

## CHAPTER 5

# The Ethnic Church

The houses of worship most frequented by Latinos have distinctly ethnic characteristics. A majority of those in the congregation are Hispanic; some Latinos serve as clergy; and liturgies are available in Spanish. The growth of the Hispanic population is leading to the emergence of Latino-oriented churches in all the major religious traditions across the country.

Foreign-born Latinos are most likely to attend Hispanic-oriented churches and to comprise the largest share of Latinos who worship at such churches. However, large shares of native-born Latinos as well as those who speak little or no Spanish also report attending churches with ethnic characteristics. Similarly, while Latinos who live in areas densely populated by Latinos are most likely to report attending Hispanic-oriented churches, smaller but still substantial shares of Latinos who live in areas where Hispanics are a sparse presence also say they attend ethnic churches.

Latino-oriented churches, then, are not exclusively a product of either immigration or of residential settlement patterns.

The formation of Hispanic-oriented churches may reflect an enduring characteristic of American religiosity. On Sunday mornings, the devout tend to seek out the company of people they consider similar to themselves. For example, a century ago European immigrants congregated in houses of worship with others of the same nationalities and language preferences. Over time this form of ethnic concentration diminished because of assimilation as well as geographic and economic mobility. Meanwhile, high degrees of segmentation by race and class have proved persistent. This study does not attempt to project the trajectory that Hispanics will follow, but it does demonstrate conclusively that ethnic churches are a widespread and defining attribute of Latino religious practice today.

This study defines an ethnic church as having three characteristics: at least some of the clergy are Latino, services are available in Spanish and most of the congregants are Hispanic. Among churchgoing Latinos, two-thirds attend a church with these characteristics. The ethnic church is strongest among Catholics, but it is also a prominent feature among Hispanic evangelicals and those in other Christian traditions.

As with the renewalist beliefs and behaviors described in Chapter 3, the extent to which Latinos worship at Hispanic-oriented churches is a clear indication that the Hispanic population is creating its own distinct forms of religious practice as well as its own religious institutions. By clustering in ethnic churches, the growing Latino population is concentrating its impact on the nation's religious landscape.

## Defining an Ethnic Church

This report used a three-step process to determine the prevalence of ethnically oriented worship among Latinos.

In the first step, the analysis excluded respondents who said they never attended any kind of religious services other than weddings or funerals. That placed 90% of all Latinos in the category of churchgoers. All of the tabulations in this chapter refer to that very large segment of the Hispanic population.<sup>†</sup>

In the second step, churchgoers were asked the following three questions about the place of worship they attend most often:<sup>‡</sup>

- 1) Thinking about the (synagogue/mosque/church) you attend most often, are there any (Hispanic/Latino) (priests/rabbis/imams/pastors) there, or not?
- 2) If you wanted to attend a (Mass/worship service) in Spanish, is one available at the (synagogue/mosque/church) you attend most often?
- 3) Typically, when you attend (Mass/worship service), would you say that most of the other people ... are (Hispanic/Latino), are some of them (Hispanic/Latino), or are only a few of them (Hispanic/Latino)?

In the third step, respondents were ranked according to how many of the three questions they answered positively. Respondents who answered affirmatively to all three questions were categorized as attending an ethnic church.

<sup>†</sup>Aside from weddings and funerals, how often do you attend religious services ... more than once a week, once a week, once or twice a month, a few times a year, seldom, or never? (Asked of all respondents, N=4,016)

<sup>‡</sup>Asked of Latinos who say they attend religious service; N=3,620 (weighted cases), Catholic = 2,524, Evangelical=580

## The ethnic character of Latino worship

Very large majorities of churchgoing Hispanics say that they attend houses of worship that have distinctly ethnic characteristics. Asked about the churches they attend most often, almost three-quarters (74%) say that most of the people in the congregation are fellow Latinos. Eight-in-ten (80%) say that there are Latino faith leaders at that church, and about nine-in-ten say services are available in Spanish.

Two-thirds (66%) of Hispanics who ever attend religious services (aside from weddings and funerals) say that the church they attend most often has all three of the characteristics that define the ethnic church. Another fifth (21%) respond positively on two of the three characteristics. These results show that a substantial majority of Latinos attend churches that are characterized by a distinctive Hispanic orientation.

