer, “between mind and world, even mind and

[54] I did not translate this into English, since it is hard to adequately find an English equivalent. Literally, “Colochon” means “the [man] with curly hair.”

body," (ibidem) leaving them vulnerable to penetration by forces outside of the body. The porous quality of Christian selves is most obvious in the context of church rituals, including the initial "acceptance" of God, as well as the experience of gifts. These encounters are described in terms of God touching the Christian and entering his or her heart, taking the Christian's "burdens." An important contribution of the Christian in these encounters is his or her ability to be open. To capture that the agency for these encounters is depicted as lying in part with the deity, I refer to Christians as "decentered selves."

In the previous chapter, we saw that conversion testimonials often start with a story of personal crisis. The convert is depicted as someone with needs and vulnerabilities. As has been noted by ethnographers elsewhere in Latin America, while the future convert is in this vulnerable state, someone or something provides him or her with the incentive to visit a church. For the Elim members involved in this study, this "social contingency element" (cf. Gooren 2007)[55] is most often a friend, family member or a neighbor extending an invitation to join church or the cell meeting. It can also be a stranger reaching out in a public space (for example, the bus). Evangelical outreach is seen as God working through people. The medium can, however, also be a radio or TV broadcast. In one interview, a male church member in his thirties, a musician, described to me how he walked by the church building and was drawn in by the music. Conversion then is typically presented as a back-and-forth with God before the actual conversion event with the first incentive most often presented as originating outside of the individual.

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[55] The social contingency element is a standard part of testimonials. All the testimonials I encountered, in formal interviews and informal conversation, included this. Even the general pastor's testimonial, in which he emphasizes personal scrutiny of the Bible, featured a social contingency element preceding conversion as well as his "chance" encounter with an evangelical church pamphlet as well as the encounter with a church pamphlet.

While God is typically presented as working through people when reaching out to future converts, sometimes his intervention is depicted as direct rather than indirect. In the following interview excerpt, Wilber, one of the professionals I met during church outreach, emphasized direct supernatural intervention guiding him to his first church visit in Elim:

> M: Do you remember the first moment you decided to visit the Elim church?
> W: First of all, I did not decide.
> M: No?
> W: My mother invited me.
> M: Uh-huh.
> W: So, we were at the bus stop, my mother was on her way to church, and I was on my way home. When my mother invited me to go to church with her, I said that [this was nothing for me]. But when she got on the bus, I literally felt that two hands on my shoulders pushed me onto the bus. They grabbed me, and made me turn around, and made me get onto the bus. When I was inside, I turned around to see who had pushed me but there was no one.

The preamble to conversion is then presented as the convert's response to God's call, a process in which the agency of the individual is deemphasized, but not fully absent. Even in Wilber's account, despite presenting God's call as a literal push, he still leaves room for his own agency in responding. Whereas at first he mocked the other people in church, after a while he felt a need to accept God's call.

The decentralized agency of the convert, as well as the latter's porousness in relation to the deity is even more accentuated in accounts of the actual event of conversion. Again, the convert is described as responding to an external call. At one level this is the literal response to the altar call made at the end of each church service. Conversion takes place when the person attending church steps forward and publicly accepts Christ. For most this is a very emotional moment, and it is not uncommon to see people (men as well as women) in tears. The act of stepping forward is not depicted as a response to a human call, but rather as a response to the deity's reaching out. The imagery used to describe this suggests openness as well as

submissiveness on the part of the convert. Converting is very commonly referred to as "surrendering" ("entregarse" in Spanish), as arriving at the feet of Christ. But it is also a moment in which the boundary between self and the divine other becomes tangibly permeable, with the heart as locus of a dividual exchange. The convert, "touched by God," "opens his or heart" to accept the deity. God in return "cleans" the convert from sin, and offers salvation. At this moment, the convert is "reborn" as child of God.

The porousness and decentered agency of the Pentecostal Christian self is most outspoken in descriptions of the experience of Gifts of the Spirit. As discussed in chapter three, during the first part of the typically two-hour church service some of the church members speak in tongues and a few of the people present engage in prophecy. It is typical to cry during the experience of gifts. Not everyone who accepts God receives gifts of the Spirit, but in testimonials there is thematic overlap in the descriptions of both experiences, with the Christian being depicted as susceptible to God, who is reaching out. One (female) church member describes this susceptibility in the following way.

> There are people who do this mechanically, who come to church and sit there with their eyes open, these people will not receive the Spirit of God. To be able to prophecy, to cry in the church you need to arrive with a sensitive heart, with a heart that is ready to receive and that knows that God will fill the emptiness in your life.

The permeability of the boundary between inner and outer with regard to the deity is even more emphasized in descriptions of the Gifts with Christians describing this as a moment of being touched by God, as a moment of being close to the deity. As is typical for Charismatic Christians elsewhere (Luhrmann 2012; Brahinsky 2012), the encounter with God is experienced in a sensory, bodily way. This can be, for example, a sensation of warmth running through one's body or of sensing a jolt in one's stomach. Tears, though sometimes, as informants acknowledge,

an expression of personal sadness, are generally explained as a sign of being touched by the Spirit. As such, they can be seen as a material expression of being touched by the Divine, making visible the permeability of inner and outer.

Reminiscent of the theme of emotional change, described in the previous chapter as one of the transformational effects of conversion, the relief of anxiety and stress is one of the most often cited immediate effects of this experience. This is again described in terms of permeability of the Christian vis-à-vis God, with images of God filling the Christian (who struggles with emptiness), or God taking the Christian's burdens. One female interviewee describes this as the bodily sensation of being liberated:

> When I come here in search of God's Word… I am made free of the burden I carry, I put it in the hands of the Lord. I shed what I have inside, and when I leave [the service] I leave without feeling this burden in my body, without this weight.

While there are thematic similarities between conversion and the experience of Gifts, these respective encounters are not allotted the same meaning or value. Conversion happens only once, bringing about an ontological change. While people might alienate themselves again after conversion, and later re-approach, this second accepting is referred to as "reconciliation." Gifts happen more habitually, and are not experienced by everyone who converts. In the words of my interviewees, gifts are a way "to recharge your batteries," and "they offer support, rather than transformation."

The account of conversion and Gifts provides insight in the relationship between Christian and deity. Reminiscent of Mosko's argument that parts of God are detachable and become (as cited earlier) "intimately attached to the vital parts of [believers'] total personal being--e.g., their hearts or souls" (Mosko 2015: 370), we see that believers do profess to "have God in their hearts" after conversion. In the previous chapter, [Rogelio], the lawyer who for some time stepped away from church life, testified that, while outside the church he did not

engage in practices not compatible with church life because "he still had a chip of God in his heart." Because of this "exchange" with God, the believer is transformed into a new being. We saw in the previous chapter that conversion is understood to be an ontological shift making the new believer into a "child" of God rather than a mere "creature." This new being becomes part of the larger unit of the "body of Christ," but it is still a being that has an inner core separate of that of other believers and that is in many ways separate from God. The latter is implied in the language used to describe encounters with God. The ways believers describe God suggests they see Him as external to themselves, and that they do not always experience His presence in the same way. For example, they mention "being touched By God," or that during worship in the church His presence is real and can be felt, or that in the moment of "quebranto" (being touched by the Spirit; literally translated as "brokenness") they are closer to God. Even more intimate connections are described in terms that imply a degree of alterity, with God described as "always walking with the Christian," or even as a "husband."

In the accounts of the experience of gifts believers shared with me, was also implied a relation towards the other. I will briefly discuss this with regard to both speaking in tongues as well as prophecy. Both gifts are seen as the Spirit being channeled through individual people. As was mentioned earlier, this is only likely to happen when someone comes to church with the right disposition: an open heart, and closed eyes. In chapter three I discussed that closing eyes is in fact mandatory, and that people are reprimanded if they sit through the worship part of the service without closing eyes. This reinforces an inward-looking orientation. In line with Cucchiari's description of Pentecostal churches as examples of hybrid spaces simultaneously public and private (Cucchiari 1990), attention is drawn away from others and into the self. Interviewees commonly told me that they "forget" the presence of others. Speaking in tongues

then is at once a personal experience of intimacy with the deity as a public expression of being touched by the Spirit.[56] It is public because there are church members present who do not experience gifts and are likely to be aware of the manifestation of the Spirit in others. The church space is also at all times surveilled by church diaconos who are in charge of making sure that nobody takes advantage of the moment to engage in criminal activity, or transgresses the implied norms of bodily comportment during gifts. Tears are common, but nobody is wailing uncontrollably. Nobody falls to the ground or sways their bodies.[57] Toward the end of worship, a few people engage in prophecy. If accepting a hierarchy of charisma (cf. Haynes 2015), the latter gift is much rarer than speaking in tongues. During this part of the worship session, the interplay between public and private, social and intimate becomes more palpable. While people are still expected to have their eyes closed, they are also invited to listen to one or two people engaging in prophecy. This process is facilitated by the diaconos who pass the microphone to those people they notice experiencing prophecy so that the whole congregation can hear what is being said. So, unlike speaking in tongues, the prophecy is rendered in intelligible language and is meant to communicate a message to the church community, coming directly from God (the person conveying the prophecy typically repeatedly adds "Dice El Senor" ("says the Lord"). It makes explicit that part of having a connection with God means doing service to others: in this case, being the vessel for a divine message meant to reach those listening (including the people present in the church, as well as those who are following the service via the media or internet).

[56] Jon Bialecki contrasts speaking in tongues with "properly Protestant speech (Bialecki 2015b: 96)," which is a "sincere expression of the inner self" (see also Keane 2007; 2002) in that the value of speaking of tongues lies in its "supernatural inspiration" (Bialecki 2015b: 96), more than in its sincerity as personal expression. While I agree with that, I argue that both presuppose an inner core. Speaking in tongues requires an inward-looking stance so that the inner self can be touched by the Spirit and channel the gifts.

[57] If people do they are admonished, and sometimes even asked to leave.

"Prophecy," as one of my interviewees explains to me, "is when the Lord manifests what he wants us to know as church, sometimes he gives us strength, other times he reproaches us and other times he answers our questions." While this message is understood to serve the collective, interpretation of its meaning is personal. There is no public discussion of the content of the message. People interpret the message as God speaking directly to them at a personal level.

*Exchange with God*

For Naomi Haynes, reporting on the Prosperity Gospel in Zambia, the "central tenet of…the "health and wealth gospel"…is that God wants all believers to be rich, healthy, and successful." In exchange, she says, "all that is required to access these divine blessings is faith in God's power, faith that Pentecostals are urged to demonstrate through the giving of gifts" (Haynes 2013: 85). Unlike *Tabernaculo Israel, Amigos de Israel*, the other transnational Salvadoran-born evangelical mega-church with headquarters in San Salvador, Elim is not a proponent of the Prosperity Gospel. Nevertheless, there is an implied notion of exchange in believers' accounts of their relationship with God. In the above discussion of ritualized life in the church, this was already intimated: Christians believe and are saved; Christians open their hearts to God and are relieved of their burdens. In this section of the chapter, I will more explicitly engage with the notion of exchange.

In several accounts of conversion (both in Elim and other evangelical churches), either gathered informally or formally, I was told how people had an expectation that God would be willing to help them. During one of my many taxi rides with Don Emiliano, an evangelical older man with several adult children, he told me that he had decided to take one of his non-evangelical sons to church. His son was struggling with drug addiction, and Don Emiliano hoped

that his son going to church would elicit God's help in overcoming the addiction problem. Others did not just hope God would help, but tried to actually bargain with the deity, a practice that was also observed by David Smilde in his study of evangelical conversion in Venezuela (Smilde 2007a), and that in my data set was only reported by males. For example, Eliseo, introduced in the previous chapter, told me that he had promised God that he would serve Him if God helped him overcome a serious injury. This bargaining with the deity before conversion shows that many times conversion does not involve a new belief so much as a new relational orientation towards the deity. This can sometimes also involve bargaining on behalf of children. Milton, the former gang member whose conversion story was broached in the previous section, was drawn to church because he wanted God's help with his fragile infant's son health. Though he had promised to serve God if his son got better, he still hesitated to fulfill the promise until he felt directly admonished in prophecy. This may seem to stand in tension with the notion that the relationship with God is personal, but while salvation is individual, it is quite typical for believers to request help on behalf of other people. As one single Mother told me, given that she was responsible for her children as long as they were minors, any blessings awarded to them, were blessings for her as well.

The notion of exchange between believer and deity is also implied in the common exhortation that Christians need to persevere, even when faced with adversity and difficulty, without any observable response to their requests. The exchange in the believers' lifeworld is ultimately in God's hands. He is a God who controls everything, but His plan is not always transparent. He is understood to do things "in His own time." Sometimes he allows for bad things to happen, even to Christians. In the opening vignette, we saw that while Yesenia felt secure in having eternal salvation, she was not as certain that God would ensure her physical

safety. The account of Jorge, a middle-aged man and long-term active church member (currently a cell leader) whom I met in church and had two two-hour long semi-structured interviews with, offered a striking example of how during persistent adversity doubts can creep up. During the beginning of the interview Jorge was quite passionate in telling me how becoming evangelical had changed his life for the better. He said that while right now he was not as economically comfortable as he had been once before (when he was selling beverages), he trusted God "would open a door for him." Though "his purse was empty, his heart was full, something only Christ can accomplish." However, as the interview progressed, Jorge opened up to share some of his underlying worries, referring to himself as a "non-conforming Christian" ("soy de los Cristianos inconformes"). He said he frequently asked God why his commitment had not resulted in more economic blessings:

> Lord, I gave you my life, and you are the master of gold and silver; why do I have to live in misery? Why should I go around, hungry for a little bite to eat when I should be living in abundance? If I am your son, and if I am really your son, open doors for me! Give me what I need!

He further lamented: "What does God want with me? What does God want for me?"

While Jorge's account was atypical in that living in economic "abundance" was not generally identified as a Christian objective in the context of the Elim community, stories of God intervening in immediate financial crises were more common. Other common themes were health (both physical, emotional as well as spiritual) and safety from violence. Testimonials of blessings indicate how the relationship with God is understood to have effects in the personal lives of believers rather than only in the ritual life in the church. In the previous chapter, we saw that the self-transformation effected through conversion is reported to bring about changes in emotional health as well as safety (with regard to the latter the emphasis was on reducing risk through anger management). But when asked directly how God works in their lives, interviewees

identify how positive change is brought about through direct intervention of God, or because of God working through other people. Blessings include accounts of actual miracles, particularly narratives of miraculous healings that, according to the testimonial, are subsequently confirmed by medical exams showing that the medical affliction has vanished. Melinda, a young woman in the cell group I attended during the second half of my fieldwork shared a dramatic story of how her heart problems, so severe she would need a heart transplant, were healed by God. Similar to Jorge she could not understand why as an "obedient" Christian she had to suffer with this heart problem. The last time she faced God about this, he healed her:

> God, I am obedient. Why do You do this? Why do You make me feel like this? On this particular day, I felt that my heart really was not functioning well anymore. I was home alone, watching TV. It was a really hot day. Suddenly I felt a little breeze, and the presence of someone next to me. A voice said: "I give you a new heart." Then the breeze was gone, and the voice was gone, and in this moment I felt that I had a new heart.

When her mother came home, she declared that she was cured. In response to her Mom's disbelief, she said her medical exams would prove so. She also told God that if she was really healed she would go share her testimonial witnessing to God's power (which shows again people's promise to do something in return for God's blessings). In Melinda's account of her health problems, she received the miraculous gift of Divine healing (even though she was yet to receive the Pentecostal gift of speaking in tongues). An ordinary day (she was at home watching TV) turned into absolutely extraordinary when Melinda unexpectedly experienced the alterity of the Divine, an encounter that (at least in the logic of the story)[58] changed the course of her life. More frequently, blessings are more everyday events, not per se turning the day into the same degree of extraordinary. Believing that there is no such thing as luck, believers see the hand of

[58] I make explicit that this is true in the logic of the story to remind readers that this dissertation, while engaging with people's accounts of their religious beliefs, is at no time taking any theological stance.

God in many of the good or fortuitous things in their lives. For example, Roxana, a middle-aged church member I met in the CETI sessions I attended, told me that one day she needed money desperately and God guided her to the person who was able to lend her the money she needed. Another time, Roxana was on the bus on her way home when thieves entered the bus. Public transportation is particularly unsafe in El Salvador, with buses often being robbed and sometimes the scene of tragedy (with one of the worst stories involving a bus set on fire with all passengers still inside). As the thieves started making their rounds, Roxana became very nervous because she did not have any money or anything of value with her, and she was afraid the thieves would hurt her. She asked God to keep her safe. The thieves got off at the next stop, before they got to the section where Roxana was sitting, which she saw as a sign of God's intervention. "God walks with us, he liberates us," she said. Thinking back to Yesenia's story, the relationship with God furthermore affects the everyday in that God, especially for single women, provides an alternative for absent relationships of intimacy and trust with human beings. God offers solace and companionship, for some in some sense even filling the absence of a husband.

The most fundamental form of reciprocity on the part of the believer is to accept God, and to believe in Him. This is what salvation hinges on. But the believer is also expected to live his or her everyday life in a way that honors being in a relationship with God. This is described in moral imagery, such as, for example, "being obedient to God," "maintaining one's cleanliness," "living a life that pleases God," as well as "persevering." For believers, serving God involves a horizontal dimension. As part of their relationship with God, they are expected to take on responsibilities towards others. Magdalena, one of the more conservative members I talked to, sighed: "You can't just come to church, and think, "oh, I've been coming here for twelve years, I am guaranteed salvation," and not care about others, thinking that it is really their

problem if they go to hell or not." As I will discuss in the next two chapters, this 'horizontal aspect' is foregrounded even more explicitly in the reorientation towards holistic mission. In formal and informal conversations, believers made it clear to me that serving other people is ultimately in function of a relationship of exchange with others. Rogelio, as we saw in chapter four, is very explicit about this when he states that "his debt with God is with the people."

