

# WRESTLING THE DEVIL

## Conversion and Exit from Central American Gangs

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*Abstract: A crisis of urban violence has emerged in northern Central America during the past two decades. Although youth gangs are responsible for only a portion of this violence, punitive approaches to dealing with gang violence have sharpened public hostility toward gang members and created a context conducive to the practice of "social cleansing" aimed at reducing gang violence by eliminating gang-affiliated youth through extrajudicial executions. Against this backdrop of public anger and resentment aimed at gang youth, a sizeable number of Evangelical-Pentecostal pastors and lay workers have developed ministries aimed at rescuing gang members and restoring them to society, often making considerable sacrifices and taking personal risks in the process. After describing the difficulties and risks associated with leaving the gang, this article takes a sociological approach to gang member conversions to discover the resources that Evangelical-Pentecostal congregations and gang ministries offer to former gang members facing the crisis of spoiled identity. I draw on semistructured interviews conducted in 2007 and 2008 with former gang members and gang ministry coordinators in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, and a handful of follow-up interviews conducted in 2013.*

Oswaldo was a thin, curly-haired, twenty-five-year-old father and ex-gang member living on the outskirts of the northern coastal town of La Ceiba, Honduras, when I interviewed him in 2007.<sup>1</sup> At that time he had been out of the gang for just over four years after thirteen years in the gang, having joined when he was just eight years old. Oswaldo described how, during the early 2000s, when President Ricardo Maduro promoted a series of antigang measures, he had fled to the nearby mountains to escape a wave of social cleansing by off-duty police officers and other individuals intent on solving the gang problem by means of extrajudicial killing of gang youth. Later, he had decided that he no longer wished to be a part of the gangs or to participate in gang violence, but he found himself the target of several attempts on his life, this time by leaders from his own gang seeking to eliminate a deserter. Facing a precarious future with few alternatives, Oswaldo plunged into depression and substance abuse. He said:

I was full of pain, when all of a sudden a friend appeared who was going through a process with *Hermana Luz* [a Pentecostal woman who had opened a halfway house for ex-gang members] and he said, 'Oswaldo, do you want to remake your life? Do you want to give your life to Christ?' And I just looked at him and I said 'Yes.' I wanted to remake my life and give it to Christ. But for me to give over my life to Christ, I had to wrestle with the devil himself.<sup>2</sup>

1. Names of gang members have been changed for reasons of safety and anonymity.

2. All quotations are translated from Spanish to English by the author.

Osvaldo's decision to escape the gang and "remake" his life by means of Evangelical-Pentecostal conversion and participation in a religious gang ministry is not unique in Central America, where both the rules of gang membership and the stigma attached to having belonged to the gang make leaving the gang and building a stable life afterward exceedingly difficult and even treacherous. This article uses the tools of sociology to examine religious conversion among former members of the transnational gangs of Central America. Using qualitative data from sixty-three interviews with former gang members, I explore the unique set of resources provided by small, neighborhood-based Evangelical-Pentecostal churches and church ministries for gang members and ex-gang members seeking to overhaul a deeply stigmatized identity. Examining the characteristics of these neighborhood-based churches and church ministries reveals the extent to which Evangelical-Pentecostal Christianity has become a key site for the reconstruction of identity and for the experience of community and camaraderie, especially for young males. In addition to providing insights into the role of Evangelical-Pentecostal Christianity in Central America, my research sheds light on the acute personal crises faced by gang youth desiring a transition to a stable nonviolent lifestyle.

#### GANGS AND GANG LIFE IN CENTRAL AMERICA

In recent decades, Central America has earned a reputation as the hemisphere's most violent region. In the 1980s, violent armed conflicts rocked much of the region, but since the 1990s, criminal violence has replaced the political violence of an earlier era (Restrepo and Tobón García 2011). The countries of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador in particular have posted some of the highest homicide rates in the world (UNODC 2013). A great deal of this violence emanates from drug trafficking and organized criminal groups working within each country to manage auto theft, kidnapping, and contraband, and these groups often maintain ties to retired military and intelligence officials (Arnson and Olson 2011; Bosworth 2010; Torres-Rivas 2010). But a significant share of the violence is produced by youth street gangs like the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and the Mara Dieciocho (M-18). Members of these groups, which are often referred to as transnational gangs due to their cross-border ties and origins among immigrant youth in East Los Angeles, participate in violent crime and homicide at alarming levels. For example, a study of more than a thousand San Salvadoran gang youth in 2001 found that one in five active gang members reported having participated in a homicide (Santacruz Giralte and Concha-Eastman 2001). Furthermore, gang youth are widely perceived to be the single most important contributors to violence and insecurity in Central American cities. Due to the exceedingly low arrest and conviction rates for homicides in the region, authorities have great freedom when attributing violent crime, and the absence of data has led to a situation in which representatives of the National Police in Guatemala and El Salvador are able to blame the transnational gangs for 60 percent of the homicides in Guatemala and El Salvador (Bruneau 2005; Kraul, Lopez and Connell 2005; Ranum 2007). Accusations such as these help to explain the widespread fear and animosity surrounding the

gangs. By framing the very real crisis of violent crime as a problem of reckless and belligerent youth, and by fashioning a political response with a cogent title such as Plan Mano Dura or Plan Escoba, Central American politicians have been able to scapegoat the gangs and direct attention away from the more complex social and political sources of violence (Aguilar 2013; Holland 2013; Levenson 2013).

