

Iglesia De La Luz Del Mundo

By Timothy Wyatt

Travelling along Texas Highway 59 in northeast Houston, it is hard to dismiss the golden dome that towers above the landscape. Part of a larger Greco-Roman inspired structure, the dome stands in sharp contrast to the surrounding neighborhood. With a large number of vehicles passing by the building each day, only a small number of commuters and even fewer travelers know the purpose of the opulent marble edifice. The stark white construction, surrounded by a painted metal fence, looks more like a monument to an

eccentric millionaire than a church, but it is one of the many houses of worship that can be found around the city. The denomination that meets here is not Baptist, Catholic, or even Greek Orthodox; rather a form of Pentecostalism that caters to a primarily Latin American congregation calls the church home. The church, known as *Iglesia de La Luz del Mundo* (Light of the World Church), represents the central Houston congregation of the Mexico-based denomination of the same name.

The Romanesque temple of La Luz del Mundo is located between Darden and Bostic Streets in Northeast Houston along Highway 59. The church is the central Houston location for the Mexican-based congregation.

Photo by Omar Silva Ambriz courtesy of La Luz del Mundo.



Eusebio Joaquín González established the organization, formally known as *La Iglesia del Dios Vivo, Columna y Apoyo de la Verdad, La Luz del Mundo* (The Church of the Living God, Column and Foundation of Truth, The Light of the World), in Monterey, Mexico, on April 6, 1926.¹ Called into the service of God through a vision, González changed his name to Aaron and began his service as a minister. Known as the Prophet Aaron to congregants, González spread Oneness Pentecostalism across Mexico. The Oneness wing of Pentecostalism rejects the eternal divinity of Jesus, instead believing that it was his baptism that made him the Christ and therefore divine.² *La Luz del Mundo* ministers, in the tradition of Oneness beliefs, baptize solely in the name of Jesus Christ instead of the Trinity: God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In the 1950s, González established the *Hermosa Provincia*, or Beautiful Province, in Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico, which remains the headquarters for *La Luz del Mundo*.

González held the positions of both “Apostle” and “international President of the *Luz del Mundo* church” until his death in 1964. During his tenure, the Prophet Aaron oversaw the expansion of the church throughout Latin America and the world. Oddly, Aaron opted to move north into the United States with his missionary work before continuing south into Central America. Because of a Pentecostal awakening in both the United States and Latin America, the denomination grew rapidly. With over one million members in Mexico, *La Luz del Mundo* is currently the second largest denomination in the country, eclipsed only by the Catholic Church.

Upon his father Eusebio’s death, Samuel Joaquín Flores became the leader of the denomination, expanding the church’s influence into forty-six countries with adherents numbering around five million worldwide.³ From the *Hermosa Provincia* in Guadalajara, Samuel directs the ever increasing number of churches. As the sole head of the church, Flores appoints ministers, defines doctrines



The golden dome rests atop the Roman-inspired temple of the La Luz del Mundo church. The staff of Aaron, the symbol of the church, can be seen at the peak of the dome. Photo by Timothy Wyatt.

and practices of the congregation, and organizes religious rituals. Samuel attended the consecration of the Houston temple, and his son, Benjamin Joaquín, currently acts as minister to the Houston church, showing the importance of the Houston church to the organization.

Two brothers from San Antonio brought the teachings of *La Luz del Mundo* to Houston between 1965 and 1967. The movement started in a small house that the brothers used



Fourteen stone columns are situated in a circle in front of the pastor’s house to the right of the temple. Each column is adorned with the name of an apostle on a bronze plaque. The circle includes columns representing Aaron and Samuel Joaquín.

Photo by Timothy Wyatt.



Detail of the hand-carved stonework depicting Biblical scenes located above the entrance to the temple.

Photo by Timothy Wyatt.

for prayer meetings.⁴ As the congregation grew, the members of the church constructed a small temple off of Bostic Street in Northeast Houston, the site of the current church parking lot. In 2000, the construction of the present church began in earnest. With donations of time and money from the congregants, the current building was completed in 2005 and opened its doors in July of that same year. The work was done primarily by *La Luz del Mundo* members, many of whom work in the construction field as skilled laborers. The Central Houston church acts as the regional center for Southeast, Texas. Members from this location have gone on to start churches in Pasadena, Victoria, Port Arthur, and in other areas of Texas, as well as churches as far away as the cities of Atlanta and Miami and in countries such as Israel.

The \$18 million Houston structure consists of the temple, classrooms and offices, and a pastor's house, making it the largest *La Luz del Mundo* church in the United States. A white metal fence, trimmed in gold, surrounds the facility and remains locked when the church is not in use. Inside the compound is a sitting area encircled by fourteen free standing columns—one each for the original Twelve Apostles that followed Christ and two that honor Aaron and Samuel Joaquín.⁵ The golden dome rests atop the temple, adorned with the unique symbol of the church, the staff of Aaron. This symbol stands not only as recognition of God's miraculous power but also in honor of the denomination's founder.