## 5.4 Conclusion

Situating my analysis of the Salvadoran Pentecostal Christian self within the debate on Christian personhood, I argue that Salvadoran Christians, particularly in relation to other human beings, are individual beings, with an inner core. Ethnographic evidence for this is ample. First of all, as Yesenia, cited in the beginning of the chapter stated, salvation is individual. Her belief in God does not guarantee the salvation of her children. Moreover, similar to Keane's observation of the sincerity of speech reflecting an inner core, Elim members talk about sincerity and authenticity. This, however, for Elim members is mostly described in relation to sincere practices, and sincere emotional change, rather than sincere speech. As Willian, featured in the previous chapter, said, in reference to his own self-description as an "angry person:" "The hardest parts to change are those that are inside of you, and that are not per se visible to other people."

However, I also showed that the Pentecostal Christian individual is notably different from its secular counterparts. In the conception of believers, the individual's inner core becomes transformed in conversion. Moreover, the intimate and personal connection of the believer vi-a-vis the deity involves a form of exchange, with some dividualistic characteristics. To capture this dynamic between self and Divine Other, I refer to the form of individualism I encountered

among the Christians in my fieldsite as “decentered,” and “porous.” I furthermore argue that the exchange with God is negotiated, at least in part, via service for others. This is, for example, reflected in the hierarchy of Gifts. We saw that the Gift of Prophecy, in which the believer becomes a temporary vessel for God’s voice, rendering a message for everyone present with, is quite rare, and as such considered more prestigious (from the ethnographic view that only those with especially “clean hearts” are chosen for this). Further developing the theme of service for others as part of a relationship with God, I argue that Salvadoran Pentecostal Christians, in order to live up to what is entailed in being a Christian, need to reach within themselves and their own inner core, but also reach outside of themselves in order to live up to what is entailed in being a Christian. Because this is so intrinsic to the Christian self, I argue that this reaching outward is part of the moral self-work Christians engage in following conversion. As such, work involving others, I argue, is also typically characterized by a tension between “self-restraint” and “responsibility.” I refer to this relational component of “self-work” as Pentecostal ethics of care for the other. Such “relational self-work” is often considered quite challenging, in that it involves maintaining the right degree of balance between reaching out, while also safeguarding one’s inner core from potential spiritual pollution, particularly, as we will see later, when engaging with certain social domains of the secular world.

In the following chapters, I sketch out what practices are associated with such Pentecostal care. By comparing traditional and holistic Pentecostalism, I discern differences on two axes, shaping the scope and content of the ethics of care implied in Pentecostal post-conversion transformation: (1) the relative value attributed to the material vis-à-vis the spiritual. While reaching out beyond the self as part of enacting Christian faith is not contingent on positive valorization of the material, the specific values attributed to the material, I argue, affect the scope

of Pentecostal care; (2) differences in the way the three dimensions of "I," "God," and "Other" constitutive of the Pentecostal self are negotiated. In the holistic model, more weight is attributed to the dimension of "Other" than in its traditional counterpart. This, I show, affects notions of agency and responsibility. While this implies that the degree of decenteredness vis-à-vis the deity is somewhat less pronounced in the holistic model, the notion of decentered is still relevant, at least in the ideal version as propagated by Pastor Vega. In Vega's words, a holistic understanding of the Bible maintains a radical reorientation towards the other, to the extent that the Christian's inner core becomes defined as the "not-I," expressing that serving others is a core duty.

# Chapter six:

## Ethics of care and Christian subjectivity: Renegotiating the value of the material under integral mission

### 6.1 Introduction

In this chapter and the next, I will, building on the arguments of the previous two chapters, examine a number of core Christian practices that help produce forms of Christian personhood and that are expressions of ethics of care toward the other in function of the individual believer's relationship with God. This chapter is dedicated to practices that have traditionally been understood to be responsibilities of "the Good Christian" within the Elim community, but the scope of which has expanded because of the revalorization of the material under the impetus of integral mission. Specifically, I will examine the practice of announcing the faith through evangelical outreach and living the word, as well as the practice of providing forms of assistance other than spiritual (referred to as "helping"). Building on last chapter's argument that believers are decentered individuals who in order to produce their "sacred selves" have to reach beyond the boundaries of the self in circumscribed ways, I will examine how the adoption of integral mission has affected the relationship between self vis-à-vis other and vis-à-vis larger collectivities (church and society).

### 6.2 Announcing the Good News: Evangelical outreach

Since Elim's inception evangelizing has been a core aspect of its mission. In chapter three we discussed some of the evangelizing strategies Elim as an institution has adopted in its trajectory of growth from a small church in Ilopango to a transnational organization, spanning

several continents. Strategies included mass evangelical events, which brought together thousands of people in one space, the deployment of media (initially with radio broadcasts, followed by television emissions and, more recently, by internet publications), and, since the eighties, the adoption of a cellular system. One of the explicit purposes of cell meetings (church meetings in people's homes) is evangelizing.[59] As several of my interviewees said, a cell should always include non-evangelicals (referred to as "friends") because otherwise the cell does not serve its evangelizing purpose.

The reference to the cell system reminds us of how, as described in chapter three, many individual Christians are given tasks and roles in the church organization, affording them a more formal place in the church hierarchy. As such, it is to be expected that at least some of the institution's goals are also goals for individual Christians. In this chapter, I will describe how the core mission of evangelizing is considered an important responsibility for individual believers. While evangelizing is a way to enact the decentered Christian self, it is also an expression, at least for those members who are actively involved in the church as organization, of being part of the collective body of the church. Teasing apart how evangelizing produces the Christian self in the context of Elim as institution, I will first establish that evangelizing is a practice in function of a relationship with God. Then, I will show that evangelizing though directed at "the other" is an example of the "work of the self on the self" believers engage in as part of the post-conversion transformation described in chapter four. Evangelizing is not always considered easy, and, particularly in the context of El Salvador's culture of anxiety involves the occasional overcoming of feelings of discomfort and even fear. Next, I will turn to evangelizing as an

[59] The other two explicit goals are "edificación," and "confraternización." The former refers to the goal of providing continuing instruction and guidance about the Gospel, the latter refers to the importance of creating a comfortable and friendly atmosphere. For example, cell meetings always end with the sharing of a snack.

expression of "ethics of care" towards non-evangelicals and ultimately towards the larger collectivity of society both evangelical and non-evangelical Salvadorans share. Specifically, I will discuss aspects of the changing form and content of evangelizing in light of the adoption of integral mission. Last, returning to the theme of how evangelizing is informed by the institution's goals, I will include some of the recurrent critical comments and concerns I encountered during interviews with long-term members about the topic of evangelizing.

The argument that individual Christians engage in practices as part of an exchange with God, and that also affect others, is arguably the most clearly and convincingly illustrated with the practice of evangelizing. This is explicitly acknowledged in how Christians talk about evangelizing. As we saw in the previous chapter, it is not uncommon to promise God to engage in evangelization as a way to serve Him if granted hoped for blessings, or as an expression of thanks for received blessings. The practice itself is commonly described as a way to "win souls for Christ," or "bringing [souls] to the feet of Christ." Recapturing the notion that conversion is the result of the interplay between the deity reaching out and the convert responding, it is also commonly described as a way to facilitate God's work. Sharing his conversion narrative, one of the coordinating pastors I talked to, described this as follows: "God touched my heart by means of members of the church that were evangelizing where I was studying. They talked to me about Christ, and God touched my heart." Pastor Ramón, who, as will later in this chapter be discussed, is an active proponent of integral mission, makes explicit that he sees his role in outreach as merely "creating the space and the conditions so that God can do His work [i.e. convert people]."

While in my interviewees' conceptualization, evangelizing is depicted as doing God's work, it is also acknowledged that for many active church members it is a concrete way of fulfilling the demands of being part of a church institution the core mission of which is growth.

In chapter three we discussed how the cellular system requires/enables lay members to take on leadership roles, leading and hosting individual cell meetings in the respective roles of "leader" and "anfitrion" [host] or overseeing multiple cell groups in the more encompassing role of "supervisor." One of the main goals is to accomplish cell multiplication: each time the goal of fifteen members has been reached the mother cell is divided into two daughter cells. In the words of one cell leader: "We serve the Work, we continue growing, we have multiplied cells, we have had the opportunity to divide this cell into three." Cell leaders receive careful institutional supervision. Each meeting, they have to send in statistics on how many people visited their group [including how many "friends," i.e. "non-converts"]. As some members confided, it has happened that in case the growth numbers have been stagnant, cell leaders are approached by the supervisor or by the neighborhood pastor and encouraged to improve on the goal of evangelization.

Having established evangelizing as a practice in function of a relationship of God as well as, for the more involved lay members, in function of membership in the church institution, I will next show that it is also a clear illustration of "work of the self on the self." In chapter four, I explained that such work is often seen to involve quite a bit of self-restraint and self-discipline of the individual who engages in this as an expression of Christian responsibility towards self and other. While evangelizing is directed at an "other," it nevertheless, at least for some evangelicals, involves quite a bit of self-discipline. Approaching others to persuade them of your beliefs is not something that comes easy to everyone given that this is a form of social interaction that can be perceived as quite intrusive. For example, writing on the Word of Life church in Sweden, Simon Coleman reports that its members are at times considered to be overbearing in their proselytizing efforts, which contributes to their being labeled as "un-Swedish" (Coleman 2015: 14). In

Coleman's analysis, Word of Lifers incur this label because, at once seen as "hyper-aggressive" and as "vulnerable" (due to suspicions that members are brainwashed), they confound Swedish normative notions with regard to the "boundaries of the person and…appropriate action in relation to others" (ibidem). Similar to Coleman I argue that evangelizing involves a renegotiation of the boundary between self and other. It is exactly in this space of "overbearingness" that self-discipline and responsibility for other coalesce. In the context of El Salvador this renegotiation is further complicated because of its embeddedness in a social environment in which distrust and fear of violence are commonplace.

Living with a Catholic host mother during the first months of my fieldwork I soon became aware of this "space of overbearingness" between evangelicals and Catholics. We lived in a fairly middle-class neighborhood, though not in one of the richer parts of the city. My host mother, Carmen, was a retired schoolteacher, who also operated a business from her home renting out parking spaces to her neighbors. She was an elegant, well-dressed and courteous person, making sure to stay on good terms with her neighbors, many of whom were also her clients. Wanting to be helpful to me in setting up my fieldwork, she decided to introduce me to the neighbors a few doors down who attended an evangelical church. Though not close friends of hers, they were people she maintained an amicable relationship with, and that she regularly interacted with since they rented parking space with her. The next few weeks I went to church with Carmen's neighbors, and joined a small prayer group at their home. Soon, however, they started asking me to bring Carmen along to the meetings. When I mentioned this to her, she suddenly grew really anxious. Although she did not outright ask me to stop going to her neighbors, I became aware of her growing discomfort and discontinued going. It turned out that her neighbors had invited her before. A dedicated Catholic with a love for Mary, Carmen was not

interested in converting to a new religion. Out of courtesy for her neighbors she had in the past attended a few times, but had then discontinued going. My involvement with her neighbors, though initiated at Carmen's suggestion, seemed to offset the careful balance she had managed to create between maintaining friendly relations with her neighbors and yet keeping enough distance so they would not be persuaded to renew their conversion efforts.

From the perspective of evangelicals, this in-between space is not per se termed a space of "overbearingness." During fieldwork, I did meet people who were quite comfortable approaching others about the Gospel. In chapter four, we introduced Eliseo who makes sure to always dress up when going out in case an opportunity arises to engage in proselytism. Ada, also introduced in chapter four, is absolutely gregarious and simply loves talking to people. For her any everyday encounter could turn into a chance to talk about Jesus. In her own testimonial, she shared how she converted in response to persistent visits from a group of evangelical women. Though Ada was at first reluctant to the point that she hid from the women when they came knocking on the door, they persisted, not apparently deterred by "the overbearingness" involved in the encounter. Eventually, Ada became more responsive, particularly after one of her teenage children died. She compares the church sisters to fishermen who "insisted, and insisted until they finally caught her" ("insistian hasta que me pescaron"). But some people indicated that from the perspective of the evangelizer too the practice of proselytism can sometimes feel like impinging on other people's personal space. Sister Mirna, the cell leader in my neighborhood, found it quite uncomfortable to go knock on her neighbors' doors to invite them to join the cell meeting. She did go on occasional rounds around the neighborhood, pushing herself beyond her comfort zone. But more often she would simply stop at the houses of people she knew were interested in

coming, but needed help with transportation to be able to attend. In the months I attended I rarely saw anyone join the group beyond its few regular members.

Both Carmen, my Catholic landlady, and Mirna, my evangelical cell leader, see the negotiation of personal space implied in evangelizing as fraught with tension. After all, the evangelizer's ultimate goal is to radically change the person they are talking to by persuading them of their religious beliefs. While such tension is not per se specific to the Salvadoran context, as we saw in Coleman's Swedish case study, in El Salvador this is further complicated because of its embeddedness in a social context of pervasive distrust and insecurity. As discussed in chapter two, navigating El Salvador's "culture of anxiety" is for many Salvadorans an embodied habit that informs social encounters, including those between evangelizer and evangelized. It is not unheard of to hear stories about criminals ringing doorbells, posing as evangelicals. But similarly, evangelicals also take into account safety concerns before approaching others. It is in the evangelical encounter with a potentially dangerous other that the work of the self the evangelizer engages in becomes most tangible. I previously argued that proselytism involves entering an in-between space in which the evangelizer creates a degree of "overbearingness" of self in relation to the other. That this process is given shape by the self-disciplining work on the self and how this stands in tension with the Christian responsibility the practice seeks to convey becomes more visible in cases when this tension becomes more difficult to negotiate and may fail altogether. In chapter two, we saw that criminal violence was foregrounded as the main source of societal instability, with young male gang members publicly crafted as the intimate face of the post-war crime wave. Not surprisingly then, it is the young male, and particularly the young male with tattoos and other public signs of gang membership who becomes most difficult to approach. Both in formal interviews as in informal chats I was

told of the importance of reaching out to such youngsters, as well as the fear that often stood in the way of that. In a casual conversation with Sister Mirna on our way to the cell meeting (she would typically give me a ride there), she brought up one such dilemma. There had been a man on the bus who looked like someone who was probably involved in gang activity. Sister Mirna felt that she should go over to him and talk to him about Christ, but she simply could not bring herself to do so. She did not dare to approach him. In this case, despite clearly thinking it was important to approach this man, she was not able to successfully engage in the self-disciplining work of pushing herself out of her comfort zone, and overcoming her fear. That she did see this type of outreach as a valuable endeavor was emphasized by the admiration with which she next told me about a friend of hers who, as Mirna put it, had had the courage to invite a sinister looking man to church. The man was really quite dangerous, Mirna said, because he was known locally for being involved in extortion.

Outreach involving a "dangerous other" not only makes the self-disciplining work that goes into evangelizing more visible, but it also highlights how this stands in tension with a sense of responsibility towards the other person. Evangelizing, I argue, is an example of the ethics of care involved in post-conversion transformation. In an interview with Sister Patty, a church sister who regularly engages in the ministry of prison outreach, she characterized her work with delinquents as seeing them from God's perspective:

> We approach anyone, including those who are involved in delinquency. We know who they are, but we also know who they are in the eyes of God. They [as other human beings] are souls in need, for whom Jesus dies on the cross. To them as well God offered the plan of salvation.

By characterizing criminals as "souls in need," this church sister emphasizes what many Christians consider the first and foremost important responsibility involved in evangelizing, namely that of saving souls. With many expecting Christ's Second Coming to be imminent, this

is considered an urgent task. In the words of an interviewee, "the times are short, and He will come, and so many souls will be lost." But as we saw in chapter four, conversion is also understood to bring about effects in the here and now. It is at this level that the evangelizer is seen as "an agent of societal change," at the level of the neighborhood, and, more abstractly, at the level of the nation. The notion is that God will change El Salvador one soul at a time, and that the evangelizer participates in this work. One of my interviewees likens the evangelizer to an individual knot in a larger and ever-growing chain: "Evangelization brings the good news of hope to [whomever] is without, and it brings change to the life of that person, who then can also generate change in the life of others, it is a chain." Here societal change is seen as the sum of small incremental changes in individual conduct. We saw in chapter four that anger management was commonly cited as an expression of change through conversion. Again, this becomes writ large in the figure of the gang member. Stories of successful conversions of former gang members are considered particularly powerful testimonials of God's power to change. For example, Comiskey's book on the Elim church starts with the story of Wadner Gill, a former gang member whose former sinful life of robbery and murder stands in stark contrast with his current involvement as supervisor in Elim's cellular system (Comiskey 2004: 13-14). For Sister Patty, the value of prison outreach does not only lie in saving the souls of people who in the eyes of society are lost already, but it is also her hope that it makes an actual difference in the lives of the young men she engages with, that they leave prison with, as she puts it, "a cleaner mentality" enabling them to leave behind their life of crime.

Evangelicals in Elim and elsewhere in El Salvador commonly share the view that evangelization facilitates the saving of souls and that it helps bring about change in individual conduct. Under the impetus of integral mission, however, some have come to adopt a more

comprehensive view of evangelization. Not only the soul of the other person needs to be saved but the entire person. Underlying this, as was explained in chapter three, is a revaluation of the material. Rather than positing the soul as more important than the body, the unity of both is emphasized. For the evangelizer, this means that not only the non-evangelical's spiritual well-being should be addressed, but the entire composite of that person's needs, including his or her material needs. As one of the pastors put it, "you can't [approach a poor person and] say "God Bless [but] go with hunger." To get a more concrete sense of what such outreach can look like, I will provide a discussion of the pastoral work of Pastor Ramón, one of the pastors I met who was most committed to integral mission.