Such widespread and continuing public animosity toward gang members—one poll in Guatemala reported that 60 percent of Guatemalans believed that the “social cleansing” of gang members was an acceptable means of dealing with gang violence (Aguilar 2007)—has left Central American gang youth in an increasingly vulnerable situation. Government crackdowns due to a series of antigang policies have made belonging to a gang, and the mere possession of a tattoo, an offense meriting arrest or violent questioning by police. While much of the criminal gang activity, including the extortion of buses and small businesses, is directed from the relative safety of a prison cell, gang members on the outside must dodge violence from opposing gang members, from off-duty police officers, and from hit men hired by desperate neighbors and business owners (Casa Alianza 2009; Payne 1999; PDH 2006). Finally, active gang members are sometimes eliminated by members of their own gang cell due to rivalries or for “disciplinary” reasons.

Within this context of constant fear and danger, some Central American gang youth begin exploring possibilities for leaving the gang that involve a transition to a safer, more stable lifestyle. But leaving the gang is itself a difficult and treacherous matter, especially as the gangs have responded to political scapegoating by tightening the reins on their members. Some Central American churches, especially among the small Evangelical-Pentecostal congregations located in the marginal neighborhoods where gangs operate, have spearheaded the recruitment of gang members and gang deserters. These churches have excelled at providing difficult-to-come-by cultural and social resources for rebuilding what Erving Goffman (1963) would call a “spoiled identity”—that is, a distinguishing characteristic, behavior, or reputation that socially discredits the person to whom it is attached. I argue that Evangelical-Pentecostal congregations engaging in gang ministry offer at least three resources for leaving the gang and renovating an identity: a discourse of individual transformation, powerful emotional rituals, and social networks with non-gang members. My argument is based on research conducted on-site in 2007 and 2008. During this time I interviewed sixty-three former members of gangs in Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. Four of the ex-gang youth were women and the rest were men.<sup>3</sup> I also interviewed professionals such as sociologists, psychologists, and social workers whose daily work involves the reintegration of former gang members into the larger society at youth centers and residential rehabilitation centers as well as in Catholic and Evangelical-Pentecostal gang ministry programs. All of the ex-gang members professed having made a formal break with the gang, although some of the youth had fled the area or the country while others had communicated their decision directly to

3. Since the rules for gang exit are applied differently for female gang members, who are typically allowed to leave the gang for the birth of a child if they so desire, I am choosing to focus attention in this article on the issues faced by male gang members seeking to leave.

a gang leader. Not all of the former gang members professed religious conversion or had joined a church, but over half were active in an Evangelical-Pentecostal congregation at the time of the interview, and none reported being involved in such a church during their active phase in the gang.<sup>4</sup> A second phase of research began in 2013 involving follow-up interviews with the same ex-gang members interviewed earlier. Some reference will be made to these new interviews, but except where noted, the data for this article is drawn from interviews conducted in 2007 and 2008.

#### THE MORGUE RULE AND THE EVANGELICAL EXEMPTION

Perhaps the most important concern of a Central American gang member wishing to leave the gang is the fear that a leader might order his death for having deserted the gang. Much like a court-martial during an especially intense war, many Central American gang cell leaders upped the ante for leaving the gang in the early 2000s by ordering the death of deserters. Indeed, the phrase *hasta la morgue* was recited with great frequency among those interviewed for this study. Although the phrase is reportedly used as a kind of rallying cry of solidarity among friendly gang members, it can also be recalled by a gang leader as a warning to a member of his crew who might be thinking of leaving. Uriel, a former M-18 member from the neighborhood of El Milagro in Guatemala City, reported:

For example in the *clica* [cell] I was in, with the guys I ran with, you joined *hasta la morgue*. You're a part of this gang *hasta la morgue*, until you die. You can't leave. But I left a fugitive, a fugitive because they look for you all over, wherever they can. And if someone sees you in another neighborhood from a different cell in the same gang, they [can also] kill you because you've run. You have problems with them.

