

Leaving The Light: Digital Ecologies and the Transformation of Social Realities in La Luz Del Mundo

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Abstract

This thesis, *Leaving the Light: Digital Ecologies and the Transformation of Social Realities in La Luz del Mundo*, investigates the profound impact of digital media on the reconfiguration of religious authority and subject formation within the context of La Luz del Mundo (LLDM), a transnational Pentecostal megachurch. Following the June 2019 arrest of Naasón Joaquín García, the church's leader, on charges of child sexual abuse and human trafficking, a significant shift occurred. Dissent among its ex-members soared, giving rise to a distinct counter-public. This research focuses on the subreddit r/exLLDM, an online space established by former members that emerged as a critical platform for alternative discourse and community formation in response to the church's strict authoritative control.

Employing digital ethnography through virtual interviews and web-scraping techniques, this study analyzes how r/exLLDM facilitates the articulation of ex-LLDM identities and fosters a participatory culture that challenges the church's authoritative narratives. The findings reveal that digital ecologies not only provide a means for dissent but also enable new forms of subjectivity and intimacy among users. By examining Reddit's affordances, such as its algorithmic architecture and the participatory practices of its community, this thesis highlights the unique capabilities of digital platforms in creating spaces for marginalized voices and reconfiguring social realities.

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Introduction

“Growing up, Sandra Martinez’s world revolved around La Luz del Mundo church. She shoveled dirt as a teenager to help build a new church in Houston.

Years later, when the church asked congregants to help support their missionaries, Martinez said she and her husband donated the deed to their house and moved into an apartment.

After Martinez, now 37, left the church, she was able to preserve her relationship with her mother, a current member. But that changed in early June, when Naason Joaquin Garcia, the head of the church, known to followers as ‘the apostle’ of Jesus Christ, was arrested and charged with multiple counts of sexual abuse.

Mother and daughter exchanged a heated, long string of texts. They haven’t spoken since. Her mother, who would usually visit Martinez and her children every month, has not come by.

As the church aggressively backs Garcia, former parishioners are quietly wrestling with the news of his arrest. The more than a dozen former members The Times spoke to cited a variety of reasons for leaving a church that had once been so central to their lives, including potential backlash for dating outside of their faith and feeling unaccepted because they were gay. Some said they simply no longer believed in the apostle.

Like Martinez, some former church members have found a sense of community in a Reddit group with more than 800 members, where individuals anonymously discuss developments in a criminal case that has repercussions ranging from Mexico — where La Luz del Mundo was founded — to dozens of countries around the world.

But the group has also become a focus of Garcia's defense team.

In a brief filed Wednesday, they alleged that a witness for prosecutors searched for people in the Reddit group who would be willing to participate in a plot to frame the apostle that would help her sell a documentary she was making about Garcia and the church.

The brief alleges that the witness, whom they do not name, falsely claimed Garcia raped her and that she coerced two minor witnesses into engaging in child pornography to frame Garcia. It says that in a Reddit post, she solicited funds to finance her documentary and discussed the need to get damaging footage of Garcia 'being legally served for rape, embezzlement and fraud' in order to have better 'B-roll.'¹

Excerpt from the *LA Times* on July 15, 2019—just one month after the arrest of Naasón Joaquín García.

The Problem

On June 3, 2019, Naasón Joaquín García, the leader of La Luz del Mundo and self-proclaimed "Apostle of God," was arrested on several counts of child sexual abuse and human trafficking in Los Angeles, California. His arrest sent shockwaves through both members and non-members of the church, many of whom—regardless of their religious beliefs—had viewed Naasón as an untouchable figure of immense power. In a matter of moments, a man who previously claimed to be God's favored interlocutor appeared on the front pages of mainstream news outlets, sporting a striking orange ensemble.

The arrest triggered an unprecedented surge of media attention on La Luz del Mundo, forcing the institution to reevaluate its public identity under an avalanche

¹Leila Miller, "Reddit group becomes flashpoint in sex abuse scandal at La Luz del Mundo church," Los Angeles Times, July 15, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-luz-del-mundo-defectors-20190715-story.html>.

of scrutiny. However, this publicity was not limited to the official church; a subreddit community called r/exLLDM, oppositional to the church, faced newfound recognition that spiked its online engagement significantly while reformulating the dynamics of the space. As the previous excerpt illustrates, the LA Times published an article titled “Reddit Group Becomes Flashpoint in Sex Abuse Scandal at La Luz del Mundo Church” (LA Times, 2019),² highlighting accusations from Naasón’s attorneys that the subreddit operated as a network of malicious, tech-savvy agents conspiring against him. The controversies surrounding the subreddit showcase just how significant and entrenched digital platforms like Reddit have become, not only in legal contexts but also in challenging established figures of authority. These platforms also serve in shaping novel articulations of digital community and subjecthood in the digital age.

Object of Study

My thesis, *Leaving the Light: Digital Ecologies and the Transformation of Social Realities in La Luz del Mundo*, argues that digital ecologies facilitate the proliferation of dissent within institutions of authoritative control, thereby reconfiguring traditional notions of authority in the digital age and opening up possibilities for transforming social realities. New media, specifically digital technologies, serve as a powerful tool for constructing alternative articulations of subjecthood through distinct modes of virtual intimacy, participatory culture, and algorithmic affordances. My research specifically focuses on the r/exLLDM subreddit, an online space within the social media site Reddit, established in 2017 by former members of the transnational Pentecostal megachurch La Luz del Mundo (LLDM), also known as The Light of the World. This particular subreddit serves as a platform for former members and individuals in the non-LLDM lifeworld to share vital information, provide exit support, and engage in various forms of alternative discourse and symbolic meaning-making. By analyzing the various cultural norms,

²Miller, “Reddit group becomes flashpoint.”

discursive modalities, and participatory dynamics of the subreddit, I examine how digital media challenges traditional religious authority and reshapes the formation of subjects in the digital ecosystem.

This thesis positions r/exLLDM as a counter-public—one that opposes the hierarchical structures and mediated norms of LLDM, creating a space for alternative modes of subject formation and meaning-making even as they are bounded by the platform’s algorithmic architecture. Through this analysis, I explore how Reddit’s unique affordances, including pseudonymity and participatory culture, allow users to cultivate an ex-LLDM identity. This reformulated identity fosters a sense of agency that feels more authentic compared to the highly controlled structure of LLDM, while simultaneously being shaped and constrained by the invisible hand of the platform’s interface.

Given Reddit’s pseudo-anonymous nature, members of the r/exLLDM subreddit leverage the platform as a space to produce and share media, engage in dissenting discourse, and reformulate their non-LLDM identities. Prior to the subreddit’s emergence, dissenting voices were rarely heard, largely due to the church’s strict control over media narratives and its well-documented political influence in Mexico, which suppressed most critical perspectives. In Foucaultian terms, the church functions as an institutional panopticon, where members are subjected to constant surveillance embodied by the pervasive gaze of García and the broader hierarchical authority.³ However, LLDM members also sustain this intricate surveillance system through a horizontal form of control, simultaneously perpetuating and negotiating their subjugation within its structures as consenting agents.

The r/exLLDM subreddit serves as a digital counterpoint to this system of control. Initially established as an informal space for ex-members to connect and converse, the subreddit rapidly evolved in response to a surge of users and the legal controversies surrounding García’s arrest. This sudden influx necessitated that its mod-

³Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979; ©1977).

erators assume new responsibilities, navigating the complexities of managing acceptable discourse while addressing the diverse needs of a disoriented community. In this way, the subreddit became a space where users sought what they perceived as truth and authenticity amid fractured ideologies and the church's pervasive control of information. Over time, it transformed into an alternate authority, carefully moderating the boundaries of debate, providing resources for those grappling with disorientation, and fostering supportive networks—both online and offline.

As users reterritorialize their identities from the LLDM social world to a digitally mediated one, their sovereignty is reconfigured and extended within the algorithmic lifeworld; agency is seemingly reclaimed through their digital subjecthood.⁴ As Wendy Hui Kyong Chun suggests, the digital arena offers a “simpler, more reassuring analog of power, one in which the user takes the place of the sovereign executive ‘source,’ code becomes law, and mapping produces the subject” (Chun 2006, 59). While sovereignty appears to be extended in the digital realm, users are nevertheless shaped and influenced by algorithmic culture. Building on Chun's framework, I analyze how Reddit's interface—through algorithmic affordances such as profile pseudonymity and participatory culture—functions as a mechanism for performing ex-LLDM identity and shaping alternative subject formations within the digital ecology.

Is there something distinctly novel about new media's potential to facilitate counter-public subjecthood that distinguishes it from traditional religious media? In *Global Skeptical Publics*, Jacob Copeman and Mascha Schulz explore how new media technologies foster what they term “skeptical publics,” emphasizing how semi-anonymous platforms like Reddit enable actors to engage in activism and community-building that are more visible and accessible than ever before. As established religious authorities increasingly adapt new media tools to extend their evangelization efforts and appeal to a more media-savvy audience, it becomes essential to investi-

⁴I use the term “reterritorialize” here, referring to Deleuze and Guattari's notion of reterritorialization in their project *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972).

gate how these same digital tools are used to challenge religious institutions. This thesis examines new media through the lens of ex-members—individuals who congregate online around a shared experience of subjugation—to identify how they leverage the platform’s accessibility, algorithmic amplification, and pseudo-anonymity to position themselves as skeptical users and enhance the visibility of dissenting discourse.

However, ex-members of La Luz del Mundo are not unified by a shared epistemology or theology; their ideological beliefs are varied and complex. Instead, they are united by their shared opposition to the dominant authority of LLDM, as my ethnographic work showcases. Importantly, the boundary between members and non-members is more fluid than it seems. While the subreddit serves as a vehicle for dissent and ex-LLDM identity formation, it encompasses users with varied relationships to the church. Some users accept the church’s doctrine but reject García himself, while others reject both the doctrine and García’s authority, yet remain within the church for personal, familial, or social reasons. Some users have never been members themselves but are indirectly affected by the institution for non-religious reasons. Consequently, the subreddit functions less as a cohesive community with a singular mission and more as a panoply of opinions and beliefs that collectively sustain a supportive network.

LLDM’s institution and subject formation

LLDM is now the most internationally prominent Pentecostal church in Mexico (Fortuny, 1995). Its striking and unprecedented growth has captivated the attention of many scholars, particularly given the church’s humble beginnings and its remarkable transformation into a cosmopolitan institution in less than a century. Founded in 1926 in Monterrey, Mexico, by former military officer Eusebio Joaquín González in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution, the church’s evolution is closely aligned with the Mexican state’s nation-building project, which em-

phasized the cultivation of the authentic Mexican citizen. Mexican anthropologist René de la Torre highlights the significance of González's background as a revolutionary militant in shaping the church's foundation, arguing that its core principles—obedience and discipline—reflect the institutional structure of the Mexican revolutionary army (De La Torre, 2000). The church's embrace of the values and objectives of the post-revolutionary Mexican state has been instrumental in establishing LLDM's robust infrastructure and facilitating its remarkable growth.

De La Torre's book *Los Hijos De La Luz* (2000) examines the formation of social identity within LLDM through communication processes, specifically highlighting how communication practices—encompassing discourses, rituals, symbols, and everyday interactions—contribute to the creation, preservation, and transformation of the religious reality of the church (De La Torre 2000, 40). Discourse and ritual performance play a crucial role in the formation of subjects within LLDM, where individual agency is both influenced by and negotiated within the institution's structures. Building on De La Torre's insights, I argue that LLDM functions as a vehicle for subject formation, guiding its members through specific technologies of self-regulation aimed at achieving ultimate piety. By internalizing the church's rules and codes of conduct, members navigate their roles within the community. Thus, LLDM operates as both a religious and a social system of control, regulating behavior and beliefs both within and beyond its social context.

Official Media in LLDM

Under Naasón Joaquín García's leadership, LLDM underwent a profound transformation that placed media and digital publicity at the center of its internationalization efforts. In her dissertation, Mary Puckett analyzes the role of transnational networks, social media, and international missionaries in the church's cosmopolitanization during García's leadership (Puckett, 2017). To project a public-facing identity as an inclusive, global institution, the church adopted digital media tech-

nologies as tools for constructing and performing LLDM's evolving identity. As Stewart Hoover explains in *The Media and Religious Authority* (2016), religious authorities in an increasingly digitized world must adapt to media landscapes to sustain their influence in systems shaped by media dynamics.

Before ascending to power as LLDM's leader, Naasón established Berea International, a broadcasting media service that functions as the church's official news outlet. Berea International became a vital mechanism for disseminating official information and multimedia resources by leveraging modern technological tools. The platform produced and distributed a diverse array of digital content and physical materials. Through these efforts, Berea International effectively dominated the information landscape, controlling the church's discourse and, most importantly, reinforcing Naasón's apostolic authority through the constant replication of his image.

However, Berea International was not entirely hierarchical in its production process. A significant portion of its content was created by church members who volunteered their time, enabling them to engage in symbolic meaning-making through their interactions with the media landscape. This raises important questions about the extent to which these participatory roles afforded individuals agency in the production of official media within LLDM. My thesis investigates how religions in the digital age adopt new media tools to reinforce their authority, while also examining how consenting agents within LLDM navigate their religiosity through these technological means.

Reddit as Disruptive

Reddit, popularly known as the "front page of the internet," was created in 2005 by Alexis Ohanian and Steve Huffman. Initially designed as an aggregation platform where users shared media from other sources and discussed it, Reddit eventually evolved into a space for hosting original user-generated content. Many former

members of LLDM discovered Reddit while researching and reading about the church online. What initially served as a tool for investigation quickly became a source of community, offering a sense of inclusion in a space anchored by a shared, disorienting experience—a system that helped make sense of it all. My paper analyzes how Reddit serves as a platform for ex-LLDM members to reconfigure their subjecthood, exercising agency while working within the boundaries shaped by the underlying mechanisms of the platform.

In *Participatory Culture, Community, and Play* (2014), Adrienne Massanari describes Reddit as a participatory platform where user experiences are shaped by the platform's algorithmic design and structural contradictions. Her work emphasizes the co-creative nature of the platform, where meaning is constantly contested and negotiated by its members. Users engage in this dynamic by upvoting or downvoting content, thereby actively shaping the visibility and significance of various ideas. Massanari suggests that Reddit allows for and encourages a sense of identity that is multiple and flexible, contradictory to the stringent norms in LLDM (Massanari 23). Building on Massanari, I contend that this inherent participatory culture enables ex-LLDM members to engage with and reconfigure their subjecthood through a distinct form of ritual participation, while also contributing to the broader culture of the digital ecology.

Furthermore, Reddit's text-based communication format, which fosters knowledge-sharing and dialogue, makes it a prime platform for hosting subversive discourse, particularly for groups like ex-LLDM (Massanari, 24). Unlike platforms heavily reliant on "authentic," curated profiles, Reddit's pseudo-anonymity and algorithmic affordances create a unique environment for dissenting voices. In my ethnographic interviews, I found that Reddit's accessibility was not just limited to the digerati; many members of the subreddit were those who had not engaged with digital platforms like Reddit before discovering r/exLLDM.

Thus, algorithmic features on platforms like Reddit encourage the formation of “poetic lifeworlds” that constitute counterpublics. These counterpublics disrupt simple notions of affiliation or voluntary association, making them uniquely incompatible with dominant narratives (Chalfant, 2022). Building on this idea, I examine how Reddit’s algorithmic and pseudo-anonymous affordances enable new forms of identity articulation and meaning-making for ex-LLDM members.

Organization of Paper

This paper is structured to provide a comprehensive overview of the La Luz del Mundo (LLDM) Church, establishing a solid foundation for an in-depth analysis of its digital counter-public, the subreddit r/exLLDM, which serves as the primary focus of this research. I will begin by outlining my ethnographic process, which includes virtual interviews, data scraping from Reddit, and a brief reflection on my personal positionality.

Therefore, this thesis is organized into two major sections: one dedicated to LLDM and the other to r/exLLDM. While both sections contain three chapters, the r/exLLDM section serves as the main area of analysis, offering a deeper exploration of the dynamics and implications of this digital ecology in opposition to the church.

Section 1: LLDM

The first section offers a contextual analysis of the LLDM Church, structured into three chapters. The initial chapter provides a comprehensive historical overview, tracing the church’s early origins under its first leader, Aarón Joaquín González, and examining how his life has shaped the church’s mythical history and theological foundations. It also delves into the church’s formation during the post-revolutionary era in Mexico, emphasizing its parallel development alongside the nation-state building project and the construction of an ideal, authentic Mexican citizen. Additionally, this chapter outlines LLDM’s hierarchical organization and

the significance of its physical community, the Hermosa Provincia. It concludes by exploring the church's internationalism, extending into the late 20th century, and highlights the substantial impact of its second leader, Apostle Samuel Joaquín Flores (SJF), on the church's global vision.

The second chapter discusses the church's "new era" under the leadership of Naasón Joaquín García (NJG), focusing on the pivotal role of new media in his cosmopolitan and expansionist efforts. It emphasizes how the church's official media serves as a tool for symbolic meaning-making, shaping the church's narrative through carefully curated and ubiquitous imagery. This chapter examines how LLDM has adapted digital technologies to realize its vision and reinforce the authority of the apostle.

The final chapter of the LLDM section explores the technologies of subjugation and subject formation within the church. It examines the role of discourse and ritual in performative subject formation, illustrating how members navigate their subjectivity within the church's framework. This analysis lays the groundwork for understanding how ex-members unravel and subvert these dynamics in the subreddit.

Section 2: r/exLLDM

The second section of the thesis examines the dynamics of the r/exLLDM subreddit, using it as a case study. The first chapter offers a comprehensive overview of Reddit, covering its history, user participation mechanisms, and the overall structure of subreddits. It highlights the platform's rules, moderation practices, and user engagement strategies, providing essential context for understanding the smaller ecology of r/exLLDM.