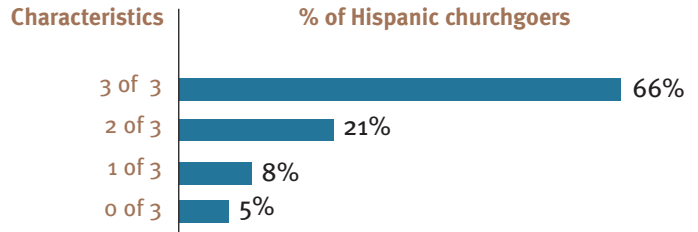
**Figure 5.1**  
**Three Characteristics of Ethnic Churches Reported by Latinos**

| Does the church you attend most often have... | Yes | No  |
|---|-----|-----|
| Hispanic clergy                               | 80% | 17% |
| Spanish-language services                     | 87  | 11  |
| Mostly Hispanic congregation                  | 74  | 25  |

Note: based on Hispanic churchgoers

**Figure 5.2**  
**Most Latinos Attend Churches with All Three Characteristics of an Ethnic Church:**

Does the church you attend most often have... Hispanic clergy, Spanish-language services, a mostly Hispanic congregation



The three measures assessed thus far in this section illuminate the characteristics of places of worship. To better understand the value Latinos place on these characteristics, the 650 respondents in the follow-up survey of Catholics were asked about their preferences on all three matters. The results show that the availability of services in Spanish was the most highly valued.

A majority of Latino Catholics (56%) say they prefer to attend Mass in Spanish, while about a third (36%) say it does not matter and fewer than one-in-ten (8%) say they prefer Mass in English. Preferences for the other characteristics are less strongly held. Asked whether it matters whether Mass is celebrated by a Latino priest, three times as many say it does not matter as say that it does matter (74% vs. 25%). The results were similarly lopsided (77% vs. 23%) in favor of respondents who say it does not matter whether most of the other congregants are Hispanics when they attend Mass.

**Figure 5.3**  
**Ethnic Worship Preferences among Latino Catholics**

| Would you prefer to...   | Among Hispanic Catholics |
|--|--------------------------|
| <b>Attend Mass in Spanish?</b>                                 |                          |
| Yes, prefer Spanish  | 56%                      |
| Doesn't matter   | 36                       |
| No, prefer English <sup>†</sup>                                | 8                        |
| <b>Attend Mass where there is a Latino priest?</b>             |                          |
| Yes, prefer Latino priest                                      | 25                       |
| Doesn't matter   | 74                       |
| No, prefer non-Latino priest <sup>†</sup>                      | 1                        |
| <b>Attend Mass where most of the other people are Latinos?</b> |                          |
| Yes, prefer where most others are Latino                       | 23                       |
| Doesn't matter   | 77                       |
| No, prefer most others be non-Latino <sup>†</sup>              | *                        |

<sup>†</sup>Note: Volunteered response

## The ethnic church by religious tradition

Latino-oriented churches are most prevalent among Catholics, but they are also widespread across all other religious traditions. Seven-in-ten Catholics (70%) and six-in-ten evangelicals (62%) say they attend churches with all three characteristics of an ethnic church. Even among mainline Protestants — denominations in which Latinos are a relatively small presence — nearly half (48%) of Latino churchgoers report attending a church with those ethnic characteristics.

Figure 5.4

Ethnic Church Characteristics of Latinos by Major Religious Traditions

Among Hispanic churchgoers who are...

| % whose church has...            | Catholic  | Evangelical | Mainline Protestant | Other Christian |
|----------------------------------|-----------|-------------|---------------------|-----------------|
| Hispanic clergy                  | 82%       | 82%         | 72%                 | 77%             |
| Spanish-language services        | 91        | 81          | 67                  | 86              |
| Mostly Hispanic congregation     | 79        | 66          | 53                  | 69              |
| <b>All three characteristics</b> | <b>70</b> | <b>62</b>   | <b>48</b>           | <b>61</b>       |

Latino Catholics who say they attend Mass at least once a week are just as likely to report that their churches have ethnic characteristics as those who attend less often. Among Latino evangelicals, however, frequency of church attendance is related to the extent to which they report worship in a Latino setting. Two-thirds (67%) of evangelicals who attend church services at least once a week describe their houses of worship as having all three characteristics of an ethnic church, compared with half (50%) of those who attend less often.