Uriel himself reported having repeated "¡Hasta la morgue!" to his friends as a testament to his own courage in earlier moments of gang life. But eventually, after having been the victim of shootings on two different occasions during attacks by the MS-13, he had changed his mind and decided to flee the gang. Antonio, also a former member of the M-18 from a different area of Guatemala City, explained the rise of the morgue rule in the following way:

When I was a member of the gang there was a lot of envy around and now there's even more of it. Nowadays the gang members don't just have as rivals the enemy gangs but also each other. Because the gang has adopted a saying that says you shouldn't trust anyone, not even yourself. "*Trust no one*" [Antonio delivered this phrase in heavily accented English]. They say you shouldn't trust anyone. . . . So I didn't ask permission from anyone to leave. I knew they wouldn't give it to me anyway. Things changed. They used to say to someone who wanted permission to leave, "Okay if you want to, fine. You can have your squares." "Squares" meant that you could be *tranquilo*. But you can't smoke, drink, steal or this or that. And maybe you had a bunch of tattoos. Who's going to give you a job? Where are they go-

4. Some of the themes in this article are treated in my book *Homies and Hermanos: God and Gangs in Central America* (2012). However, the discussion of the discourse of transformation as well as the role of the habitus and how it is renovated through participation in an Evangelical-Pentecostal church are new to this article, as are all of the extended quotations used here.

ing to give you a job? Nowhere. And this is something the gang didn't anticipate. So, many *locos* went back to robbing just to feed their families because they couldn't find work. That's what happened to me.

Gang members who left with permission—often called *calmados* in the rhetoric of the gang—found themselves competing with the gang for extortion and drug sales, thus hastening their own demise by inviting the punishment of the gang. Antonio eventually found legal work in a shoe shine and repair shop begun as a project funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). But he was killed by a young male with a handgun two months after our interview. It was the third attempt on his life.

Although many, perhaps most, gang leaders eventually closed the door to the *calmado* method of exiting gang life, many gang leaders kept open another option—that of becoming an active Evangelical-Pentecostal Christian. Osvaldo, whose decision to convert is cited at the beginning of this article, reported that the leaders of his own gang, on two occasions, had sent emissaries to eliminate him.

They wanted to kill me because the rule in the gang is that one cannot leave one of these groups unless one gets out by becoming a Christian, holding on to the things of God, as it should be, sticking to the straight and narrow. And there were many of us who left the gang but kept on drinking and using drugs and robbing and so that's why the gang itself tries to kill you.

Neftalí, a Guatemalan youth who left a cell of the White Fence in the mid-2000s and joined a Pentecostal church, recalled an earlier time in the gang when another member from the same cell left the gang. He remembered that when someone in the group asked the gang leader what would be done about the deserter, the leader replied, "No. He became a Christian. Leave him alone."

When I pressed ex-gang members for reasons as to why the gang might allow for this "Evangelical exemption" to the morgue rule, I received a variety of answers that often included a reminder that the gang did not want "competition" from former gang members. The idea was that Evangelical converts would be far less likely to begin freelancing by selling drugs or extorting in the name of the gang. The gang leaders are well aware of the strict behavioral codes promoted by the neighborhood Evangelical-Pentecostal churches. Consuming alcohol or recreational drugs is strictly forbidden. A practicing *hermano* (brother in faith) can be expected to lead a more orderly lifestyle that is far less likely to be a threat to the gang. Other ex-gang members remembered being told by their cell leader, "One doesn't mess with God." In other words, gangs that deliberately execute a former member who has become an active Christian are "messing with God" and inviting divine retribution. Two ex-gang members—one in Guatemala and one in Honduras—recited the slogan "con el Colochó no se juega" when referring to the hands-off rule regarding Evangelical converts. This phrase can be translated "Don't play [or mess around] with Curly."<sup>5</sup>

Informants made reference to what I have called the "Evangelical exemption"

5. In Central America *el colochó* means "curly" or "curly-haired one," and in certain popular barrios (as well as the gang) it is understood to refer to Jesus.

to the morgue rule almost everywhere I conducted interviews. A few gang experts, especially in El Salvador, claimed that the gangs had been burned so often by Evangelical gang converts seeking cover in the church that the door to conversion had been closed. This may have been the case in some neighborhood cells. But other gang exit facilitators insisted that true converts were still given a pass. While it is difficult to know for sure which version of events holds true today, it is quite possible that fewer and fewer gang leaders are allowing exit by conversion. In Guatemala and Honduras especially, gang cells tend to operate with a great deal of local autonomy, and it is possible that even gang converts who carry out the required behavioral change—following the rules of exit by conversion and staying away from alcohol, drugs, and crime—are sometimes killed as deserters. Six of the original sixty-three ex-gang members interviewed for this study have been killed violently since the research began, and of these six youth, three were actively involved in an Evangelical-Pentecostal congregation at the time of their interview.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, at the time I entered the field, most informants, religious or not, reported that converts usually get a pass as long as they show evidence of real change. But if the Evangelical exemption is relatively straightforward, the task of reforming one's lifestyle from the ground up is far from easy. How do converted gang members navigate the other difficulties of life after the gang? Overcoming addictions left over from the *vida loca*, finding a job, and escaping the violence of social cleansing were just a few of the obstacles faced by the former gang members who spoke with me. In short, even when Evangelical conversion could buy the gang leaver some time, there were plenty of other matters to be dealt with, including that of demonstrating a change in lifestyle sufficiently severe as to convince the gang leader of the sincerity of the new believer. As Osvaldo put it, even after the decision is made to convert, one still has to "wrestle with the devil." Such "wrestling" as it turns out, involves a great deal of this-worldly activity. For as the lived religion perspective makes clear, religious practices are both embodied and emplaced. Becoming an Evangelical *hermano* (no less than identifying as a gang *homie*) typically involves the adoption of concrete practices involving what to ingest, what to put on, and where and with whom to spend one's free time. Below I discuss some of the tools and resources Evangelical-Pentecostal churches of the barrio provide for the social reintegration of former gang members.