Both the pastor's house and the temple itself seem more apt to be found in Greece or Rome, with magnificent stone pillars reminiscent of the Parthenon. The front of the building is decorated with individual stone work scenes from the Bible and three panes of stained glass. As opulent as the outside of the church appears, the sanctuary, which can hold 4,500 congregants, is even more extravagant, boasting marble floors, glass chandeliers, and wood paneling. The building's architecture seems more decadent than one would expect of a congregation that comes from a primarily working class background.

Latin Americans, many of whom have migrated to the

United States, make up most of the congregation. Migration plays an important role in the growth of the church with over half the congregation consisting of members who have immigrated from Mexico, Honduras, and El Salvador. A large portion of the *La Luz del Mundo* members formerly belonged to the church in their native country and, upon entering the United States, found a sense of community within the local church. The church actively aids new immigrants in assimilating into their new home, providing food, lodging, and help in finding jobs. This idea of community transcends race and nationality and reflects the nature of the denomination.

Though the hierarchy established in Guadalajara primarily leads the different member churches across the world, each individual church has a measure of autonomy. Each congregation acts as an independent body, which has its own ministers and missions. The church as a whole stresses community service within its congregations. *La Luz del Mundo* temples work hard to feed and clothe the less fortunate of their members, encourage youth to gain as much education as possible, and provide needed assistance in the assimilation process. Also, the church promotes lifelong marriages and provides counseling to couples.

Outside of work environments, many members only associate with other congregants, both in the United States and their home countries. This fosters an environment of a close knit community. To add to this idea, *La Luz del Mundo* directly and indirectly promotes endogamy, the practice of marrying within one's own community.⁶ As a result, a large portion of congregants will only consider marriage within the denominational membership, including individuals from other churches in the *La Luz del Mundo* network. Because of the transnational nature of the organization, members from across the globe often stay in contact with others from churches half a world away. These communications across borders combined with a shared religious ancestry have bred a strong denominational identity. Though never explicitly denying nationality, many members of *La Luz del Mundo* often identify more readily with other members of



The Pastor's house, located on the south side of the compound, mimics the architecture of the main temple. The building acts as the residence for the head minister of the central Houston congregation.

Photo by Timothy Wyatt.

the church rather than others of a shared national origin.

The role of the founding church in Guadalajara strengthens the worldwide network. Every August, it encourages congregants from around the world to make the pilgrimage to the *Hermosa Provincia* to take part in the *Santa Cena*, or Holy Supper, celebrations. The week-long celebration, ending on August 14 (the Prophet Aaron's birthday), marks the beginning of the church's ritual calendar. An estimated 300,000 members from across the globe make the trek annually and spend the week in religious devotion and prayer with their fellow congregants. Members of the church in Guadalajara open their homes to the visiting pilgrims, extending the sense of community. At the *Santa Cena*, members of *La Luz del Mundo* fully immerse themselves in the teachings of the church.⁷

As in other Pentecostal denominations, *La Luz del Mundo* has strict codes of conduct for its adherents. Services are separated by gender, with women sitting on the left and men on the right side of the temple; both the congregation and choir remain segregated. Women wear traditional head coverings while in the church. In the tradition of Pentecostalism, women do not cut their hair or wear makeup or jewelry and are instructed to wear long, full skirts. By contrast, men of the faith do not have a dress code, with the exception of a ban on long hair.⁸ Women congregants also carry a lower status in the church compared to their male counterparts. Female adherents cannot be ordained into the priesthood, but they can be *obreras*, a form of missionary or evangelizer, who occupy the lowest rung of the church hierarchy. Yet women do take an active part in the church activities. Women play an instrumental role in the organization, administration, and coordination of events that take place in the community. Also, since the early stages of *La*

Luz del Mundo, women have led exclusively female prayer services.⁹

The central Houston church offers daily worship services at 5:00 and 9:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. The church encourages congregants to attend daily, with estimates of up to sixty percent of the members present on a daily basis.¹⁰ The services lack any instruments, as believers see them as an abomination to God. However, *La Luz del Mundo* has a choir that performs traditional hymns as well as unique songs developed by members. The denomination has a long history of its own distinct hymnology. Though Samuel Joaquín ordained the minister of the central Houston church, lay ministers who later received ordination started most of the congregations.

The *Iglesia de la Luz del Mundo*, just as any religious body, plays different roles in the lives of its members. It not only provides religious instruction to its adherents, but also provides its primarily minority-based congregants with a sense of community. The Central Houston church stands as a place of worship, education, and social interaction. As one of the fastest growing denominations in the world, it is likely that the church off Highway 59 is only the first of many *La Luz del Mundo* temples to be established in Houston. For example, the Magnolia congregation, an off shoot of the central Houston church, now resides in a converted movie theater to accommodate its growth. It is likely that the smaller congregations located around Houston will follow this same trend as the denomination's membership continues to expand.

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