The second chapter examines r/exLLDM in detail, beginning with its origins, rules, and moderators, as well as the various functions that enable it to operate.

It discusses the early ways users participated in the space, focusing on deconversion testimonials as expressions of authenticity and the use of memes as a form of alternative symbolic meaning-making. The concept of pseudonymity is explored as a means of fostering dissent, particularly in how users utilize discourse to challenge the church's authority.

The final chapter examines the evolution of the subreddit after the surge in user traffic following the arrest of Naasón Joaquín García (NJG). It analyzes the impact of new rules enforced by moderators and how this shift in authority has influenced subject formation within the community. Further analysis positions r/exLLDM as a crucial alternative information space, featuring court digests and discussions related to important legal developments. This section also explores the support network that has developed within r/exLLDM, highlighting the complexities of fostering community and the distinct digital counter-public that emerges in opposition to LLDM.

Ultimately, I argue that this space offers an alternative authority to LLDM, where user sovereignty is expanded in the digital realm, yet remains constrained by the norms and algorithmic limitations of the subreddit. This dynamic creates a complex agency that, while challenging, provides a sense of freedom that stands in stark contrast to the constraints experienced within LLDM.

Ethnography

An Ethnography of Reddit

Digital anthropology is an exciting and rapidly evolving field that challenges the binary distinction between the “virtual” and the “real.” It introduces possibilities for exploring meaning-making and community formation in an increasingly digital world. Rather than existing as a transcendent cyberspatial realm, the internet has become an integral part of our lives; we find ourselves online as an extension of our other ways of being and acting in the world. As Tom Boellstorff notes in *Coming of Age in Second Life* (2008), there is a pressing need for methods and theories that address how signification and social action unfold within “virtual” worlds.

This thesis conducts a digital ethnography by engaging with interlocutors from the r/exLLDM community on Reddit, including moderators, users, content creators, and others. Reddit serves as a dynamic space where individuals are continuously reshaped through processes of virtual meaning-making, necessitating a nuanced understanding of how agency is constructed, negotiated, and expressed in digital environments. My ethnographic approach is multi-modal, encompassing both virtual interviews and online web scraping.

Interviews

As part of my ethnographic research, I had the opportunity to conduct virtual Zoom interviews with several r/exLLDM moderators and users, each of whom had a unique connection to the subreddit. I connected with some participants directly through Reddit, while others were introduced to me through mutual acquaintances. These interviews, lasting between 1 to 3 hours, were recorded and transcribed as part of my research process. I interviewed six individuals in total:

Alex (Moderator 1), u/Cmmntynsnty (Moderator 2), Emma Padilla (Moderator 3), Dario Meza, Areli Soria, and A.J. Perez. Each interview provided unique insights, revealing various facets of the experience of being part of the larger ex-LLDM digital ecology.

Web-scraping Reddit Data

To understand the complexities of online engagement, it is essential to examine contemporary phenomena at the sites where they unfold. Christine Hine suggests that one must understand the internet as an embedded, embodied, and everyday phenomenon, which can be illuminated through the agility of ethnographic examination (Hine 2015, 13). To gather ethnographic data on existing Reddit posts and threads, I utilized a pull-push API tool. This tool facilitated the retrieval and analysis of content from the specified subreddit, allowing me to find specific posts, titles, usernames, dates, and engagement metrics. By analyzing these posts, I was able to identify recurring themes, sentiments, and the overall discourse surrounding the LLDM community.

Personal History

Ethnography emphasizes the significance of embodiment and participant observation, and I wish to share my personal connection to the research that follows. My commitment to this project is deeply rooted in my history with LLDM. Born and raised within the church, I belong to a multi-generational lineage that has been intertwined with LLDM since its origins in Western Mexico. As a second-generation immigrant, a Chicana, and a first-generation ex-LLDM, I resonate with many of the collective experiences and hardships faced by my informants, particularly the profound weight of separation from our former community.

We share a history that is often overlooked, a consequence of persistent marginalization; this thesis aims to illuminate this shared experience. Coming of age during

the transformative era of Naasón, I witnessed his expansive digital mission and the subsequent tragedies that unfolded following his arrest. Having been affected by the church's authoritative control, community dynamics, and related online ecologies, I was eager to explore the existing literature on the church, build upon it, and contextualize it within the digital age.

My experiences motivated me to investigate the processes of subject formation both within and outside the church, as well as how digital media is employed to both reinforce and challenge religious authority. By documenting the experiences of others who share similar backgrounds, I aim to unravel the histories, forces, and structures that have shaped my own subjectivity.

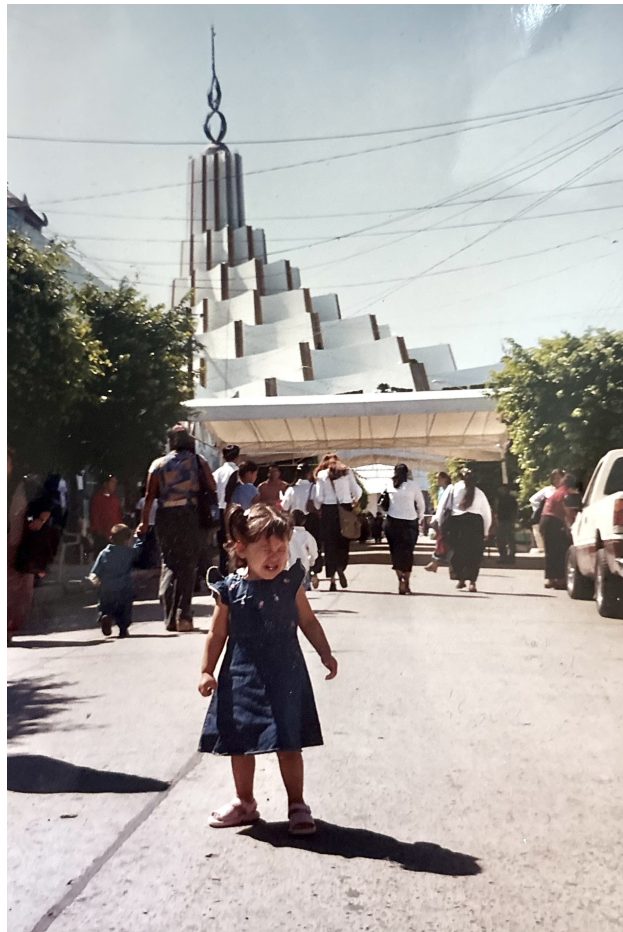


Figure 1: Me in front of the flagship temple in Hermosa Provincia, Guadalajara, Jalisco, 2004

La Luz Del Mundo

Chapter 1: Historical Overview of La Luz Del Mundo Church



Figure 2: Portrait of Eusebio 'Aarón' Joaquín González, sourced from YouTube.⁵

One clear, starry night, God said to his chosen one: “Behold, there is a man whose name shall be Aaron.”⁶ Eusebio Joaquín Gonzales awoke and turned to his wife, who lay beside him, asking if she had heard a voice. She replied that she had not, suggesting he might have been dreaming. He went back to sleep until he was visited by God again. This time, he saw an enormous white hand on the wall, its finger pointing directly at him, as a thunderous voice echoed once more: “Your name shall be Aaron!” Later that night, Eusebio gazed up at the ceiling of the dwelling as if the roof had melted away to reveal the vast expanse of the night sky. The stars shimmered above, aligning to form a constellation that framed a divine message: “Your name shall be Aaron, and I will make it notorious throughout the world. You shall be a blessing, and your descendants shall be as numerous as the stars in heaven.” God, manifesting in a cosmic form, had just entrusted him with the sacred task of restoring the primitive church of Jesus Christ and guiding His chosen people toward salvation. Finally, “Next Thursday, I want you to go to the land that I will show you,” God said to him. The following day, Eusebio and his wife, Elisa Flores, embarked on foot to find the promised land, ultimately

⁵Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=01aioH1NLUw>

⁶René Rentería Solís, *Los Hechos de Aarón Joaquín, Apóstol de Jesucristo* (Guadalajara: Casa Cultural Berea, 2015).

discovering that the sacred place they sought was the city of Guadalajara.

“Your name shall be Aaron!”

Eusebio “Aarón” Joaquín Gonzales, founder of LLDM, was born on August 14, 1896, to a working-class Roman Catholic family in Colotlán, Jalisco. His life story serves as a foundational myth that resonates deeply within the psyche of every member of the church; children are raised on tales of his divine calling, akin to a beloved nighttime folk tale. Yet, despite this rich narrative, much of Aaron’s early history remains obfuscated, with access to official church archives limited to the highest levels of leadership. As Jason Dormady points out in *Primitive Revolution*, (2011) this intentional process of shaping collective memory through curated oral traditions and textual narratives is significant. It reveals the elements Aaron deemed essential to present to his followers, thereby crafting his marketable, messianic image (Dormady 2011, 21).

In this context, members of LLDM emphasize that Aaron had an Indigenous appearance, which they believe highlights his humility and physical embodiment of an “authentic” Mexican. As Dormady highlights, members have even brought to light their leader’s appearance in a 1987 decree on government and religion to distinguish their church from the foreign-imported leaders of the Roman Catholic church. Some members even drew comparisons between Aaron and Don Benito Juárez, the esteemed Mexican reformer and opposer of the Catholic church’s political domination in Mexico (Dormady 2011, 21, Fortuny Loret de Mora 1995, 154). This underscores the significance of authenticity—represented by both the ideal Mexican citizen and the true Christian—as a central tenet of the LLDM public.

At a very young age, Aaron joined the Mexican Revolutionary War as a fighter for Francisco “Pancho” Villa’s division. Disillusioned by the injustices attributed to the so-called *villista* “bandits,” he switched over to the *constitutionalistas* (Con-

stitutionalists) faction, aligning himself with the eventual official narrative of the Mexican state, which demonized the *villistas* while glorifying the *constitutionalistas* (Dormady, 22). The experiences he gained with the Constitutionalist forces significantly shaped Aaron's militaristic character, instilling in him values that formed his personality for the rest of his life. As De La Torre notes, examining Aaron's early life is crucial for understanding the characteristics of the church he founded. His militaristic background enabled him to appropriate national symbols of the Mexican state and integrate the fundamental principles of the Mexican Army—namely, obedience and discipline—into the church's organization (De La Torre 2000, 70-71). These militaristic undertones are apparent in the church's discourse, where terms like “Battalion” are regularly used to describe missionary youth as troops prepared for spiritual warfare. Additionally, Aaron's military experience proved fruitful by allowing him to forge connections and negotiate with local and national political figures, as we'll see later on.

After being relocated several times, Aaron and his wife, Elisa, came into contact with evangelical Pentecostals in the mid-1920s in Torreón, Coahuila. In the period of his conversion to Pentecostalism, Aaron struggled to reconcile his military life with his newfound Christian beliefs. Nevertheless, his military experience laid the groundwork for his religious perspective—his identity as a pacifist and his role as a good citizen of the *patria* became crucial elements that shaped the beliefs of La Luz Del Mundo. The importance of being a model citizen is emphasized as a fundamental aspect of one's identity within LLDM; members are taught to respect and obey the laws of the nation as part of their civic duty as long as their religious beliefs remain intact. It is even common for LLDM apostles to offer prayers for state leaders and politicians during important spiritual sermons. To illustrate this patriotism, a common slogan said by Aaron was, “Good Christians for the world but also good citizens for our homeland” (Fortuny Loret de Mora 1995, 154). Thus, while LLDM may be perceived as counter to the state due to its direct

opposition to the hegemony of Roman Catholicism in Mexico and the prosecution of Evangelical Christians during the Cristero wars, this perception is misleading. Since its inception, LLDM has embraced post-Revolutionary objectives, particularly developing and promoting an authentic Mexican identity.

After completely leaving the army due to his newfound Protestant principles, Aaron and his wife sought refuge in an evangelical Protestant church in Monterrey, Nuevo León. They stayed in the home of self-proclaimed prophets: Saulo, Silas, and their multiple wives. According to the official story, they were given a small space in the kitchen to sleep in in exchange for domestic labor. It was under Saulo and Silas' roof that Aaron's celestial calling came to him. At that moment, Aaron, a military man who had previously had a promising career in military leadership, found a new pathway toward authority. Aaron's covenant with God paved the way for a new dispensation for humanity, marking a chapter in history that only he would lead.

In the spring of 1926, Aaron, his wife Elisa, and a few followers set out on a journey southward on foot. The official history of LLDM underscores the antagonism they faced from Catholic fanatics and Cristero soldiers, as well as the self-imposed physical hardships they endured, including the rejection of food, shelter, and clothing during their travels.

December 12, 1926, marks a significant date in LLDM's mythological history—the day Aaron Joaquín Gonzalez arrived at the place God had predestined: Guadalajara, Jalisco. In the mind of Aaron, Guadalajara, a bastion of Mexican Catholicism, was a city strife with paganism and corruption. Ironically, their arrival coincided with a celebration of the Virgin of Guadalupe, a stark contrast to LLDM's anti-iconoclastic Pentecostal beliefs. Moreover, Guadalajara was the city where his family lived. However, upon discovering his new spiritual path, they chose to turn a blind eye to him, leaving him and his wife without a home. Fortunately,

they managed to find shelter in the home of an elderly widow in an impoverished neighborhood on the east side of Guadalajara, which they used as a base for their missionary work.

While preaching in the *barrios* of Guadalajara, Aaron sold shoes in the markets to support his family. Gradually, he began to attract a loyal following, primarily composed of working-class and uneducated individuals—people with limited resources who had migrated to the city in search of work and a place to live. They viewed Aaron not only as a vessel for eternal salvation but also as a means to elevate their social and economic status. Many of these followers combined street vending with biblical preaching, which enabled the movement to establish new congregations beyond Guadalajara. Aaron's message resonated with a population that identified with his experiences of material poverty, limited education, and Indigenous traits. In this sense, Aaron's story, beyond his personal charisma, reflected and symbolized the aspirations of a marginalized social group that saw in him a pathway to improvement—spiritually, morally, and socially (De La Torre 2002, 76).

It is also important to note that Aaron played a crucial role in the literacy of his followers, as almost all members learned to read and write by engaging with the Bible (De La Torre, 74). Furthermore, the new religion emphasized the spiritual over the material, offering a revaluation of poverty to its marginalized members. Its message included elements that reclaimed the significance of being poor, as my father used to say: “Mija, it does not matter whether we are materially poor; as the children of God, we are spiritual billionaires!”

Aaron's early parishioners saw him as a warm and protective paternal figure while also recognizing his rigid and methodical nature. This duality was crucial for his followers, allowing them to perceive him not merely as a humble preacher but as an extraordinary leader whose transcendent qualities distinguished him from the

rest of humanity (De La Torre, 76). From the beginning, Aaron cultivated an aura of prophetic mystique bolstered by accounts of divine revelations and miraculous events. He was a man of few words—introverted and reserved—traits that only deepened his enigmatic charm and elevated him to the status of a messianic figure. In the eyes of his followers, Aaron’s words became synonymous with the voice of God; he was seen as His intercessor on earth. His followers venerated him, composing hymns and singing praises to him while also presenting him with numerous gifts in celebration of his birthday (De La Torre, 76). Aaron’s charismatic demeanor laid the groundwork for a dynastic rule within a church whose very existence depended on the words, guidance, and livelihood of a single man.

Pentecostalism, Revolution, Cristero War

Iglesia Del Dios Vivo Columna Y Apoyo de la Verdad, La Luz Del Mundo (typically shortened to LLDM) is Mexico’s largest non-Catholic religious association, notable for its rapid growth in a relatively short period of time. LLDM views itself as the restoration of the primitive church of Jesus Christ and does not publicly identify with the broader category of “Pentecostalism,” even though it falls within this religious movement. In recent years, Pentecostalism has seen a dramatic increase in the Global South, particularly in Latin America and the Latin American diaspora in the United States through transnational migration (Barba et al., 2023). As De La Torre observes, Aaron, the church’s founder, was drawn to oral tradition Pentecostalism, which is characterized by ritualism and strong emotional expression. This form of worship resonated more deeply with his social context and that of his followers than historical Protestantism, which was often “pragmatic and ethical” and primarily attracted adherents from the emerging middle class (De La Torre, 76).

The roots of Mexican Pentecostalism, also known as *Apostolicos*, can be traced back to the Azusa Street Revival events of the early 20th century, where partici-

pants gathered in the streets speaking in tongues. These Pentecostal leaders promoted baptism in the name of Jesus Christ, diverging from the traditional Holy Trinity formula; this variant is known as “Oneness Pentecostalism” (Barba et al., 2023). After the Great Depression precipitated the Great Repatriation (1929-39), thousands of U.S.-born Mexican Americans were forced to return to Mexico as the U.S. government sought scapegoats for the economic crisis. This migration facilitated the evangelization efforts of Oneness Pentecostal believers in towns, villages, and agrarian communities in Northern Mexico (Barba et al., 6).

LLDM was established during the post-revolutionary era, a crucial period when the Mexican state was focused on shaping its identity and promoting national development. The church aimed to restore original Christianity while actively engaging in the formation of the emerging societal order (Dormady, 14). Aaron’s narrative unfolds against the backdrop of the revolutionary period and the Cristero War (1926-1927), a conflict marked by armed rebellion in response to the anti-clerical and secularist reforms instituted by the 1917 Mexican Constitution, as well as the state’s determination to enforce these laws. The Cristero War represented one of the most significant political-religious crises in Mexico’s history, contributing to widespread societal disorganization. This conflict polarized the population, dividing it between revolutionaries, or agraristas, who supported the government, and cristeros, who opposed it (Fortuny, 148).