#### EVANGELICAL-PENTECOSTAL RESOURCES FOR GANG EXIT

A variety of organizations, including government-sponsored organizations, international nongovernmental organizations and religious groups both Catholic and Protestant, have responded to gang violence with institutions and ministries aimed at reducing gang violence at the local level. Many of these organizations prefer to address what they believe to be the root causes of gang affiliation and

6. It is not possible to know for sure why these youth were killed, not least because homicides involving the death of a youth suspected by police of having been involved in a gang are rarely, if ever, investigated.

participation—poverty, weak schools, and unemployment. This article is not the place to evaluate those efforts, which are usually referred to as gang prevention programs. Nor will I address the recent and highly controversial truce efforts under way in El Salvador and Honduras. Although the participation of a few Catholic bishops has attracted considerable attention and merits careful analysis, such negotiations are beyond the scope of this article. Instead, I will undertake in the following section to explore some of the most important resources offered by the neighborhood-based Evangelical-Pentecostal churches and ministries, most of which aim their efforts at rescuing gang members from the gang via efforts that are overtly religious but implicitly social. The larger goal is to explain how ex-gang member converts put religion to work in improving their odds of survival.

### *Values and Discourse*

In addition to the relative advantages in safety offered by the gangs' respect for conversion, many ex-gang members were attracted to the Evangelical-Pentecostal discourse implying that "no one is beyond hope" of transformation. A key feature of Evangelical theology regards the possibility of salvation for all individuals, no matter how lost they are in sin (Míguez Bonino 1995). Converts seemed to grasp and cherish this insistence on the possibility of personal transformation for anyone. For example, it was not uncommon for active Evangelical-Pentecostal ex-gang members to recite scripture during the course of the interview, and one oft-repeated text was the phrase from the letter to the Corinthians stating that when a person becomes a Christian, he becomes a "new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things have become new" (2 Corinthians 5:17, King James Version). Such texts seemed to inspire hope in the minds of converts that a full transformation was not only possible but assured for the believer. An even more commonly cited scripture verse was 1 Corinthians 1:28, which, especially in its Spanish rendering, suggests that God has a particular affinity for "raising up" lowly and despised individuals: "Y lo vil y despreciado del mundo ha escogido Dios" (Versión Las Americas).

Although Evangelical theological doctrine and biblical texts play a role in creating a discourse of openness to personal change, the Pentecostal tradition of seeking and celebrating healing is also important. While it is a widely established fact that Central American Pentecostal churches celebrate the role of personal experience in the life of the believer and of the gathered community (Chesnut 2003; Garrard-Burnett 2000), it is also true that Pentecostals emphasize the importance of a particular form of experience—that of *healing* (Williams 1997). Several of the Pentecostal gang ministry coordinators interviewed for this project described their ministry in the language of healing, and most referred to their ministry as *restauración* (restoration). Thus, both the Evangelical insistence on the possibility of individual transformation and the Pentecostal inheritance emphasizing the personal experience of healing (especially with regard to stubborn issues of addiction) combine to create local communities of persons who preach for, sing about, believe in, and celebrate personal transformation. Indeed, these congregations actively sought out potential candidates for such transformation, recogniz-

ing that the presence of a fully reformed ex-gang member in their midst would help to bolster the faith of the membership.

The Evangelical-Pentecostal discourse of leaving behind the old creature in order to become something new is especially powerful for individuals whose past actions and affiliations have left them with a spoiled identity. Kimberly Theidon (2013) has reported on a similar phenomenon among former members of the guerrillas and paramilitary units in the newly demilitarized zones of Western Colombia. Theidon argues that although the international community as well as local Catholic institutions have conducted important work in demobilizing the machinery of war, considerable unfinished work remains in what she refers to as “social repair,” or the business of reintegrating former combatants into the fabric of communities in which they have often committed great harm. Noting the significant and very recent growth of the small Pentecostal churches in Urabá, where political violence in recent decades has taken a heavy toll on the entire region, Theidon reports that the Pentecostal discourse of forgiveness and “divine justice”—that is, the understanding that God alone has the responsibility to carry out justice or retribution—has enabled converted ex-combatants to reimagine the past and their own guilt in ways that make room for rebuilding relationships, in some cases in their former communities.

