

Field Report: The Light of the World in Greater Los Angeles

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We will always be by your side, we have promised to the Lord,
We will never stray from your side, you're Anointed by our God;
Our hearts are overflowing and give glories to the Lord,
For HE made you an Apostle for salvation of our souls.

“All Glory Be to God,” English translation of Andres Orduna Arguello’s
“La Gloria Sea a Dios,” *The Light of the World Hymnal* (2018, 578)

ABSTRACT: La Luz del Mundo (LLDM, “The Light of the World”) is a Mexican-born restorationist or “primitive” Christian church that dates to the 1920s. Under the leadership of its second Apostle, Samuel, and now under the guidance of its third Apostle, Naasón, LLDM has increasingly sought to expand its base beyond Mexico (where it is the second largest religious group after the Catholic Church) and now boasts a presence of millions in over 50 nations. This short article, based on fieldwork conducted at churches in southern California, surveys the church’s history in the Greater Los Angeles Area and examines some forms of LLDM community and non-profit engagements. The tight community networks established by LLDM members around places of worship have contributed to social improvements (decreased crime, increases in home value, opening of businesses, increased civic participation and recognition from local authorities, etc.). This phenomenon was evident in East Los Angeles, where hundreds of members live in the neighborhood that surrounds the most significant LLDM temple in the region.

KEYWORDS: La Luz del Mundo, The Light of the World, Religion in Los Angeles, Religion in California, Fieldwork – Religious Groups, Restorationist Theology, Lived Religion.

Introduction: LLDM as a NRM

Scholars of La Luz del Mundo (LLDM, “The Light of the World”) have typically approached the group from the perspectives of Protestant and Latin American history and, not surprisingly, have therefore tended to emphasize the group’s similarities to, and roots in, Pentecostalism (Nutini & Nutini 2014, 76; Fortuny 1995, 2016; de la Torre 2000); however, there has been little scholarly attention to the ways in which LLDM qualifies as a Mexican-born and globalized new religious movement (NRM) (Masferrer 1997). To be fair, its restorationist theology—which has been explored in the literature (Dormady 2007)—problematizes the label of “new religion” in much the same way that it does for, say, Mormonism, another restorationist tradition with North American origins that has gone global. However, the “NRM lens” is helpful to better understand LLDM’s strategies of community outreach and legitimation as it continues to expand across the world where it is new and unknown (Greenway 1973; Biglieri 2000; Puckett 2017). In this field report, I offer a short history of LLDM in southern California, followed by my observations of temples in East Los Angeles, downtown Los Angeles, and Long Beach from my perspective as a researcher of new religious movements. I focus most of my attention in this report on the church’s temple in East Los Angeles, where I witnessed the role of community and tight social networks in improving social conditions, evidenced by decreased crime in the face of gang violence, increases in home value, the opening of new businesses, increased civic participation, and recognition from local authorities.

LLDM in Southern California

According to LLDM (Estrada 2020), the church’s presence in southern California traces to October 1955, when the first Apostle and leader of the group, Aarón Joaquín González (1896–1964), paid a visit to Los Angeles. He was invited by a Mexican national, Dr. Alfonso García Osorio (1917–2010), who, according to LLDM, “convinced the Apostle to come to the United States with the promise that in the United States there was freedom of speech and freedom of religion” (Estrada 2020). There, the Apostle Aarón was evidently impressed with the freedom of evangelizing Protestant ministers in places such as Olvera Street in Los Angeles (adjacent to Chinatown and, one might add, near Little Tokyo, home to the Azusa Street Pentecostal revival that took place four

decades earlier). LLDM's earliest ecclesiastical presence was a house church located at San Pedro and 87th Street (Estrada 2020), and indeed house churches continue to function as mission locations in areas where temples are too remote. Members soon outgrew this location, however, and relocated across the street from the future location of the LLDM temple in East Los Angeles. The church continued to expand, and in the early 1970s LLDM purchased land at 112 North Arizona Avenue, where church members built the current temple themselves, drawing from the skills and strengths of the membership that lived in the surrounding area. The East Los Angeles temple seats over 1,000 and was inaugurated by LLDM's second Apostle, Samuel Joaquín Flores (1937–2014), in 1985 (see figure 1). In 2005, Apostle Samuel visited the church in Los Angeles to celebrate the 50th anniversary of LLDM's ministry in the area.