Ramón was one of the pastors I got to know when teaching Greek classes. He stood out because of his jovial personality, always ready to make a friendly joke. Ramón did his pastoral work in what was considered a "high-risk" neighborhood, an especially impoverished and conflictive "colonia."[60] At his own request he had been recently transferred there. He had become acquainted with some of the local gang in the neighborhood while doing social work with an evangelical NGO, and requested to be pastor there to be able to reach out more to them. Rather than demonizing them, he saw them as vulnerable youngsters, many of them with families they were hardly able to take care of. He had learned to see them with compassion, he said, rather than with anger or fear. For Ramón reaching out to the youngsters was a Christian responsibility. It was God's will, Ramón said, for Christians to engage with those that are spiritually the neediest. But having come to see the youngsters as marginalized and stigmatized outsiders in society, he furthermore thought of them as needing practical help, as well as simply

[60] At Ramón's invitation, I visited his pastoral neighborhood one time, going there by taxi. Don Emiliano, my regular taxi driver, agreed to drop me off at the entrance but refused to go any further because he considered it too dangerous. Once there, a group of church members accompanied me to the event I was invited to.

needing to be reaffirmed in their human dignity. This help would ultimately not just benefit the youngsters, but the entire community that was affected by their criminal activities. The first initiative Ramón organized was a Christmas dinner for the gang members and their family. Pastor Vega attended the dinner as well, to preach a sermon and to pray for the young men and their family. Several church members, who lived in the same neighborhood, were present as well to help facilitate the event. The dinner provided an opportunity to preach to the youngsters, but it was also a gesture to establish more social rapport with the group and to simply do something nice for them. Ramón commented, "we welcomed them, and we told them that for us they are important as human beings, we showed them the love God has for them." Having engaged the gang, Ramón had created the opening he needed to engage the young men in his next initiative. With permission of and help from the church's general pastor and with financial aid from a church in the United States, Ramón and a small group of Elim members founded a small bakery. Both the gang members and local evangelical youth were invited to come work there, and to learn the trade of baker. Though the ultimate objective was to convert the gang members, and help them establish a new life outside the gang, the more immediate goal was to simply offer them an alternative means of making a living. Leaving a gang is not only complicated by the gang's retaliation, but it is also practically challenging in that tattoos and other markers of gang membership make it considerably more difficult to find legitimate employment. For Ramón, the bakery was an example of a more holistic approach to evangelizing. While it was a central goal to convert the gang members, they were not pressured to do so. It was thought that this would happen in God's time, and that the church group's role was to simply create the conditions of possibility for the youth to accept God. Their more immediate needs in the here and now, and those of their dependents were considered important as well. Ramón was hopeful the young men

would be able to earn a steady monthly income in the bakery. A year into the project six men had converted to Christ. Despite being successful in small ways, the project was nevertheless weighed down by having to operate in what I referred to as "a culture of anxiety." The gang members, as other Salvadorans, had to negotiate insecurity in their lives. The bakery faced extra scrutiny from the police. Some of the limits of the project became more visible when one of the converts--one of the first gang members to have joined the bakery--died a violent death. The rumor was that the gang had been unwilling to accept him leaving the group.

Returning to the notion of evangelizing as a way to bridge the space between self and other, we see that in the case of holistic mission this space is bridged not only with words but with a form of action that implies relieving needs beyond a strictly spiritual need. In Ramón's case, we saw that he gradually bridged the space between himself and the young gang members by slowly establishing a relationship with them. His concern with their material and psychological well-being was not only as a means of converting them and thus bringing about their eternal salvation. Instead this concern was an additional goal and one that Ramón considered valuable in and of itself. In Ramón's conceptualization, by narrowing the space between himself and the gang members, he opened a space for God to touch the youngsters. He says, "we create the space so that God does what He can do…all we do is show them God's love." But at the same time he also engages in a form of social commentary. He is making a statement that it matters whether or not people have their basic needs met, and that the other person's suffering in the here and now is something that he should respond to if he can. This, Ramón indicates, is a shift in thinking for evangelicals. He comments, "[it is no longer the case] that all that matters is thinking of [the future] up high, that it does not matter what happens here below, because in any case God is keeping a space for us in heaven, and it does not matter if we

suffer here." As Ramón makes explicit, care about the other's basic needs in El Salvador's widespread context of poverty becomes imbricated with a larger concern with injustice. For Ramón, the gang members are not just perpetrators of violence but also victims, subjected to the same challenges other impoverished Salvadorans need to negotiate.

Holistic evangelism, though a clear shift from other modes of evangelizing, is most readily contrasted to "traditional modes of evangelizing" and presents less of a break with the type of outreach done within the context of the cell system. I am adopting the term "traditional outreach," following the terminology used by some of my informants, to those encounters in which the evangelizer engages in a typically fairly short verbal exchange with passersby in a public setting. This can be a one-on-one encounter or a more formal way of addressing a crowd in a park, on a bus or a street corner, among other places.[61] In describing his own experiences with this type of outreach, Pastor Alberto refers to this as "going to a place [such as a bar] and interrupting what people are doing to talk to them about the Gospel, yelling at them to catch their attention." The word "gritar" (Spanish for "yelling") was used repeatedly to describe this form of outreach, particularly by those critical of the more traditional methods. This more incidental encounter does not lend itself well to outreach focused on alleviating a composite of needs, since these needs are likely not known to the evangelizer. Holistic evangelism as described with the example of Ramón's outreach stands less in contrast with some of the outreach that Elim members engage in via the cell system. Because outreach is conducted with neighbors rather than anonymous passers-by, the space between self and other is negotiated differently. "Interrupting" can still be part of this style. We think back of the story of Ada's conversion and how she would drop what she was doing to hide from the evangelizers knocking on her door. But

[61] Media outreach also tends to privilege verbal communication between evangelizer and virtual other.

in the context of neighborhood outreach the evangelizer has more of an opportunity to establish a personalized relationship with the people they are seeking to reach. Rather than "gritar" (yelling out the Word in a public place) the mode of evangelizing can be described as "relacionarse" (more focus on a personalized approach). This could be knocking on someone's door repeatedly, but also simply greeting a person each time you see him or her. There is opportunity for a mode of interacting with the non-evangelical 'other' that is at once subtler and more gradual, as well as more insistent than the rather incidental "interrupting" implied in "gritar." Verbal exchange plays a central role here as well. This is emphasized by the description of cell outreach as "inviting" a person to the meeting. But in this more personalized approach people's needs are more known. While a focus on needs other than spiritual well-being is not the main focus, the cell system, as I will comment later, does function as a network for alleviating practical needs.

While I phrased the space-in-between evangelizer and evangelized as a space of overbearingness, this was an analytical rather than an ethnographic term. Evangelicals typically describe bridging this space as a way to communicate God's love to the non-evangelical. This refers to all evangelical encounters, including those that center on brief verbal exchanges. For Alberto, evangelizing in any form is an expression of "empathy with the pain of others." He further explains, "the etymology of the word "evangelize" means "to present the Good News"…In this insecure world people need words that are distinct…to evangelize is precisely this, bringing words of hope, of health, of relief to people who need it." But in the recent shift in perspective in Elim simply telling a person he or she is beloved by God is not considered a fully "authentic" expression of the Gospel unless it is accompanied by an effort to 'show God's love. In one of his editorials, Pastor Vega makes explicit the opposition between "gritar," and "mostrar." He recounts how on a Saturday morning he observed two evangelicals preaching in a

nearly abandoned park, their words barely breaking the park's solitude. "After all," he comments, "it is easier to yell out the Gospel from a distance, than to show it in everyday life" (Vega, June 3, 2011). Rather than reading this as a critical reflection on the behavior of two people, I read it, more broadly, as a plea for the Salvadoran evangelical community that outreach should be embodied practice in everyday life. So, this includes efforts like Ramón's to facilitate holistic transformation in the lives of marginalized youth. But Pastor Vega's plea for evangelism as embodied practice also points at an entirely different conception of outreach. It is the notion that a Christian needs to embody Christian values in all aspects of everyday life, rather than in a set of especially designated activities, and by his or her example inspire others to the same religion (or phrased negatively, not deter them by a negative example). This was a notion that was also reflected in the interviews that I conducted with those pastors that were most supportive of the theological shift in the church. It is not that the concept of "Living the Word" was entirely new. As a dedicated and conservative cell leader told me, "if the person hosting the cell meeting is known as a trouble maker ["buscapleita"] in the neighborhood, then less people will be interested in attending." It was rather that the scope of what is included in "Living the Word" has become more encompassing. As Josué explained to me, many evangelicals think that "Living the Word" means to attend those activities that are meant to increase spiritual health. This includes, among others, church and cell meetings. But, it should be, pastor Josué said, a style of life in which showing care for the other is central. How this care for the other should be expressed is beyond the scope of this particular section, as chapters six and seven are dedicated to understanding how care for the other is central in post-conversion transformation, as well as how the scope of this has changed in light of integral mission. It is nevertheless worth pointing out here that embodied everyday action is considered a form of evangelism. In this conception, the

responsibility implied in being a Christian is all-encompassing, given that everything a Christian does, should inspire others to become Christians as well. It underscores, as Hermana Mirna repeatedly said, that it is hard to be Christian.

Recapturing the arguments made in this section, I developed the view that evangelizing is a practice that allows the Christian to enact a decentered Christian self. As part of his or her relationship with God, the Christian sets out to "win souls" for the deity. The encounter between evangelizer and evangelized, I argued, involves the renegotiation of the boundaries between self and other, with the self creating a degree of "overbearingness" in relation to the other. This involves self-disciplining work of the self on the self, and conveys an expression of care for the other. I furthermore discussed differences in various modes of outreach in terms of form and content, pertaining respectively to the way in which the space between self and other is bridged and the scope of care implied. With regard to form, an opposition was drawn between "gritar" (yelling) and "mostrar" (showing), referring to the distinction between (in terms of evangelical imagery) "communicating God's love" in brief, interruptive verbal exchanges, versus "showing God's love" in a more encompassing, practice-oriented style. In terms of content, the main difference here was between saving souls, versus saving the human being in his or her entirety (i.e. body and soul). The outreach that takes place in the context of the church's cell system has some aspects of both in that the approach is more personalized and contributes to alleviating practical needs. However, several people shared their concern with me that there was still too much emphasis on "quantity" over "quality" in the cell system's outreach approach. One church member, a lawyer who engages in church outreach, told me

> I don't like that they regard the cells as places where you "win" people, and these people mean more numbers for the church…This has changed some with the new leadership because he has a more humane and sensitive approach, but still, the [purpose] of cells [is still too much on] increasing numerical growth.

This concern was shared with me a few times in interviews, but it was also brought up in an organizational meeting I attended for cell leaders. The central question discussed that evening was why there was still so much violence in El Salvador when the number of evangelicals was on the rise as well. The main answer suggested that evening was that not enough care went into following up new converts, and supervising their process of transformation. While this may lay bare some of the limits of the process of transitioning into a more integral approach to the Gospel, it also shows that some lay members involved in the church organization are actively thinking about the changing views on Christian responsibilities vis-à-vis the other, and society more broadly.

### 6.3 "Helping:" material needs as Christian responsibility

On the Wednesday evening of the first week I was doing fieldwork with Elim I attended an organizational meeting with cell leaders in Apopa, run by Josué. The purpose of the meeting was for the cell leaders to report on the goals reached in their cell group. One of the questions Josué asked the group was what needs cell leaders had been able to help with. Several leaders raised their hands with concrete stories on how they had provided practical assistance to attendees in need (for example by giving food items). Josué then held a short sermon for the group in which he emphasized that Christians should not only be concerned with saving souls, but rather with saving the entire person. He furthermore said that care for the material needs of others should not be limited to brothers and sisters in Christ but ought to include everyone. Given that this was the first week I was participating in activities with Elim, I did not quite realize that Josué's sermon engaged with a pivotal change within Elim. Nevertheless, I was really struck by his words. I remember thinking how powerful it was that this church seemed to

operate as an alternative network of support for a membership that mostly stemmed from El Salvador's impoverished underclass. In a later stage of the fieldwork, when I had started doing formal interviews, a recurrent theme in the interviewee's answers was that "helping" was an important way the church could contribute to the betterment of society.

In this part of the chapter, I will tease apart what exactly is meant with the term "helping" (in Spanish "ayudar") and how the scope and/or meaning of this practice has changed because of the implementation of integral mission. Though the verb "to help" is fairly indeterminate in that it can denote a wide array of actions, I use it here in translation of the Spanish term "ayudar," which my informants used to refer to the practice of providing material aid (for example, food, clothing, medications,…). This topic was already touched on in the previous section, with the discussion of Pastor Ramón's outreach among a group of young gang members and their families. In this section, I will further elaborate on this, by evaluating how the practice of providing material assistance relates to evangelical outreach. In my analysis, I will furthermore show how such practical assistance, while always to a degree present among individual church members, has, in recent years, been taken up as an institutional responsibility as well. Last, I will examine how the revaluation of the material is also expressed in different practices of "self-care."

Examples of small, group-based gestures of help are not hard to come by given that this really was very common. I participated several times in such efforts, for the most part not because I was approached on the assumption that as a foreign visitor I had more access to financial means, but rather because I had become integrated in various church groups. For example, having gotten to know the group of women who volunteer with the church's radio, I contributed when the group collected money on behalf of one of the sisters who struggled with

fairly severe medical problems. During a church retreat with the same group of women, there was a collection to help a recently bereft church member to buy a coffin for the burial of her deceased relative. When Maria and Willian, members of my cell group who, as was mentioned earlier, became engaged and got married during my time there, Mirna, the cell leader made sure Maria would be able to wear a beautiful wedding dress. She contacted a local seamstress who agreed to make the dress for forty dollars. Mirna then collected money among the group participants to jointly pay for it. While all of the examples I personally witnessed, centered on collecting money, informants gave many other examples that involved giving food or other items to people with an urgent need. For example, Wilfredo, one of the professionals I talked to, told me that when his daughter, the cell leader of a group for children, noticed that one of the children could no longer attend because she did not have wearable shoes, Wilfredo and his daughter bought the child a pair of shoes. What is most striking about this type of assistance is that it is organized by and for people who occupy similar class positions (with most people being part of the Salvadoran impoverished underbelly), and who are part of one another's everyday life. It shows how church membership can facilitate local networks of support among people who live in the same neighborhood, and who attend the same local cell meeting. Wilfredo comments that he is most inclined to help those people he personally knows, in part so that he can verify they are really experiencing an urgent and dire need. He says,

> If I know the family, and I know the person I will be more committed to helping. If this is a situation in which someone lost his or her job, I say to myself, "My God, I know what it is like to be without work. You have to pay rent, water, electricity, food, clothing, school money."

Wilfredo's observation reflects that rather than abstractly "helping the poor," material assistance involves the alleviation of a concrete and fairly urgent need of someone who is relatively close-by, rather than a distant "other."

As many interviewees, including the General Pastor, assured me, this type of small-scale help was common before the shift to holistic mission. This underscores the previously made point that cell-based outreach stands less in contrast to holistic mission than its traditional counterpart. In this more personable approach, as I argued in the chapter's previous section, the space between self and other is bridged more gradually, allowing the evangelizer to become aware of the overall set of needs of the other. However, while the practice of providing material aid in the context of the cell system bears on material well-being, and can be co-opted in a shift towards holistic mission, it is nevertheless quite distinct from the latter in several ways. First, the pattern of distribution of aid within the context of the cell system, rather than being indicative of a specifically Christian form of social outreach, suggests that the church network has taken on aspects of an alternative support system. As mentioned earlier, recipients are peers rather than "distant others." In the examples I observed recipients were most often already part of the Christian network. This reverberates with Pastor Josué's admonishment that help should be allotted to Christians and non-Christians alike, indicating that providing material assistance to non-Christians is less common. Given that aid is primarily distributed to peers, a parallel can be drawn with the burgeoning phenomenon in the United States of online *GoFundMe* pages in which people solicit others in their social network for financial help. The comparison holds in that help is requested for an urgent problem, often pertaining to a medical emergency, and that the people contacted are peers and friends, who, if inclined to respond, typically each contribute a small amount of the total sum needed. Moreover, the comparison with the secular phenomenon of *GoFundMe* pages underscores the prevalent need for alternative networks in the neoliberal era.

Second, while holistic mission is seen to contribute to the salvation of spirit and body, material aid distributed in the context of the cell system, if and when conceived in terms of outreach, is typically only seen to further spiritual salvation. For example, interviewees did acknowledge that providing material assistance helps connect with people and helps to successfully invite them to cell meetings. In some of the examples provided, material help afforded to participants in the Christian network facilitates those recipients to stay involved, or to take on new roles in the network. By buying a new pair of shoes for one of her cell attendees, Wilfredo's daughter made sure the child would be able to continue visiting the meetings. Mirna's gesture of kindness towards Maria could also indirectly be read as a form of evangelism, or, more generally support towards meeting church goals. Willian, Maria's fiancé, wanted to become a cell leader, but before being able to do so he had to formalize his relationship with Maria, with whom he had been living without being married. While these examples indicate a degree of evangelism (defined as "saving souls") in at least some instances of material assistance, they do not testify to the motivation of providing aid in order to further material salvation.

Having established that the practice of providing material aid was traditionally well embedded in Elim's cell system, I will next address the question of how the scope and meaning of this practice has shifted under the impetus of integral mission. As the following excerpt from an interview with pastor Mario Vega indicates, an important difference is that while before people helped one another, the church as institution did not partake in such efforts:

> MV: Before, the church was not involved. The church would not typically respond to even very small requests, like say, a person needing a medicine.
> MP: Would you say that there is more emphasis on helping one another now in the cell system?
> MV: No, I would say that there has always been mutual help. But in the cell system it is not so much the church but the people who are helping one another.

> But before it was not the case that part of the church budget was dedicated to, say for example, a center for child development, or AIDS prevention programs. It was not like it is now.

So, the notion that bodily well-being and, more generally, non-spiritual aspects of life are a Christian concern is not just represented in church discourse, but is materialized in how the church budget is organized, and which events and programs the institution becomes involved in. The church institution has become more responsive to requests for assistance from individual church members. Depending on what help is asked for, the neighborhood pastor can either make the decision to help or bring the request to the pastor next in rank in the church hierarchy (i.e. the district coordinator). In some cases, Mario Vega will make the final decision on if and how the church will provide help. For example, Evangelina, introduced in chapter four, told me that for several months the church helped her cover her children's school tuition when she was not able to make the payments. Pastor Josué, she explained, had been responsible for providing this help.[62] This shows institutional involvement with the small-scale help that already existed in the cell system.