David Smilde has also written about the role of Evangelical-Pentecostal discourse in enabling projects of self-reform. Building on years of ethnographic work in Caracas, Venezuela, Smilde has developed the theory of “imaginative rationality” as a means of explaining how religious concepts can be a means by which individuals can “get things done” with culture. Smilde (2007, 52) argues that some Venezuelan men who struggle with interpersonal violence and substance abuse are able, through the adoption of concepts such as God, sin, and the devil, to “gain a cognitive fix on these [objects of experience] that facilitates action with respect to them.” Smilde’s theory of culture helps specify the mechanisms by which culture comes to have an impact on human action; space does not permit its full rendering here. Important for the purpose of this article is the notion that religious concepts can facilitate programs of action at the individual level by providing social actors with a means of gaining leverage over a chaotic lifestyle.

Finally, Edward Flores (2008) has conducted research among both Catholic and Pentecostal gang ministries in Los Angeles, where he found that religious discourse about masculinity and the “proper role” of a “real man” played an important role in the self-reform projects of ex-gang members involved in the Victory Outreach Pentecostal gang ministry. In the context of sermons and in small groups, ex-gang members learn to critique the masculinity of the gang and rebuild an alternative masculinity oriented toward faith and fatherhood. Consistently with my own research among Central American ex-gang members, Flores finds that the “reformed barrio masculinity” promoted within religious gang ministries is not free of gendered norms or patriarchy. In fact, the possibility of accessing and practicing male authority in the home and at church is probably one of the more attractive features of participating in Pentecostal gang “restoration.” As Flores (2013, 144) puts it, by submitting to the demands of gang rehabilitation ministers, “Chicano men used gang recovery to shed the costs of



*machista*-oriented gang life for the privileges of macho, patriarchal domesticity." In some cases, a powerful discursive tool used by Pentecostal pastors intending to lend masculine legitimacy to this exchange involves the recasting of the Christian life as a matter of victory by Christian "soldiers" battling "sin" (Brenneman 2012). In short, Evangelical-Pentecostal religious discourse attracts ex-gang members and provides them with conceptual tools for embarking on a transformation of identity. Among these is a compelling narrative template that contrasts the old self with a new self, as well as a belief in divine justice.

### *Religious Rituals and Emotion Regimes*

A further challenge facing ex-gang members seeking safety and a second chance involves reorienting their own disposition in such a way that their everyday behaviors and manner no longer project anger or instill fear in those around them. Gang members also worry that their demeanor, manners, vocabulary, and dress may give them away as gang members in public spaces. Ex-gang members referred to this obstacle—what might be called the risks of possessing a *marero* (gang member) disposition—in a variety of ways. Ernesto, a Honduran orphan who had joined and eventually left the M-18, told me that as he became more and more involved in the gang, his mode of thought was, in effect, reshaped by the group, or, as he put it, "Me formaron la mente diferente." When I asked him to explain what he meant with this phrase, he replied:

I used to be a little bit quiet. I would let everybody insult me. If other people tried to hit me, I would let them. Like that. And afterward, after I'd joined the gang, I started thinking twice. . . . If somebody insulted me, I would insult them. I wasn't going to let anyone tell me anything or treat me badly. If I needed to kill them, I would do that too. I did everything my way.

Similarly, Ronaldo, a Honduran former member of the M-18, when asked what the most difficult aspect of leaving the gang was, responded:

The hardest of all this I think was attitude [*el carácter*]. Because when you're on the street you have an attitude. If someone touches you, you're always angry, or how can I say it, hyperactive, really angry. If they come and they tease you, they try to hit you, like guys are always doing on the street . . . you're always, it's always your attitude that's the hardest to change. But that's what we've been doing with God's help.

The American sociologist Elijah Anderson (1999), writing about inner-city Philadelphia, has described a similar phenomenon that he calls the "code of the street." Emphasizing that the code arises in contexts where marginalized groups are deprived of public safety, he describes the code of the street as a code of behavior or a "posture" that communicates to neighbors and pedestrians, friends and enemies, "If you mess with me, there will be consequences" (1999, 300). I have argued elsewhere that the gang code of behavior, which some Central American gang members refer to as *clecha*, is motivated by a desperate and anxious search for respect among youth whose ethnicity, economic status, neighborhood, and home life have left them with an experience of profound and chronic shame (Brenneman 2012). The point here is simply the fact that the gang disposition is

an identifier that must be unlearned both because it exposes gang members to a heightened risk of violence from enemy gangs and social cleansing, and because it presents a profound obstacle to building trust among family members, neighbors, and employers.