Amidst the social instability of the time, Aaron seized the opportunity to engage with both Cristero and Agrarista discourses, particularly within marginalized communities. He represented an alternative ideology that resonated with those disillusioned by the prevailing circumstances and who felt voiceless in the face of socio-political turmoil (Fortuny, 148). In the post-revolutionary period, Mexico underwent rapid urbanization, prompting many early LLDM members to migrate from rural areas in western Mexico to Guadalajara, the nation’s second-largest city, in search of economic opportunities. This migration was largely driven by

the failure of state agricultural policies, which had devastated small agrarian and industrial economies. The unfolding revolution and subsequent social movements provided Aaron with a unique platform to align himself with the state's objective of dismantling Roman Catholic dominance, while simultaneously positioning the Catholic Church as a natural adversary to LLDM and its mission.

Dormady points out that Mexico's lack of protection of the rule of law enabled local leaders like Aaron to redefine and negotiate the porous law to their benefit (Dormady, 10). The inconsistent legal enforcement allowed LLDM to carve out an exclusive community that ultimately supported the central state's initiatives to foster urban development, literacy, and economic mobility. LLDM strategically aligned its objectives with those of the state, and Dormady argues that for Mexican Pentecostal groups like LLDM, embracing the state's programs and propaganda while adhering to theological principles often at odds with the revolution represented their own form of revolutionary embodiment (Dormady, 7).

LLDM's mission to embody the state's vision of the ideal Mexican citizen after the revolution was integral to its religious objectives. As Dormady suggests, the formation of LLDM coincided with the leadership of Mexican presidents Álvaro Obregón and Plutarco Elías Calles, both of whom sought to monopolize the definition of a "good" Mexican citizen. A notable strategy employed by the church was to appropriate the modes of state leaders and integrate them into their religious mission. The church gained formal legal recognition from local and state authorities and publicly expressed its adherence to the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) for protection in a system characterized by the absence of the rule of law. These political negotiations helped the church reconcile its outsider status and establish itself as a symbol of model citizen identity (Dormady, 20). Consequently, LLDM's role as a positive contributor to Mexican society positions it not as a counter-public but as a sub-public, one that does not directly oppose the hegemony of the state. Ultimately, LLDM's quest for authenticity in both citi-

zenship and religion at the local level reflects its commitment to embodying the definition of a model citizen, as shaped by the evolving socio-political landscape of post-revolutionary Mexico (Dormady, 20).

Mapping LLDM's Organization

Central to LLDM's belief system is the conviction that God has called a living apostle—Aarón, Samuel, and Naasón—to continue His work and lead His chosen people. The names Aarón, Samuel, Naasón, and La Luz del Mundo are all derived from the Old Testament, signifying that their current existence fulfills a divine promise, with the Bible serving as the most faithful witness to this (De La Torre, 77). LLDM's fundamental doctrine is rooted in absolute faith in apostolatry, which is regarded as the pinnacle of its hierarchy. This authoritative structure draws inspiration from Aaron's militaristic background, which influenced the values of obedience and order within the organization.

Hierarchical Organization

Though the sophistication of LLDM's organization was cemented during the second leader, Samuel's leadership, Aaron undoubtedly mapped the nodes of its initial formation. Over time, what appeared to be a small group of congregants around the emergence of the new Messiah began to expand throughout the region, and its growth also required greater institutionalization, specialization of functions, and means of social control over its members. In 1937, God revealed to Aaron the requirements for the ministry, that is, the regulations upon which the organization of the Church should be founded. From this moment on, Aaron chose among his followers those who would occupy ministerial positions: his oldest disciples, those who had shown faithfulness from the beginning (De La Torre, 79). The organization of this body presents a pyramidal hierarchy: at the top is the Apostle of God (referred to by various titles: Servant of God, Anointed of God,

Apostle of Jesus Christ, etc.) who is the exclusive channel through which God disseminates his will. As the church's central spiritual leader, he monopolizes sacred values and distributes them differently among the faithful. He is also the General Director of the church, and exercises civic authority to negotiate with government agencies for goods and services (Fortuny, 155).

The Church calls the leadership the Ministerial Corps, to which the apostles occupy its apex. Under the "Servant of God" are the pastors who are anointed by the leader. Pastors can embody three different dimensions: doctors, prophets, and evangelists. The church is divided geographically, and a pastor heads each jurisdiction. After the pastors are deacons who hold very administrative and ritualistic functions: they lead presentations of children, baptisms, weddings, revivals, ordaining the managers and exercising authority over them as well as the workers, deaconesses and the rest of the religious community (Fortuny, 156). The next level is the managers who are in charge of groups of congregants as a taskforce of vigilance and control; they guard and control the religious society's moral order and exercise control. Depending on gender, each believer has a manager to whom they report cases of a personal problem (Fortuny, 156). Women are included in the hierarchy as deaconesses, secretaries, managers, and workers but cannot administer ritual sacraments. The most notable role women can have in LLDM is as a personal secretary to the apostle, aiding him in an administrative capacity. These women are often outside of the eye of the general public but travel with the apostle wherever he is and run his daily functions. The rest of the members of the church participate in the church's various activities like the chorus, missions, communal work, maintenance of the temple, etc, where they can additionally have important roles and responsibilities.

LLDM's organizational structure is notable for its ability to integrate all its believers into positions of power and authority. The apostle is responsible for selecting pastors through the process of unction, and the corps of pastors is a stratum that

separates the rest of the community, giving him the status that centralizes power in his hands (Fortuny, 157). However, this mechanism permits anyone to become part of the ecclesiastical hierarchy since there is no formal religious education required; as long as one demonstrates loyalty to the apostle and dedication to their faith, they too can pursue some form of authority. In this way, all believers have access to the production of the sacred and occupy positions of spiritual power. Thus, the church combines an authoritarian system with some distribution of power, positioning it against the formal exclusivity of the Catholic church, which limits the possibility of acceding to positions in the hierarchy. LLDM, therefore, not only is an attractive alternative for those who want a career in religion but also grants each and every member a sense of personal agency and mobility.

Hermosa Provincia

The first temple of LLDM—with official recognition—was founded in 1934 in the famous working-class neighborhood of San Juan de Dios, a haven for poor migrants and a place that fueled the nightlife of the city. In 1940, the church moved to 12 de Octubre Street, a temple that still exists today. Then, in 1952, Aaron realized a broader vision; he purchased fourteen hectares located to the east of the city in a sparsely populated area of Guadalajara; here, the first physical community, Hermosa Provincia (HP), was established. The land was subdivided to offer affordable plots to house the church members exclusively. This made it possible for the majority of his followers living in the city—around two thousand—to move to the colony to distance themselves from the external world and lead a life dedicated to his spiritual mission. Initially, a stone border wall was built around the colony, isolating its inhabitants from the rest of the city while simultaneously unifying them internally (De La Torre, 81). This physical separation reflected LLDM's early identity as an outsider and a marginalized community, providing a sanctuary from the tumultuous events of the outside world. Consequently, the church emerged as a paradoxical phenomenon: it served as an alternative to the

dominant cultural and social structures surrounding it, yet it was also cushioned by governmental support, allowing it to engage in the nation-building projects of that very system.

Furthermore, Aaron offered his followers the means necessary to ensure their survival and integration into the urban environment and the possibility of belonging to a community for those who suffered the anguish of uprooting and marginalization caused by economic migration. The foundation of this colony was possible due to Aaron's relationships with the governmental authorities of the state of Jalisco from his military experiences. It is worth noting that he served under García Barragán, who later became the governor of Jalisco (1943-1947), for whom he always expressed support (De La Torre, 82). The foundation and progress of HP were thanks to a pact between the government and the brothers and sisters that made up LLDM. Shortly after the colony was established, basic public services were available, something that had not occurred in other popular subdivisions in Guadalajara. In return for the government's favors, the members consistently volunteered in state development projects and the PRI's political demonstrations.

The success of HP was also contingent upon the active involvement of LLDM members in community tasks through both voluntary work and financial contributions. The LLDM community thrived in an environment characterized by brotherhood, solidarity, and mutual aid.

At the heart of HP, an expansive temple was constructed, surrounded by essential services such as a market, large shelters, and Aaron's residence, where he maintained daily contact with his followers. This community allowed congregants to live in a space where both religious and secular lives intertwined. In addition to spiritual resources, HP provided access to housing, medical care, social services, educational facilities, and other urban amenities, ensuring that residents no longer needed to venture beyond its borders for basic necessities. The colony also estab-

lished small workshops whose products were sold in street markets throughout the city. Internal businesses—such as bakeries, eateries, convenience stores, pharmacies, clothing shops, and stationery stores—are run by members, further enhancing the community's self-sufficiency.

Members of HP enjoyed the protections afforded by their haven-like community, shielding them from the uncertainties of the market they were contingent to and allowing them to recreate the small-town life they had left behind (Dormady, 15). The religious sphere intertwined with state politics, facilitating the construction of a national identity project. Thus, LLDM represents not just a faith but a comprehensive social, economic, and political initiative, mirroring the nation-building efforts of post-revolutionary Mexico.

LLDM in the late 20th Century

Under the leadership of Samuel Joaquín Flores (SJF), the second Apostle of Jesus Christ, LLDM evolved from being merely the light of the world to becoming the light *for* the world. This second apostleship represented a significant turning point for the church, shifting its focus from a nation-state building initiative to a more expansive international mission. Samuel was regarded as the international director of LLDM, remembered not only for his charismatic leadership but also for his remarkable ability to transform the church into a global entity that expanded economically, politically, and socially across borders.

Global Vision: SJF's Internationalism

In the wake of Aaron's passing, a new leader emerged from the shadows of his father's formidable legacy: his youngest son, Samuel Joaquin Flores, who ascended to power in 1964. As Samuel took the helm of the kingdom his father had established, he not only pledged to continue the missionary work but also aimed to expand and modernize it in ways that would have been unimaginable to his prede-

cessor. Inheriting leadership in his late twenties, Samuel witnessed and nurtured the church's extraordinary growth over the next half-century. As De La Torre observes:

“With Samuel, a new phase began: the community opened up to the outside world, Hermosa Provincia integrated into urban life (the stone wall disappeared), the preparation of specialized professional leaders was encouraged, internal organization was consolidated, hierarchies were defined, and the development and expansion of the Hermosa Provincia colonies in Mexico and abroad increased. The doctrine was also disseminated through specialized media, cooperative and negotiation ties with the government were formalized, multiple community service establishments (schools, hospitals, shelters, asylums) were built, and attention was focused on the construction of the majestic headquarters temple” (De La Torre, 87).

De La Torre's observations regarding the HP community's modernization and openness to the outside world aptly capture the essence of Samuel's leadership. His reign heralded a transformative era for LLDM, marked by modernization and a welcoming attitude toward external engagement. As De La Torre notes, the church experienced a remarkable “boom” during Samuel's tenure. In 1972, membership stood at 75,000, and by 1986, it had surged to an impressive 1,500,000 (De La Torre, 89). His leadership was so outward-focused that by 1993, LLDM had expanded to 23 countries worldwide, with 45 congregations in the United States alone. This transnational growth, particularly in the U.S., positioned Samuel as a resilient figure against adversity, adept at uniting diverse communities across racial and economic divides (Fortuny, 151). Furthermore, Puckett argues that belonging to LLDM is what helped transmigrant church members successfully adjust to life in the United States by having a continuous orientation toward the HP (Puckett, 71). In fact, it was under Samuel's leadership that the church constructed their monumental temple in the HP, a landmark that would become the emblem that

cemented the church as one of the most important growing religious phenomena in Latin America and a spiritual home for members worldwide. Under Samuel's leadership, LLDM embarked on an ambitious expansion initiative aimed at establishing congregations on every continent (Puckett, 108).



Figure 3: Hermosa Provincia Temple, Guadalajara Jalisco. Source: Netflix, "The Darkness Within La Luz Del Mundo" (2023)

A Man Born Dead: SJF

Born on February 14, 1937, in Guadalajara, Samuel was destined for greatness from an early age, meticulously prepared to carry forward his father's mission. According to legend, Samuel entered the world lifeless, and Aaron often recounted a profound bargain he struck with God—offering his son's life in exchange for his survival. This poignant narrative would later serve to legitimize Samuel's apostolic service when the moment arose.

Samuel's personality and demeanor were strikingly different from those of his father. While his father's militaristic background shaped a more austere presence, Samuel's early spiritual involvement as a pastor under his father's shadow allowed him to cultivate a warmer, more fatherly disposition. This nurturing approach allowed church members to develop a unique affection for him. Fortuny argues

that, unlike his father, Samuel's charismatic persona was crafted "after the fact" and enhanced through savvy media manipulation (Fortuny, 151). The role of the official media in crafting Samuel's charisma is undeniable; he exuded an air of elegance, always impeccably dressed in silk suits and designer labels. Photographs of him captured a warm, inviting smile that seemed to radiate from the images.



Figure 4: Samuel Joaquín Flores. Youtube, LaLuzDelMundoTV

With ample time to refine his charismatic personality, many members came to know him primarily from a distance as the church grew under his direction. Their perception of him was shaped by the carefully crafted image he projected through official media channels and religious presentations, which enhanced his ability to present himself as a benevolent leader.

Despite his warm, paternalistic reputation, Samuel faced multiple allegations of sexual and physical abuse in the 1990s that garnered international media attention, including an article in the *LA Times* (Sheridan, 1998). One notable case involved Moises Padilla, who alleged that Samuel had sexually abused him as a minor. Padilla was later kidnapped and brutally stabbed over 50 times by Samuel's guards for speaking out. Another significant story was that of Karem Leon, who also bravely spoke out against Samuel's abuse in the late 90s. Karem's story is particularly heartbreaking; her pain and isolation from her religious community

ultimately led to her death by suicide, a tragedy highlighted in the Netflix documentary *The Darkness Within La Luz Del Mundo* (2023). These accusations largely went unaddressed, partly due to the weak rule of law in Mexico and the significant political and economic influence wielded by Samuel and the church. Additionally, the church restricted congregants from accessing news coverage of the allegations. As a result, the church's membership remained largely unaffected by these serious claims, as Samuel maintained tight control over the flow of information in this environment and successfully shielded himself from any form of accountability.

Samuel passed away in June 2014, marking the conclusion of a 50-year era in LLDM. In his final years, the congregation was aware of his illness, yet the specifics of his condition remained shrouded in mystery, adding to his enigmatic charm. Church members were led to believe that his sickness was a reflection of their collective sins; as the church expanded, so too did the severity of Samuel's ailment. When the news of his death broke, the church was engulfed in profound anguish, despair, and uncertainty. One interviewee recalls vividly, "I remember my mom rushing into my room in the middle of the night, saying, 'Papa Samuel just died.' I was in disbelief. How could he die? I thought he was immortal. He could read your mind, know your past, your sins. How could a man with such power possibly die?" The congregation was left grappling with the uncertainty of who would guide them to the gates of heaven in the absence of their beloved apostle. As worry loomed, thousands flocked to Guadalajara, seeking solace and answers in the wake of his passing, until a new leader emerged from the depths of sorrow to fulfill the dynastic prophecy.

In conclusion, the early development of LLDM was intricately linked to the nation-state building efforts during Mexico's post-revolutionary and anti-clerical period. As the church matured under Samuel's leadership, it embarked on an unprecedented expansion, driven by his international vision and strategic control over

information. This control enabled the congregation to grow, even in the face of allegations of abuse and external controversies. As we move into the next chapter, we will explore how the third apostle further modernized the church, expanded its reach, and harnessed new forms of media to legitimize his authority.

The Dawning of a New Era: NJG

Excerpt from an interview

Areli:

“It was always normal for me to have everything available to watch online. I had cousins who were cameramen in Berea in Phoenix, so I always saw it as a positive thing. I thought it was so impressive when I saw the Berea logo do the little animated spin during the livestreams - like, wow, we’re growing in so many cool ways. I noticed he was trying to modernize everything, construct new buildings... and we only saw it because of Instagram and Facebook.

And for every event, there would be photo shoots at the Phoenix church. Like for Naason’s birthday, we would gather around the temple in crowds, holding blue balloons and literally waving and shouting ‘Happy Birthday’ at the sky while drones recorded us. I remember we also ate a giant cake that said ‘Happy Birthday, Apóstol Naason,’ and we took videos of that as well. Everything was always being documented. I don’t know, it just felt like, ‘Yeah, we have to document this; this is history’”(April 9, 2025).

“My Time Has Come”

The story outlined above was told by Areli Soria, a 22-year-old native of Arizona who identifies as a fifth-generation ex-member of LLDM. Areli’s account sheds light on the profound influence of digital technologies within the church, revealing how these tools serve as instruments of institutional control over information. Displays of affection for the church’s leader, as exemplified in Areli’s experiences, are meticulously recorded and broadcast across the church’s official social media platforms. This practice not only fosters a sense of connection and unity among members, transcending geographical boundaries through their collective admira-

tion for the Apostle, but it also establishes a pervasive web of surveillance and control over the church's media landscape while solidifying and perpetuating the authority of the Apostle.

For Areli, this environment felt entirely normal, as she was born and raised within the church's confines. Throughout her formative years, she witnessed the significant technological and modernizing shifts introduced by the third Apostle, Naasón Joaquín García. His transformative embrace of digital modalities not only defined his leadership style but also shaped the institutional norms that influenced Areli's subjectivity within LLDM. As she navigated her faith under the new Apostle's guidance, Areli learned to harness digital media to reinforce her religious identity, participating actively in the church's digital mediascape.

Areli never anticipated Samuel's death. Growing up, she had been led to believe he was immortal, possessing the ability to read her mind, her past, and her sins with just a single glance. His sudden passing, followed by Naasón's appointment and his bold vision for the church's future, ignited something within her. She felt an overwhelming urge to align herself with Naasón's expansionist and modernist mission, eager to become a more devoted follower. Areli recalled her memory of the pivotal transition between the two Apostles, Samuel and Naasón, as follows:

“After SJF's death, we quickly packed and left for Guadalajara. The Hermosa Provincia felt different this time—somber, with 24-hour prayers. It was a collective mourning. A family member urged me to write everything, saying, ‘We're living in a historic moment. This is the Bible; we can write the Bible.’