Figure 5.5

Ethnic Church Characteristics of Latinos by Religious Affiliation and Frequency of Attendance

Among Hispanic churchgoers who are...

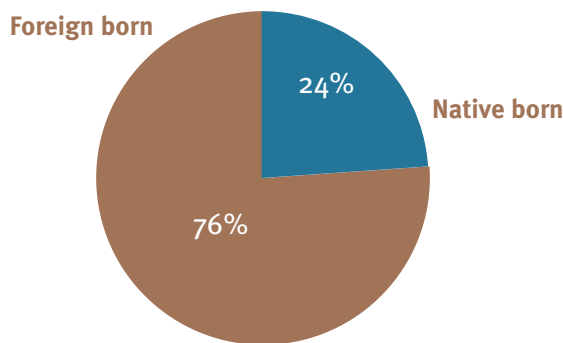
| % whose church has...            | Catholic attend weekly | Catholic attend less often | Evangelical attend weekly | Evangelical attend less often |
|----------------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Hispanic clergy                  | 83%                    | 82%                        | 86%                       | 72%                           |
| Spanish-language services        | 92                     | 91                         | 85                        | 71                            |
| Mostly Hispanic congregation     | 81                     | 78                         | 68                        | 61                            |
| <b>All three characteristics</b> | <b>70</b>              | <b>70</b>                  | <b>67</b>                 | <b>50</b>                     |

The follow-up survey of Latino Catholics further explored the breadth of the ethnic church phenomenon, particularly attendance at Spanish-language services. For example, 60% of Latino Catholics say the service was in Spanish every time they went to Mass over the past year, and 12% say it was in Spanish most of the times they went.

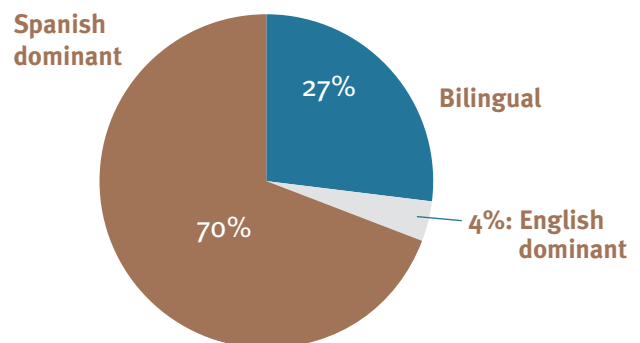
Not surprisingly, an overwhelming majority (76%) of Latino Catholics who always attend a Spanish-language Mass are immigrants. Nonetheless, almost a quarter (24%) of Latino Catholics who hear Mass in Spanish every time they go to church are native born. Looked at another way, 70% of Latinos who always hear Mass in Spanish are Spanish-dominant; that leaves three-in-ten Latinos in these congregations who are either bilingual or English-dominant.

Figure 5.6

Latino Catholics Who Always Attend Mass in Spanish: Nativity



Latino Catholics Who Always Attend Mass in Spanish: Primary Language



Underscoring the high value Latino Catholics attach to Mass being celebrated in Spanish, four-in-ten Latino Catholics (42%) say they would be willing to travel farther or attend Mass at a less convenient time to hear Spanish Masses. Study findings suggested, however, that such services are widely available closer to home, as 76% of Latino Catholics say they go to Mass at the church nearest their home.

## The demography of ethnic worship

Although Latino-oriented worship in the U.S. is most prominent among foreign-born Hispanics, it is by no means exclusively a product of immigration.

The foreign born, by an overwhelming majority (77%), report that the churches they attend most often have all three characteristics of Hispanic-oriented worship. Significant majorities of the native born report attending churches with each of the characteristics, and roughly half (48%) attend churches with all three. The widespread prevalence of Latino-oriented worship even extends to Hispanics of the 3rd generation and higher (the native born of native-born parents).