It is important to note that the gang disposition or posture is deeply embodied. It is not merely anger management that must be addressed, although learning to deal with instances of disrespect is certainly important, especially when starting a new job or venturing out of the community. Andrés, a Salvadoran and former member of the MS-13 who had not converted, told me that even though he had left the gang seven years earlier by escaping to Guatemala, he continued to struggle to unlearn the gang manner. After our interview had finished, the twenty-five-year-old surprised me by asking, "Do I stick out? [Se me nota?]" When I asked him to clarify, he responded, "I've tried to learn to get rid of the gang manner. I've tried to learn to speak better, to watch the way I talk, the way I walk." Unsure of how to respond, I lied to Andrés, assuring him that I didn't know what he was talking about. But I had indeed noticed the stares directed at our table from a few other patrons in the mostly empty middle-class restaurant. Seven years after Andrés had begun his exit from the gang and nearly three years after he had erased all tattoos from those places on his body that could not be hidden by normal street wear, the former Salvatrucha was still struggling to unlearn the disposition of a *loco*.

Dispositions, including a threatening tough-guy demeanor no less than one's manner of walking and talking, are acquired slowly, are embodied, and are extremely difficult to modify. We know from the work of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984) that dispositions, and what Bourdieu calls "habitus," are deeply influenced by social class, and this is certainly true in the case of Central American gang members, nearly all of whom grow up in marginal urban communities. But gangs go further to develop and cultivate a recognizable vocabulary, mode of dress, and demeanor aimed at identifying each other and instilling pride among members. Unlearning this disposition, and replacing it with one that is less threatening, is one of the most difficult and most important aspects of staying safe and building relationships of trust with non-gang members. Evangelical-Pentecostal churches provide one of the most promising environments available for doing just that precisely because their shared practice of religion draws on embodied ways of speaking, dressing, and relating to each other. The practice of Evangelical-Pentecostal Christianity thus involves the cultivation of habits and rituals that facilitate the navigation of an often precarious and even dangerous social context.

Worship is a key site where dispositions are formed and reformed (McGuire 1990; Warner 2007). At the center of the Evangelical-Pentecostal congregation is a deeply emotional, highly interactive social space. Actions that express trust and connection, such as holding hands and embracing, occur frequently, as do emotional displays such as weeping, which communicates vulnerability. Several ex-gang members described experiences of finding themselves emotionally overwhelmed after visiting a church service. For example, Ricardo, a leader of a Vato Loco gang cell in Honduras, remembered feeling goose bumps after stepping inside the Pentecostal church across the street from his home one evening: "[Then]

when I opened my eyes I was in front of the altar crying, asking forgiveness from God for all of the things I had done." Ricardo had been attracted to the church by the music he heard inside. Similarly, Emerson, a Guatemalan who left the M-18 in 2006, remembered finding himself trembling and sobbing in the presence of several Pentecostal women who had visited his home and asked to pray for him. In both cases, the experience of weeping in the presence of others served as an important turning point in the self-narratives of the youth and an emotional clue that an important transformation was already under way. Just as important, however, was the fact that these experiences proved satisfying enough to bring gang members like Ricardo and Emerson back again and again.

One way to conceptualize Evangelical-Pentecostal congregations is as emotion regimes that are particularly effective at building emotion and harnessing it toward projects of personal transformation, including, in some cases, a significant overhaul of the habitus. Although Bourdieu himself argued that an individual's habitus is class-based and fixed by adulthood, recent research by sociologists of culture has demonstrated that cultural institutions such as churches (Vaisey 2008) and mosques (Winchester 2008) can play a role in forming and re-forming the habitus. Thus, while the content of Evangelical-Pentecostal discourse is certainly important to the project of identity overhaul, the intensity of emotion experienced in worship can be crucial for reshaping gang demeanor or embodied lines of action that, unchanged, present a risk and a barrier to social reintegration. In effect, Evangelical-Pentecostal worship experiences provide a set of deeply embodied and emotion-laden interactive rituals that cultivate a habitus characterized by interconnection and vulnerability. One argument for why Pentecostal worship services provide such intensive emotional power comes from comparing the typical Evangelical-Pentecostal worship service with the components of a successful ritual described by Randall Collins (2004) in his theory of interaction rituals. Collins argues that the most intensive interactive rituals contain a high degree of bodily copresence, barriers to outsiders, mutual focus of attention, and shared mood. When most or all of these components are present to a high degree, an interactive ritual becomes a powerful lever for uniting a group and energizing members around a set of symbols and values that marks and identifies them.

Evangelical-Pentecostal worship services score high on Collins's list of ritual components. The typical Evangelical-Pentecostal church of the *barrio*, that is, the kind of church that I found was most likely to be engaged in gang ministry, is generally small and unimpressive on the outside and is effective at bringing a group of persons into close proximity and temporarily isolating them from outsiders through both physical walls and the aural barrier created by extremely loud amplification within a small, usually spare space. The loud music and well-amplified sermon also serve to unite the attention of the congregation and impart a shared mood. All of these characteristics make Pentecostal worship rituals particularly effective at arresting the attention and charging up the emotions of those who participate. It should come as no surprise that regular participation in such a ritual space can have the impact of engendering a shift in the habitus of a young gang member who would like to change his disposition but doesn't know how to pull off such a difficult feat. And indeed, I observed many ex-gang member

converts whose dress, demeanor, posture, and vocabulary made it difficult for me to imagine their former life as a homie.