On the day of the announcement, my mom woke me up in the middle of the night, and we went outside the house since everything was being transmitted on the speakers in the streets. I remember everyone kept saying, ‘listen closely because once they say his name and you don't feel in

your heart that he is the Servant of God, well, you've got to pray to God that he saves you.' I was afraid. My mom literally trained me the night before; she said, 'When he's announced, pray, pray, pray to God to make you believe in your heart that he is the Apostle.' I just felt like that was a lot of pressure for a 12-year-old.

The pastor who was about to announce it said, 'I'm going to read this manifestation, and it will reveal his name.' He prepped us to be ready. So he starts by telling the story, and the moment he says, 'Naasón es mi escojido!' everyone drops to the floor, sobbing. So I dropped to my knees too. And yeah, after that, there was this feeling of, 'Well, I think I believe in him; I want to believe in him; I believe in him,' and I just continued that. By the time I was 14, I believed in him, and I was loyal."

"That was the perfect age for that to happen to me," she reflected. She vividly remembers feeling personally called to Naasón's vision for the youth, urging them to join his "battalion of missionaries" when they turned 18. Areli had begun mentally preparing for this mission at 12 years old, engaging in activities like choir to deepen her commitment and readiness for the journey ahead. At that age, she was too young to question Naasón's authority, as she had been conditioned all her life not to question, and now would not be the first time. She was also part of a new generation of incoming devotees—young and media-savvy—who were quick to embrace the innovative forms of religious media that Naasón introduced. The ubiquity of images and other content symbolizing Naasón's authority reinforced her belief in his new dispensation for humanity.

Naasón Merarí Joaquín García was born on May 7, 1969. At the age of 45, he ascended to the highest position in LLDM when he became the Apostle, succeeding his father, SJF, on December 14, 2014. These were among the first words Naasón shared with the congregation as he announced his divine Apostleship on

that winter dawn in Guadalajara:

“The ministry of Samuel Joaquín has not died. IT LIVES! God bless all my brothers. God be with you. You were not alone, no! There was only a pause to honor a beautiful body. And now that my time has come, I can say freely, Naasón Joaquin Garcia, Servant of the living God and Apostle of Jesus Christ! Church of Christ Jesus, do you accept my ministry?”
(Translated to English; Naasón Joaquin Garcia, December 14, 2014).

This declaration was accompanied by his signature fist bump, a gesture that quickly became a unifying symbol for his followers. “Today, a new era begins,” he announced, igniting a sense of hope within the church. As he walked down the aisle of the grandiose temple, members collectively raised their fists in the air, chanting, “*Somos de Naasón Joaquín*” or “We belong to Naasón Joaquin,” heralding the literal dawn of this new chapter. Just like his trademark symbol, Naasón would lead the church into this transformative era with an iron fist, adopting a more authoritarian approach than his father’s warm reputation. He was dedicated to pursuing an ambitious modernization and global expansion mission while inspiring unwavering devotion among his followers.

Notably, his anointment was distinct from those of his predecessors; it was broadcast live from the HP for the world to see. I recall being struck by how quickly the livestream displayed the title “Apostle of God, Naasón Joaquin” in gold lettering just minutes after his revelatory announcement. Taking on the legacy of his father’s successful leadership was no small task, thereby necessitating the strategic use of digital media to fulfill his ambitions and inspire loyalty among his followers. Under Naasón’s leadership, we see the crucial role of digital media in legitimizing his newfound authority and aiding his evangelization and cosmopolitization efforts, marking a notoriously digital era for the church.



Figure 5: Naasón Joaquín walks through a crowd at a gala event hosted by the Association of Professionals and Entrepreneurs of Mexico (APEM), May 13, 2018. Berea Internacional.



Figure 6: Naasón addresses the youth in Baja California on November, 2018. Berea Internacional.



Figure 7: Congratulations from the Children of Santa Tecla, El Salvador, to Apostle Naasón Joaquín on his birthday, May 2016. Berea International.



Figure 8: A welcome back celebration for Naasón in HP, March 1, 2015. Berea International.



Figure 9: Naasón greeting his followers in Pachuca, Hidalgo. Berea International June 2017. Berea International



Figure 10: Naasón receives a recognition award from current Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele. Berea International.

The Role of Official Media during Garcia's reign

With Naasón as its new leader, LLDM experienced an extraordinary transformation, positioning new media and digital publicity at the heart of its internationalization efforts. In an effort to cultivate a public identity as an inclusive, globally

minded institution, the church aggressively embraced digital media technologies. These tools became the instruments for shaping and portraying LLDM's evolving identity while cementing Naasón's authority among his followers.

As Stewart Hoover discusses, traditional religious authorities must adapt to the changing media landscape to maintain their influence in an increasingly digitized world. Hoover notes, "The media increasingly set the terms, and religions—and specifically religious authorities—find themselves working within those terms" (Hoover 2016, 31). Always having recognized the importance of digital media, Naasón quickly implemented and expanded LLDM's technological capabilities, using these advancements to realize his grand mission in the "new era."

Building on Max Weber's typology of authority, Hoover argues that the concept of charismatic authority must be redefined to include the sensational forms of religious mediation facilitated by modern media (Hoover 2016). In the context of LLDM, Naasón adeptly utilizes digital media to saturate the church's mediascape with official images and narratives that highlight his evangelization efforts, spiritual dedication, and benevolence, thereby positioning himself as a worthy leader. This strategic media engagement actively shapes his charismatic persona and encourages his followers to embrace his leadership. Consequently, digital media plays a vital role in revitalizing religious authority, particularly as Naasón navigated the transition from his father's leadership to his own. By dominating key media and communication channels, Naasón effectively redefined the parameters of authority within LLDM, ensuring that his desired self-image remained central to the church's identity.

Notably, these new forms of media play a crucial role in the production of religious meaning. The symbolic and imagistic processes inherent in LLDM's media shape its social reality; in other words, images serve as active symbols that construct and produce reality. In his exploration of the simulacrum of divinity and religion,

Baudrillard raises a question: “do icons, as revelations of divinity, merely reflect supreme power, or do they create and wield power themselves?” He asserts that images represent a vast simulacrum—an uninterrupted circuit of symbolic meaning (Baudrillard, 1981). The replication of Naasón’s image creates its circuit of religious meaning.

Similarly, Hoover emphasizes that “the field of images is the field of practice where forms of social, cultural, and religious capital are constructed and exchanged” (Hoover, 23). In this context, Naasón’s strategic use of official media channels to inundate his followers with carefully curated images of himself has effectively shaped the church’s social reality. In this dynamic, Naasón’s image has come to overshadow his physical presence; many church members have never met him in person, yet the symbolic processes facilitated through digital media play a vital role in elevating his religious authority.

Through this continuous engagement with digital media, Naasón reinforces his leadership and fosters a shared sense of identity among his followers, illustrating the profound impact of media on the construction of religious meaning within LLDM. The virtual connections contribute to the formation of an “imagined community” within LLDM (Puckett, 76). Through the ubiquity of symbolic imagery, LLDM creates its imagined social reality. Thus, digital media plays a crucial role in fostering a sense of community and belonging, creating a networked “spiritual family.” In his effort to increasingly modernize, Naasón employed official media channels like Berea International to technologically position LLDM as a cosmopolitan institution.

Cosmopolitanization and New Media

Naasón’s determination to expand the congregation through digital networks stems from a desire to reposition the church as a globally palatable institution. In her dissertation, *The Cosmopolitanization of The La Luz del Mundo* (2017), Puckett

explores the role of transnational networks, digital media, and young international missionaries in the church's cosmopolitanization efforts under Naasón's leadership. She argues that LLDM transformed its identity from a distinctly Mexican church to one that embodies a cosmopolitan ethos. The way LLDM members in the U.S. were forced to engage with the dominant culture laid the groundwork for a cosmopolitan outlook; members' desire to reach across national, cultural, or ethnic differences, driven by the expansionist desires of the apostle Naasón, makes them a cosmopolitan institution. Although her focus is primarily on the LLDM migrant community in the U.S., her insights apply to the institution as a whole, as communication and information channels are centralized with the Apostle at their core. Members exemplify this cosmopolitan outlook while remaining devoted to their own "nation," *Hermosa Provincia*.

Similarly, Hoover argues that religions become relativized in the digital media landscape; that is, it is now more difficult for any one religion to claim precedence over another (Hoover, 31). Whereas LLDM once positioned itself as oppositional to the Catholic Church in Mexico, it is now an equal pretender to every other religion struggling to win the hearts of individuals worldwide.

A key tool in Naasón's visionary expansion has undoubtedly been the strategic use of digital media. Social media, in particular, has played a crucial role in how LLDM members envision themselves in relation to the church's cosmopolitanism. The imaginative possibilities afforded by the church's mass media create opportunities for what Puckett describes as "semiotic diacritics of great power." This ability to reimagine their lives empowers members to assert greater control over the direction of their religious experiences (Puckett, 119).

Recognizing this potential, Naasón has placed significant emphasis on engaging the youth, who possess the agility and skills necessary to evangelize across national contexts and adeptly navigate new media. In 2015, he issued a call for

applications from young church members to join a new “battalion of warriors” dedicated to missionary work around the globe. Their capacity to navigate diverse social, cultural, and digital landscapes makes them ideal candidates for LLDM outreach (Puckett, 142). In this digital age, youth are increasingly reflexive about the media and its role in shaping their identities and cultural contexts (Hoover, 26).

Berea International

Before becoming LLDM’s central leader, Naasón, serving primarily as a pastor in the U.S., established Berea International, the church’s official media outlet (<http://bereainternational.com>). Although he initiated the Berea project during Samuel’s leadership, it gained significant momentum and broader institutional adoption once he assumed the title of Apostle. Under his direction, Berea International evolved into a powerful channel for disseminating official LLDM media, producing and distributing a diverse array of content, including photos, videos, news updates, official “Apostolic statements,” YouTube videos, television programs, sports entertainment, radio content, and livestreams.

Areli’s mother was deeply involved with Berea International, familiarizing Areli with the church’s innovative use of technology to spread its religious message. She eagerly anticipated the Apostle’s international livestreamed sermons and was happy that her mom consistently updated her on announcements. The Apostle’s words inspired every member, and the digital connection only strengthened the spiritual family’s faith. As Puckett observes, “The LLDM’s camera technicians can capture dramatic photos of special events that impart a sense of pride to LLDM members, who, of course, attribute the grandeur depicted in these photos to the work of God” (Puckett, 65). Beyond the livestreams, mass publications of photos and videos bombard the LLDM digital sphere, thereby instilling in every member a sense that the Apostle is virtually near. These images are then shared across all social media platforms for members to engage with on a daily basis. This further

creates a particular reality for LLDM: the reality that Naasón is ever-present in their lives and watching over them as a spiritual father.

Though its primary focus has been digital media, Berea International also creates physical religious media, such as hymn books, Bibles, and veils, all of which are available for purchase and prominently stamped with the Berea logo. Areli described feeling manipulated by the official Berea Bibles, which feature the leaders' logos on their front covers. She then showed me a new non-LLDM Bible she had acquired, eagerly pointing out that it bears no NJG logo and lacks the lengthy introduction detailing the history of the Apostles. "This is what a Bible should look like," she remarked, highlighting the unique way LLDM controls every aspect of the religious media landscape.



areliyoo



fourteen

November 18, 2016 12:04pm

Figure 11: A photo posted by Areli Soria on VSCO in 2016, showcasing her official LLDM Bible alongside her “presentation” dress for her 14th birthday



Figure 12: Official Berea Hymnal Books adorned with the NJG Logo. <https://bereabooks.com/collections/hymnbooks/products/small-hymnbook-himnario-chico>

While Naasón’s vision guides Berea International, it is only sustained through the voluntary labor and unwavering commitment of faithful members who have embraced digital media as a means of expressing their piety. The institution’s investment in cutting-edge technology, such as cameras and drones, along with its adaptation of contemporary media channels like social media, allowed members participating in Berea to be part of the church’s larger modernization process. By producing images, videos, graphic art, and a variety of other content, LLDMM members assert their sense of belonging to the church while also exercising their ability to create meaning. This engagement allows them to actively participate in the process of meaning-making through their interactions with the official media landscape.

Although Areli had never directly worked for Berea, she regularly engaged with their social media campaigns and attended special events hosted by various sub-associations, such as Berea Radio, which featured concerts with artists like Abdiel Joaquín (Naasón’s nephew). She mentioned that before an important ritual event known as revivals, it was “strictly Abdiel Joaquín’s Spotify music in my ears”; there was a specific song she listened to on repeat that praised the Servant of

God, serving as a constant reminder of his benevolence. Areli also recalled drawing inspiration from LLDM micro-influencers on social media who shared their decisions to abstain from social media platforms when significant events requiring “consecration” were approaching. Additionally, as an active member of the church who participated in the recordings of important celebrations, Areli served as a consenting agent in the process of religious meaning-making. Through her involvement, she contributed to the church’s collective narrative, reinforcing her connection to the community and deepening her faith in the Apostle’s doctrine.

Thus, while Berea International effectively dominates the information landscape, exerting top-down symbolic control over the church’s narrative and communication channels, it also empowers members to engage with the media landscape and express their forms of religious participation through symbolic and imagic meaning-making. As observed in LLDM, the public’s perception of religious authority is shaped both by media representations and institutional mediations. As a result, the portrayal of religious authority often extends beyond the control of the authority itself, resting instead in the unpredictable hands of the media. Moreover, as new media actively facilitate adherents’ participation in the meaning-making process, this participatory role underscores that authority is not a static entity; rather, it is constructed through dynamic interactions within the media landscape

New Era: New Media

Naasón’s extensive use of social media platforms, such as Berea International, significantly facilitated his transition to Apostle by helping the church embrace his leadership. The widespread dissemination of his images, logos, and live-streamed broadcasts reinforced his divine authority among members—many of whom had previously been loyal to Samuel. This reliance on easily accessible and continuously updated social media fosters a short historical memory among members, smoothing the transition. As a result, information about Samuel’s Apostleship

has become increasingly scarce within LLDM, with all attention now directed toward Naasón (Puckett, 133). While digital media has served as a powerful tool for LLDM authority to advance their cosmopolitanization efforts and solidify Naasón's authority, it also leaves the church vulnerable to the consistently evolving, unpredictable implications of new media.

As Hoover argues, new media has the potential to reshape the public's perception of religious authority. For example, the impact of external media on the Catholic Church has been visibly detrimental, as it can no longer effectively define the boundaries of its power or maintain a clear distinction between itself and "the media" (Hoover, 19). Consequently, religious institutions are becoming increasingly vulnerable to heightened public scrutiny, as the control over information gradually slips from the leaders' firm grasp. Moreover, new media open up spaces for agency in unmediated locations. Hoover observes, "Above all, the media age has empowered audiences, or at least has invested audiences' practice with a claim of autonomy and empowerment, and that has radically changed the grounds on which religious and spiritual meanings and symbols are now articulated and circulated" (Hoover, 32).

In *Religious Authority and the New Media* (2007), Bryan Turner argues that the interplay between digital platforms and religious movements significantly influences contemporary faith practices. He posits that these platforms empower individuals to question and challenge established religious authorities, while those authorities, in turn, adapt to or co-opt new media to retain their influence. Turner's analysis offers a valuable framework for understanding the transformative impact of new media on religious institutions, highlighting its role as a double-edged sword: it opens new avenues for evangelism while also enabling disruption. However, beyond this binary interpretation, new media introduces a range of complexities regarding religious authority. For example, contemporary religious organizations like LLDM leverage these digital tools for outreach and engagement, while mem-

bers also utilize them to create religious meaning both in collaboration with the institution and sometimes independently of its oversight.

Furthermore, LLDM's extensive engagement with digital media enables the church to function as an institution of surveillance. As Areli described Naasón's birthday celebrations, every event is recorded, live-streamed, and digitally documented, creating a comprehensive surveillance assemblage that reflects the digital age in which we live. This sophisticated use of technology allows church authorities, including the Apostle, to monitor and influence the actions of members while simultaneously strengthening the church's religious networks. Members of LLDM are aware of the possibility that they are being observed—not only by their peers worshipping alongside them but also by church members worldwide and potentially by the Apostle himself. This awareness compels them to regulate their engagement and participation. Such a system reinforces the church's influence and helps maintain the fidelity of its members across international contexts by creating an imagined international community (Puckett, 121). Consequently, the surveillance network actively shapes how members present their pious selves both online and in the real world.

Areli described an experience where the church's authorities utilized social media as a form of control and surveillance. One day, her pastor inquired about her family's apparent reduced inactivity. In response, her family candidly shared their knowledge of the sexual abuse committed by Naasón. The pastor then referenced her mother's Facebook page, pointing out how it clearly reflected her love for her daughters, which he emphasized would be evident to anyone who browsed through her page with malicious intent. "That felt like a threat," Areli said, expressing how church officials deliberately used social media to surveil and intimidate them. This encounter ultimately led them to stop attending church altogether, as they felt the church's digital surveillance had become a threatening presence. This experience highlights a new dimension of new media and its effects on authority in the digital

age, revealing how it can serve as a tool for control and intimidation.

Just as Areli's young age influenced her acceptance of Naasón's divine assignment, her decision to leave the church at a young age profoundly affected her. After encountering traumatic revelations about Naasón, Areli fell into a deep depression. She described this period as an identity crisis; she had just begun preparing for college, and her ultimate goal had always been to pursue higher education in honor of the church. "I didn't know what I was living for anymore. Am I going to heaven? Does God exist?" These questions swirled in her mind as she began to unravel her religious beliefs. "I don't want to cry," she said, fighting back tears, "but I was suicidal." Her years of devotion made it difficult for her to find a reason to live without religion. She couldn't even bring herself to pray for God to take her life, as Naasón's influence had deeply shaped the way she learned to pray.