Figure 1. East Los Angeles temple, 1985 inauguration.
Photograph provided by Bigvai Estrada.

Site Trips: East Los Angeles, Downtown Los Angeles, Long Beach

During a visit to southern California LLDM sites in January 2020, organized by ministers Bigvai Estrada and Jack Freedom, I visited temples in East Los Angeles (112 North Arizona Avenue), downtown Los Angeles (901 West Washington Blvd), and Long Beach (785 Junipero Avenue). The temples in Long Beach and downtown LA (see figures 2 and 3, respectively) were smaller in size than the main East LA temple, each seating approximately 150–200. All three primarily serve Spanish speakers, although services are available in English through the use of translators. I was told that LLDM, in an effort to internationalize itself beyond a Mexican-born group, has opened several churches in the United States where English is the exclusive language. English-speaking temples include Redlands, California and Houston, Texas, among a handful of others.

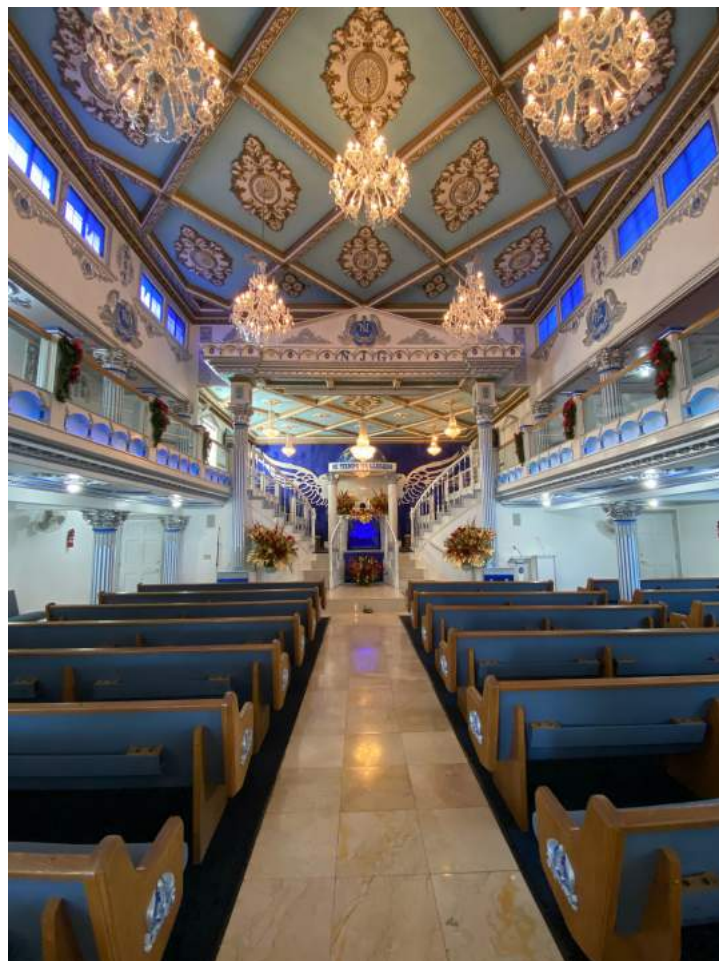


Figure 2. Interior, Long Beach temple, January 2020. Photograph by author.



Figure 3. Interior, downtown Los Angeles temple, January 2020. Photograph by author.