### *Social Networks*

A final resource offered by Evangelical-Pentecostal churches engaging in formal or informal gang ministry is that of abundant and dense social networks of support. As implied above, a crucial obstacle to reintegration involves building ties to individuals ready to trust the ex-gang member in spite of his past crimes and connections to a violent group. Many gang members have burned bridges with the very few relatives who might otherwise have been a source of social or economic support. Most Central American employers are deeply reluctant to hire ex-gang members for reasons going beyond their typically minimal formal education. Though I was unable to verify them, I heard multiple stories of professed ex-gang members who, after several months of working in a small business, abused the position in order to rob or extort a business owner. Such stories, apocryphal or true, create an environment that is especially challenging for ex-gang members in need of safe, supportive relationships and an income.

Many ex-gang members reported receiving help from pastors and church members eager to see them succeed and transform their behavior. A few ex-gang members reported that they were only able to obtain a job after a pastor provided them with a written recommendation. One former White Fence member even reported that the congregation he had joined following his conversion provided him with financial help that made it possible to transition away from extorting local businesses in order to provide income for formula and diapers for his newborn son. Other ex-gang members stressed the importance of the protection found among the Evangelical-Pentecostal hermanos. Otoniel, a Salvadoran ex-member of the M-18, reported escaping to the home of a cousin who was a Pentecostal minister, where he was provided with safe hiding and a job. Although his immediate family was devoutly Catholic, his decision to seek out his cousin and join an Evangelical-Pentecostal church reflected both the reputation of these churches and their openness to providing support for an ex-gang member. One congregation in a large town to the south of Guatemala City even opened a safe home for ex-gang members in an isolated rural setting. Similarly, Hermana Luz, the Pentecostal homemaker who provided refuge to Osvaldo, offered refuge to more than a dozen other ex-gang members during a three-year period.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that although the social networks provided by Evangelical-Pentecostal congregations were crucial for acquiring a job and staying safe, such networks cannot guarantee safety or job stability. Already during the first round of interviews in 2007 and 2008, some ex-gang members, including some who had converted, were having difficulty finding or keeping a steady, legal job. Recent follow-up interviews confirm such difficulties. Several ex-gang members reported relying on a working spouse or a family member to pay for food or provide shelter. Others have been killed. Pancho, a Honduran former MS-13 member who became an Evangelical-Pentecostal convert during a stint at a rehabilitation center, was later arrested for an earlier crime and spent several years

in prison after our initial interview in 2007. He was killed shortly after leaving prison. Beto, a Honduran who had informed me that his own gang leader had told him, "Don't mess with Curly or the gang," was killed in June 2013, seven years after leaving the gang. Beto's pastor, who had been violently interrogated by Honduran police just two months prior to the killing, reported that Beto's death came at the hands of enemy gang members.

Evangelical-Pentecostal gang ministries come in a variety of organizational shapes and sizes, but most have meager financial resources and few if any paid staff, relying instead on motivated church members to provide occasional access to vocational training in trades such as bricklaying or baking. Involvement in such training programs (*capacitación*), even when informal, is at least as useful as a means of soaking up the spare time of the ex-gang members as it is in generating income or laying the groundwork for future employment. In Guatemala, a handful of ministries (including those with Catholic and with Evangelical-Pentecostal ties) received funding from a USAID grant during the 2000s for outreach to ex-gang members as well as prevention for at-risk youth. But the funding had dried up by the end of the decade. Most Evangelical-Pentecostal ministries are tied directly to a local church and rely on the skills and charisma of a minister, although I encountered a few ministries, such as the "home ministry" promoted by *Hermana Luz*, that had no formal ties to a congregation and no direct involvement from a minister. In short, it is difficult to generalize about the organizational nature of Evangelical-Pentecostal gang ministries beyond the fact that nearly all such entities make considerable use of the voluntarism and commitment of non-professional church members and leaders.

#### CRITIQUES OF GANG EXIT MINISTRY

Examining the resources offered by Central American Evangelical-Pentecostal churches to gang members seeking to leave the gang provides a window on the nature of Central America's fast-growing Protestant religion while also affording a clearer picture of the challenges faced by gang youth desirous of a transition to a safer adulthood. The purpose of this article is not to argue that Evangelical-Pentecostal religion provides a definitive solution for Central America's very real gang violence problem. As long as Central America continues to be a deeply stratified society that marginalizes and economically isolates whole sectors of its large and youthful population, gangs will continue to provide an attractive social space for children and youth experiencing profound alienation and chronic shame. Furthermore, at the macro level, it is possible that Evangelical-Pentecostal discourse, by emphasizing the importance of individual transformation rather than systemic or political change, serves as an obstacle to the kind of social-structural reform that could diminish the attraction of the gangs in the first place. Such is the argument of anthropologists like Adrienne Pine and Kevin O'Neill.