She shared that her greatest anguish stems from her estrangement from family members who continue to support Naasón despite his criminal actions. "Some of my uncles have master's degrees, even Ph.D.s. How can they still believe in him?" she questioned. Additionally, she revealed that she still experiences physical symptoms of PTSD when discussing LLDM. In the next chapter, we will delve into the processes of subject formation within LLDM, which make it exceedingly difficult for members to navigate their separation from the institution.

Chapter 3: Subjection and Subjecthood in LLDM



Figure 13: Dario Meza sits atop a bus owned by Naasón Joaquín García, positioned in front of the temple in HP. His father managed a bus business for Naasón at the time. Circa 1990s.

Excerpt from an interview

Dario:

“I’ve struggled a lot. I was homeless. I had nowhere to go. I remember grabbing all my stuff, taking my baby and my ex, and heading to Puebla. We had no option but to sleep on the floor for a while.

I look at what I have now—I have a job, a family—but sometimes it’s not enough. I’ve seen the darkest side of humanity. The people I grew up with, what they did... is not cool. It hurts.

My dad doesn’t talk to me. When he dies, I’m not going to be welcome at his funeral, and that’s heartbreaking. I don’t know how I’m ever going to fix that. People ask me, ‘Are you ever going to heal?’ Heal from what? How do you heal from everyone you’ve ever known turning their back on you because you did the right thing? Because you stood up for victims?

But when I think about it, I wouldn’t change my experience. It’s taught me how the real world is: all the same propaganda and all the same patterns. It’s as simple as having a conversation on Reddit. They try to shut us down and silence us, and it motivates me to do more.” (Dario Meza, March 12, 2025).

Identity Construction: LLDM and Subject Formation

Dario Meza, 32, was born in the heartland of LLDM, HP, Guadalajara, Mexico—a place that undeniably shaped the essence of who he is today. In our interview, he reflected with bittersweet nostalgia, “I grew up in that neighborhood, and it was all I knew. The church was like my mother.” His family has been intertwined with the church since the 1930s, hailing from the same town as Aaron in Colotlán, Jalisco. Dario’s father was one of Naasón’s closest friends, which meant Dario grew up in

the shadow of the Joaquín dynasty, considering them almost like family.



Figure 14: Dario pictured with baby tigers brought to the HP for the Joaquíns. Circa 1990s.

As he recounted the painful process of leaving LLDM during our interview, tears welled in his eyes. He expressed the deep anguish he feels about not being welcome back home—the lively city streets where he grew up and the cherished people who raised him. In leaving the church, he not only lost communication with his parents but also an entire community that had profoundly shaped his identity. Dario spent his childhood years in Naasón's house on Pablo Valdez Street, HP, where he lived on the first floor while the Joaquíns occupied the second. His earliest memories are filled with tender moments spent with the Joaquín family in their shared courtyard and family vacations to Acapulco beach—intimate privileges not even afforded to LLDM ministers.



Figure 15: From left to right: Dario Meza, sits alongside Adoraim Joaquín, son of Naasón Joaquín, with Naasón himself to the right of them, enjoying time on the beach. Circa 1990s.

At the age of 24, two years into Naasón’s apostleship, Dario made the independent decision to step away from religion. No longer believing in God, he automatically disqualified the divine authority of the Apostles. Dario clarified that he never intended to oppose the church; he simply lost his faith. However, once he shared his spiritual doubts with those around him, he was ultimately shunned from his tight-knit community with no one to talk to. “The moment I realized I didn’t believe in any of that, I started looking for places to vent,” he shared, revealing the stifling norms within the church that discouraged any expression of doubt. Not even blood could bridge the chasm created by his lack of faith; Once he voiced his spiritual struggles, his loved ones quickly severed ties, leaving him isolated, disconnected, and utterly unseen from the place that he once called home.

In his quest for understanding, Dario stumbled upon Reddit. He began by searching for “La Luz del Mundo,” hoping to uncover information that might ease his mental isolation, and was quickly drawn to the digital refuge of the r/exLLDM

subreddit. This online community became a lifeline, allowing him to share his most vulnerable thoughts and feelings—expressing dissenting views that were strictly prohibited within the church. By replacing prayer with digital venting, Dario discovered alternative forms of discursive and ritualistic practice in this newfound virtual environment—one rooted in what he shared as the liberation that comes from expressing oneself more authentically, free from the rigid social norms that defined LLDM.

Despite this rhetorical freedom, Dario expressed a lingering fear of the potential consequences stemming from his dissent. He explained, “Sometimes I think about the fact that *he’ll* be out of prison in a couple of years, and what if he comes after me? I mean, I don’t think I did that much, but some people seem to think so.”

Dario was referring to the looming anxiety surrounding Naasón’s eventual release from prison. The church’s hierarchical structure not only dictates acceptable norms and practices of discourse but also produces a pervasive fear of punishment for those who challenge or disobey the established social order. Moreover, Naasón’s omnipresent influence instills in Dario a sense that he is still being constantly surveilled, even after his departure from the church.

Dario’s story illustrates how the social elements of his early life profoundly shaped the construction of his identity within LLDM. In this framework, the LLDM subject is intricately linked to one’s participation in the community; the embodiment of its religious norms and practices serves as the algorithm that solidifies this identity. When Dario distanced himself from the community, the foundational core of his subjectivity was severed, and the relationships that sustained his connection were lost, prompting him to seek new ways to connect with others and reprogram his identity within the digital ecology. While his identity has reterritorialized in the architecture of the digital platform, remnants of his past remain, manifesting in his hurt, confusion, and fear of the future stemming from his lack of obedience

to the authoritarian structure. The code of his LLDM identity remains inscribed in the deepest layers of his being.

Identity and Subject-formation

Dario, who grew up in the HP, was deeply shaped by the dynamics of LLDM's intimate community, characterized by what he refers to as pervasive surveillance and authoritative control. Within the church's hierarchical structure, LLDM members navigate their individual identities, becoming obedient and disciplined subjects in the pursuit of a pious LLDM identity. De La Torre's analysis of the HP reveals how the church's hierarchical framework dictates the norms and practices of the LLDM community, one based on both domination and agential consent. She contends that, in addition to the direct oversight and institutional surveillance represented by the "panoptic eye" of the community, these influences have become deeply embedded in the habitus of church members. This internalization allows the practices experienced within the colony to extend into broader public spheres, such as workplaces and homes (De La Torre, 290). The process of identity formation transcends the boundaries of the HP, as each congregant is shaped by the church's prescribed social norms, willingly consenting to the higher authorities that establish these standards. Congregants live and express their pious dispositions in all arenas of their lives.

Beyond hierarchical implications, LLDM members, as consenting agents, fully embody their identities by engaging with and adhering to the norms of the institution. Michel Foucault's concept of the "technologies of the self" refers to the methods and techniques through which individuals regulate and shape their own bodies, minds, and ways of being in order to transform themselves into a specific kind of modified subject (Foucault et al., 18). In the context of LLDM, the institution functions as a vehicle for subject formation by guiding its members through specific self-regulation practices to effect their souls, conduct, thoughts,

and ways of being, so as to transform themselves into pious subjects through these self-modifying technologies. As De La Torre observes, “The faithful of La Luz del Mundo strive daily to purify and consecrate their daily lives: free time, work, education, courtship, and family are elements of daily life that have an ultimate meaning: to please and serve God” (De La Torre, 290). By internalizing the rules, codes of conduct, and the reverence for God and His appointed leaders, LLDM members construct their identities within the church. Anthropologist Saba Mahmood’s analysis of Muslim women in Cairo during the women’s mosque movement further illustrates this process. Through cumulative and repetitive acts of piety, these women cultivate an embodied sense of devotion that shapes their internal dispositions. Consequently, ritualistic practices and everyday habits become essential means of both being and becoming a specific kind of person (Mahmood 2012). In this way, the practices of LLDM members reflect a similar dynamic, where identity is continuously formed and reformed through engagement with the institution’s expectations and norms.

It is important to note that LLDM primarily emphasizes the cultivation of a collective identity, positioning the church as the central reference point for its members and fostering a unified sense of belonging as “the people of God.” De La Torre posits that identity within LLDM is fundamentally collective and can be understood through three dimensions: a reference identity, which positions members as part of a mystical body of the “chosen ones”; a belonging identity, which emerges within the church’s socialization networks; and a contrast identity, which defines itself in opposition to the “other” (De La Torre, 291). This collective identity is essentially built on the church’s institutional myths and histories, marking the members as distinctly LLDM through this reference point. Furthermore, this identity is perpetuated through their social interactions and rich community, especially since LLDM encourages relationships to be restricted within the bounds of the church. Finally, LLDM collective identity, as De La Torre notes, is defined by

their supposed oppositional position to the outside world, mainly through its effort in demonizing the hegemonic Catholic church and secular world more generally.

Similarly, sociologist Paula Biglieri argues that LLDM's religiosity acts as a unifying anchor of identity, serving as "a central reference point" by which members relate to each other. Therefore, there is a pervasive "contagion" of the sacred throughout all aspects of the member's lives, leading to the subjugation of daily experiences to the strict tenets of their doctrine (Biglieri, 408). By identifying themselves as members of the LLDM community, they draw upon a shared identity and a multitude of daily experiences that are distinctly shaped by social practices and representations that are largely controlled, resulting in a form of cultural homogenization within LLDM (De La Torre, 196). Though members, as agents of consent, utilize the ritual and discursive modalities to inform their subjectivities, this is overpowered by the collective identity that is shared among the congregants and which is contingent on the norms put in place by the authoritative structure—such as the expectations to be good citizens and devout Christians.

Therefore, this process enables members to appropriate church structures—rituals, discourses, and norms—and incorporate them into their own thoughts, assessments, and ways of being. Through this appropriation, members gain a practical understanding of their social and religious roles, allowing them to fully inhabit the institution and embody a unifying identity. Through ritual participation and acceptable forms of discourse, they learn to embrace and embody LLDM subjecthood. As De La Torre states, "In La Luz del Mundo, the modalities of power are intertwined with the articulation of discourse and the religious practices promoted by the ministries for the maintenance and strengthening of the social order." (De La Torre, 175).

Ritual practices

To investigate how LLDM agents become fully integrated members of the church, we will analyze the role of ritual practices in the process of subject formation. Rituals serve as a crucial arena for enacting and expressing the core principles that unify the community. They provide a space for the reproduction and demonstration of cultural forms, reinforcing social relationships and the authority of the church hierarchy. Within the context of LLDM, rituals facilitate the development of embodied pious subjects while simultaneously affirming the hierarchy's authority. Furthermore, through these rituals, believers forge a sense of community, identifying with one another through shared values and symbols. By examining the ritualistic elements of daily practices and significant events within the church, we can gain a deeper understanding of how these structured experiences shape the principles that each member embodies through their participation in ritual.

Among these rituals are those practiced daily. Church members are encouraged to engage in daily sermons, where pastors preach, evangelize, and impart Christian doctrine. Each day includes three sermons: one at 5 a.m. for early-shift workers (typically men), another at 9 a.m. for housewives (often led by women), and an evening service, which is considered the main gathering, encouraging attendance from all members. De La Torre notes, "The offer of religious practices and everyday ways of acting exerts a routinization that enables these elements to be internalized in the form of habitus, serving as structuring frameworks for the daily behavior of individuals" (De La Torre, 196). In a similar vein, Judith Butler's theory of performativity highlights the "stylized repetition of acts" through which individuals navigate their identities (Butler 1990, 179). This continuous engagement in structured, daily religious performance reinforces members' internal faith and articulates their subjectivities through embodiment.

In addition to the daily sermons, LLDM places significant emphasis on Sun-

day morning services, making attendance particularly mandatory for congregants. Those in charge preside over services and instruct congregants on how to read the Bible, providing the only authorized interpretation as dictated by the Church while also regulating the topics that can be discussed (De La Torre, 193). While the topics are tailored to the specific needs of each group, they generally align with the agenda set by the ministerial body for the entire church or, if not, by the local pastor. Each sermon begins with a series of hymns and dedicated prayers. An example of a hymn sung by the church is Hymn Number 81: “LIKE THE DAWN,” composed by José Pérez, which speaks of the Apostolic election:

Like the dawn that shines bright, Darkness disappears; Like the rain on the dry land, So are You with Your authority; And the doctrine that God has given You Will bear its fruit of holiness, And a new song they will sing, For the election that shone upon Your anointed ones.

CHORUS

Who will they be? Those who sing the song, Who will they be? Those in white garments; Who will they be? Those who will be with the Lamb, Who will they be? Those who accepted His authority.

The heavens are adorned, With the stars, the moon, and sun; Christ has also adorned You, With virtues and the election; Sing, goldfinches and nightingales, Let the rivers and the sea resound, Angels sing, let us all sing: May God bless His majesty!

Center of glory, the Lord has given You, A beautiful crown God has placed upon You; Adorned with fine pearls, Precious pearls, diamonds they are; The faithful souls who have already triumphed, Pure adornments of great value; Beautiful glory the Lord has given You.

Hymns like these reinforce and perpetuate the divine authority of the Apostle

through ritual. Prayer also plays a crucial role in legitimizing leadership, structured through a series of ordered prayers. The first prayer allows members to address God directly, seeking forgiveness and expressing gratitude. When Naasón became the Apostle, he introduced a second prayer specifically for the church to offer on his behalf, asking God to protect him as the divine leader and to reinforce their belief in his apostleship. The third prayer is dedicated to the ministerial body, and finally, at the end of the service, the pastor will conclude with a prayer for the sick and needy members of the congregation. Thus, sermons and ritualized practices like singing and praying serve as avenues for members to embrace and embody the church's norms and hierarchical authority.

Furthermore, there are two fundamental rite-of-passage rituals in LLDM that aid in the subject-formation process. Both of these rituals signify the beginning of each member's belonging to the spiritual community and present themselves as milestones in the acquisition of a new religious identity. The first is baptism, that is, the conversion and public act of faith through which one becomes a member. For those born into the religion, baptism is required at the age of 14, a significant age in LLDM that signifies spiritual maturity and the ability to make independent decisions. For others, baptism serves as a conversion process. This act is executed as a complete submergence into water, in the name of God. Baptism washes one's sin and asserts one's individual commitment to the church.

The second significant rite is the "reception of the Holy Spirit," a moment when the commitment made during baptism is reaffirmed, establishing the recipient's identity both individually and within the community (Biglieri, 408). In LLDM, this rite of passage is essential for ensuring a member's salvation and entry into the gates of heaven. The reception of the Holy Spirit involves a deeply emotional ritual that often evokes states of ecstasy, manifesting as glossolalia, or "speaking in tongues." Specific weeks are designated for these events, called "revivals," culminating in the announcement of the recipients' names in church, where they are

presented with palm fronds. The process of receiving the Holy Spirit can be intense; members are often instructed to kneel for hours while leaders observe them for signs of reception. I personally experienced this shortly after my baptism; I remember the hours spent kneeling in a room, crying and wailing, striving to embody the most pious demeanor.

The act of “receiving” carries profound significance within the LLDM community. Members who have “not received” are often perceived as spiritually empty. One of my interviewees, Areli, recalled a poignant moment following the death of the second leader: “I remember seeing my cousin in tears, believing he wouldn’t go to heaven because he hadn’t received [the Holy Spirit] and the Apostle was gone.” In LLDM, the further one strays from the works of God, the more challenging it becomes to receive the Holy Spirit, emphasizing the need to align with God’s wishes.

Revivals play a crucial role in ensuring members’ obedience and adherence to the church’s rules and also act as an initiation process, dramatizing the confirmation of God’s presence and affirming that LLDM is “the true Christian church” (De la Torre and Fortuny, 1991a; 134). Through the reception of the Holy Spirit, individuals join the larger LLDM community, with their access to the heavenly realm assured as long as they remain obedient to the Lord’s will. The ritualistic practices during revivals—where members openly and publicly engage in glossolalia—shape one’s subjecthood within the church, allowing members to embody their deepest piety through these sacred rituals.

Furthermore, LLDM observes its own ritual holidays, the most significant of which is the annual Holy Supper, celebrated on August 14, coinciding with Aarón’s birthday. Initially, faithful members would travel from their hometowns to visit Aarón and present him with gifts on this special day (De La Torre, 214). This practice seemingly evolved to be the most significant ritual in the LLDM imaginary and

mythology. Participation in this ritual is mandatory for all church members, as it is considered essential for the annual cleansing of their sins.

Historically, hundreds of thousands of members from around the globe have made a pilgrimage to the holy city of HP to witness the blessing of the bread and wine, presided over by the Apostle. Much like Muslims undertaking the Hajj, LLDM members go to great lengths to travel to this Mexican Mecca. The Holy Supper symbolizes the consecration of the soul, representing a rebirth and a profound connection to the mandate of Jesus Christ through the consumption of His body and blood. This celebration serves as a poignant reminder of Jesus Christ's sacrifice and reinforces the fraternal bonds and harmony within LLDM. It is akin to a New Year for the church, where members forgive one another and seek forgiveness from God for their sins, emphasizing that this forgiveness is granted solely through the authority of the Apostle on earth.

During the ceremony, everyone except the Apostle is required to dress entirely in white, symbolizing purity. The climax of the event occurs when the Apostle blesses the bread and wine, offering a prayer to God to forgive the sins of his merciful followers and asking God to punish him instead. In response, the members kneel, overwhelmed with emotion, often crying fervently. Following this sacred act, the congregation experiences a state of ecstasy as they partake in the bread and wine, while the choir sings unifying hymns such as "I'm the Child of a King."

As the number of believers in LLDM has grown significantly, accommodating everyone in one location has become increasingly challenging. The LLDM website reported 550,000 attendees for the Holy Supper in HP in 2023, with thousands more participating in various countries. Consequently, the Holy Supper is now celebrated in different nations with national or regional headquarters and on various dates, allowing more members to partake in this vital ritual. Nevertheless, the Holy Supper continues to serve as a unifying event for the grand spiritual family,

bringing them together in the sacred practice of consuming the body of Christ and listening to the words of the sanctified Apostle.



Figure 16: Naasón Joaquín addresses his followers during the Holy Supper on August 14, 2018. Berea International.