The temples in downtown Los Angeles and Long Beach are two stories tall and include ornate decorations and Jewish and Christian iconography on the walls. Notably, the initials of the current Apostle, Naasón Joaquín García, are found in the main sanctuaries (see figure 4), just as they are in East LA, as a sign of respect for the leader. In fact, I noticed that the stylized initials *NJG* likewise formed the basis of a sticker found on the back of LLDM members' cars as well, which serves as an outward identifier that has religious utility in the car-driving culture of California. Another distinguishing feature, common to all the temples I visited, is the placement of a seat of honor reserved for the Apostle Naasón in front of the altar. The pulpit in each temple, one notices, is set off to the side of the stage, which I am told serves to emphasize the elevated status of the Apostle in relation to the local minister and other speakers. I was also struck by the prominence, at the entrance of the temples, of hand sanitizers to ensure cleanliness and purity once in the temple. Even more striking, however, is the placement of lion statues (with the paw held up) in some temples, such as East Los Angeles and downtown Los Angeles. Finally, I was intrigued to learn that each temple has a neighboring or nearby house for the minister and his family. Full-time ministers serve for three

years before rotating to a new location to be determined by senior LLDM leadership.



Figures 4. Initials of Apostle Naasón Joaquín García, at entrance to downtown LA temple, January 2020. Photograph by author.

My visit to the main California temple in East Los Angeles was notable for several reasons. First of all, it was older than the others I visited in southern California, and it became clear that it is an important ecclesiastical site—some of my guides referred to it as the “Mother Church” in the region—as well as a center of community. As we drove through Monterey Park toward the temple, the presence of LLDM members on the sidewalk was pointed out. My guides parked their cars at the temple, and we then proceeded to walk around the block. Jack Freeman, a white American, and his Mexican-American wife, Rael, described the history of the LLDM in the area (as recounted in the previous section), as well as

the discrimination, harassment, and vandalism Jack faced by the non-LLDM Hispanic community.

The neighborhood around Arizona Avenue was once the site of intense and ongoing gang violence, especially between 1970 and 2000, with rival gangs positioned on their own side of the block, with the temple caught directly in between (Estrada 2020). As more LLDM members moved into the area, they initiated a “beautification project” (Estrada 2020), in which gang safe houses were purchased and, slowly but surely, crime rates decreased in the area (corroborated by Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department 2012; Los Angeles County 2018; Los Angeles Police Department 2020; Federal Bureau of Investigation 2020), property values rose (Los Angeles County Office of the Assessor, 2020; Zillow 2020a, 2020b), and new businesses opened (recent examples I discovered were Subway, Denny’s, and a number of local markets). The church received recognitions of its service to the community from the County of Los Angeles (Burke 2001) and Governor of California (Davis 2003). I discovered a vestige of this gang history in an alley that featured a mural—not produced by LLDM members, I am told—lamenting the senselessness of gang violence and the lives lost in decades past (see figure 5).



Figure 5. Mural in an alley near East LA temple, January 2020. Photograph by author.

Today, the area surrounding the temple is quite safe and walkable, and my guides told me that most of the residents in the vicinity—at least 75% by their estimate—are LLDM members. Walking around the block, my guides pointed out the occasional house that was not owned by an LLDM member, and these were typically in some state of disrepair, in sharp contrast to the homes of church members with clean yards, fresh paint, newer automobiles, and families seen playing in the front and backyards.