Reaching beyond the alleviation of individual needs, the church outreach programs imply goals of rehabilitation and prevention in relation to, using Chesnut's term (Chesnut 1997), such "states of dis-ease" as physical illness, poverty and violence. As Pastor Vega mentioned, examples of such outreach efforts are AIDS prevention campaigns and child development programs. One Sunday when I went to Elim to attend the church service, the church had organized a free blood draw in the parking space in front of the church building. Anyone who was there, Christian or not, was invited to participate and to have a blood sample tested for HIV free of charge. This initiative is not unique in El Salvador. Free HIV testing has been organized

[62] Evangelina, approached the pastor of her zone about this, and asked him for help.

since 1997. According to a 2010 USAID report, 174 health facilities and two mobile clinics provided free HIV testing by the end of 2006. Following the United States, then-president Tony Saca coined June 27 as national HIV testing day (USAID 2010). While free testing is not unprecedented in El Salvador, Elim's participation is testimony to the institution's quite radical break with its previous inward-looking and spiritualistic orientation. First, this demonstrates care for the health of the body, and openness to a biomedical approach to health and healing. It communicates to the churchgoers that it is okay to solicit medical help from professionals for health problems, rather than primarily relying on prayer. Even more, the disease tested for is associated with stigma, and, from a Christian point of view, with (past or present) sinful conduct. The church's participation in free HIV testing then not only reflects that positive value is attributed to the body that conforms to Christian ethics, but to that of the sinner as well. Value here is implied in the notion that these bodies are worthy of healing and care. This notion of the intrinsic worth of the body stands in contrast with the more traditional Christian conceptualization that its value lies in how much it has come to embody the inversion of sin (e.g. the abstinent body). By participating in free HIV-testing the church contributes to reducing the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS in El Salvador and to increasing awareness of the disease.

The concern with prevention is perhaps most explicitly represented by the church's budding efforts to engage with child and youth welfare. Since 2010 Elim, as was already mentioned, has been organizing cell meetings specifically for adolescent youth, the group most at risk for becoming involved with gang violence. Part of the idea for such meetings is to provide youth, particularly those from disintegrated families, with an alternative "family," or new space of belonging. Not only does this indicate a preventative approach to gang violence, but it also implies an alternative narrative to why youngsters join gangs, counter to the demonization

inherent in media portrayals of such youngsters. It engages with the notion that youngsters from impoverished neighborhoods are drawn to gang life, among others, as a way to find an alternative community, as well as an alternative source of prestige. As Pastor Vega told me in the interview I conducted with him, a similar focus is present in the cells for children. Rather than an alternative space for peer belonging, the emphasis for this age group is on the relationship between cell leader and child:

> MV: I have insisted that the leader (male as well as female) takes on the role of substitute parent to these children. The majority of children who get embroiled with violence are from families that don't serve their emotional needs, or [are children] who don't have homes, who don't have families. When cell leaders lend the children a listening ear, call them by their names, don't hit them, don't mistreat them, they become like [substitute] parents, and this contributes to the theme of prevention of violence.

The theme of care as a means of prevention is taken further in the church's participation in child development programs in which some of the most impoverished children are provided with basic needs in terms of education, health, and nutrition. For Pastor Vega the underlying purpose of this is "to allow the children to develop in such a way that they are less likely to participate in violence." In his view, as he states in the interview as well as other communications, there is a connection between child neglect, poverty and the high incidence of violence. By pointing at the poor living conditions of high-risk populations, Pastor Vega again contributes to the humanization of those involved in crime. He points at the larger set of circumstances that play into this behavior. From a religious perspective, individual sin is indirectly placed in the encompassing frame of "structural sin," (i.e. El Salvador's widespread poverty). While the larger problematic of Salvadoran society is indirectly touched on, the solution proposed reinforces the emphasis on change through individual transformation. The view is that taking steps to improve the well-being of individual people in terms of their overall sets of needs bears on the well-being

of society. The church's role in the holistic sense is to contribute to the conditions of possibility for individuals to manage their own lives differently (by taking ownership of one's own body and life by taking an HIV-test; by learning to have a changed emotional life and conduct by having one's needs met as a child).

Going from an institutional shift supported by church leadership to one that is put into practice by individual members is a very gradual process. An important strategy in this respect has been Bible exegesis. Pastor Vega's series of detailed discussions of entire books in the Bible are a central example of this. The church also hosts a series of Bible study classes, named CETI, dedicated to themes of integral mission. Due to the controversial nature of the shift towards a holistic gospel among many in Elim, CETI, at the time of my fieldwork, was only organized in Pastor Josué's district. The course was organized and taught by members of the Christian NGO "La Casa de Las Semillas," most of whom were not personally affiliated with Elim. Organized in four modules on the respective themes of "church," "family," "work," and "society," the purpose of the classes was to concretely illustrate how Christians can incorporate holistic mission into their everyday lives. The core idea is that the Christian faith should be lived in all aspects of life rather than only being expressed in those times the believer participates in religious activities. During fieldwork, I got to know several church members who had participated in the whole cycle of CETI classes, and who sought ways to put these teachings into practice. For Rogelio, the lawyer introduced in chapter four, this was the quite ambitious project of bringing together a group of professionals (including doctors, dentists, and lawyers) to engage in organized outreach. For others, like Eliseo, this consisted of much smaller initiatives of trying to help others. Next, I will discuss the initiatives of Rogelio and Eliseo (which I will discuss in less detail). Their examples provide insight into how education on holistic mission fosters new ways for

individuals to express care for the other, in contrast to the more traditional and well-established practice of mutual assistance in urgent need.

Rogelio[63] was introduced in chapter four as a lawyer who returned to Elim in his early thirties after having been expelled as a teenager for unruly behavior. From the onset Rogelio wanted to take on a more actively involved role in the church, and traversed the church hierarchy, first as cell leader and then as supervisor. After taking CETI classes, he approached the General Pastor with the request to do social outreach in the church community. Rogelio developed the initiative to marry people in the church free of charge. The first two couples he married were members of his cell group. Rogelio comments,

> I was leader and I married two couples in my group. This was the first collective wedding ever organized in the church. I married these two couples, and I already knew [I would do more], but I never would have guessed at that moment that I would be marrying more than a hundred couples in the church…In 2008, we married 101 couples at once, and in 2009 we married 108.

Rogelio recruited other professionals to participate in his outreach work. He needed a group of eight to ten lawyers to help officiate mass collective weddings. His group continued to expand and came to involve other professionals as well, including medical staff. In addition to the weddings free of charge, the group also organized regular sessions of free legal advice (for which they were allowed to use one of the office in the main church building) and outreach sessions to other Elim branches across the country, providing free medical care and handing out staple foods (including rice, beans, and sugar).

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[63] I got to know Rogelio because one of the pastors introduced him to me. The pastor, knowing of my dissertation research, told me that Rogelio was someone I needed to talk to. Rogelio was very responsive and invited me to participate in several outreach activities. In return, I offered to teach free English classes to his group of professionals. I conducted two unstructured two-hour life history interviews with Rogelio, and also conducted semi-structured interviews (each of at least one hour) with five members of his team.

For Rogelio, engaging in outreach is an important aspect of how he lives his Christian faith. He clearly spends a lot of time looking for ways to implement his professional skills in the service of others, as well as the church community. While the immediate beneficiaries of his outreach are the people he provides services to, his outreach also serves the underlying purpose of what Rebecca Allahyari calls "moral selving," or "the effort to create oneself as a more virtuous and often more spiritual person" (Allahyari cited in Elisha 2011: 132). Quite content with his own life, he interprets his success and happiness as blessings from God. Comparing his relationship with God with that between a creditor and debtor, he sees helping people as a way to repay God. "My debt with God," he says, "is with the people." He furthermore interprets the fact that, unlike some others, he fairly easily obtained permission to organize his projects in the church community, using space made available to him by the church leadership, as an expression of his relationship with God. He, for example, reports believing that God guided him to take CETI classes, because this would make it easier for him to realize the outreach project. In response to another lawyer being resentful that Rogelio and his group received permission, while he did not, Rogelio comments, "I don't know the details of that situation…but I said nothing [in response] because I knew that this was the business of the Lord, and that I should not get involved." So, while the outreach project is Rogelio's individual initiative, he attributes part of its success to the agency of the deity. This confirms the previously made argument that Christians in the Elim community conceive of themselves as decentered individuals in relation to the deity. It was furthermore argued that in order to produce a Christian self, such decentered individuals are tasked to reach beyond the self in function of their relationship with the deity. For Rogelio, social outreach serves as a way to accomplish this. While his work focuses on alleviating material needs, without engaging in preaching, Rogelio argues that it is an alternative

form of evangelizing in that it is fairly common for his outreach work to result in some conversions.

The next example I will turn to is that of Eliseo. Eliseo was also introduced in chapter four, as the earnest salesman who always dresses up when going out in case an opportunity to evangelize arises.  Eliseo and his wife bake bread, which he sells at the market. I got to know Eliseo when we were both traversing a CETI module. Unlike Rogelio, Eliseo does not engage in structured, group-based social outreach. In a semi-structured interview I conducted with him in two parts he describes helping an economically struggling couple he knew from the cell meetings. Rather than give them some money or food, Eliseo and his wife decided to provide more encompassing help. Like Rogelio, Eliseo used his professional skills as means to help the couple. First Eliseo and his wife contracted the couple as bread vendors. When this was not sufficient to stabilize the couple's economic situation, Eliseo and his wife decided to teach the couple how to bake their own bread, and to help them set up their own business.

Eliseo's gesture provides insight into how individual Christians can engage with concepts of holistic mission in personal initiatives, rather than as part of organized outreach in the context of the church. While Rogelio's outreach projects tend to focus on "distant others" in that the beneficiaries of his work are often in a lower social class than himself, and are people he may not know personally, the couple Eliseo reports having helped are people he knows personally, with an urgent need. As such, the aid he provides follows the pattern of distribution typical of the mutual assistance embedded in the cell system. The difference is that rather than offering a temporary solution to a problem by giving food or money, possibly with the objective of persuading someone to join the faith or stay committed as a Christian in the church and cell system, Eliseo wants to offer more substantial help. Similar to the institutional initiatives

discussed above, the underlying goal is to transform individual lives in terms of their material well-being by enabling these specific individuals to manage their own lives differently. This reverberates with how Paula, one of Rogelio's professionals, a female lawyer in her thirties, characterizes the difference between charity and holistic mission. She says,

> It is good to give food to the poor, but they fail to go a step further, to ask "why are you poor?" Is it because you don't have a place to live, because you don't have work, because you don't know how to work? I will give you food, but I will also teach you a workshop so you can learn how to do carpentry, or [something else]. Or is the problem that you don't have clothes to wear [to go to work]. Then I will give you clothes. Or maybe there is another problem, drug addiction maybe? In this case we have to help with that. This is different from saying: "here is some food, go to church," and then stop giving food when that person stops going to church.

In helping the couple set up their own business, Eliseo does go that step further. He determined that merely providing minimal employment would not be sufficient to help the couple repay their debts. He taught them a skill and provided them with equipment so that they could manage their own economic situation differently. While this type of help seeks to engage with people's material well-being for its own sake, it nevertheless continues to operate within the constraints of the existing neoliberal system. Rather than advocating structural change, change is envisioned as the incremental sum of individual change.

The growing concern with individual material well-being is also reflected in changing attitudes to what individuals should spend their personal time on. Because of the emphasis on spiritual well-being, particularly in light of preparing for Christ's Second Coming, spending time on secular ambitions (including education) was discouraged. Joking, Rogelio said it was fortunate he had been a rebellious teenager or he would not have invested in going to law school. In the last few years, there has been a shift in this message to the congregation, away from an exclusively spiritual focus. In the words of Paula, Rogelio's colleague,

> Before we said that we are so focused on getting ready for the Second Coming that we neglected the things of this earth. Today we say, "God comes, but meanwhile we cultivate ourselves, because we don't know when He will come." We believe that God comes, but we have added the notion that while we are here, [waiting for Him], we need to take care of ourselves, and live a holistic life.

So while currently members are encouraged to still engage in spiritual activities as much as possible, it is also acknowledged that other needs that are important as well. Examples that are explicitly referenced in the church are the need to spend time with family, as well as the need to spend time on education and on developing skills to join the labor force.

## Chapter seven:

## Ethics of care and Christian subjectivity: Renegotiating the dimensions of "I," "God," and "Other" under integral mission

### 7.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will examine the practices of prayer and denouncing. I will show that the scope of both of these practices has expanded because of the renegotiation of the dimensions of "I," "God" and "Other" following the shift to holistic mission. With respect to prayer, I will discuss the social aspects implied in, what Padilla terms "existential" and "political prayer" (Padilla 2009). Turning to the practice of denouncing, I show how under holistic mission this has come to refer to structural sin as well as the more traditional focus on individual sin. While denouncing structural sin is similar in scope to political prayer, it is nevertheless considerably more controversial. This is in part, I argue, because of the implied reinterpretation of the relationship between human and Divine agency (though God still controls everything that happens, more weight is given to human agency and responsibility).

### 7.2 Prayer and the production of Christian subjectivity

First, I will examine the production of Christian subjectivity is prayer. So far I have argued that the Christian self is a decentered individual that needs to reach beyond the boundaries of self in function of being in a relationship with God. Unlike the practice of evangelizing, which ostensibly requires "an other," prayer, for the evangelicals I talked to, is often depicted as a private conversation between an individual believer and the deity. Rather than the connotation of "overbearingness," the evangelical practice of prayer has been labeled an

indication of “passivity.” For example, in the dissertation’s opening vignette about the tragic bus accident involving Elim congregants, it was pointed out how some of the journalists covering the accident culpabilized the victims for their own demise. They had been heard praying while trapped in the bus. This, in the journalists’ interpretation, implied that the passengers had chosen to rely on supernatural intervention rather than try to rescue themselves.

Underlying these apparently contradictory perceptions, I argue, is not that prayer produces a radically different subjectivity than evangelizing, but rather that the underlying dimensions of “self,” “deity” and “other” are balanced out differently in both respective practices. The main questions then asked in this section of the chapter are how these three dimensions are negotiated in prayer, and if and how this has changed following the recent shift towards a holistic approach in Elim. I will start my analysis by examining the dimension of the self vis-à-vis God, in which I will emphasize, revisiting the argument made in chapter five, that the self has a porous quality in relation to the deity. Next, I will turn to the social aspects implied in prayer. I will discuss how prayer, though presented as an individual expression, is nevertheless shaped in its linguistic form by the church collective the believer is part of. Content-wise prayer can be an expression of care for the other, depending on the requests made to the deity. Turning to the question of how integral mission may have affected the production of subjectivity implied in prayer, I first look at how the scope of requests made on behalf of others has become more encompassing. Here, Rene Padilla’s distinction between “existential prayer” and “political prayer” (Padilla 2009: 58-60), pertaining respectively to personal needs and to broader societal concerns, is relevant. While “existential prayer” is still predominant, there has, in the last few years, been more space for the more societally engaged type of prayer. This is most prominently illustrated by the monthly prayer sessions to stop violence in El Salvador, the first of which took

place in 2010. In a careful discussion of one such prayer session, I will show that "political prayer" facilitates a process of consciousness-raising, problematizing a black-and-white approach to societal problems. It furthermore instills the sense that such problems are within the scope of what Christians should be concerned about. A second recent shift in emphasis pertains less to the scope of prayer than to the relationship of the individual towards what is being asked. I examine evangelical responses to the criticism that prayer implies a passive attitude towards problem solving. While believers indicate that prayer is necessary in that sometimes only God's intervention can yield solutions, there is nevertheless increasing emphasis on the idea that the individual believer is responsible for seeking ways to fulfill the requests made to the deity. This indicates a shift in the interpretation of what the individual's agency should be in the face of difficulty. Rather than waiting for a miracle, a "good Christian" makes an effort to actively contribute to possible solutions.

In the first part of this discussion I will turn to how individual believers characterize the meaning prayer holds for them. Opposing evangelical prayer to the more ritualistic form of its Catholic counterpart, my interviewees typically described prayer as a personal conversation with the deity. This might be to ask God for intervention in personal difficulties, to express thanks to Him, or occasionally, as we saw in chapter five, to barter with Him, or simply to share everyday experiences with the deity. However, when asked about the meaning of prayer, believers tend not to foreground the specific nature of their conversations with God, but rather emphasize that the practice of prayer is foundational in their relationship with the deity. While it does not actually change the ontological status of the relationship, as happens when the convert accepts God, it helps to establish and maintain a closer connection with the deity. This connection is characterized as one of intimacy. Although God is often compared to a close friend, a husband or

a parent, the intimacy accomplished with the deity is experienced as qualitatively different than that in close relationships with people. Similar to accounts of gifts this involves "quebranto." Silvia, one of my interviewees explains this as follows,

> Prayer for me is an intimate conversation with God, [expressive] of the trust [I have] as His child… With another person, you are not going to cry. In prayer there is "quebranto." You are not going to tell another person "I am happy and that is why I am crying."

Moreover, given that God already knows what is in the believer's heart, the communication does not have to involve words. As another interviewee puts it, "if I am too much in tears when presenting my problem, God understands me anyways. All I have to say is, "God, I want You to help me, and I can't say anything else because I can't."

While prayer establishes a more intimate connection with the deity, it also embeds the relationship within everyday life. Prayer is something that need not occur in a ritual context, but can take place at any time and at any place. The notion is that believers can communicate with God whenever they want or most need to. It was common for people to tell me that they often prayed while on the bus, or out on the street. In the words of one of my interviewees,

> I pray while walking, meditating, asking "God help me," possibly even saying this out loud, or, "God forgive me," or, "God protect me," when passing by a certain place or when seeing something strange…or simply invoking God, this is a form of prayer too. It is not the case that you can only talk to God in an enclosed space. You can do that [anywhere].

In ritualized settings prayer is typically with eyes closed, indicating that the connection with the deity is found by turning inward. While this is not the case when praying in everyday spaces, interviewees still indicate the presence of an inward orientation by characterizing such prayer as being in a "meditative state."

Even in group prayer the notions that prayer is an individual expression and involves an inward orientation are reinforced. During fieldwork, there were many moments in which I

participated in such group prayer. Given the embeddedness of prayer within everyday life, this would not only be during church services, cell meetings or prayer sessions, but rather any time a group of believers engaged in an activity together. For example, each time I taught evangelicals a language class, or attended Bible exegesis with Elim pastors, we would begin and end the class with prayer. Typically, one person would lead the group in prayer, asking for blessings for the group and the activity at hand. The others would chime in, though in a considerably less audible manner, each with their own version of prayer. So, despite praying at the same time, each person nevertheless engaged in his or her own personal communication with God.