Figure 5.7  
Ethnic Church Characteristics of Latinos by Nativity and Generation

| % whose church has...            | Among Hispanics who are... |             |                |                |                 |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------|----------------|----------------|-----------------|
|                                  | Foreign born               | Native born | 1st Generation | 2nd Generation | 3rd+ Generation |
| Hispanic clergy                  | 85%                        | 73%         | 85%            | 75%            | 69%             |
| Spanish-language services        | 93                         | 77          | 93             | 80             | 72              |
| Mostly Hispanic congregation     | 84                         | 57          | 84             | 65             | 49              |
| <b>All three characteristics</b> | <b>77</b>                  | <b>48</b>   | <b>77</b>      | <b>53</b>      | <b>42</b>       |

Given the high incidence of attendance at ethnic churches among foreign-born Latinos, it is not surprising that Latinos whose primary language is Spanish register the highest levels of attendance at places of worship with a Hispanic orientation. Eight-in-ten (80%) Latinos whose primary language is Spanish attend churches with all three characteristics of an ethnic church.

But, as with nativity, language measures also show that this phenomenon is not confined to one segment of the Hispanic population. Two-thirds (64%) of bilingual Latinos and one-third (34%) of those whose primary language is English and who speak little or no Spanish also report attending churches with all three characteristics.

An analysis of the survey data shows that both language and nativity are powerful factors in determining which Hispanics attend Hispanic-oriented churches. The two factors are, of course, intertwined, and it is difficult to determine the individual importance of each. But the analysis shows that both are influential factors that act independently of each other.

Figure 5.8  
Ethnic Church Characteristics of Latinos by Primary Language

| % whose church has...            | Among Hispanic who are... |           |                  |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------|-----------|------------------|
|                                  | Spanish dominant          | Bilingual | English dominant |
| Hispanic clergy                  | 86%                       | 81%       | 65%              |
| Spanish-language services        | 94                        | 88        | 70               |
| Mostly Hispanic congregation     | 89                        | 72        | 42               |
| <b>All three characteristics</b> | <b>80</b>                 | <b>64</b> | <b>34</b>        |

It seems, then, that one aspect of the phenomenon is rooted in history: Immigrants tend to seek each other out, in the process giving a distinct ethnic characteristic to neighborhoods, businesses and houses of worship.

Another distinct and related aspect of Latino-oriented worship is more rooted in language: People seek out a place of worship because services are available in their native language.

### Beyond immigrants and Spanish speakers

The importance of language preference is seen when comparing Catholics and evangelicals. Larger shares of Latino Catholics than evangelicals are both foreign born and Spanish-speaking. Catholics also score higher than evangelicals on ethnic church measures. This pattern persists even when controlling for differences in nativity and language.

While the size of the ethnic church phenomenon may be, to a great extent, driven by immigration, its vitality across the whole of the Hispanic population is nevertheless compelling. For example, 61% of Latino Catholics who say they can carry on a conversation in English “pretty well” and 23% of those who rate their ability at “very well” say that they prefer to attend Mass in Spanish. These Latinos demonstrate an attachment to ethnically oriented worship that goes beyond linguistic necessity.

Put another way, with 70% of Latinos who are English dominant attending churches where Spanish services are available, the ethnic church phenomenon is plainly not limited to Spanish speakers. Moreover, the fact that over half of Latinos who are native born say they attend services where most of the congregants are also Latino also shows that this phenomenon cannot fully be accounted for by the immigrant experience. Indeed, a great many Latinos who speak only English, were born in the U.S. and trace their ancestry in the U.S. for several generations attend churches that are characterized by a Hispanic orientation.

The prevalence of Hispanic-oriented worship does not vary greatly among Latinos of different countries of origin. Puerto Ricans are the exception, reporting somewhat lower attendance at churches where Hispanics make up most of the congregation.