The routinization of rituals and daily practices within LLDM reinforces the values and meanings that the organization imparts to its members. De La Torre states, “In La Luz Del Mundo, the ritual—whether political, social, or religious—always aims to elevate the status of the church’s hierarchical structure” (De La Torre, 227). Rituals solidify the symbols and values established by these hierarchies, thereby legitimizing the hegemonic power of the church’s highest authorities. Conversely, LLDM members demonstrate a unique form of agency through their engagement in ritual practices and daily activities that reinforce their identities within the community. By willingly submitting to the authority of the apostle and the institutional framework of the church, members actively shape and embody a disciplined and obedient subjectivity that is regarded as pious in the eyes of God. In this way, their submission to a dominant structure transcends mere compliance; it represents a distinctive expression of agency, allowing them to navigate their faith and

identity within a framework that they have embodied and embraced.

Authoritative Discourse

Beyond the routinization of rituals as a means of legitimizing power and meaning within the church, it is crucial to examine the role of discourse, which shapes the subjectivities of members and influences their interactions with one another and the external world. Acceptable forms of institutional discourse both arise from and contribute to the power dynamics within LLDM. At the apex of this discursive authority is the apostle, whose words are regarded as the will of God, leaving no room for questioning, disqualification, or dissent.

Authoritative discourse serves to confirm religious authority in LLDM, often beginning as a socialization process from a young age. As children, we affectionately referred to the Apostle Samuel as “Papi Samuelito” or “Daddy Samuel” during church studies and in our everyday conversations. Church leaders and families actively encouraged these endearing terms, reinforcing his authority through accepted discourse. As Areli Soria recalled during our interview:

“I remember asking my mom as a kid, ‘Does Papa Samuel ever cuss?’ and with a stern look on her face replied, ‘Don’t ever think badly about Papa Samuel! If you think bad about Papa Samuel, you’re going to hell!’ From that moment on, I understood that I could never speak negatively about the apostle again” (Areli Soria, April 9, 2025).

Such socialization processes solidified the perception of Samuel as a holy figure, establishing norms of discourse that surrounded his divine leadership and fostering a deep affection that resonated in the hearts of his followers. Within this framework, social agents are unable to alter the code that governs the dominant discourse; however, they are deeply influenced by it and participate within its established conditions. As a result, each official discursive act is crafted to reaffirm

the authority of the church's leaders while simultaneously reinforcing the congregation's sense of submission (De La Torre, 227).

Religions like LLDM act as systems of social control, imposing boundaries on communication processes while constructing a hierarchy rooted in the recognition of authorized discourse (De La Torre, 42). De La Torre suggests that communication, in this sense, is the principal vehicle for socialization and identity formation. It mediates between the symbolic and material realms, serving as the foundation for creating and sustaining community. She notes that:

“We must not overlook the power that comes from controlling resources and the use of speech, as discourse is not merely an instrument but embodies and circulates worldviews; it offers the capacity to shape and mold reality. However, it is not enough to exercise control and manipulate the processes of social discourse production to conquer ideological power; the legitimization, acceptance, and plausibility of an alternative are also required” (De La Torre, 2000).

The organizational structure of LLDM significantly influences the norms surrounding the production, circulation, and recognition of everyday discourse. However, it is essential to recognize that discourse also plays a crucial role in shaping and perpetuating social reality, serving as the means through which the social order is legitimized (De La Torre, 176). For example, following Naasón's arrest, the church's official communication body launched a campaign that was embraced by members on social media. Church members began posting “#honorable” to assert their leader's innocence and uphold his honor, mirroring the messaging promoted by the church's ministerial corps. By establishing this form of communication, the leadership explicitly challenges the legitimacy of Naasón's arrest, effectively dismissing any narrative that might suggest his guilt. This dominant discourse, which frames Naasón as innocent, influences how members perceive him, and the

widespread use of “#honorable” reinforces the narrative that the church seeks to instill in its followers.



Figure 17: Screenshot taken by Areli Soria on instagram in 2019.

Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of “Authoritative Discourse” revolves around a rigid external dogma or doctrine, encoded in a specific “script” that distinctly separates it from all other forms of discourse that coexist alongside it; this code remains unalterable. All other types of discourse are structured in relation to it, making it fixed, immutable, and impervious to hacking (Bakhtin, 342). Anthropologist Alexei Yurchak applies the notion of authoritative discourse to analyze the performative acts in the late Soviet Union, viewing them as mechanisms through which social agents navigated a system characterized by hyper-normalized authoritative discourse. Yurchak argues that the discourse and forms of knowledge that permeated everyday Soviet life were not isolated, fixed, and clearly defined spheres or codes; rather, they were dynamic processes that were never entirely predetermined and were continuously produced and reinterpreted (Yurchak 2005, 18).

In LLDM, the normalization of authoritative discourse emanating from the highest levels of the religious hierarchy significantly shapes the subjectivities of its members by establishing the conditions for articulating their identity. The institutional and symbolic mediations lend validity and recognition to this discursive

framework, regulated by the hierarchical structure that governs and normalizes the community's social and religious practices (De La Torre, 179).

However, the everyday lives of members are far more complex and nuanced than the institutional discourse and normative frameworks suggest. While the dominant discursive modalities and institutionalized rituals shape the subjectivity of members, these individuals also act as social agents who reinterpret and infuse symbolic meaning into their daily, secular lives. Certain discursive practices are considered normalized, such as the customary way members greet one another. For example, when greeting each other, members typically say, "The Peace of the Lord" before engaging in any further communication. This practice not only reinforces one's identity as a pious and obedient LLDM member but also serves to reproduce that identity within the community. However, these normalized discursive modalities also provide members with a pathway to engage in forms of unmediated discourse. In other words, by starting a conversation with "The Peace of the Lord," individuals can then transition to discussing a wider range of topics, whether secular or non-secular. Therefore, by engaging with the authoritative discourse, members can liberally navigate communication, operating on the ubiquity of normalized discourse. This dynamic creates a fluid space where social actors appropriate and reconstruct the institution's rules, imbuing them with significance that aligns with their own motivations and needs. It is within this space that they forge their own practical and symbolic domains of socio-vital existence (De La Torre, 270). Moreover, as Butler notes, being shaped by discourse does not eliminate the possibility of agency (Butler, 182).

Investigating the ways members of the church navigate their subjectivities within the framework of authoritative discourse is crucial for understanding how digital mediations disrupt these structures and enable ex-members to exercise a particular form of alternative agency. Specifically, these digital mediations create opportunities for reinterpretation and fluidity in discourse, independent of church leaders'

influence. As Judith Butler notes in their analysis of gender performativity, “Paradoxically, the reconceptualization of identity as an effect, that is, as produced or generated, opens up possibilities of ‘agency’ that are insidiously foreclosed by positions that take identity categories as foundational and fixed”(Butler, 187). Building on Butler’s insights, we see that subjectivity within LLDM is not static; it is active, fluid, and embodied through practices and participation in rituals and discourse. As the discursive landscape shifts from LLDM to platforms like Reddit, the nature of subjectivity transforms, leading to the rearticulation, re-signification, and restructuring of discursive modalities.

r/exLLDM

Chapter 4: Reddit: A Brief History and Overview

Excerpt from an Interview

Areli:

“I’m the type of person that needs a visual; something to read and go back to consistently. Re-read and re-read. I remember fighting the urge to look for something, thinking, ‘I’m just gonna scare myself, and I’m not even going to leave.’ It was the very beginning of August 2018 when I typed in keywords: “LLDM. RAPE. ABUSE.” I saw mostly positive things about LLDM, like the church website and YouTube videos, until I scrolled far enough to find the Reddit. I knew what Reddit was, but I had never used it; I just knew it was where people told stories anonymously.

When I clicked on it, there were only about 10 members on the sub. I didn’t join or make an account; I was just lurking. The first post I saw was a literal file of Naasón getting sent nude pictures through text message. I thought that was scary. Another traumatizing post I found was about a guy detailing how he got raped and abused. It was a whole story about how Samuel seduced him, how he kept him quiet afterward, and how he threatened him. After reading that I remember feeling completely shocked and scared. Now that I think about it, it might have been Moises Padilla from the 90s.”

Reddit’s History

Reddit is a social networking platform created in 2005 by college roommates Alexis Ohanian and Steve Huffman. As the self-proclaimed “front page of the internet,” Reddit was intended as a space for users to aggregate and share links and news in the burgeoning spirit of Web 2.0. At its core, Reddit is simply a forum where users share original and/or reposted content from around the web.

It hosts a network of smaller communities called “subreddits,” with various and diverse user-created boards forming a larger panoply of digital culture.

Initially founded with the support of the startup incubator Y Combinator, the team of two was joined by Aaron Swartz, a passionate advocate for freedom of information and digital rights. In 2006, Reddit was acquired by the media company Condé Nast, and in 2011, it became an independent subsidiary of its parent company, Advance Publications. Swartz was fired after the company relocated to San Francisco under AP for undisclosed reasons, although his personal blog hinted at his dissatisfaction with the corporate culture and policies under the new ownership.⁷ Ohanian and Huffman eventually left Reddit in 2009 to pursue their own ventures while the platform faced a tumultuous period characterized by leadership changes and user revolts against various policies implemented by the ongoing succession of CEOs.

In 2014, Ohanian and Huffman returned to leadership roles, signaling a renewed commitment to Reddit’s development amid user dissatisfaction. Reddit users often engage in online boycotts when they feel discontent, giving moderators and active users significant influence over the platform’s internal affairs.

Reddit transitioned to a publicly held company in 2024. While it may not be as universally recognized as other social media platforms, it has emerged as the third most visited website in the United States and ranks twentieth globally (Gaudette et al. 2021, 3491). As of September 2024, Reddit boasts over 100,000 active communities and has accumulated more than 16 billion posts and comments.⁸

Most notably, Reddit’s community-centered forum has served as a powerful platform for various movements and has fostered collective action in the physical world. Much of the activism on Reddit has centered on protecting free speech and online infrastructure in the U.S., such as privacy and net neutrality (Massanari, 45). One particular focus of mobilization was the Stop Online Piracy Act

⁷<http://www.aaronsw.com/weblog/officespace>

⁸<https://redditinc.com/>

proposed by Congress to track internet use and limit online piracy. Additionally, the case of *Netchoice v. Paxton* highlights the active involvement of Reddit users in mobilizing for these issues. Moderators of the r/scotus and r/law subreddits collaborated to develop an amicus brief challenging Texas and Florida social media laws, which threaten their ability to effectively moderate content by limiting essential tools for managing acceptable speech and undermining the user-centric model of expressive association.⁹

However, this activism exists alongside significant criticisms of Reddit as a platform. Scholars have noted the tendency to overstate new media's potential to democratize, often overlooking the contradictory nature of these platforms, which can enable both toxic technocultures and socially progressive movements to thrive. Much of the discourse on Reddit has been marred by blatant racism, misogyny, transphobia, ableism, and homophobia, influenced by technological logics that underpin the platform, such as "geek culture" and hegemonic masculinity.¹⁰ Consequently, Reddit has maintained a controversial position in the public sphere, facing accusations of facilitating the growth of far-right extremism in the U.S., particularly through subreddits like the infamous r/the-donald, which was ultimately banned for violating platform rules. Scholars have observed that far-right spaces on Reddit, such as r/the-donald, foster collective identity formation and create echo chambers for extremist ideologies. Reddit's participatory features can promote and normalize otherwise unacceptable views while limiting the visibility of alternative perspectives (Gaudette et al. 2021, 3503).

Thus, Reddit emerges as a dual-edged sword, raising important questions about the nature of community in the digital age. I examine how Reddit provides an alternative space to powerful institutions, strengthening member bonds through shared experiences while also exploring how these spaces cultivate specific nor-

⁹<https://www.reddit.com/r/scotus/comments/18d1tyt>

¹⁰Massanari describes that many web 2.0 platforms are inherently informed by "geek culture" because of the nature of corporate technology (Massanari, 47).

mative cultures that may restrict diverse discourse. In summary, Reddit acts as an incubator of diverse technocultures, creating a complex cultural laboratory that reflects both the potential and pitfalls of online community engagement.

How does Participation Work on Reddit?

Reddit initially emerged as an aggregation site where users could link to external content and engage in discussions within comment threads. Describing Reddit's nature can be challenging, as many definitions tend to be either too broad or too narrow. At its core, Reddit serves as a platform for users to discuss a wide array of topics, share photos and media, and interact with one another. While it began as a bulletin board for linking and aggregating content from other websites, it has evolved into a space where users frequently post original content and engage in intellectual debates.

Subreddits

Reddit is primarily characterized by its diverse online communities known as “subreddits,” which are organized around shared interests. These subreddits can be based on any subject, ranging from broad themes to highly specific niches. Some examples of today's most popular subreddits are showcased in the image below:

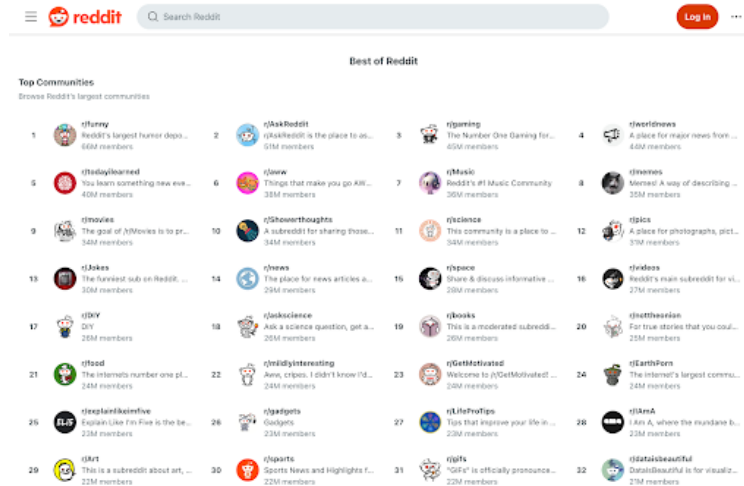


Figure 18: Screenshot of Reddit's homepage

Rules

There are eight platform-wide rules that, if violated, can lead to account bans by site administrators. The first rule, intriguingly anthropocentric, is to “remember the human.” This rule encourages users to avoid any form of discrimination or bullying. The second rule emphasizes the importance of adhering to community guidelines, highlighting the platforms’ commitment to fostering appropriate engagement within subreddits. The remaining six rules focus on preventing specific behaviors, including invasion of privacy, sexually abusive content, impersonation, posting graphic content without appropriate labeling, illegal activities, and hacking.

While the official rules are brief, Reddit’s Rules page acknowledges that each subreddit, with its unique subcultures, may have its own approaches to regulation. The page emphasizes that the boundaries and norms of social interaction are shaped and enforced by the communities themselves, allowing for a diverse range of experiences across the platform. Many have described Reddit’s moderation approach as a “laissez-faire” regulation style, contributing to its controversial reputation for allowing toxic communities to thrive (Gaudette et al. 2021, 3494).

Moderators

Given that the responsibility of regulation lies within the subreddit, Reddit would not successfully function without its dedicated band of moderators. These unpaid, self-appointed individuals oversee subreddits, determining and enforcing the rules that govern each community. Moderating requires a significant investment of time and resources, and many moderators from larger subreddits collaborate closely with Reddit's administrators, showcasing their importance to the company as a whole. Moderators have the authority to establish specific guidelines and standards for discussions within threads, as well as more tailored rules related to the subreddit's subject matter. Massanari suggests that by creating and enforcing these rules, moderators play a key role in shaping the content, interactions, and overall tone of individual subreddits (Massanari, 122).

User Engagement

The most fundamental form of participation on Reddit is through upvoting and downvoting posts. Upvoting a post enhances its visibility and encourages user engagement within a specific subreddit community, while downvoting reduces its visibility, helping to determine which posts warrant more attention. In this way, users have direct agency in shaping the discourse of their chosen communities, effectively setting the terms of debate and configuring the scope of appropriate discourse.

Redditors can also receive upvotes and downvotes on their comments, making the discussions surrounding posts one of the platform's most engaging features. Importantly, these votes are anonymous and not linked to individual accounts, allowing users to express their opinions and shape the debate without a trial. This anonymity distinguishes Reddit from other social media platforms, which often focus on public-facing personas and, as a result, typically do not provide a "dislike" option akin to downvoting.

Furthermore, users who submit content or participate in discussions earn Karma points, calculated based on the total number of upvotes and downvotes their posts and comments received. This system of Karma not only incentivizes quality contributions but also fosters a sense of community and accountability among users.

Information Environment

The name “Reddit,” a play on the phrase “I read it,” perfectly encapsulates the platform’s information-centric environment. While Redditors share a variety of media, including links and images, it is primarily a text-based platform where communication occurs predominantly through written content. This format allows users to exchange knowledge and insights, fostering a culture of dialogue and discussion (Massanari, 24). Reddit is a hub for more substantive conversations than visually driven platforms such as Instagram or TikTok, which focus on curated profiles and imagery. The emphasis on text-based engagement encourages deeper intellectual discourse that is often lacking in other social media spaces. This commitment to user-generated content is so significant that in 2024, Reddit entered into a 60 million annual licensing agreement with Google to provide data for training its AI models.¹¹

One can marvel at the extensive wealth of information that Redditors contribute on a wide range of topics, reflecting a deep interest in understanding the world at large. Though it is not a utopian realm where the best of humanity convenes, Reddit plays a crucial role in our information ecosystem, fostering debate and dialogue that might otherwise remain overlooked in more mainstream discourse.

Pseudo-anonymity

Reddit’s pseudo-anonymous structure is a pivotal aspect of its capacity to foster collective action and facilitate alternative world-making. I use the term “pseudo-anonymous” rather than “anonymous” because Reddit users can cultivate a rep-

¹¹<https://www.reuters.com/technology/reddit-ai-content-licensing-deal-with-google-sources-say-2024-02-22/>

utation over time, distinguishing it from completely anonymous platforms like 4chan, where interactions are transient and lack continuity. On Reddit, users can directly message one another, and their profiles showcase comments and contributions across various subreddits. This visibility allows others to piece together a user's background, glean insights into their location, interests, hobbies, and even sensitive information through careful examination of their posts and comments.