Prayer then, similar to evangelical outreach, is a practice engaged in as part of a personal relationship with God. However, as with outreach, this practice is also shaped by the collective(s) the individuals are embedded in. We saw that participation in outreach fulfilled some of the requirements of being formally involved in the church hierarchy. With prayer, a similar tension between the individual and the larger collective can be discerned when taking a closer look at the language used in prayer. Based on fieldwork observations, as well as transcriptions of Mario Vega's sermons on Genesis, I identified some recurring stylistic elements and formulaic expressions. For example, prayer typically starts by addressing God with "Father," and ends with "Amen" (often said twice). The latter is often preceded by a variation on the sentence, "we ask this in Jesus' name." Several epithets are commonly used to describe the deity, such as, for example, "God who is in the Heavens," and "Beloved God." Before formulating any prayer requests, it is common to first thank God and to acknowledge His generosity. Evocative of the implied intimacy in the practice of prayer, God is always addressed with the more informal "tú," as opposed to the more formal "usted,"[64] which both translate as "you" in English.

[64] For more information on the use of tú and vos in San Salvador, see Quintanilla 2009.

It is noteworthy that the colloquial and very informal "vos" is never used in addressing God. So, while, as one of my informants put it, evangelical prayer is never "a [memorized] liturgy," the individuality of expression is colored by cultural convention and expectation.

Turning to the content of prayer, the most immediate observation is that prayer often operates as a practice of self-care. Both my fieldwork observation as well as what people reported in formal interviews supports the notion that prayer requests are often informed by personal needs. Common themes in this respect were financial needs, health-related problems, or issues rooted in social conflict. These problems could be very concrete, such as, for example, asking for God's help with a bill that cannot be paid. While the believer communicates these requests to God in hope of divine intervention, there is also an emotional aspect to sharing such "existential" problems with the deity. Wilfredo, one of the professional I talked to, explains this tension as follows, "we present our requests, we present our problems to God, and we leave them in His hands so that He can administer our lives." Here, similar to accounts of experiences of gifts, we see the notion that the believer obtains some emotional release from sharing personal burdens with God.

Nevertheless, prayer also often expresses care for the other. While most prayer centers on small-scale requests, pertaining to individual lives (as I witnessed in fieldwork observation and was told in formal interviews), these requests are with some regularity made on behalf of others. In response to my questions about what they would typically pray about, my interviewees would first give me a range of topics pertaining to their own lives, and then typically identify other people they might include in their prayer requests, often ranked in degree of closeness. All of the people included in such requests were part of the believer's everyday life, mostly family, but also neighbors and sometimes co-workers. The more involved church members often included others

involved in the church network in their prayers, as well as specific church-related goals. For example, Wilfredo identified the following recurrent themes, "protection for my family, health, blessings for the church brothers that I am closest to ("de confianza"), blessings to those brothers that offer specific help to the church, and the pastors." This expression of care for the other can be kept private between the believer and God, or it can be a more open gesture of solidarity. This can be between individual people, with one asking or promising the other person support in prayer, for example, to someone's request to pray on their behalf. But this can only take place in a group context with the whole group praying on behalf of the participants' individual requests. At the end of each cell meeting, for example, all people present are asked to identify a need of their own or of someone else, after which the group prays for all requests made. Such prayer can also involve a specific theme, as we saw in the case of Rogelio, whose testimonial was presented in chapter four. Upon returning to Elim, after years of absence, he learned that his mother and other devout church members had regularly prayed together that he and others like him would reconcile with God (i.e. publicly reconfirm acceptance of the deity).[65]

The solidarity conveyed in the above examples, reveals a social dimension in prayer that, following Padilla's categorization, falls under the rubric of "existential." This shows that prayer, even at the more personal level, extends beyond the dimension "I-God." This type of relatively small-scale solidarity with the lives of individual people has commonly been embedded in prayer, even in the more inward-version of Christianity espoused prior in Elim. However, before the shift towards holistic mission, it was not considered relevant or even appropriate to engage with "the social" at an analytical level surpassing that of the individual. There was no space for "political prayer," given that this implies the existence of "structural sin," and the Christian

[65] In such group prayer, as was mentioned earlier, the format is that one person prays out loud, and the others chime in less audibly.

responsibility to engage with this. In the last of two formal interviews I conducted with Pastor Josué (with whom I held numerous informal conversations), he reflects on how his own thinking has shifted quite considerably in this respect:

> J: Before, I used to be indifferent.
> M: Indifferent?
> J: Indifferent towards the social environment, the world did not matter. What mattered was to know God, and to be saved, and to otherwise tolerate everything because it was a sign of the end of the times. This was my viewpoint.
> M: What do you mean with being indifferent? For example, how about if your children or wife went through something difficult?
> J: No, I was not indifferent in this more immediate sense. One has a natural sense of responsibility towards one's family. No, I mean with regard to the social.
> M: What exactly do you mean with "the social?" Do you mean, the life of your neighbors?
> J: No. No. With the social, I am referring to the way a country is governed, the laws.

In this interview Josué indicates that while he always had a minimum of interest and care for the lives of the people in his most immediate circle, he closed himself off from reflecting on what he saw as part of the domain of the state. In other conversations with Josué, he told me how he had not been interested in taking sides in the war, or in engaging with any of the underlying causes of El Salvador's widespread poverty and ubiquitous violence. Suffering, as Josué used to think, was the outcome of individual sin. In the interview, Josué also indicates that he links his "indifferent mind-set" to his religious commitment, or rather, to how he interpreted and experienced that commitment at the time. What really mattered for him was eternal salvation. Thinking about the underlying reasons for societal problems, or acting to improve them, did not contribute anything towards reaching that goal. Doing so was at the very best irrelevant, and at the worst interfered with accomplishing spiritual health.

As someone who developed from a staunch defender of the more inward-looking Christianity that was typical in Elim to one of the most passionate proponents of integral

mission, Pastor Josué's shift represents the larger turn within Elim. Having come to accept a structural dimension to sin, and the Christian responsibility to act on this, pastor Josué sees an important role for prayer. Placing the events in the Salvadoran past and present in the context of a larger cosmic battle, he admonishes that demonic forces orchestrate both injustice perpetrated by individuals as well as that embodied in sinful structures. "Without prayer," he says, "we would be acting disconnected from God, and doing the same as what NGO's are doing." Implied in Josué's statement are two reasons for why he believes prayer is an essential strategy in the fight against injustice. For Christians, it reinforces that this is something they are doing as part of their connection with God. Because they ask for the deity's intervention in prayer, Christians, unlike secular humanitarian organizations, engage with the spiritual dimension they believe to be underlying injustice.

The monthly prayer session[66] to stop violence constitutes the most prominent example of such "political prayer" in that this is a recurrent event, open to the entire church community,[67] and broadcast on the internet. To get a more concrete sense of its scope I will provide a comparison of three sermons, examining how violence is depicted and which, if any, responses are instilled. Included are the very first sermon against violence, delivered by the general pastor, a sermon by Pastor Aaron, the particularly popular speaker who was introduced in chapter four, and another one by Pastor Miguel,[68] a more conservative pastor. Sermons by these three pastors are included in order to capture that not all of the eighty pastors serving Elim's La Central are equally receptive of integral mission. While Pastor Vega is a leading proponent of the holistic

[66] Such sessions include prayer as well as a sermon on the topic of violence.
[67] Prayer groups can also be organized at a much smaller level, for example, based on the neighborhood.
[68] Aaron and Miguel are pseudonyms, but I refer to the general pastor with his actual name, given that he is a public figure in El Salvador.

vision, Pastor Miguel is among those who are most resistant of the approach. Pastor Aaron's preaching reflects at least partial acceptance of the new vision. Before engaging in my analysis of the thematic content of the prayer session, I first want to acknowledge that for participants the salience of such prayer lies in the act of beseeching God's intervention in a problem that affects nearly everyone in El Salvador, to one degree or another. The day after one of these sessions I was told that there had been no murders in Apopa, which was read as an immediate outcome of the prayer session.

Although each of the prayer sessions varies in terms of the sermon as each pastor has his own approach and emphasis when preaching, the same six prayer requests are repeated every time. Each month the church congregation asks God

1. to stop the homicides
2. to save gang members by converting them
3. to dismantle drug trafficking groups
4. to protect the safety of those people who are being blackmailed
5. to protect children and youngsters from getting involved in violence, and to save them by conversion
6. to provide guidance to the political leaders

The argument can be made that these prayer requests, other than serving the purpose of asking God for intervention, also operate as a form of consciousness-raising. While the severity of violence and its impact on the Salvadoran population is taken seriously, as reflected in requests one and four, the implied model for how to respond is one of prevention rather than penalization and repression. Instead of asking for the incarceration (or death) of gang members, for example, the request is to convert them. The General Pastor explicitly comments on this in

the first session that was organized, saying “we are not asking for the destruction of the sinner, but for his repentment.” The focus on prevention is furthermore made explicit in the request to safeguard children and adolescents from being coopted in violence. The church engages seriously with the topic of outreach as strategy of prevention among youth. For this purpose, as was mentioned in the previous chapter, as of 2010 the church started operating cell meetings specifically for teenagers, in addition to those for children that already existed prior. The idea to organize such meetings targeting adolescents was to create spaces of belonging as an alternative for gang membership. The request to provide guidance to El Salvador’s leadership could indirectly be seen as a form of criticism. On the one hand, the validity of their leadership is not questioned. All that is asked for is guidance, and not their replacement or absence. On the other hand, the request to “illuminate” such leaders can be seen as an acknowledgment that their judgments may not always be perfect. This ties in with criticism voiced in some of the editorials of the church’s general pastor on the government’s overemphasis on penalization, with a series of laws implementing a zero-tolerance policy, and limited attention to prevention. Another form of consciousness-raising exists in the expansion of the category of violence beyond that of gang crimes, as witnessed by the request to dismantle drug trafficking groups. In chapter two we discussed that Salvadoran media depict young gang members as the main enemy of the state, underreporting other forms of crime and violence. Again, the general pastor makes an explicit comment about this, saying in the first sermon on violence that “only about thirty percent of crimes are perpetrated by gangs, and the remaining seventy is not talked about.”

Turning to a discussion of the content of the three sermons I selected, there is, as was expected, commonality as well as substantial difference in how each pastor treats the topic.[69] The main commonalities lie in that all three pastors make explicit that the scope of prayer is expanded from the more traditional emphasis on self and family to one that includes the neighborhood, as well as the nation and that all three pastors emphasize the need for a degree of action, in addition to prayer. Pastor Miguel's sermon focuses on the importance of the central Christian practices of evangelizing. He reminds the churchgoers that it is their responsibility to reach out to the world, because, as he says, "the power of the Gospel is its only hope…it is the hope for those people who live amidst conflicts and difficulty." He acknowledges that even for pastors it is sometimes hard to overcome the fear of approaching potentially violent strangers, or of going to dangerous places. His approach in evangelizing is traditional in the sense that he reiterates that its importance lies in eternal salvation of the soul. His preference for the soul over the body is also made explicit when he turns to the topic of prayer. He admonishes the congregation not to "fall asleep after five minutes because what does it matter that the body 'attacks' you." His call for action is presented as the responsibility to not only talk about Jesus, but to be like Him. Overall Pastor Miguel's sermon resonates with the traditional model of evangelism in that he sees conversion as the main answer to the difficulties Salvadorans cope with, and particularly in light of its promise of eternal salvation. Violence is presented as a challenge to the goal of evangelization, more than something that needs to be solved in the here and now. Pastor Aaron's sermon recaptures Miguel's emphasis on the spiritual. He exhorts his

[69] I point out how these three pastors have a slightly different perspective, but it is also relevant to point out that the same pastor can differ in approach depending on the specific argument he wants to develop in his sermon. For example, while Pastor Josué is a staunch defender of a holistic approach, believing in a multifaceted Christian response, he devoted a sermon entirely to the importance of prayer as a Christian weapon. When I asked him why he had not presented other ways of responding as well, he said that he chooses to focus on one angle per sermon.

audience to never give up on believing in God, and to always praise Him, even when one's life circumstances are challenging, reinforcing the notion that being a Christian is difficult at times. Like Miguel, he reinforces the importance of prayer. However, Aaron, more than Miguel, conveys hopefulness that the pervasive violence will end some day in the here and now. "One day," he says, "today's problems, like the war, will be history to us. We will see them only in videos. We will forget these difficult and bitter days." In explaining why prayer is essential in this, Aaron includes subtle criticism of prevailing government responses. He comments, "politicians say, why are these churches praying, violence will not stop because of prayer. But they don't have God in their lives. It is not with an iron fist, but with God's fist that the nation [will be saved]."[70] While Aaron's call for action mostly consists in invoking God's intervention, he nevertheless also calls for the importance of human agency in some situations. In relation to domestic abuse, he reminds women that they should not accept to be treated with abuse by their husbands, but denounce this "demonic behavior." There is some space within the church, and particularly for those members who are more involved with the church hierarchy, to ask for a pastor's intervention in the case of domestic violence. The act of denouncing such violence then does not have to involve the intervention of government officials.

Implied in these sermons is an evangelical answer to the criticism that prayer is an indication of a passive attitude to problem-solving, conveying the stance that while centrally important, prayer needs to be accompanied with a form of action. Pastor Josué further elaborated on this when I asked him some follow-up questions on a sermon he had delivered on the topic of prayer in which he had argued that "prayer is the most salient Christian weapon."

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[70] Aaron makes a word pun that works better in Spanish. He says, "no es la mano superdura, no es la mano humana, es la mano de Dios que va [salvar] esta nacion." Translated literally this means "it is not with a super tough hand, nor with a human hand, but with God's hand that the nation will be saved." "Super mano dura" is a zero-tolerance government plan.

Starting with reconfirming that prayer is essential to any Christian response, he asserted that this does not have to imply an exclusive reliance on the agency of the deity. Prayer alone is never enough in response to a problem, Josué explained. But even more, prayer, in his view, acts as an individualized form of consciousness-raising, making the individual reflect more guidedly on how to find a solution to the problem at hand. In Josué's words,

> Even though the teaching is to pray, prayer awakes in us a sense of responsibility, it makes us aware of what we should be doing. It makes us aware of what our role should be. [For example,] if I need a job, then I will pray to God about this, but I will not just passively wait for God to help me. I will think about what I should do, and I will think that I need to be looking for a job. The same when it comes to injustice, I will pray to God, but I will also ask myself the question, "What can I do?"

Josué echoes Rogelio's assertion that rather than asking what the church should do for the individual, the question is the reverse, "What should the individual do for the church?" Having argued that Christians are decentered selves, we nevertheless see that there is a shift in the holistic model towards placing more emphasis on the individual's agency vis-à-vis the deity than was traditional.

In this discussion of the production of Christian subjectivity in prayer, it was first foregrounded that the believer is an individual in relationship with God. In prayer, the believer engages in intimate conversation with God, reporting on personal needs in a format that leaves some room for personal expressiveness. Observations that the deity can see into the believer's heart, that He knows the believer's thoughts without explicit verbalization and take over the burdens communicated to Him support the view developed in chapter five that the believer has a porous quality in relation to God. Central in chapter six was the argument that such Christian individuals reach beyond the self, reaching out to others, as part of their relationship with God. At first glance this dimension appears to be less pronounced in prayer. For example, I showed

that prayer often operates as a practice of self-care. But I also showed that believers do quite regularly express solidarity with and care for others in prayer. Most often this pertains to small-scale solidarity with the lives of the individuals that pertain to the believer's inner circle. More recently, this expression of care and solidarity has expanded beyond the level of the individual, in what Padilla terms "political prayer." This type of prayer engages with matters of society and politics, which were not previously considered part of the responsibility of Christians in the Elim community. Political prayer is a very clear-cut example of a Christian practice in which the individual reaches beyond the self as part of their Christian commitment. Whereas traditionally prayer often foregrounded the "I" and "God" dimensions in the Christian subject, political prayer cannot be "political" without the inclusion of the dimension of "the other." So, while this points at a renegotiation of the dimensions of "I," "God" and "other" in the practice of prayer, another aspect is implied in the notion that prayer should always be accompanied by action. This conveys a renegotiation of the degree of "decenteredness"[71] of the Christian subject vis-à-vis the deity. The association of prayer with "passivity" points to the presupposition that the believer presents his or her needs to God in hope of divine intervention in the hardship. The more recent emphasis that this needs to be accompanied with personal action shows a redefinition of individual agency in relation to that of the deity. This emphasis on action as the outcome of personal responsibility regardless of whether this is in response to personal hardship or structural sin reinforces the individuality of Christian subjects.

[71] In chapter five I coined the term "decentered self" to emphasize that the individual sees itself as affected by divine agency (for example, the reason for conversion is presented as being the outcome of having been touched by God).

### 7.3 Denouncing sin: from individual to structural sin

*Introduction*

In the first part of chapter six, I discussed the practice of "evangelizing," also referred to as "announcing the Good News," which, in Elim has traditionally been foregrounded as a core Christian responsibility. More recently, however, there has been growing emphasis in the Elim community that the work of announcing needs to go hand in hand with the (inverse) mirror practice of "denouncing sin." Both of these practices are seen to contribute to "individual transformation" in complementary ways. As discussed in chapter four, the latter is understood to come about upon conversion (most frequently in response to an evangelical encounter) and involves change through work of the self on the self (among others by abandoning practices thought to be sinful). Under the impetus of integral mission, the practice of "denouncing sin" has, however, not only gained in prominence but has also become more comprehensive in scope as witnessed by the growing engagement with instances of "structural sin." The indictment of sin embedded within societal structures fosters a Christian approach to societal transformation that moves beyond an exclusive focus on transforming individual conduct to an engagement with questions of social justice.

A similar shift towards a concern with "the social" beyond the analytical level of the individual was observed in the earlier discussion of prayer. The case can be made for continuity between political prayer and the prophetic practice of speaking up against various forms of injustice. For example, in the previous section I discussed examples of political prayer in which a critical stance was adopted with regard to the prevalence of zero tolerance policies in response to violence. A parallel can further be drawn in that both practices have generated concerns that the

church is losing perspective on what its mission should be, becoming involved in “politics,” rather than focusing on spiritual salvation. Despite similarities in focus and response, the evangelicals included in this study saw denouncing sin as a significant break with Salvadoran evangelical traditions, opposing this to the more traditional response of prayer. In the words of pastor Josué, “before we believed, and we taught that the relationship between church and state should be limited to prayer…But now we have understood that the church can speak up.” As will be discussed later, part of the reason for why adopting the practice of denouncing (structural) sin is controversial lies in part in the implied shift in balance between human and divine agency with prayer depending more on divine agency and denunciation facilitating a higher degree of human agency.