Figure 5.9

### Ethnic Church Characteristics of Latinos by Country of Origin

| % whose church has...            | Among Hispanics who are... |           |           |           |                  |                |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------------|----------------|
|                                  | Puerto Rican               | Mexican   | Cuban     | Dominican | Central American | South American |
| Hispanic clergy                  | 77%                        | 80%       | 86%       | 85%       | 86%              | 83%            |
| Spanish-language services        | 82                         | 87        | 90        | 90        | 92               | 91             |
| Mostly Hispanic congregation     | 59                         | 76        | 75        | 82        | 86               | 76             |
| <b>All three characteristics</b> | <b>56</b>                  | <b>67</b> | <b>74</b> | <b>74</b> | <b>79</b>        | <b>72</b>      |

## Ethnic neighborhoods and ethnic churches

Attendance at houses of worship with a Hispanic orientation is most prevalent among Latinos who live in neighborhoods where most residents are Latinos. But large numbers of Latinos who live in non-Hispanic neighborhoods also attend ethnic churches, so the phenomenon is not simply a product of residential settlement patterns. This is particularly important in light of recent demographic trends that have increasingly dispersed the Latino population so that a little less than half of Hispanic adults now live in neighborhoods where a majority of other residents are Latinos.<sup>1</sup>

The demographic characteristics of a religious congregation often reflect the characteristics of the population living in neighborhoods around the place of worship. That is true in the Catholic Church, which is primarily organized around parishes that have geographic boundaries. Indeed, in the follow-up survey, three-quarters (76%) of Latino Catholics say they attend Mass at the church nearest their residence. However, Latinos live in many different kinds of neighborhoods, and in all of them large shares of Latinos attend houses of worship with Hispanic characteristics.

### Stratifying Survey Samples by the Density of the Latino Population

The Hispanic samples in the surveys conducted for this study were stratified according to the density of the Latino population in a respondent's residential area, as determined by telephone area code and exchange (the first three digits of the telephone number). The samples were constructed to reflect the distribution of the Latino population across five strata of density:

- 75-100% Latino = 17% of respondents
- 50-74% Latino = 29%
- 30-49% Latino = 28%
- 15-29% Latino = 19%
- 0-14% Latino = 6%

### Ethnic church characteristics by population density

Latino churchgoers who live in the most densely Hispanic areas are the most likely to report attending a house of worship with Latino characteristics. For example, 88% of Latinos who live in areas where at least three-quarters of the residents are also Latino report that there is a Hispanic priest or pastor at the house of worship they attend most often and 92% say services in Spanish are available.

<sup>1</sup> See "Dispersal and Concentration: Patterns of Latino Residential Settlement," Pew Hispanic Center, 2004.

Hispanic-oriented churches are also quite prevalent at the other end of the spectrum. Among respondents who live in areas where fewer than 15% of the residents are Latinos, significant majorities say that there is a Hispanic faith leader (62%) and that Spanish services are available (77%). It is not surprising that people in the highest density areas would say that most of the other people at their houses of worship are Latinos, and 85% do. Yet most Latinos (57%) who live in the lowest density areas also respond in the same way.

Figure 5.10

Ethnic Church Characteristics of Latinos by Density

*Among Hispanics who live in areas that are...*

| <b>% whose church has...</b>     | <b>0-14% Latino</b> | <b>15-29% Latino</b> | <b>30-49% Latino</b> | <b>50-74% Latino</b> | <b>75-100% Latino</b> |
|----------------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|
| Hispanic clergy                  | 62%                 | 76%                  | 81%                  | 83%                  | 88%                   |
| Spanish-language services        | 77                  | 79                   | 90                   | 89                   | 92                    |
| Mostly Hispanic congregation     | 57                  | 65                   | 76                   | 76                   | 85                    |
| <b>All three characteristics</b> | <b>43</b>           | <b>56</b>            | <b>68</b>            | <b>68</b>            | <b>80</b>             |

Note: Percent Latino in respondent’s residential area derived from telephone area code and exchange

Examining respondents who say they attend churches with all three characteristics of Hispanic-oriented worship reveals the same pattern. Eight-in-ten residents (80%) in the highest density neighborhoods say the churches they attend most often have Latino clergy and Spanish-language services and are mostly Latino congregations. Among those who live in areas where fewer than 15% of residents are Latinos, a little over four-in-ten (43%) attend churches with all three characteristics.

All of this points to the same conclusion: Residential concentration is an important factor in producing the ethnic church phenomenon, but it is hardly the only one. While this phenomenon is most prevalent in areas where Latinos are a very large share of the population, a great many Latinos who live in communities where Hispanics are a sparser presence also report attending Hispanic-oriented churches. ■