Creating an account on Reddit is a straightforward process that requires minimal information—primarily an email address. This relative obscurity of one's real identity empowers users to share personal information through their online personas, often leading to disclosures they might hesitate to make in face-to-face interactions. Additionally, the ease of account creation enables users to establish “throwaway” accounts, which they can use to engage in discussions without revealing details about their personal lives or previous interactions on the platform.

Moreover, pseudo-anonymity serves as a vital tool for dissent. It provides a space for individuals to express and discuss dissenting opinions without the fear of reprisal, which is essential for fostering alternative discourse and challenging authoritative institutions. By allowing users to engage without sacrificing their real-world identities, pseudo-anonymity cultivates a unique form of community and counter-public. In this context, anonymity acts as a binding force, while the flow of information fuels the interconnected web of discussions. Powerful institutions often rely on the concept of personhood to maintain control; thus, pseudo-anonymity becomes a form of resistance against rigid subject formation. In this way, pseudo-anonymity has immense power.

Community-based platform

Reddit's community-based structure is at the heart of its distinctiveness, setting it apart from other social networking platforms. While many platforms empha-

size individual self-presentation and cultivate microcelebrities, Reddit focuses on collective participation. This emphasis on community means that Reddit is not centered around a singular, individual identity; instead, it thrives on the collective identities that emerge from its communities. Each Community defines its own identity, often in opposition to or in connection to other spaces (physical or virtual).

The inherently communal nature of participation on Reddit allows users to engage with topics of interest rather than individual personas. As a result, interactions are primarily driven by the content of posts rather than the posters' identities. In contrast, social media platforms that rely on individual presentation are the extension of embodied subjecthood rather than a result of digital meaning-making and community identity formation.

The commitment to collectivity and community cultivates a unique type of digital subjectivity. As Massanari notes, Reddit allows for and encourages a sense of identity that is "mutable, flexible, and multiple" (Massanari, 23). In this environment, users engage in significant identity work. The result is a dynamic space where individuals can formulate their identities in relation to others, fostering a sense of belonging and shared purpose that is often absent in more individualistic social media landscape

Politics of Platform

The politics of platform design and operation are crucial to understanding how users engage with spaces like Reddit. As Massanari points out, all web platforms, including Reddit, are commodified environments shaped by technological logics that influence individual behavior (Massanari, 31). This commodification raises important questions about the dual role of platforms as both services for users and as entities catering to advertisers, media producers, and lawmakers. Gillespie highlights this tension, noting that the term "platform" serves as a discursive rest-

ing point that reveals the complexities of these relationships. Platforms are not merely spaces for code execution; they are designed to facilitate communication, interaction, and commerce, thereby sanctioning specific modes of engagement and expression (Gillespie, 2018).

The notion of a neutral platform is a myth; all platforms engage in moderation, which inherently shapes the norms of discourse and cultural production. Whether it's top-down platforms like Facebook or more decentralized ones like Reddit, decisions regarding moderation play a critical role in shaping user interactions. As Gillespie asserts, the decisions made regarding moderation—or the lack thereof—are themselves political acts that influence user engagement and the overall culture of the platform (Gillespie, 2018). This perspective aligns with Bruno Latour's actor-network theory, which posits that technologies and humans are co-constitutive (Latour 2007). In this framework, algorithmic technologies are not just tools; human actions and decisions inform them, and in turn, they shape human behavior.

Nick Saever further elaborates on this idea by describing algorithms as a form of culture where technical and non-technical elements intertwine to create a unique cultural landscape (Saever, 2017). Since algorithms are products of human practices, they are inherently diverse and reflective of the cultural contexts in which they operate. This means that the design of platforms like Reddit is not merely a technical endeavor; it is a cultural one that influences how users interact, communicate, and form communities. Understanding the politics of platform design thus requires a critical examination of the algorithms that govern these spaces, as they play a pivotal role in shaping user experiences and the broader cultural dynamics at play.

Chapter 5: r/exLLDM as a Case Study

Excerpt from an interview

Hanan: *Why did you join the r/exLLDM subreddit?*

Alex (Moderator 1): *I was just trying to feel like... I wasn't the only one dealing with these kinds of thoughts and concerns and... I was hoping I could find other people so I wouldn't feel alone.*

Hanan: *What were those thoughts and concerns?*

Alex (Moderator 1): *I was concerned about some of my family's involvement in... some activities that... just didn't sound right to me, like spending a lot of time in Samuel and Naason's houses in HP. Nothing about it really seemed right... I felt like I had to talk to other people.*

Just Winging it: r/exlldm origins

The first interviewee, who we'll call Alex (29 years old), encapsulates in just a few sentences the driving force that set r/exLLDM on its emergent path: the desire to not feel alone. Alex, one of the formative r/exLLDM moderators, joined the group during its developing phase in 2017. Growing up in the belly of the beast, HP, and the US, she describes her childhood as an echo chamber, where contact with anyone outside the church—even family—was virtually nonexistent. Her parents' relentless involvement in HP left her straddling two worlds, resulting in a fragmented educational experience and a sense of disconnection from any non-LLDM livelihood.

As Alex transitioned into adulthood, she began to cultivate a growing skepticism about LLDM. By age 18, she started distancing herself from the church, gradually stepping back from typical youth activities such as participating in the choir

and fundraising by selling food outside the church. Her desire for separation underscores LLDM's rigid authoritative structure: adherence to LLDM doctrine is a prerequisite for belonging. One is not allowed to question the divine mythologies or discursive authorities that define the LLDM lifeworld. This inflexible framework allows little room for questioning, particularly regarding the authority of the apostle. Therefore, Alex, feeling alone and guilty for possessing dissenting opinions about her beliefs, looked to a digital audience for support.

Our conversation prompted me to consider how LLDM operates as both a vertical and horizontal panoptic surveillance system. Members not only rely on authoritative surveillance from the top (the apostle) but also vigilantly monitor the spiritual status of their peers. This social dynamic fosters an environment where individuals are acutely aware of each other's faith, further entrenching the church's control over its members through their own vigilance. Building on Foucault's concepts of power and surveillance, Fortuny argues that LLDM's hierarchical disciplinary power transforms into what she terms "indiscrete power," as it "is everywhere and always alert, and absolutely discrete since it functions permanently in silence" (Fortuny, 158; Foucault, 1991, 104-110). The construction of the online space as a haven for LLDM dissent illuminates the fact that church members function as agents of disciplinary power; control is ingrained in the community's culture.

Throughout our conversation, Alex expressed a palpable sense of reservation, likely stemming from a persistent fear of the church. "There's a lot of stuff I'm scared of," she admitted as if the looming threat of the church deciphering her online persona and uncovering her true identity was ever-present.

In this context, Alex joined the subreddit seeking an ideological and emotional sanctuary from the perils of LLDM. She sought validation for her doubts and concerns by connecting with like-minded individuals for anonymous discussions. Despite grappling with traumatic experiences, her primary focus in r/exLLDM

was to casually engage with others about her personal struggles and spirituality, hoping to find people who'd validate her concerns. She never intended to use the forum as a platform for profound revelations about the church's abuses; she simply wanted better answers to her life-long questions.

When I asked Alex if she had any prior experience with Reddit before joining r/exLLDM, I was surprised to learn that she had barely interacted with the platform prior to becoming part of the ex-LLDM community. Her initial explorations of Reddit were within other ex-religious groups, such as r/exmormon and r/exJW (Jehovah's Witnesses), before she ultimately found her digital home in r/exLLDM. Reddit's reputation as "the front page of the internet" highlights its visibility and accessibility as a platform. One doesn't need to be a member of the digital intelligentsia to participate in alternative communities; all you need is a browser and a dose of curiosity. By utilizing Reddit's digital affordances, Alex uses the platform as an alternate space to perform non-LLDM identity, consequently shaping her re-configured self as an ex-member of LLDM. In this way, Alex exercised a particular form of agency by choosing to participate in a distinct counter-public, r/exLLDM. While she did not choose to be entrenched in the LLDM community, she chose to be an active participant in the digitally articulated exLLDM life world.

Moreover, Alex is aware of the political undertones that permeate the Reddit ecosystem. "If I knew more about the culture or how it's perceived, I probably would avoid Reddit," she shared, indicating a nuanced understanding of the complexities involved in navigating online spaces. This speaks to Reddit's dual nature: on the one hand, it is a space offering an alternative mode of identity and community building, and on the other, it is an incubator of communities on the ideological fringe that often perpetuates toxic behaviors. We'll explore the polarizing dynamics within the r/exLLDM subreddit itself later on in the thesis.

By transitioning to Reddit as a space for reconstructing her identity, Alex reterri-

torializes her previous state of subjection by referring to a new narrative framework offered by r/exLLDM. Her experience illustrates how users of r/exLLDM actively reconfigure their identities by inhabiting different versions of themselves, leveraging specific affordances such as pseudonymity to make their new identities visible within this digital landscape. However, the process of identity formation is intricately tied to the algorithmic structures and contextual conditions in this environment. The r/exLLDM subreddit not only creates the conditions for alternative subjecthood but also reflects a dynamic interplay where the community both influences and is influenced by distinct nodes of digital interaction and platform structures.

Subreddit context and Overview

To gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics within r/exLLDM, it is essential to examine the foundational elements that constitute the community's front page. As of now, r/exLLDM boasts a membership of 6.1k. The subreddit was established on February 5, 2017, approximately two years before Garcia's arrest, a pivotal moment in the community's evolution. The sidebar features the official group description, which reads:

“Welcome, we are the internet's first forum for ex-members of La Luz del Mundo! Bienvenidos al primer foro bilingüe y público para exmiembros de La Luz del Mundo. Here you can share exit support, discussion, and current events related to the church. We are bilingual and encourage discussion in both English and Spanish. Aquí puede compartir el apoyo de salida, la discusión y los eventos actuales sobre la iglesia. Somos bilingües y fomentamos la discusión tanto en inglés como en español.”

The subreddit's bilingual nature represents its transnational reach and commitment to inclusivity and multiplicity of voices. Looking through the array of content on the sub, one can see that the posts are in both English and Spanish. Contrastingly,

outside of r/exLLDM, most Reddit users are English-speaking, with 42 percent of users from the US, followed by the UK, Canada, and Australia.¹² As an English-dominating forum, it is interesting to observe that having and generating content in Spanish is a crucial pillar of r/exLLDM. This reiterates the notion that those involved in the ex-LLDM community are not exclusively individuals who reflect the broader Reddit user base, mostly comprised of white, male-identifying Americans. Like the subreddit description, many posts are written in English and translated into Spanish, opening accessibility to users whose primary language is Spanish, like many of those from the church. This has seemingly flourished from user advocacy, as user u/LIBRE2022 notes, “MAS PUBLICACIONES EN ESPAÑOL,” where they call for more Spanish inclusivity on the subreddit (u/LIBRE2022, 2023).¹³

Rules

As previously discussed, the rules governing a subreddit play a crucial role in shaping the culture and norms of the specific community. The explicit rules listed on the subreddit page delineate the boundaries of acceptable discourse, influencing users’ relationships with one another and consequently shaping their possibilities of engagement. Currently, there are ten rules that govern the r/exLLDM subreddit. Outlined on the home page are things not allowed on the subreddit, as follows:

1. Personal attacks/incites to violence/bigotry
2. Sensitive information/outing/Doxxing/
3. No Proselytizing
4. Generalized abuse and harassment
5. Spamming and URL Shorteners

¹²<https://explodingtopics.com/blog/reddit-users>

¹³“MAS PUBLICACIONES EN ESPAÑOL” translates to “More Publications in Spanish” /u/LIBRE2022, “MAS PUBLICACIONES EN ESPAÑOL,” r/exllm, October 31, 2022, 10:23:01 AM, <https://www.reddit.com/r/exllm/comments/yiicmh/>

6. No argumentative apologists
7. No Low-Effort content
8. No posts about regular members or secretaries/helpers without sending us proof you have reported
9. Posts about church spokespeople and ministers are allowed as long as it is your testimony, not rumors
- 10.No official court documents from the case

Some of these rules align with Reddit's general guidelines, while others are tailored specifically to the r/exLLDM community. Notably, rules 2, 3, 6, 8, 9, and 10 are particularly significant to this subreddit, and I will briefly discuss the importance of each.

Rule 2 is integral to the protection of victims, especially those involved in the legal case against Naasón. The subreddit is committed to ensuring that no posts or comments reveal the identities of individuals who may be vulnerable. This rule fosters a sense of safety and confidentiality within the community.

Rule 3, which prohibits "proselytizing," is particularly interesting given that this subreddit caters to ex-believers. This rule aims to safeguard the subreddit from individuals attempting to convert others to their personal beliefs, thereby preventing active LLDM members from persuading former members to reconsider their departure. The presence of "lurkers" from LLDM, who may participate in the subreddit with the intention to disrupt, poses a threat that exists heavily in the ex-LLDM imaginary.

Rule 6 specifically discourages participation from individuals who harass ex-members or advocate for Garcia's innocence. The description for this rule states, "Argumentative apologists are treated as trolls regardless of their authenticity." Here,

authenticity is crucial; being an ex-LLDM member involves performing a non-LLDM identity.

Rules 8 and 9 are designed to prevent the spread of misinformation and disinformation within the subreddit. Rule 8 protects from unverified discourse about Naason’s personal “secretaries,” an ambiguous title for women in his inner circle, as many posts seek to expose them. Rule 9 addresses the need to refrain from spreading rumors about ministers or other official LLDM spokespeople. These rules reflect an interesting aspect of the subreddit’s culture; its early ecosystem was rife with gossip and rumor, which played a significant role in performing ex-LLDM identity and subjecthood. By implementing these rules, moderators aim to protect the subreddit’s informational integrity and steer it away from behaviors they deem detrimental.

Rule 10 explicitly prohibits users from re-uploading court documents related to Garcia’s case as a liability and safety issue to refrain users from causing harm to any ongoing cases.

Overall, these rules reflect the moderators’ concerns and priorities, shaping the subreddit into a space that seeks to balance open discourse with the protection of its members and the integrity of the information shared. However, these rules reflect not only the moderator’s priorities and concerns but also the broader community advocacy for shaping the subreddit’s culture.

r/exLLDM Wiki

The subreddit’s “Wiki” page serves as a comprehensive repository for publicly available information about LLDM.¹⁴ This resource includes a variety of materials, such as general overviews of LLDM, scholarly research, and publications related to the church, links to informative videos, details about the leader’s immediate and extended family, exit resources for those seeking to leave the church,

¹⁴<https://www.reddit.com/r/exlldm/wiki/index/>

news reports, and other relevant documentation. By curating this information, the Wiki provides users with critical insights that regular, active members of LLDM may not encounter or access through the church's official channels.

The Wiki is a vital component of the subreddit's role as a counter-information ecology. Given the church's stringent control over members' engagement with external news materials—an issue highlighted by user u/losingyit in a post titled “Doubts,” where they stated, “I don't think it's right that we are told not to look at the news”—the subreddit functions as a network that hosts alternative perspectives and information.¹⁵ Through the Wiki, the subreddit community reinforces its commitment to fostering informed discussions and making information widely accessible.

Counter-Public Identity



Figure 19: Screenshot of r/exLLDM logo

All of these components construct a particular ex-LLDM identity designed to place the subreddit in opposition to the institution. Pictured above is the subreddit's logo, cleverly subverting one of LLDM's popular mottos: “*Somos de Naasón Joaquín*,” which translates to “We belong to Naasón Joaquín.” Instead, the logo boldly proclaims, “No somos de Naasón Joaquín,” meaning “We do not belong to Naasón Joaquín.” This intentional rephrasing serves as a powerful statement of resistance against the dominant LLDM public, where users are actively redefining their relationship to the church's leader. This visual representation of dissent

¹⁵/u/losingyit, “Doubts,” Reddit, /r/exlldm, August 30, 2020, 12:02:47, [<https://www.reddit.com/r/exlldm/comments/ijib8v/doubts/>].

is crucial to the signification processes of ex-LLDM, as it directly challenges the dominant narrative propagated by the church that portrays Naasón as an innocent and benevolent leader.

Moderators in the r/exLLDM Early Days

R/exLLDM has ten official moderators, a number that has undoubtedly fluctuated over time as the space has grown gradually and in intermittent bursts. As the subreddit has evolved, so too have the dedicated moderators, adapting and transforming alongside it. As arbiters of acceptable participation and discourse, the moderators wield significant power in shaping the community's collective identity, influencing how individual members of r/exLLDM articulate their digital subjectivities. I had the opportunity to speak with several moderators of the r/exLLDM subreddit, both current and retired, to better understand the motivations and challenges behind their voluntary and highly laborious roles.

Among them was Alex, one of the subreddit's earliest moderators. "To be honest, I was just winging it," Alex recalled, reflecting on her role during the subreddit's "early days" before Naasón's arrest in 2019. She elaborated, saying, "I was just trying to do the right thing, but what does that even mean? It was hard to know what to do at times. I often wondered, 'What if I become legally liable for this?' For me, it was a balancing act between all these responsibilities and trying to do the right thing. It was hard. I had no life experience outside of church." Alex found it difficult to reconcile her strong desire to help others navigate the complexities of post-LLDM life while also tending to her own needs. As a former member of the church, she struggled with redefining her identity in this new landscape. In LLDM, the lines between right and wrong were drawn with certainty by the church's authoritative hand, but in this uncharted digital realm, those boundaries were yet to be established, leaving the weight of decision-making on the shoulders of moderators like her.