In this section of the paper I will further explore why the practice of denouncing is so emblematic of the shift in paradigm, and examine how this practice (re)shapes the production of Christian subjectivity. To start this discussion, I will first offer a careful description of the semantic valence of “denouncing.” I use the verb “denouncing” in translation of the Spanish “denunciar.” Depending on context, the latter verb could be translated in slightly different ways. To ensure a clear understanding of how the verb “denunciar” is used in the Elim church, and the evangelicals included in this study, I will discuss the various contexts in which it is commonly used. Next I will provide a discussion of the church’s responses to the 2008 tragic bus accident in Colonia La Málaga as an example of a concrete, well-known and fairly polemical instance of “denouncing.” Engaging with the range of responses the church’s engagement with the tragic events of July 2008 generated within Elim, I will examine how the practice of denouncing may affect the production of Christian subjectivity.

*"Denunciar:" Shift in meaning*

Deciding on how to best translate the verb "denunciar" to render how it's used in the Elim community was not an easy feat due to the verb's implied polysemy. By analyzing the specific contexts in which the verb occurred, and by taking into account which synonyms interviewees used, I identified the following range of meanings, including "to report on someone (to the authorities)," "accuse," "exhort," "condemn," "signal," and "demand."[72] The verb either occurred without direct object, or with the object "el pecado," (Spanish for "sin") (and in one instance with the direct object "lo malo" (Spanish for "the bad")).

In the context of the Elim community, the verb "denunciar," and the phrase "denunciar el pecado" traditionally referred to exhortations to abandon "individual sin." Examples of the latter are the types of conduct hailed in conversion testimonials as typical of pre-conversion conduct, including alcohol and drug abuse, engaging illicit sexual relations, wearing make-up, jewelry and sexualized clothing (or pants for women).[73] As Pastor Josué explained to me, this notion of sin implied a conception of injustice focused on the individual and his or her relationship with God. In Josué's words, "my idea of justice [was about] personal injustice, [it was about the individual] being distant from God." Similarly, the Christian concept of "reconciliation" was also limited to the individual and God.

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[72] I also wish to acknowledge the useful suggestions I received from a group of peers (all academically trained and bilingual in Spanish and English) in response to my informal query on social media on how to translate the verb "denunciar." Thanks in this respect to Xavier Beteta, William Dawley, Suzanne Dunai, Naomi Haynes, Rosanna Lubrani-Womack, Hans Luyckx and Nancy Peniche May. I would like to note that the translations suggested captured the same range of meanings as indicated in my analysis of the language use of my informants. Translations included "renouncing (specifically in relation to sin)," "making a complaint," "to report on someone to the authorities," "accuse," "condemn," as well as "indicate" and "reveal."

[73] See the discussion in chapter four for more information on sinful behaviors associated with pre-conversion conduct.

Following the expansion of conceptions of sin, reconciliation and salvation under holistic mission (with these concepts no longer viewed as limited to the individual vis-à-vis the deity and extended to include the "social" as well as the environment), the view on what the evangelical church needs to take a stance against is also being renegotiated. In an article on structural sin, the Salvadoran Christian newspaper *Pax Noticias* questions if the call for a more involved practice of denouncing has sufficiently been answered:

> In theory, the evangelical church preaches against sin, the consequence of which is death and eternal separation from God. But, does the evangelical church demonstrate that in their everyday practice? Could it be that there is an aspect of sin the evangelical church tolerates? (Barrera, January 13, 2014)

The rhetorical framing of this question implies that while some Salvadoran evangelical circles are kindling debate about the evangelical role with regard to "structural sin," overall the practice of a "prophetic voice" with regard to social matters is in an incipient stage among Salvadoran evangelicals. While the topic continues to be controversial in Elim as well, there is nevertheless burgeoning engagement with if and how the practice of "denouncing" as Christian responsibility should be reinterpreted. This is particularly so in light of the protagonist role the church's leadership has taken in the matter. In the next sections I will depict the concrete parameters of this debate, asking what types of injustice Christians envision engaging with, how they seek to do so, and which audiences they seek to address.

One of the overarching themes in this dissertation has been the evangelical privileging of the dimension of the individual in relation to the social. In formulating an evangelical response to societal injustice, individual transformation remains primordial as it continues to be considered the starting point of any change. Pastor Josué explains,

> There is growing awareness [about the theme of injustice] and awareness to produce change, but these changes need to start in our most immediate circle…We need to live this first, this is the first step. Otherwise [speaking about

> justice] remains theoretical, we are telling others what to do, but don't succeed ourselves.

For Josué, change needs to begin with change of the self, followed by transformation of the social relations in one's most immediate environment, before turning to larger questions of social change.

Moreover, the call for denouncing forms of abuse and injustice that were previously ignored, or suffered in silence is seen to bear on and follow from a revaluation of individual rights and responsibilities. As Cristela, one of my interviewees fervently in favor of holistic mission, poignantly puts it, "I need God's peace in my heart, but God's peace implies that I get to live a dignified life and that my rights are respected." For Cristela, her belief in God, and the spiritual solace she finds in her relationship with the deity do not imply that she should tolerate injustice in the here and now, and focus on the hereafter. On the contrary, her religious beliefs vindicate a new-found entitlement to, what Cristela calls, "a dignified life." This can be traced directly to her commitment of a holistic approach to the Gospel. To quickly recapture for the reader, we saw earlier that holistic mission pivots on a re-affirmation of the value of all aspects of God's Creation, the material as well as the spiritual. This bears on the conception of rights of human beings: because humans, as part of God's Creation, have intrinsic value, their material as well as spiritual needs matter. It also bears on the conception of (Christian)[74] responsibilities: as stewards of God's Creation, human beings need to be committed to the reconciliation of all aspects of the Creation. As Agents of Christ they are called to express care for the self, as well as for the other, and the environment.

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[74] Note that I attributed "rights" to all human beings, and limited "responsibilities" to Christians. Part of the shift in holistic mission is that all human beings are understood to have value, and are entitled to have their needs met. Because Christians are seen to have a special status (in that conversion transforms them from a Creature of God into a Child of God) they are also tasked with more responsibilities.

In line with the Christian emphasis on the transformation of the individual and his or her most immediate social relations, the revalorization of rights and responsibilities has opened up space for the "denouncing" of violence and abuse in the everyday spaces of home and work. As we saw in chapter two, the ample media coverage of delinquent violence, and gang violence in particular, stands in sharp contrast with the minimal attention paid to domestic abuse, despite high rates of occurrence. As Mo Hume observes, even though intra-family violence was included to the Penal Code in 1998, domestic violence continues to be considered a private affair (Hume 2004). In short, domestic abuse has been a normalized and silenced type of violence in El Salvador, irrespective of one's religion. This has typically also been the case in evangelical churches, including in Elim. Brother Aaron aptly describes the passive approach traditionally adopted towards such abuse. "Pastors," Brother Aaron says, "would typically counsel a battered woman to kneel down and pray for God to give her patience and to transform her partner." The call in Elim to speak up against domestic abuse targeting women and children signals a jarring break not only with the more traditional non-assertive stance in the church, but also with the broader Salvadoran context of tacit acceptance of domestic abuse.[75] The practice of denouncing in this context takes various forms. At the level of the church an important contribution is to simply raise awareness that domestic abuse is wrong, that it should not be accepted as a "normal" feature of everyday life, and calls for intervention. "Denunciar" in this use is best translated as "reveal," or "signal." Instances of this are informational messages circulating on the

[75] Not only do I want to point out that the traditional discouraging of human intervention in cases of domestic abuse is not per se significantly different from the more general stance taken in Salvadoran society on the issue. It is also worth pointing out that evangelical belief and practice can also provide a degree of empowerment in such cases, as has been documented in the literature on Pentecostalism and gender. This was for example implied in Yesenia's testimonial about her abusive marriage. When her husband forbade her to go to church, she felt empowered to go anyways, thinking that loyalty to God superseded loyalty to her abusive husband

church's media, or (depending on the pastor) exhortations from the pulpit to denounce such abuse. In this sense, the church contributes to the de-normalization of domestic violence. For individuals "denouncing" such abuse can concretely involve reporting the practice to one of the pastors with the request to intervene, particularly when all parties are involved in the church, or even filing a report with the authorities. For bystanders, "denouncing" could refer to finding ways to afford assistance. One of my interviewees, a woman in her early twenties who was a leader in cell meetings for children told me that the growing awareness of domestic abuse in the church made her look for subtle signs of abuse in the children she worked with (for example in drawings they made).[76]

The work place is also cited as an everyday space in which many Salvadorans, particularly those that are part of the country's impoverished underbelly, encounter forms of injustice. Pastor Josué, for example, points at poor labor conditions and remunerations in many of the country's factories.[77] Christians are not traditionally considered movers and shakers when it comes to indicting infringements on labor rights. In the words of an interviewee, "employers think that Christians will not complain, but leave [the problem] in the hands of God." More generally, in a context of employment scarcity, standing up for your rights, or otherwise asserting yourself is not self-evident. Several interviewees indicated to prefer to cooperate with an employer, even if it made them uncomfortable. Maria, for example, told me that while her evangelical faith forbids her to wear pants and make-up, she does so at work, because her employer considers it part of professional attire. Nevertheless, there is growing openness towards

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[76] A related theme that would come up with regard to domestic abuse was the concern that Christians spend too much time on their religious obligations and neglect spending time with their children. Similarly, the concern would be raised that some Christians are on their best behavior in church, but at home engage in domestic disputes with their partners and abusive conduct towards their children.

[77] See chapter two for more information.

Christian participation in protest marches, granted that "the theme is compatible with Christian values," and, that the march is non-violent. The form of "denouncing" in relation to labor rights is then primarily one of "signaling," That such signaling should occur in peaceful, non-violent ways is expressed quite emphatically, both by interviewees and in meetings I attended during fieldwork that touched on the topic.

So far, the discussion has been on if and how Salvadoran Christians should "denounce" forms of violence and injustice in everyday spaces. Examples have shown that such denunciations can take different forms, ranging from speaking up about abuse so as to increase awareness to actual reporting of abuse either within the church or with the authorities. When it comes to denouncing delinquency, the main shift is that, as witnessed in the monthly prayer sessions on violence, the Elim church has taken an active role in signaling that crime and violence should not be reduced to gang violence. As Xiomara's story, presented in chapter two, shows in the sense of reporting criminal incidents to the authorities, Christians are not any different from non-evangelical Salvadorans in that denouncing crime to the authorities is most often not considered a viable or safe option. In this context, the call for human action to safeguard one's personal dignity is subservient to the responsibility to take precautions to keep oneself safe.[78]

Implied in this analysis of (collective and individual responses) to infractions on individual rights is that individual and social forms of injustice are deeply enmeshed. While infringements on labor rights, for example, may vary from employer to employer, it is also the

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[78] I have argued that the shift towards denouncing encroachments on personal rights indicates an increased emphasis on human agency and responsibility as opposed to the more traditional conception of leaving everything in God's hands. A similar shift can be seen in the increased emphasis in church to exert personal judgment about what is and what is not safe, rather than to uniquely rely on God for personal safety.

case that patterns of labor exploitation are substantially shaped by larger structural forces. Similarly, while homicides are perpetrated by individual people, El Salvador's high murder rates are also embedded in national and international social processes.[79] Raising awareness of the intrinsic entanglement of individual and structural sin is another dimension of "denouncing." In one of his editorials Pastor Vega extrapolates on the relationship of these different levels of sin, and how their imbrication bears on the responsibilities of the church,

> The structural determines the personal and vice versa. People as well as social structures need conversion…The conditions of sin as they currently exist in El Salvador…need to lead the evangelical church to reflect on its evangelical mission. This should not just focus on the individual but should be broadened to incite change in society. While violence comes into existence in the hearts of individuals, this becomes embedded in sinful social structures that lead to exclusion, violence, abuse and aggressive conduct…The church needs to convert behaviors, and change schemes [of oppression], signal sin and bring hope…in these sad moments of our history the church needs to be the defender of life (Vega, March 10, 2014).

While an evangelical approach informed by integral mission still privileges the dimension of the individual, the assertion that individuals are constrained by their environment has implications for notions of transformation. In the next section I will turn to a discussion of the church's responses to the tragic bus accident in Colonia La Málaga as an example of how the church takes on a prophetic voice with the intention of affecting societal change by directly addressing structural social problems.

[79] Some examples of such processes are unequal distribution of wealth in El Salvador, as well as the international drug trade.

*Denouncing mismanagement of the natural environment: a case-study of the 'Tragedy of La Málaga'*

Introduction

In this section of the dissertation I am returning to the tragic bus accident in Colonia La Málaga, which has featured as a central theme in this dissertation. The church's responses to the accident illustrate the semantic multilayeredness of the act of "denouncing." Moreover, the debate it kindled within the Elim community highlights why the shift to holistic has been controversial. Before starting my discussion, I will first recount the events. By doing so in a neutral and matter of fact tone, I want to draw a "bare image" of these events, before turning to a discussion of how this set of events became emblematic in the church's development of "a prophetic voice." First, I will discuss in the different forms (in terms of content and format) of "denouncing" the church engaged in as part of the discourse on this accident. Then, I will turn to a discussion of why this has generated controversy within the Elim community. The information presented in this section is taken from newspaper articles, editorials by Pastor Vega, as well as the transcription of two broadcasts of Elim's radio program 'Foro Abierto," a Christian news analysis program.

Recounting the events

In the evening of July 2008 a group of Elim congregants were on the bus home. They had just attended the evening church service in Elim's La Central in Soyapango. The bus had thirty-two people on board, the bus driver and thirty-one passengers. This included people of all age groups, also children and older people. It was El Salvador's rainy season. On its way through the neighborhood La Málaga, the bus got stranded. Water from the engorged Arenal de Montserrat had flooded onto the street. The street did not feature any infrastructure meant to protect passers-

by in case of such an occurrence. The people inside the bus panicked, and were heard praying. Some people on the bus called their family, using their cell phones. Two men managed to climb through one of the small windows out onto the roof. Fabricio, a sixteen-year-old jumped to the roof of a nearby home. Melvin, a young man in his early twenties, stayed on the roof, trying to find a way to help more people out of the bus. A short while later, perhaps a few minutes, a flash flood engulfed the entire bus and the force of the water dragged the bus, with Melvin and all the people still trapped inside, into the river. Around the same time, the flood destroyed the nearby home of Don Eugenio Cerón, a 78-year-old carpenter. Don Eugenio was asleep when his entire bedroom was swept into the river. That evening thirty-two people drowned in the river. It took days to find their remains, and the bodies of three people were never found. The day after the accident, the events were reported on in the newspapers. What was highlighted was the fact that the passengers had been heard to pray when they were caught in the vehicle. In the view of the reporters, this meant that the evangelicals trapped in the bus had decided to rely on divine intervention, rather than to try to climb out of the bus. For the reporters this meant that the perished people had been complicit in their own demise. Also complicit, in the view of the reporters, were the doctrines of passivity taught in the burgeoning evangelical churches.

<u>Content and forms of denouncing</u>

Over the years, the church has formulated a number of responses in relation to the events of the accident in La Málaga. In the immediate aftermath of the tragedy, and the ensuing media responses, the church leadership engaged in a public press conference. The church pastor has also repeatedly published editorials on the subject. While these were more frequent shortly after the accident had occurred, the pastor continues to write at least one a year, remembering the victims, and discussing the set of responses to the accident. Moreover, once a year, on the

anniversary of the accident, the church organizes a memorial event in La Málaga. In terms of content, the practice of "denouncing" is in some instances an instantiation of consciousness-raising,[80]but in other instances "denouncing" takes a more forceful form, directly indicting and demanding a response.[81]

The press conference organized shortly after the accident transpired was, as said earlier in the dissertation, unexpected, and even controversial, both within and outside the Elim community. The expected response had been that the church would pray, and otherwise not further engage with the events. Instead, the pastor publicly demanded justice for the victims, reclaiming their dignity, and indicted the government for its poor management of the environment. In this instance then, "denouncing" is synonymous with a more direct form of accusing, with an explicit addressee (or addressees) who is--either implicitly or explicitly--called to respond. Addressees in this case are the government, as well as the journalists who cast blame on the victims. In directly addressing the government about their management of public space and the environment, this form of denouncing represents a break with the evangelical emphasis on the individual and the personal. This form of denouncing then is an unambiguous example of the church adopting "a prophetic voice" about societal injustice.

The church's call for justice did not remain unheard. A few months after the accident the *Office of the Procurator for the Defense of Human Rights* ("Procuraduria de los Derechos Humanos") published a report with a list of the people in government it considered responsable, as well as a list of recommendations for the State to comply with, including disaster mitigation works, a judicial investigation, an oficial apology from the State, and moral reparation for the

[80] Going back to the discussion of the semantic valence of "denunciar," this meaning then corresponds with a translation of "denunciar" as "to reveal" or "to sign."
[81] This corresponds with a translation of "denunciar" as "to demand."

victims and their families (Vega, July 5, 2011). Nine years later some (but not all) of these recommendations have been fulfilled. In October 2012 the Ministry of Public Works completed mitigation works, at a cost of more than two million dollars (PNUD, October 10, 2012). In 2013, a memorial monument was established near the place of the accident, featuring the names of all thirty-two victims, and an inscription explaining that the purpose is to remember the victims, and to recapture their human dignity. It moreover states that society has the responsibility to take care of the environment so as to avoid future tragedies.