My observations of social improvement in East Los Angeles align with the findings of other researchers of LLDM, including scholars who are otherwise quite critical of the church (de la Torre 2000). One conspicuous and relatively recent example is the 2014 anthropological monograph of Hugo and Jean Nutini, who—quite recklessly and inappropriately, in my mind—refer to LLDM as a “destructive sect” similar to People’s Temple, Order of the Solar Temple, and Heaven’s Gate (2014, 38) and “basically a theocracy, geared to the exploitation of the faithful under strict social control” (2014, 80). Later in the book, however, they go on to praise the *local* LLDM communities they observed across Mexico (i.e. in Fortín, Orizaba, and Tlaxcala) for “the mutual assistance that characterizes the organization of the congregation” (2014, 82) that comes from “the close proximity in which the majority of the faithful live to congregations of LLDM” (2014, 85). Citing LLDM’s “strongly held belief in self-help and support for individual members” (2014, 87), they conclude that “the most positive aspect of LLDM congregations is the pervasive atmosphere of help and cooperation” (2014, 95). They also observe in Mexico that “Mundists [LLDM members] are economically better off than the general populations of the regions where the congregations are located” (2014, 106). I agree with these positive characterizations based on my observations in southern California, and would add that I met LLDM members from a variety of socio-economic and educational backgrounds who were committed to improving themselves, bettering their communities, and expanding the faith. Members view their bodies as temples of God (see, e.g., *1 Corinthians* 3:16), and abstain from alcohol and harmful drugs. The intentional LLDM communities set up around temple buildings may be viewed as one way for members to spread this purifying influence. It becomes a manifestation of the spiritual made physical, one that benefits members and non-members alike.

Along these lines, I was struck by the respect shown by residents to my guides as we walked around the temple block in East LA. In one revealing instance, a man and woman greeted my guides on the way to their car, with the man shaking the hand of one of the LLDM ministers. The interaction was brief but cordial, and I thought little of it, assuming that the resident was an LLDM member. However, after noticing that others at the temple embraced my guides with a handshake, hug, and kiss on the wrist—the LLDM take on the Biblical “holy kiss” (see, e.g., *Romans* 16:16)—I inquired as to why the other man was met with a simple handshake. The resident in question, it turned out, was in fact a former—or “departed”—member of the church, who continues to live in the area. I detected no hostility between LLDM officials and the ex-member and, if I had not pressed the matter with my guide, would have continued to assume that he was a fellow brother, based on the hospitality and courtesy displayed. I was also somewhat surprised to learn that some of the homes near the East LA Temple are occupied by senior church leaders, including bishops. I was informed that Apostle Naasón Joaquín’s wife and mother also live in one of the homes near Arizona Avenue.

Once inside the East LA temple (see figure 6), the visitor is impressed once again by the grandeur of the sanctuary, the division of the pews between male and female members (as also found in Jewish and Muslim traditions), religious iconography on the walls (particularly inspired by the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible), abundant space for an a cappella choir, the prominence of the Apostle’s center stage throne, and, once again, stylized forms of his initials. Despite the obvious pre-eminence of the Apostle in the visual presentation, it is inaccurate to say that LLDM members “worship” Naasón Joaquín. This was emphasized to me at numerous points by guides as well. It seems to me that this is one area where a knowledge of other new religious movements—a comparative religious studies perspective—comes in handy. LLDM, again, is a *restorationist* or *primitivist* Christian church, and thus the reverence displayed by members in church services, prayers, and hymns would be expected in recognition of the Apostle’s role as God’s singular representative on earth. The relationship to the LLDM Apostle, then, is similar to how members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS/Mormons) view their president, who is regarded as a “prophet, seer, and revelator” (LDS Church 2013) in a line of restored messengers tracing back to Joseph Smith (1805–1844) in 19th century America. Among LLDM faithful, Naasón Joaquín is the restored Apostle for the 21st century, in a line that extends back to his father and grandfather in 20th century Mexico.



Figure 6. Interior, East Los Angeles temple, January 2020. Author (middle) with Jack Freeman (left) and Bigvai Estrada (right).

Of course, given the Apostle Naasón Joaquín’s detention in Los Angeles at the time of writing this article (Zaveri 2019; Miller 2019), LLDM members are left feeling particularly vulnerable and persecuted. My guides reported verbal and physical harassment against members, both in and out of the Los Angeles area, that rose soon after the Apostle’s arrest. However, this is not to say that membership numbers have been negatively affected by the Apostle’s imprisonment during this period of crisis. On the contrary, Massimo Introvigne reported increased attendance at the Guadalajara Holy Supper (Santa Cena) in 2019 compared to 2018, with some 600,000 flocking to the Beautiful Province (Hermosa Provincia) (Introvigne 2018, 2019; for accounts of the Holy Supper, in and out of Mexico, see Puckett 2017, 122–28; Fortuny 2002; and de la Torre 1996, 2000). Jack Freeman, my guide who also serves as a national LLDM spokesperson, recently remarked to the media that the Apostle’s arrest has led to increased interest in the church and even the *re-engagement* of lapsed members at the February 2020 Holy Supper held in Pomona, California and attended by tens of thousands over a three-day period (Molina 2020; Wigglesworth 2020).

