

# Guadalajara-based evangelical church spreads throughout Mexico & the world

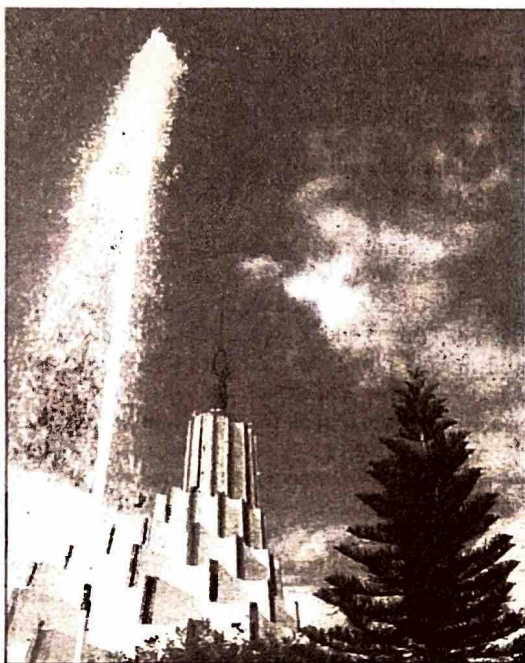
The Luz del Mundo believes modern society is plagued by luxurious material goods and excessive behavior.

By Brian Levinson

Unlike in the rest of Mexico, the death of Pope John Paul II was a news item that barely registered on the radar in Guadalajara's Hermosa Provincia. Most of the residents of this neighborhood belong to Luz del Mundo (Light of the World), an evangelical Christian church. With 1.5 million Mexican members, the Guadalajara-based organization is the largest religious minority in the country.

Earlier this month, newspaper articles suggested that Luz del Mundo officials were angered by a city proposal to name a nearby avenue after the late pope. But Eliezer Gutierrez Avelar, a church spokesman, dismisses those reports. "Our mission on Earth is not to worry about the names on the streets or the neighborhoods. Our mission on Earth is to spread the word of the gospel."

And they take that mission seriously. Members of the Luz del Mundo are baptized only after reaching 14 years of age, when they can voluntarily accept the teachings and rigorous lifestyle of the church. There is no dancing,



The ostentatious Luz del Mundo temple in Colonia Hermosa Providencia on the eastern side of Guadalajara is a tall, imposing structure that can be seen for miles around.

drinking alcohol or dating. Women wear long skirts. Marriages generally take place within the Luz del Mundo community.

Mari Bernal Beltran, 30, runs a small restaurant in the Hermosa Provincia market. She attended a public high school and was always tempted to join her friends at the bar or discotheque. "But when you are baptized, you renounce all of this, you are dead to the world, you have to please God."

Bernal, who holds a degree in business administration from the University of Guadalajara, says she had no problem making her decision to accept baptism. "I am convinced. I have been convinced since about the age of six years old. That's when they start provid-

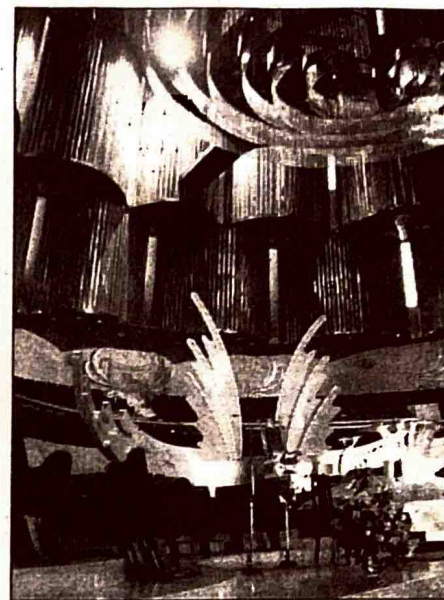
ing you with education and orations."

Her mother and co-worker, Maria de la Luz Beltran, arrived in Hermosa Provincia 49 years ago. The family was from Zacatecas and moved to Guadalajara to join the church. "But the doctrines were always difficult for my father," says Señora Beltran. "He could not submit himself to the church and eventually returned home to Zacatecas."