Over the years, the pastor has continued to write about the tragic events in La Málaga. Clearly, the scope of the prophetic stance with regard to these events transcends the specifics of this accident, engaging with injustice implied in environmental neglect, and the negation of human dignity. The practice of "denouncing" in these editorials at times takes the form of "indicting," calling the authorities for a more profound response, both to the accident in La Málaga, as well as to the larger environmental neglect and abuse in El Salvador. Other times, denouncing takes the form of "consciousness-raising." A number of the editorials are devoted to the victims and/or their family, giving them names and faces. We learn that Krissia, one of the victims, was a promising medical student, an ardent church member, and a beloved daughter. Ester was eleven years old when her father died in the accident. In the editorial, we read about how she anxiously waited for news about her father's fate, and how her mother was forced to take over the role of breadwinner, providing for Ester and her sister. These personalized sketches, while very touching, do more than making visible who the people affected were. By depicting them as people with hopes, and dreams, and love and care, their human dignity is reinforced. Such personalized narratives further create awareness that neglect for the

environment, at a structural level, is not just an abstract issue, but deeply affects the lives of individual people. It shows that the structural and the individual are deeply enmeshed.

The entanglement between the personal and the structural is also reinforced in the annual memorial events that take place in la colonia Málaga every year on the anniversary of the tragedy. While these serve to honor the memories of the victims, and their families, they also more firmly establish the series of events in the collective memories of the church, and of society more broadly. As is inscribed on the memorial monument, the goal is that "the names of the victims are seeds, the fruits of which produce permanent justice."

Debate in the church

Although the process of denouncing described here was most immediately led by the church's leadership, and supported by the victims' families and other sympathetic people, it has sparked debate in the larger Elim community. In this section, I will discuss which aspects are considered problematic, and how this reflects frictions about the changing parameters of what is understood to be included in "Pentecostal care." As we will see, at the core of this debate are concerns about changing conceptions of the relation between human and divine agency, the relationship between the spiritual and the material, and the related concern that privileging the latter opens the path towards party politics and leftism. Negotiating these issues, I argue, is challenging in that this bears on Christian subjectivity. My analysis of this debate is based on information obtained in the comment sections to Pastor Vega's editorials (published on the church website), comments called in by listeners of the radio program "Foro Abierto,"[82] as well as opinions conveyed to me in interviews or informal conversation.

[82] The two broadcasts I analysed were titled, "Pastoral Work in times of Crisis," and "Historical Memory."

A common objection to the church's practices of denouncing in relation to the bus tragedy is that doing so indicates unwillingness to accept God's sovereignty. As I pointed out in chapter three, a central belief for the evangelicals in my study is that God controls everything that happens, and that, in consequence, nothing happens without Him permitting it. While everyone acknowledges that the accident was tragic, maintaining that it should not have happened is interpreted, by some, as not accepting God's plan. Moreover, while people agree that the loss of life is deeply tragic, particularly when it concerns youth, or people with families, it was, ultimately, God who took them. Moreover, the objection goes, given that they were evangelicals, they are now with God. This means, for some, that instead of remembering them, the victims should be left in peace. Ruth Padilla, a guest speaker on "Foro Abierto," and prominent leader of the holistic mission movement counters this objection by reminding the Foro Abierto listener of the responsibility of human beings to be a steward of Creation. She says, "being Christian, acknowledging that God is sovereign does not mean that you should be passive with regard to everything that happens…Not doing anything, inaction, is a form of action too…If we do not remember this bus accident, we do not take up our responsibility to care for others as well as for the environment." At stake then is the renegotiation of human agency vis-a-vis agency of the deity, conceptualized in terms of individual responsibility. Ethnographically, as we can glean from Ruth Padilla's commentary, and has been observed earlier in the dissertation, this is in terms of active versus passive, with traditional Salvadoran evangelicals often labeled as "passive," both by their more progressive counterparts, and by non-Christians.

Similarly, responses to the objection raised by traditionalist evangelicals that concern with the material undermines care for the spiritual is countered by reconceptualizations of the content of "individual responsibility." The host of Foro Abierto, told me that people regularly

ask her, "why would you bother with planting trees and cleaning up the environment, when we are faced with the urgent task of saving souls?" The underlying notion here is while Salvadoran society and its people are indeed in the throes of considerable hardships, it is not wise to spend any time trying to improve these hardships, as they are signs of the times, and indicate the imminence of the Second Coming. The answer from more holistically minded Christians again leans towards emphasizing the need to accept responsibility for oneself and one's environment. Not knowing when exactly the Second Coming will occur, it is important to continue accepting Stewardship, as this is what Christians are called to do by the deity. "Doing religion" encompasses all aspects of life, including those that are considered secular.

The last concern I will turn to, namely that Christians risk getting involved in politics, is an extension of the previous discussion. Politics is considered as virtually anti-thetical to spiritual concerns. Not only does it have to do with material aspects of life, but the power play that is involved in it evokes negative connotations of corruption and violence. Politics is mostly defined as party politics. Leftist leaning political ideology is regarded with particular suspicion because of its association with communism and atheism. The response, as I will discuss further in the last chapter, of the progressive evangelical is to first of all assert that politics encompasses all human power relations, not just party politics and that, as human beings, it is impossible not to engage in politics in one shape or another. Again, the message is that inaction is also a form of action. Furthermore, it is reasserted that Christians need to accept responsibility in all realms of life, and be agents of Christ in all domains.

This discussion on "denouncing" reveals that what is at stake is more than the question whether or not the church can or should be involved in the world. Underlying issues are the renegotiation of responsibilities of the individual vis-a-vis the deity, and, implied in that, a

renegotiation of Christian subjectivity. To understand how this discussion bears on changing notions of Christian subjectivity, it is helpful to first of all return to the argument previously made that Christians in this context are decentered individuals who need to reach beyond the self in function of their service of God. In this sense, subjectivity is not just made up of an "I," but also features the dimensions of "God," and "the other." The revaluation of the material and the spiritual alters the way those various dimensions stand in balance to one another. The category of "other" is now expanded to also include the natural and social environment. The relationship of the dimensions of "I" and "God" becomes somewhat reorganized, with more emphasis on human agency, responsibility and decision-making. So, the quality of being a "decentered self" changes in that decenteredness is somewhat less pronounced in relation to the deity, but a bit more pronounced in relation to the "Other," given that in this conception of self care for the other is afforded a bit more weight than in the traditional conception.

Given that, ultimately, what is most important for evangelicals, of both traditional and holistic orientation, is the personal relationship with God, renegotiating the dimensions of "I," "God," and "Other" is challenging. So, while one may be called to a "progressive form of evangelicalism," the fear that overemphasing the dimension of "other" will be at the expense of the dimension of "I" in its relationship to the deity is a tangible concern. This concern, as will be discussed more in the concluding chapter, is furthermoremore outspoken in particularly contentious domains such as politics (and particularly in its association of party politics). Perhaps, my informants fear, it is not possible to maintain a healthy relationship between self and God in spiritually polluting environments such as politics.

# Chapter eight:

## Conclusion: Pentecostal care and forms of social world-making

### 8.1 Summary of questions and results

This dissertation seeks to contribute to the debate on Pentecostal politics in Latin America, and El Salvador specifically. Questions probing into Pentecostal politics are often framed in terms of whether the religion's privileging of individual spiritual well-being likely induce political conservatism or lack of political participation. Following calls to reconfigure the debate by moving away from analysis that privileges Western notions of politics (narrowly defined), this dissertation seeks to cast analysis in terms of Pentecostal categories. Specifically, the guiding question in my research is how Salvadoran Pentecostals, informed by their religious commitment, envision their role in political change in Salvadoran society, and how they enact this in everyday life. To answer this question, I did ethnographic fieldwork in a church that was in the process of adopting "integral mission," an evangelical contextual theology, akin to liberation theology. This allowed me to compare two ways of being Charismatic Christian, at once deeply entwined and divergent from one another. By disentangling what these models shared and what set them apart, I gained more insight in the processes that underlie Christian models for social change in El Salvador, and why shifting from one model to another was perceived by some as undermining the core of the church's traditional mission. Mirroring observations made in research on Pentecostal politics, the concern was if the budding engagement with issues of social justice was compatible with the traditional emphasis on individual spiritual well-being.

Starting from religious categories, my analysis is informed by the ethnographic observation that for Pentecostal Christians any form of collective change is primarily accomplished through individual transformation following conversion. A central category in Pentecostal cosmology across cultures, the latter typically involves moral work of the self on the self. To more fully understand the implications of this Christian model for change I examine what is culturally specific in Salvadoran testimonials of conversion. In conjunction with this I also examine what is entailed in Christian notions of "individualism," as enacted in El Salvador. Similar to conversion narratives elsewhere, the pre-conversion period is narrated as a time of personal hardship and existential crisis, as well as sinful conduct (from the perspective of evangelical morality). Highlighted in Salvadoran testimonials are emotional difficulties in the face of past and present conflict. Despite the prevalence of structural violence in El Salvador, testimonials tend to highlight violence between individuals, often in the domestic sphere. The moral self-work following conversion pivots on notions of self-restraint and responsibility. Concrete examples of this often pertain to emotion management, including anger management and trauma work. Based on analysis of members' accounts of transformation, I argue that such moral work on the self is a process of gradual change. Ethnographically, as part of the shift to integral mission, the processual nature of Pentecostal transformation is more and more foregrounded in sermons.

Turning to a discussion of Pentecostal personhood I refer to the Pentecostal self as a porous and decentered individual, meaningfully different from the secular individual because of the centrality of the believer's relationship with God. I call the Pentecostal self "porous" because of the requirement to be open and receptive to the deity, and decentered because of its tendency to defer to the deity's agency. Moreover, in service of the believer's relationship with the deity

the believer also needs to reach out beyond the boundaries of the self in certain circumscribed ways (engaging with the other and/or the Creation). I argue then that in order to effect faith, the Christian self needs to carefully balance out the dimensions of "I," "God," and "Other." Following this, I establish that because of the relational quality inherent in the conceptualization of the Christian self, the moral work of the self on the self, characteristic of the post-conversion process of transformation, will also to some degree involve "reaching beyond the boundaries of the self." So, while conversion narratives confirm that many Christians convert at least in part because of "existential concerns," post-conversion transformation involves, I argue, an ethics of care towards the other. By tracing the changing forms of this ethics of care, insight is gained into the processes underlying Christian models for social and political change.

By comparing traditional and holistic Pentecostalism, I discern differences on two axes, shaping the scope and content of the ethics of care implied in Pentecostal post-conversion transformation: (1) the relative value attributed to the material vis-à-vis the spiritual; and (2) differences in the way the three dimensions of "I," "God," and "Other" undergirding the Pentecostal self are negotiated. In traditional Pentecostalism, the material is given positive value in so far as it testifies to spiritual health. For example, fasting before prayer shows spiritual dedication. In holistic mission, the value of the material for its own sake is recaptured. Pentecostals should then not only be concerned with the spiritual health of other people, but also with their material well-being, and the factors that compromise it; and more broadly, with the well-being of material aspects of social life. Again, the hungry body serves as an example. Exemplifying poverty and unequal access to food, the hungry body signifies structural sin. Clearly, the revalorization of the material will affect the scope of what is included in Pentecostal care for the Other. Another shift in response to holistic mission is that while all Pentecostals

centrally value the relationship with God, the dimension of "I" vis-à-vis "Other" is renegotiated and is weighted more heavily in the holistic version. There are also differences in how human agency is understood in relation to the deity. In holistic mission, more emphasis is given to human agency, calling for individuals to accept personal responsibility in accomplishing change when faced with difficulty. For example, while all Pentecostals describe prayer as the Christian's most "powerful weapon," Pentecostals, in the holistic view, are also tasked with actively seeking to solve the challenges they are faced with, rather than exclusively awaiting divine intervention.

When analyzing the forms of social engagement implied in traditional and holistic forms of Charismatic Christianity, there are obvious differences in how each envisions Christian engagement with social change. Part of this could be captured by positing that both imply different stances about how the "church" should relate to the "world," with the former focusing entirely on spiritual Christian activities, and the latter calling on Christians to take on responsibilities in secular domains, from the perspective of needing to be "disciples of Christ" in all realms of life. By mapping the activities Christians engage in as an expression of "ethics of care for the other" according to the two axes identified above, I draw a more nuanced picture of the degrees of difference and overlap between the models for social change espoused in traditional versus holistic Christianity. While holistic mission does call on Christians to include secular domains as areas in which to make a difference as Christian, both forms of Christianity nevertheless centrally call on traditional Christian practices to express "care for the other," and create social change. Another point of overlap, as I will discuss at more length later in this chapter, is that while holistic mission does create some space for engaging with structural forms of violence in society, both models nevertheless privilege the personal, and as such foment forms of social change that are the incremental sum of small individual changes. Again, differences in

the value attributed to the material vis-à-vis the spiritual will shape how Christians should seek to affect individual change. For example, in the traditional model, such change is considered to come about when more people convert and start engaging in Pentecostal moral self-work. In the holistic model, such evangelization must go hand in hand with providing more individuals with the conditions of possibility to improve their own socio-economic situation.

The analysis also leaves room for moments of failure, and of individual conduct not matching up to guiding models. This is an analytical as well as an ethnographic observation. Repeating the words of Pastor Vega, cited earlier in chapter three, "Transformation does not happen overnight, it is not the case that you convert today and that tomorrow you wake up as Christ." Intrinsic to self-work in both models is that it is very challenging. The call for responsibility stands in constant tension with the need for self-discipline, a balance that in everyday life is not always easy to maintain. Negotiating the dimensions of "I," "God, and "Other" is challenging as well, particularly so in the holistic paradigm in which the dimension of "Other" is made more prevalent. As we have seen, for all Charismatic Christians, the relationship with God is of central importance. Renegotiating the dimensions of "I," "God," and "Other" (in terms of "Neighbor," and/or "Creation") with the aim of placing more emphasis on the "Other" induces the worry that doing so may compromise the dimension of "I" versus "God," (which is at the core of spiritual health) if not enacted carefully or correctly, or with the right degree of self-restraint. This means that while holistic mission expands the realm of activities Christians can, according to their faith, participate in, individual Pentecostals nevertheless worry about the possibility of "spiritual contamination" when doing so.

## 8.2 What about politics?

As part of my purpose to contribute to the debate on Pentecostal (and, more broadly Charismatic Christian) politics, I adopted a broader definition of politics. Throughout the dissertation, I showed how Christians engage in practices of social world-making, engaging with difference and disagreement, and involving rethinking the boundaries between self and other. Nevertheless, I also made sure to collect information about "politics" in a narrow sense during research. For example, in interviews I would routinely ask my informants what their attitudes were vis-à-vis voting, participation in political parties, as well as participation in social movements and public manifestations. In this section of the conclusion, I will reflect on the analytical value of distinguishing between these various understandings of politics. Before doing so, I will first render how Christians themselves define "politics," and if their understanding of the term, both in terms of what they consider it to connote, and how they think they, as Christians, should relate to it, has changed following the infusion of integral mission.

I will start my discussion with a quote taken from an editorial entitled "Mega Churches and Political Influence," published on Elim's website,"[83] allowing my analysis to build on the dialogue that is taking place ethnographically. I will first discuss what the editorial conveys about the ongoing debate about Christian participation in the context of El Salvador, and how this reverberates with the opinions voiced by my informants. Next, I will take a closer look at what the language choices in this editorial further reveal about the topic, and how this compares with the congregants' language use, in reference to politics:

> It is normally thought that politics is out of [the] Christian's competence. We all bewail how bad things are going because of the lack of principles and integrity.

[83] This editorial is published in three languages, Spanish, English and Korean. Rather than translating the Spanish myself, I opt for citing the English-language version, made available on the website.

> Politics must be assumed for what it should be: a service area for citizens. The best thing Christians could do is to serve with honesty…Politics do not have to be necessarily partisan and electoral. Christians from their condition as children of God can influence greatly in politics. In fact, the church has already spoken on issues such as abortion, corruption, death penalty and other ethical issues. All of those issues have political weight in our society" (Vega, August 4, 2011).

The first thing that can be gleaned from this text, is that it seeks to engage with two different, yet related notions of "politics." Acknowledging that for its readers the concept most often evokes party politics, it also posits a second reading of the term, with 'politics' being the outcome of one's ethical stance vis-a-vis aspects of, broadly defined, human relations. While politics, in the first sense, may be difficult and challenging to participate in, in the broader sense it is an intrinsic and unavoidable consequence of sharing social space with others. Furthermore, the editorial argues, one bears on the other, because some of the issues Christians are compelled to take a position on are also negotiated in those institutional settings associated with party politics.

Implied is a plea for a more open stance towards Christian participation in politics. The distinction made between two levels of doing politics is part of the argument for why and how this should be the case. As was confirmed in interviews with my informants, "politics," typically associated with party politics, is imbued with considerable negativity. Framing discussion in terms of the spatial framework of "church," and "world," my informants firmly placed politics in the space of the "world." Its mere association with the secular domain can deter Christians, particularly those of more traditional inclination, from participating. Earlier in the dissertation, we have seen that traditionalist Christians often kept aloof from secular spaces. Rogelio, introduced in chapter four, lamented, for example, that when growing up he was not allowed to play soccer with other children in the neighborhood because it was a secular activity. More strongly, "politics" is viewed as a particularly contentious area within the secular domain. As we saw in chapter two of the dissertation, Salvadoran society continues to be starkly divided, with

generalized distrust towards political actors and institutions (FUSADES 2005: 66). By making explicit that doing politics entails more than supporting a specific political party, the church manages to participate in a debate on Christian social and political involvement while maintaining distance from electoral politics. Elim as an institution does not endorse any political party, nor any specific politician, but it does voice opinions on issues that are "political" in a larger sense.

Looking at the language used in the editorial, "politics," at both levels, is described in moral terms, reflecting more broadly the language used to describe the difference between "church" and "world," as conceptualized in the Christian cosmological view. Party politics is described as a sphere marked by "a lack of integrity," and the individual Christian's task is to counter this by "serving with honesty." Politics, in the larger sense, is conceptualized as being inevitably implied in the ethical stances one adopts. When asking congregants about their opinions on whether Christian participation in activities like voting, active involvement with party politics, manifestations and social movements, the answer, is typically cast in moral terminology as well. Informants expressed most openness towards the practice of "voting." Opinions on participating in social movements and marches ranged from a categorical "no" ("this is not necessary, you can ask this in prayer") to a modified "yes." Any degree of openness was tempered by concerns about getting embroiled in a situation of "disorder" ("as a Christian you cannot disrupt order"), depending on the topic ("if the topic is "decent," and in line with Christian values), the form ("as long as there is no violence," "as long as you are passively asking for your rights"), as well as the organizers ("Christian marches are orderly") of the activity or organization. Alternatively, concerns were also voiced about the social ramifications of participating, concerns about ("if you are obligated, [then yes], if not, it is better to distance

yourself; people would call you rebellious"]. While the moral quandary in relation to social movements and marches is presented in terms of the moral quality of latter, in relation to participation in political parties the quandary is placed entirely within the individual. With party politics predominantly envisioned as a space of "mentiras" (lies), corruption and dishonesty, what matters here is the individual's personal integrity and spiritual health of the individual ("if you can hold on to your Christian principles," "if they can keep their spirituality"). So, any modified yes then hinges on the view that participation is at one's own (spiritual) risk.