Members of the church have long faced discrimination in and outside of Mexico, especially, it seems, by Catholics who view the LLDM as a Mexican-born “cult,” in contrast to the influence of American-born “cults” such as the Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses. The theme of marginalization in LLDM culture was punctuated by my reading of the 2018 edition of *The Light of the World Hymnal* (published a before the year before the Apostle’s arrest). A bilingual copy of this hymnal was provided to me by Jack Freeman. I noticed that the hymn “Time of Trials” (“Ya se Acerca el Tiempo”) is included, with these relevant lines: “If you would like to serve our Lord, You must seek for His power above; Persecution will come, there’s no doubt, You and I will certainly rise” (*The Light of the World Hymnal* 2018, 553). In addition, there is a section of restorationist-themed hymns authored by LLDM members, including one entitled “All Glory Be to God” (“La Gloria Sea a Dios”) in reference to Apostle Naasón: “Our hearts are overflowing and give glories to the Lord, For HE made you an Apostle for salvation of our souls” (*The Light of the World Hymnal* 2018, 578).

The central role of the Apostle, and the affection of members toward him, became obvious to me when I attended a “Sunday school” service at the East Los Angeles temple. The service was conducted in Spanish, but I was able to follow along thanks to a translator and use of a bilingual LLDM hymnal. A minister stood at the pulpit, guiding the membership through periods of hymns, prayers, and other messages, including from the Bible. At one point, the minister read from a letter that the church received from the Apostle while incarcerated. The letter had been received near the start of the new year, but the minister used the Sunday school as an opportunity to revisit the epistle. In it, the Apostle encouraged the church to persevere and have faith in the face of persecution and his imprisonment. Naasón Joaquín also relayed a story from prison in which he had a conversation with a fellow inmate, who thereafter recognized his authority as an Apostle of God. The rhetoric was reminiscent of the Pauline “prison epistles” (*Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon*) and the LLDM minister’s exegesis of Naasón Joaquín’s letter likewise functioned to reinforce his esteemed stature and divine authority among the hundreds in attendance. Throughout the service, members were invited to kneel in prayer; and, at numerous points, men and women began to weep as they prayed aloud as they felt moved to do so by the Holy Spirit. I did not take photographs of the parishioners, out of respect as a new

visitor, but the scene in Los Angeles was most impressive and represented a microcosm of LLDM lived religion as the church moves away from its Mexican roots and becomes increasingly cosmopolitan and globalized (Puckett 2017, 112–16).

Conclusion & Open Areas for Research

La Luz del Mundo clearly has a strong (and growing) presence in southern California and beyond. Its temple in East Los Angeles is a central place of worship and church management for the region—all the more important because Apostle Naasón Joaquín remains (as of February 2020) imprisoned in the area. My observations in East Los Angeles, downtown Los Angeles, and Long Beach supports the view that LLDM members maintain tight social networks and international communities (see, e.g., Dormady 2007, 2011). These networks reduce free riding and maintain insider/outsider boundaries (Iannaccone 1994), which in the case of the church in southern California has translated into improved social conditions in neighborhoods surrounding places of worship. More quantitative and qualitative data is necessary to situate the positive and causative role of LLDM members in their communities, including much needed scholarly work into the church's human rights campaigns, educational programs, healthcare initiatives, and humanitarian aid (The Light of the World 2019; see Šorytè, this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*), not to mention other topics such as missionary work and an impressive public relations infrastructure that makes savvy use of social media sites (Berea International 2020; LLDM Redlands CA 2020).

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