Pine (2008) draws on Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence to argue that an ideology of individual achievement, such as the one promoted by many Honduran Pentecostals, makes many poor Hondurans complicit in their own subjugation. By policing themselves and their behavior, Evangelical-Pentecostals hope to

improve their odds of individual success, but in the process, they become impervious to efforts of social-movement mobilization that could ultimately transform Honduran society, making it less violent and more equitable. In a similar vein, O'Neill (2011) examines Guatemalan Pentecostal gang ministries and notes that some of these ministries have been recipients of USAID dollars. In an analysis of a short-lived reality television series intended to help ex-gang members find gainful employment, O'Neill (2011, 334) concludes that "a Christian commitment to self-transformation (to once being lost but now being found) has become entangled with the geopolitics of American security, especially when it comes to efforts at gang abatement." In this reading, USAID's funding for gang programs, some of which are connected to Evangelical-Pentecostal churches, is part of a broader international relations strategy aimed at employing "soft power" to recast fundamental structural problems of corruption and insecurity as problems of delinquent youth in need of moral reform.

The perspectives of O'Neill and Pine offer a provocative critique of the liabilities of the discourse of self-reform. And yet both seem beholden to the view that gang violence must be interpreted either as a matter of personal crisis or a matter of social-structural crisis—but not both. They advance a view not unlike some of the earliest critics of Latin American Pentecostalism, such as Christian Lalive D'Épinay (1968), who worried that the emphasis of Pentecostalism on personal conversion represented an escape from the difficult but necessary work of social critique and movement activism. Daniel Levine (1997, 34) criticized this perspective in a review essay in which he observed the following:

Because Pentecostal churches, leaders and converts give so much stress to personal conversion and changing the inner man as opposed to collective organization and structural change, it is easy to take their position as "non-political." But such a conclusion rests on a narrow and excessively conventional view of politics. Politics involves more than states, regimes, or elections. Politics is also a matter of power and legitimacy, and of the way images of self and community are translated into capacities and dispositions to action.

If Levine is correct, social change is not a zero-sum game in which one chooses either to be a convert or to promote social justice. Religion and politics, as argued by the editors in the introduction to this issue, are not separate spheres of action, nor is the decision to join an Evangelical-Pentecostal congregation an a priori decision to confine one's attentions to the self or the home. Ex-gang members typically do not step out of the broader adult community when they convert. Indeed, they step into it, often for the first time ever, as valued, participating adults. Some ex-gang member converts even join nonreligious civic organizations. For example, both converted and nonreligious ex-gang members make up the membership of the Honduran ex-gang member society called *Generación X*, a youth organization that tries to reduce hostility against gang youth and seeks opportunities for them. In fact, when I visited in 2007, the president of the group was a converted Pentecostal.

It is of course possible to argue that the impact on national discourse of gang restoration ministries could be to elevate the language of self-reform above that of systemic change and the critique of the neoliberal state. Empirical data are not

available to accept or reject a claim so vast and general in its scope. But it is at least worth noting that such arguments seem unappreciative of the fact that the dominant discourse surrounding “what to do about gang violence” in Central America tends toward solutions resting on *mano dura* or strong-arm policies and even justifications for social cleansing. In this context, even the insistence that gang members can and should have the opportunity to reenter society nonviolently may be considered a form of social justice advocacy.

#### CONCLUSION

Leaving the Central American gang is an extremely difficult and dangerous process. Many youth who attempt to do so find themselves strapped with debilitating addictions and dangerous enemies, even while they are bereft of trusting relationships. The fact that many, though probably not all, gang cell leaders make an exception to the morgue rule for Evangelical converts is just one of several reasons some gang youth choose to leave by way of the church. Gang youth who choose to convert and join an Evangelical-Pentecostal church can also find among the church brothers a number of resources not available to those who simply leave the gang. Among these are the discourse of self-transformation, emotional rituals useful for reforming the gang disposition, and social networks for staying safe and finding a job.

Some critics of Evangelical-Pentecostal gang ministry argue that the conversion ideal itself impedes social change. After all, if we start from the understanding that religion has its primary or only impact on the (individual) mind, it is tempting to arrive at the conclusion that Evangelical theology renders its adherents powerless to oppose neoliberal politics by teaching them to work on the reformation of the self rather than the critique of social structures. But a more careful examination of the way lived Evangelical religion creates and cultivates communities of embodied selves allows us to recognize the significant contribution of these congregations to the incorporation of marginal youth. By carving out safe spaces for incorporation into the adult community and by offering embodied, emotion-laden practices useful in overhauling a disposition, these congregations play an important role in allowing for the “social repair” (Theidon 2013) of communities torn apart by violence from within. Viewed from this angle, “wrestling the devil” involves more than a converted ex-gang member’s struggle with addiction and can bear fruit that is at once personal and political. It might also aptly describe a determined and deeply religious attempt by Evangelical members of a community to come to terms with their own and their community’s violence.

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