Next, I will revisit Evangelina's testimonial, first introduced in chapter four,[84] and examine how her example illustrates the possible political dimensions of the Pentecostal ethics of care, which, I argue, is involved in the process of conversion. Evangelina's story confirms that many people first embrace evangelical Christianity at a time of personal crisis. She herself says that God reached out to her when she most needed it. The process of transformation she recounts pivots on emotion work. She relates how her faith helped her work through the pain of losing both her parents during the civil war, with her father dying a violent death in front of her, and her mother disappearing. She depicts her relationship with God as central in her life. It is, moreover, one that she experiences as deeply personal and intimate. She regularly receives gifts of the Spirit: she frequently cries in the church service (a sign of "quebranto," as was explained in chapter three), she speaks in tongues and, she has even experienced the gift of prophecy several

[84] In chapter four I introduced Evangelina as a single mother in her early forties. She lives in Apopa and takes the bus every day to go to her job as a domestic aid in a wealthier part of San Salvador's larger urban area. In her free time, she also writes poetry. She has been with Elim for more than twenty years, and is actively involved in the church organization. She participates in the cell system, and has attended all four modules of CETI.

times.[85] She strongly believes that God is by her side when navigating everyday life. She shares how she often spends the long bus rides on her way to work immersed in prayer.

Evangelina's example is a striking illustration of the decentered, porous Christian self I described in chapter five. Her conversion trajectory involves a significant amount of self-work, oriented towards her own inner self. Very gradually, she says, she learned to let go of her emotions of anger and hatred that once had been all-consuming. But what she considers most essential in this process is that "God taught her how to love." Most central in Evangelina's life, she states, are her love for God, and her love for her children. But as she repeatedly makes clear, love for God, in her view, should never just be two-dimensional. While she worries that other congregants may get too engrossed in the "I-God"-dimension implied in the relationship with the deity, she makes an effort to reflect her own love for God in care for the other. Actively involved in the church, she participates in outreach in her neighborhood, and is part of the mutual aid system, embedded, as I explained in chapter six, in the cell network. Such help can consist of praying, either alone or with a group of Christians, on behalf of the needs of individual people. It can consist of providing material help with basic needs, by donating, when she can, staple food items such as sugar, and beans. It can also involve paying visits when someone in the neighborhood is sick. After attending CETI, she has started rethinking what care for the other should look like. She is deeply sympathetic, she says, to Elim's budding engagement with "societal problems," and she tries to find ways to put this into practice in everyday life. In her neighborhood, a group of Christians (part of the Elim network) have been coming together to pray on behalf of societal problems, particularly as they manifest themselves in the neighborhood. Recurrent themes, Evangelina says, pertain to the well-being and safety of youth,

[85] I explained in chapter three that the Gift of Prophecy is experienced by less congregants than the other Gifts of the Spirit.

including youth involvement with gangs, and the neglect and abuse of children in their homes. While Evangelina continues to envision Christian responsibilities as personal initiatives in those social domains that most immediately make up everyday life, she also conveys concern with how the individual is enmeshed with the structural. For example, one of the six prayer requests in the church's monthly prayer session on violence is to provide guidance to the authorities. Looking for concrete examples of this, Evangelina believes the authorities should, rather than penalizing single mothers for child neglect when leaving their children home alone while going to work, look for ways to provide them with better accommodations. The underlying issue here, Evangelina says, is not intentional neglect, but lack of opportunity due to "la situación."[86] In the past, direct participation in politics was not anything Evangelina saw as part of her Christian responsibilities nor something that even remotely interested her. More recently, however, she went to vote for the very first time. She says, "I am forty-three years old, and I had never voted." This decision was made in response to one of Pastor Vega's sermons, on the topic of citizen participation. While not endorsing any specific party or politician, Pastor Vega had talked about how Christians too have a responsibility in helping determine the political future of the country. Other than voting, Evangelina is not planning to participate in any politically-inspired activities. While she could possibly see herself as engaging in a social movement or march, depending on the specific topic, she cannot ever see herself having any role within a political party. She does not see this as a space where she would be free to act on her Christian principles, and believes that only those Christians who are very secure in their faith would be able to traverse this domain with a chance of not compromising their spiritual integrity.

[86] "La situación" is a term Salvadorans commonly use in reference to the conditions of violence, political unrest and insecurity endemic to Salvadoran society (Jenkins 1991: 140; Jenkins 2015).

Evangelina's narrative shows, first and foremost, that her life is deeply oriented by her Christian beliefs and commitment. She does not only experience her relationship with God in the confines of the church. Instead, it is a connection that permeates her entire life. While in the beginning of her evangelical trajectory this focused for the most part on healing her personal pain, this also became expressed in her relationships with others. Her narrative furthermore shows that the new engagement within the church on societal issues has influenced how she tries to enact her Christian care for the other. Although far from a mover and shaker in terms of social activism or involvement with party politics, she did cast her vote for the first time in her life. Her stance on the value of doing so changed as a result of rethinking her Christian responsibilities. She expresses care for and engagement with the problems affecting Salvadoran society, and particularly the country's youth. In her own way, she is a very engaged citizen. This is perhaps most poignantly expressed in her poetry, in which she reflects on various aspects of her religious commitment, personal life and positionality in society. Her religious commitment then, and the forms of social world making embedded in that, inform aspects of how she negotiates competing forms of social world making. For example, her sense of how the individual and the structural are enmeshed, attuned by her participation in forms of political prayer, stands in tension with the neoliberal form of social world making, which, as we saw in chapter two, is currently hegemonic in El Salvador.

## 8.3 Tensions and agreements between Pentecostal Christian and secular forms of world-making

By approaching the topic of politics and evangelical religion from the perspective of religious categories, and specifically by analyzing the process of conversion from the angle of

“Pentecostal care for the other,” I have been able to show how various forms of social world making are enacted in evangelical practice. Given that I engaged with traditional and holistic expressions of Pentecostal Charismatic Christianity, I was able to trace out differences in how such evangelical world making looks like. Adopting, following Postero, Fabricant and Elinoff, a definition of politics as “a critical practice of world making,…the making [of which] is a product of disagreement and difference” (Postero et al. forthcoming: 15), I showed that, in this sense, both Christian expressions entailed “politics.” Doing religion then, amounts, I argue, to a form of doing politics. These forms of doing politics, I furthermore showed, engaged in different ways with secular forms of doing politics. In this part of my conclusion, I will briefly depict how the forms of Christian world-making relate to neoliberalism, which, as I outlined in chapter two, is the hegemonic form of secular world-making in post-war El Salvador.

Working with Christian imagery, I will refer to social world-making implied in traditional and holistic forms of Pentecostalism as, respectively, “building the church,” and “building the Kingdom of God on earth.” In Elim, members were traditionally inculcated to make ‘a radical break’ with their previous lives and the secular spaces they habitually traversed and focus on the spiritual. In this approach responsibility towards others in society is primarily expressed by evangelizing. As we saw earlier, this approach hinges on a firm conceptual division between “world” and “church.” In this strict bifurcation, navigating “the world,” while “representing the “church,” inevitably implies difference and disagreement. Embodying a Pentecostal ethic is not always easy. Earlier in the dissertation, I gave the example of Maria, who was pressured by her Catholic father and her secular employers to wear pants (rather than the evangelical skirts she wanted to wear). Moreover, her employers also insisted she wore make-up to her job. Pressure about clothing, I pointed out, was common both within the church and

outside of it. Another informant told me how her friend was made fun of for wearing an evangelical style outfit to her college classes. Moreover, as I described at length in chapter six, the practice of evangelizing, a core Christian responsibility, is fraught with tension since it involves the renegotiation of the boundary between self and other. For evangelicals, engaging in this practice can be quite challenging, as this expression of responsibility for many Christians involves quite a bit of self-discipline. Turning to social world-building as "advancing God's kingdom on earth," difference and disagreement are negotiated somewhat differently, due to the fact that the series of Christian responsibilities is reinterpreted to involve a more active engagement with the world. While the bifurcation between the domains of "church" and "world" is still upheld, it is enacted differently. Evangelizing is still a core responsibility, but it also entails care for the bodily well-being of the other, as well as sensitivity to those conditions that undermine this bodily well-being. More generally, the revalorization of the "material" as an area of Christian care involves new forms of tension and disagreement with the secular world, which members critical of the holistic orientation refer to as "doing politics," and as "getting involved in the world." Political prayer, and particularly the Christian responsibility of "denouncing" are examples of this.

In chapter two, I discussed that neoliberalism has become the predominant form of secular world-building in post-war El Salvador, at once all-pervasive, as well as, in some ways, quite nebulous. This is, arguably, insinuated in the polyvalence of the term, denoting, as Elana Zilberg points out, "an economic model, a political philosophy, and a mode of personal conduct." She further stipulates that,

> [a]s an economic model, neoliberalism promotes free trade, deregulation of the market, and the privatization of functions previously carried out by the state. As a political philosophy, it promotes the freedom of the individual over the power of the state, and private goods over public goods. As a discipline or mode of

personal conduct, it advocates personal responsibility over social welfare (Zilberg 2011: 4).

While neoliberalism undoubtedly benefits certain segments in society, and particularly the financial elite, as "a story of progress for the nation" it has quite a few fissures. As we saw in chapter two, neoliberal rhetoric on individual responsibility contributes to making these gaps less visible. This, as pointed out earlier, is most noticeable in discourse on violence. To fit with a story of progress, violence is now predominantly narrated as common crime, rather than as politically motivated.[87] For Ellen Moodie, this "code-switching," as she terms it, serves the purpose of representing violence as "non-critical" (i.e. as not undermining the processes of peace-building and democratization) (Moodie 2010: 3). Zero-tolerance strategies fit with the narrative that violence is a problem of "common criminals," enacted by criminals who "refuse to responsibilize themselves" (Zilberg: 7). These processes of "myth" and "silencing" in relation to violence play a role in the specifics of neoliberal world-building. By highlighting certain differences and disagreements (i.e. the demonization of the gang member), others are rendered less visible (for example, conditions of precarity that underlie some of the violence).

While I have described these various forms of world-building as having a specific internal dynamic, in everyday life these different modes are entangled in that evangelicals by default also have to traverse the neoliberal secular world. For example, as many other Salvadorans, evangelicals are likely to be either un- or underemployed, or are likely to engage as "entrepreneur in the informal sector." Yesenia, for example, featured in chapters four and five, has worked as a seamstress, selling her clothing informally. Xiomara, featured in chapter two, is unable to find employment and dreams of joining the Salvadoran diaspora. When Yesenia is

[87] Ellen Moodie gives the example of the 1993 murder of Francisco Velis, a FMLN leader. Shot when dropping off his daughter at pre-school, the murder is depicted as just an instance of 'ordinary crime' (Moodie 2010).

targeted by blackmailers, she has to manage the risk involved in this on her own. Given this intersection in everyday life, the question arises if Church- and Kingdom-building further solidify or potentially complicate the neoliberal status quo. I will show that while there is a degree of commonality with neoliberalism neither of the two evangelicals modes of world-building I analyzed in this dissertation neatly map on to it.

The most obvious point of commonality is that evangelicals, as we have seen, privilege the dimension of the individual over that of larger collectivities or structures. This is reflected in the central point of departure in this dissertation that for evangelicals any form of change hinges on individual transformation through conversion. In both modes of evangelical world building individual evangelicals are tasked with responsibilities that, as we have seen, can be quite challenging to live up to in everyday life, and require constant self-work. Especially in the case of Kingdom-building individual responsibility is foregrounded. While the pastor makes the call for Christians to become disciples of Christ, rather than mere churchgoers, he also makes explicit, as was mentioned in chapter three, that every Christian has to decide for him- or herself how to do that. In chapter four, as well as in chapters six and seven, I provided examples of how (holistic) Christians do often find inspiration in their individual life circumstances on how to specifically enact Christian care. Rogelio, for example, uses his expertise as a lawyer to do so, whereas Eliseo uses his baking skills to help someone else set up a similar business.

Furthermore, Pentecostal care often operates within the constraints and parameters of neoliberalism. In chapter six, I discussed how some holistic Christians are committed to finding ways to help others that go beyond alleviation of the most immediate needs. I discussed the example of Eliseo, who taught a friend how to bake bread, so that he could improve his precarious financial situation by opening a small business. In this case, Eliseo wanted to provide

more long-term help, and he did so using the tools available to him. While this type of care is quite involved, and helpful, it revolves around teaching individual people how to better manage their lives, rather than changing any underlying socio-economic factors.

Nevertheless, both forms of evangelical world-building also confound and stand in tension with the premises of neoliberalism. First, the evangelical individual, as I discussed in chapter five, is notably different from its secular counterpart due to the central importance of the individual's relationship with God. Also relevant is the notion of being part of "the body of Christ." Individual evangelizers bring others into this "collective," bringing change for the nation, "one soul at a time." As one of my interviewees put it, the individual evangelizer is then one link in a chain of "change." The imaginary that is generated is ultimately one of connectedness. In the context of Elim's cell system, embedded in neighborhoods throughout the metropolitan area, this connectedness, more than imaginary, opens up the space for alternative networks of assistance. I described in chapter six how participants in the cell system often participate in small collective gestures of help for one of the members in need. This can be, among others, a small monetary donation to help offset the expenses of a funeral, or a donation of staple foods, such as, beans, rice and sugar. Evangelina, for example, described to me how she was putting together some funds to help obtain a wheelchair for one of the members in her local network. In the recent shift, the institution of the church has started participating in this type of small-scale help towards their members, as well as offering forms of assistance at a more collective level. An example of this, discussed in chapter six, is the yearly free HIV testing, open to all members of the public.

These examples, which are associated with both evangelical models discussed, show the limits of neoliberal rhetoric of individual responsibility, as people find small ways to rely on one

another, rather than managing their lives fully by themselves. Everything considered, these examples show how evangelical membership fills some of the gaps of the competing neoliberal model, without per se really standing in tension with it. Some practices associated with the project of Kingdom-Building do, however, potentially reveal some of the fissures in the neoliberal "story of progress," because of its awareness of how the individual is intrinsically enmeshed with the structural. Understandably, this is a significant shift, as this even potentially complicates the evangelical notion that collective change hinges on individual transformation through conversion.

I will conclude this discussion by returning to the image of the gang member. As has been reiterated throughout the dissertation, the gang member plays a salient role in Salvadoran imaginaries. In the media, the gang member is depicted as enemy of the common Salvadoran citizen, a portrayal that contributes to the garnering of public support for repressive measures, and renders non-gang-related forms of violence more invisible. This erodes the humanity of the young gang member. "They are nothing but animals," a Salvadoran told me, when he and I were discussing everyday crime in El Salvador. When evangelizing gang members, their association of danger, as we discussed in chapter six, does affect the evangelizer. I argued earlier that it is when approaching potentially dangerous others in evangelizing that the tension between self-discipline and responsibility is most palpable. Not everyone decides to actually approach such a person, out of fear. But despite this association with danger, the gang member is still considered to be someone who could transform, who could have "a new beginning." Talking to a former gang member, I realized the openness implied in such a stance, as I caught myself feeling slightly uncomfortable at the thought of what possible forms of violence the person I was talking to might have engaged in. Moreover, within the evangelical social imaginary, the transformation

of "the gang member" is a powerful testimonial of what faith can accomplish. As such, one can argue, successful evangelization of a gang member (i.e. resulting in conversion) is a form of distinction. In the holistic approach, the set of meanings attributed to the gang members is further broadened. In this view, without therefore condoning their actions they are re-contextualized as people who seek ways to survive in the face of a precarious set of life circumstances. This complicates the media depiction of the gang member, and increases visibility of underlying structural problems.

### 8.4 Contributions

My study makes important contributions to the anthropological understanding of Christian subjectivity, and to debates in the social sciences on Pentecostal politics in Latin America. By focusing on broad interpretations of politics and by starting analysis from religious categories, my dissertation provides a fuller account of the attitudes and practices of Pentecostals vis-à-vis the social and political transformation of El Salvador than would an analysis in which focus is restricted to formal political participation. While the latter approach would have yielded an account of Pentecostals as, for the most part, politically inert, my analysis shows specifically how their practices around individual salvation are directly tied to broad social and political change in El Salvador. By documenting a Pentecostal/Charismatic Christian church's adoption of "integral mission" (a "progressive evangelical" movement originating in South America), I show, moreover, how the form and content of such practices are affected by the changing dynamics of the local and broader religious fields.

My study furthermore contributes to the growing anthropological research on El Salvador. Mapping the relationship between beliefs, subjectivities and forms of social action is

pertinent in the context of El Salvador. In 2001, a survey indicated that 75% of the Salvadoran population believed that the country needed change (Cruz 2003: 19). As human rights advocate Margaret Popkin asserts, such change is accomplished by judicial and political reform, but also by changes in attitudes and activities of the populace (Popkin 2000: 251). In the context of El Salvador, where 99% of the population testifies to believing in God, and where religion is a dynamic force as testified by the conversion in recent decades of approximately forty percent of the population to evangelical churches, it is relevant to take into account how churches help shape attitudes and activities of their congregants. This is particularly so because churches are among the most trusted actors in civil society. This study makes an important contribution by examining how Elim, one of the main actors in the Salvadoran religious field, contributes to this process, and how its congregants navigate competing forms of social world building.

As an ethnography, the value of this study also lies in its depiction of the everyday lives of people who, while inevitably shaped by having to traverse “a culture of anxiety,” are not fully trapped in that “suffering slot” (cf. Robbins 2013), but find small (and sometimes larger) ways of obtaining dignity, and meaning in their lives. More than a work on suffering, this study hopes--in addition to its main theoretical objectives--to make visible processes of resilience.

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