The family learned he was later killed during a *quinceañera* (traditional 15-year-old birthday party) when, in a drunken stupor, he tried to "rob" the birthday girl. Señora Beltran's mother, meanwhile, remarried within Luz del Mundo

and added three more children to her roost.

The market where Señora Beltran and her daughter work is located right near the Templo de la Luz del Mundo, the focal point of Hermosa Provincia and an easily recognizable structure on the Guadalajara skyline. The various tiers of curving white ramparts — it all looks like a giant wedding cake — stretch 87 meters into the



sky. Church leaders insist it is the largest temple in Latin America.

The inside is stunning. Stained glass from above creates a rainbow of colors, representing the symbol of peace that God flashed to Moses after the Great Flood. There are also giant golden structures that disappear out of sight as they lead up to the temple's peak. "This signifies the infinity and the eternity that is God," explains church member Pablo Gomez Garcia.

Gomez, 23, currently works as a faculty coordinator at a church-run university in the western part of Guadalajara. He is proud of the temple like he is proud of the religion — the meaning, the capacity to inspire, and the size. "In just 79 years, which is a small amount of time, the church has grown dramatically."

The Hermosa Providencia community comes together three times each day, for two church services in the morning and one at night. Sunday services last a total of six hours.

On April 6, 1926, Aaron Joaquin Gonzalez was in Monterrey when he received God's call. He returned to Guadalajara, where his parents lived, and set about starting his own congregation. Aaron saw himself as an apostle, just like one of the origi-

nal 12 led by Jesus, who could preach the gospel of God with a focus on the early, more modest traditions of Christianity. Members of Luz del Mundo believe modern Catholic society and religion are plagued by luxurious material goods and excessive behaviors.

Brother Aaron died in 1964, and church leadership was immediately transferred to his son, Samuel Joaquin Flores, who is also considered a divinely elected apostle of God. Under Samuel's reign, church membership has grown to five million people in 37 countries. An estimated 300,000 of them converge on Hermosa Provincia every August for Holy Convocation, the Luz del Mundo equivalent of Easter.

Church on 8



## Church from 7

At 6 p.m., two lines of empty strollers are parked outside the temple. Mothers are gathered in the downstairs, Moorish-style chapel for a session about teaching church doctrine to their young children. In the main sanctuary, a group of older women chant songs together. They are getting ready to preach the word of God to convicted criminals at a nearby prison.

Daily group meeting are also convened for adolescents, married couples and senior citizens. The community comes together as a whole three times each day, for two church services in the morning and one at night. Sunday services last a total of six hours.

Surrounding the temple is a community that looks not very different from other parts of Guadalajara, save for a couple of buildings that evoke a futuristic

commune. The aviary, constructed in the shape of globe, sits behind the Getsami Gardens where Brother Aaron and his wife are buried.

The Berea Cultural Center, across the street, is a tall glass pyramid that was inaugurated in July of last year. Choir songs are recorded in sound studios here and then played over loud speakers outside. The church also broadcasts its own afternoon radio show from the center.

In the Berea cafe, employees with lime green blouses and black skirts serve Starbucks-like drinks. Upstairs, the bookstore sells postcards and church magazines, along with watches, wall clocks, t-shirts, stationary, umbrellas, coffee mugs and backpacks that all carry the LDM logo. Framed photographs of Samuel Joaquin line the walls.

There are stacks of a July 2001 magazine listing the 300 most important leaders in Mexico. Joaquin

ranks #144, ahead of notables such as current presidential contender Roberto Madrazo (#170) and Jalisco Governor Francisco Ramirez Acuña (#228).

Susana Daza has worked in the bookstore since it opened. She attends a public high school, and occasionally encounters discrimination. "They speak badly because they lack knowledge." Daza is bright and speaks with confidence. She would like to study international commerce or accounting, or do mission work abroad.

Daza enjoys the Chicken Soup for the Soul series, but most of her reading time is spent with the Bible, and she knows it well. She opens her own copy to the Book of Matthew — to show the passage that references Light of the World — and then quickly remembers to place the scarf on her head. "We must cover ourselves in front of the word of God." □