I spoke with another moderator, u/Cmmntynsnty, or Moderator 2. A 55-year-old business owner and mother, u/Cmmntynsnty differs significantly from Alex, particularly in that she was never an adherent of LLDM. Moderator 2 hails from Flowery Branch, a city in Gainesville, Georgia, where LLDM plans to construct a physical embodiment of its utopian ideals, known as “the City of the Light of the World.”¹⁶ In 2017, the church announced plans to acquire a 272-acre campus, a project envisioned to encompass residential, institutional, and commercial buildings, including schools, churches, and hotels. As Garcia articulated in an official LLDM news post, this initiative was part of his broader vision to “bring light to the various regions where it already has a presence” and to “cultivate the values that define humanity”(Berea International, 2017). The City of the Light of the World was intended not only to territorially reinforce Garcia’s overarching authority but also to play a direct role in shaping the subjectivities of LLDM members by designing, governing, and reterritorializing the very social infrastructure that constitutes their everyday lives.



Figure 20: Image of Naasón traveling through the church’s property in Flowery Branch, Georgia, on March 1, 2017. Berea International.

U/Cmmntynsnty had never heard of LLDM until she learned that the church had purchased property in her city, which led her to join r/exLLDM in its early days

¹⁶<https://www.gainesvilletimes.com/news/growth-development/flowery-branch-is-a-huge-part-of-hbo-documentary-about-lldm-heres-why/>

when it had only 50 members. “As a victim of abuse myself, I felt so angry about the stories I was seeing on the subreddit,” she confided to me, her voice laced with vulnerability. Motivated by her feelings, she reached out to the sole moderator at the time to express her desire to help. After developing a meaningful relationship with that moderator, u/Cmmntynsnty embraced the tools of Reddit governance in hopes of supporting others. Her foremost concern as a moderator was to shield victims from doxxing, ensuring that their sensitive stories remained protected within the makeshift sanctuary of the subreddit.

Lastly, I spoke with a third moderator, Emma Padilla (Moderator 3: /u/123Montana). At 32, Padilla is a mother whose formative years were spent navigating through smaller LLDM congregations, ultimately leading her to Hawaii. This journey began when Garcia, then a minister (before becoming the third Apostle), sent her parents as missionaries from Florida to Hawaii. Although her parents were not born into the church, they converted when Padilla was just five years old, seeking a spiritual community that they found in LLDM.

Growing up as the daughter of missionaries, Padilla’s life was deeply intertwined with the church. She attended services daily, often multiple times a day. However, the church’s pervasive surveillance culture, where members acted as watchful agents, left her feeling constantly scrutinized for her perceived shortcomings as an ideal LLDM citizen. “I never felt like I fit in. I always felt unholy because I liked ‘worldly music,’ and I didn’t want to wear skirts all the time. So I had a hard time making friends because I had nothing in common with them,” she shared in our interview. Padilla struggled to connect with her congregation, feeling a profound chasm after confiding in some members about the abuse she had once endured. Their responses made her feel as though the blame was hers, she told me with sadness in her voice. She gradually distanced herself from the church as she entered college, fully leaving in her late teens. Before her departure, she described her experience as “living a double life,” caught between her personal spiritual tur-

moil and the public persona she felt compelled to maintain within LLDM. For a time, Padilla wrestled with her internal demons until she discovered a supportive community on Reddit around 2018. Her story unfolds from there:

“I’m embarrassed to admit this, but I was on Facebook one day, and I was on this wedding shaming page. I shared a story of the annual mass weddings that would happen in Guadalajara.¹⁷ Through that post, someone messaged me saying they were an ex-member. That was the first time I had talked to anyone who had left the church. We started talking, and they told me there was a small ex-LLDM community on Discord. They then shared the subreddit, where I found out there were more people. That’s when I started to slowly build community. For the first time ever, I felt validated for everything that I had ever felt. It was the best and hardest year of my life.”



Figure 21: Emma Padilla getting Baptized in Hawaii, 2006.

¹⁷These “annual mass weddings” are a longstanding tradition in LLDM, where young individuals known as “unconditionals” forfeit their right to choose a marriage partner in order to dedicate themselves to serving God as missionaries. During this event, the unconditionals gather in Guadalajara for a mass wedding ceremony, where couples are unveiled and married to a pre-designated partner all in a single day.

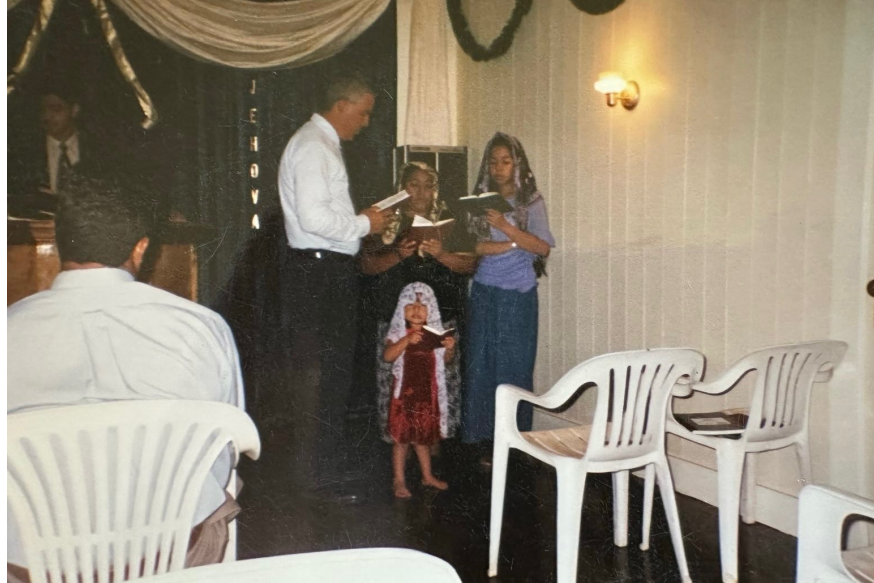


Figure 22: Emma Padilla singing with her family during the Thursday evening service. Her dad founded the church in Kauai, Hawaii

Like the other two moderators, Padilla had no prior experience with Reddit before joining r/exLLDM. She shared that she learned a great deal from the Reddit community and felt a strong desire to contribute to the supportive network of solidarity she had longed for over the years. Her primary motivation for participating in the subreddit was to help others facing similar challenges of isolation and confusion.

When asked about her priorities as a moderator, she emphasized that the team strives to maintain a neutral and fact-based environment, noting that nothing is approved without their oversight. What exactly constitutes “fact-based” and “neutral” is therefore decided by the moderators themselves, setting the tone and limits of discourse for the rest of the subreddit to adhere to.

Padilla is one of the few individuals on r/exLLDM who has chosen to make her real-life identity public in hopes of inspiring others through her authenticity. This is a “coming out” testimonial post titled “My name is Emma Padilla” that she made in 2021:

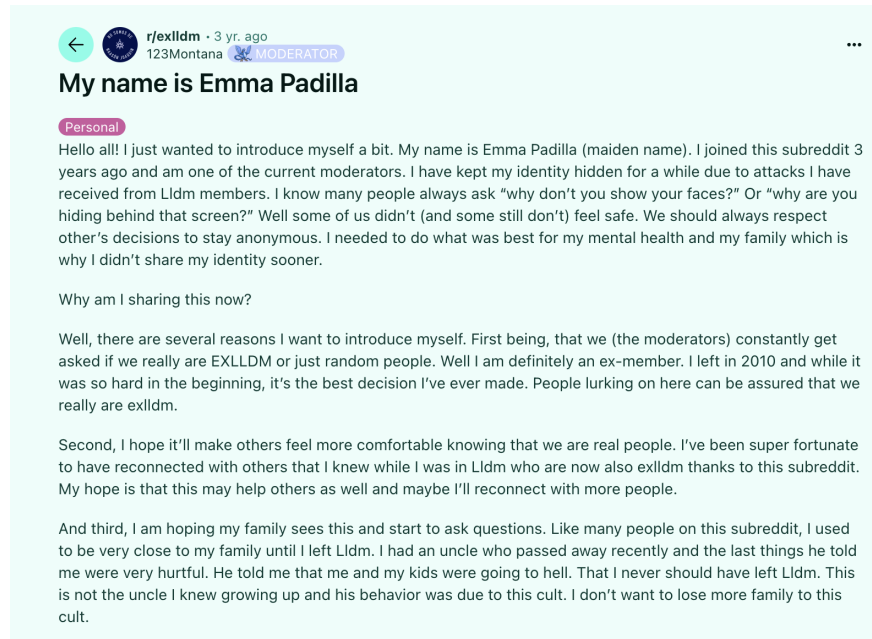


Figure 23: Screenshot of a post made in 2021 by Emma Padilla. u/123Montana, Reddit, r/exLLDM, Sat Nov 06 2021 07:57:34 <https://www.reddit.com/r/exl1dm/comments/qolza4/>

Participation on r/exLLDM

Participation in the subreddit is characterized by alternative forms of discourse and ritual, subverting the conventional signification practices within LLDM. Through their engagement in this alternative discourse and repetitive performative acts, ex-LLDM members actively contribute to the culture of r/exLLDM while simultaneously shaping their subjectivity through the digital space. These practices enable them to redefine their identities in ways that challenge the dominant narratives imposed by LLDM, creating a new narrative framework that also serves a therapeutic function for self-transformation.

Coming in: Early Testimonials

Much of the early content on r/exLLDM consisted of personal “testimonials,” where individuals utilized their pseudonymity to, in a sense, “come in.” In his analysis of digital atheism, Eric Chalfant argues that atheists on Reddit “come in” by employing a form of visibility that navigates the seclusion of digital media

from the traditional public sphere while also embracing the pseudonymous nature of participation on platforms like Reddit (Chalfant, 2022).

The concept of "coming in" can be understood as a process through which digital media creates a public space that reconfigures visibility, authenticity, and intimacy without necessarily making these aspects visible in the real world. Chalfant uses the term "coming in" instead of "coming out" because it reflects the specific modes of intimacy often sacrificed in traditional coming-out narratives. Chalfant states, "Coming in, on the other hand, involves a form of visibility that is circumscribed both by the fact of digital media's relative seclusion from the traditional public sphere and by the pseudonymous nature of participation in some digital platforms" (Chalfant 2022, 251). In this context, traditional notions of "coming out" are replaced by a form of "coming in," where the digital arena constitutes a truly public space—now a kind of pseudonymous publicity—while the traditional public sphere becomes a realm of enforced privatization. Chalfant further posits that the digital realm offers a more authentic form of publicity than the physical world, suggesting a performative poiesis of identity that can be understood through the lens of counter-publics (Chalfant 2022).

Sharing personal testimonies is a fundamental aspect of expressing one's identity on r/exLLDM. Within LLDM, the term "testimony" holds a heavy spiritual and cultural significance, often alluding to a profound spiritual revelation of some form, manifested either through a dream or lived experience. Members of the church share their testimonies in sermons, with other members, and with family, creating and sustaining the mythologies that make up the LLDM public imaginary and individual subjecthood. Testimonies can involve a diversity of interpretations but mainly revolve around a profound revelatory moment.

Contrarily, the act of testimonial storytelling on the subreddit serves to subvert one's previous LLDM identity, entrenched in the testimonies and stories that per-

meate the LLDM consciousness. By recrafting one's narratives around themes of post-LLDM revelation, testimonies on the subreddit are pivotal to digital identity formation outside the church and further position the sub as a counter-public in relation to LLDM. As we will explore, users engage in both coming-in/deconversation narratives and coming-out narratives. The former represents moments of realization, while the latter signifies moments of self-revelation. These narratives heavily rest on the community's emphasis on expressing one's "authentic self," whereby by telling their personal stories, users participate in performing their reconfigured digital ex-LLDM identities.

To investigate this phenomenon, I utilized the PullPush API to search for the terms "my story" and "testimony" between February 2017 and June 2019, a timeframe that coincides with the period before Garcia's arrest, which I call the "pre-arrest era" of r/exLLDM.¹⁸ This search for "my story" yielded 100 results, each offering a unique glimpse into the experiences of individuals navigating their newly articulated identities in the ex-LLDM subreddit.

Many of these testimonials resonate with the traditional notion of "coming out" associated with the LGBTQI+ community, reflecting a parallel journey of self-discovery and revelation. One notable post by u/ajumexx is titled "New Forum Member, My Personal Story—Relearning/Recreating My Identity Post-LLDM" (u/ajumexx, 2019). In this post, the user shares their experiences as a gay male born and raised in LLDM in California, grappling with their sexuality within the confines of the church. They express:

"For everyone out there (especially my LGBTQ+ folk) seeking support and validation, as you are picking up the broken pieces of an identity you were robbed of all your life in this church, know this: it took me 25 years to realize this church was a cult, and here I am, at 30, trying to create my identity (being gay is part of a bigger identity; it doesn't solely define a

¹⁸<https://search.pullpush.io/?kind=submissionsubreddit=exLLDMsince=1486787820until=1518323880size=100>

person) and live in my true authentic self” (u/ajumexx, 2019).

This user brings up concepts like “reclaiming identity” and living in “authenticity” common in exLLDM narratives, suggesting that users navigate the digital interface as a means of expressing a seemingly more authentic identity than the one they had in LLDM.

Another post, titled “Story Time” by u/I-Am-Light22, presents a different perspective on navigating ex-LLDM as a gay individual. Unlike u/ajumexx, this user does not denounce their belief in Naasón or the church. They begin by stating, “I would like to start with a story, my own personal story, and I’m not trying to get anyone on here to change their minds or be an apologist.” Later, they assert, “I believe in his holy Apostle. Maybe some brothers distort the doctrine, or maybe they interpret it in their own way. But I’ve heard the Apostle, and I understand him 100 percent” (u/I-Am-Light22, 2019). In this post, the user recounts their experience of falling in love with a same-sex individual and choosing to distance themselves from the church—not due to the Apostle, but because of the members’ “distortion” of the doctrine, emphasizing their individual relationship with God. By asserting their unshakable belief in the apostle, u/I-Am-Light22 brings light to the nuances existing within the subreddit during this time, complicating views of the sub as a strictly resistance-oriented counter-public. Thus, expressing digital authenticity proves key in participating in this subreddit, regardless of differing views or disagreements with the dominant culture of r/exLLDM.

The Role of Authenticity

These digital testimonials highlight the concept of authenticity and its importance in shaping the identity of former LLDM individuals. By engaging in what they perceive as the “truest” form of authenticity—characterized by raw, emotionally charged, and seemingly sincere discourse—users actively construct their ex-LLDM identities. Such vulnerable expressions are highly valued within the

subreddit, often attracting considerable attention and engagement. This dynamic fosters a culture of authenticity, where genuine sharing and emotional openness are celebrated and rewarded.

Moreover, the early testimonials in this subreddit address highly sensitive and intimate topics, including self-harm and sexual abuse. Users take advantage of Reddit's pseudonymous nature to share their stories with the ex-LLDM community, reshaping their sense of intimacy in the digital sphere. User [u/man_panda422] recounts their struggles with depression after leaving the church at age 18, following years of inauthentic adherence, which led to unfortunate instances of self-harm. In their post, they share, "One night after I finally found a place to sublease, I was in a dark place, so I grabbed a kitchen knife and attempted to cut myself because I wanted the pain and bullshit to end. I didn't go through with it because I couldn't bring myself to do it. I cried myself to sleep a lot after that. I lost my family and possibly my education because I told them I no longer believed in NJG"(u/man:panda422, June 10, 2019). They also expressed feeling as though they were "living in someone else's skin." This profoundly vulnerable account underscores the unique way in which the subreddit fosters a space for intimacy and openness.

Another user, u/Specific:Speech1208, shared a deeply personal account:

"I was abused as a young boy (5 years old) by a family member from the church, and then again as a teenager (14 years old) by a minister's son. I struggle with depression, suicidal thoughts, and anxiety. Growing up, I felt ashamed, embarrassed, and guilty about what happened to me. I blamed myself without ever realizing I was a victim of sexual abuse. My name is Abner, and I'm from Bakersfield, CA" (u/Specific:Speech1208, 2023).

These accounts of vulnerable experiences are met with high participation and en-

agement. It's posts like these that garner the most upvotes and comments. Dario explained to me that the posts in which he felt most authentic were the ones that received the most engagement. I contend that authenticity is deeply valued within the subreddit. Users perceive emotionally charged confessional practices as a means of reclaiming their agency. By engaging in raw and heartfelt discourse, individuals believe they are expressing their truest selves, liberated from the constraints of the institutionally mediated identities imposed by the church. This process allows them to navigate their experiences and emotions in a way that feels genuine and empowering.

Numerous testimonies highlight the challenges of isolation, particularly in the context of coming of age. For example, user u/slickricks shares their poignant experience in a post titled "Disowned at 15," where they recount being excommunicated by both their family and community. They conclude their narrative with a powerful statement: "I'm only sharing my story because it feels good to know I AM NOT ALONE, and I am not crazy for believing that the teachings of the church are full of DOUBLE STANDARDS" (u/slickricks, 2019). This narrative encapsulates the profound sense of loneliness that often drives individuals to join and engage with the subreddit, a sentiment echoed by several moderators.

I contend that authenticity is deeply valued within the subreddit and serves a therapeutic function for members. Users perceive emotionally charged confessional practices as a means of exercising their newfound agency outside of the church. By engaging in raw and heartfelt discourse, individuals believe they are expressing their truest selves, liberated from the constraints of the institutionally mediated identities imposed by the church. This process allows them to navigate their experiences and emotions in a way that feels genuine and empowering, while also engaging in a new narrative framework that enables them to construct a life away from LLDM.

Forms of Participatory Play: Images as symbolic meaning-making

A popular form of participatory play on Reddit, with the ability to offer incisive commentary of those in power, is posting memes; they are pictorial artifacts that weave together the community. Memes are a form of play that solidifies membership in the community and works to rearticulate discourse in an ex-LLDM fashion through socially constructed meaning-making. Memes on the subreddit serve to subvert the official media of the church while also rearticulating the discourse. Through this type of participatory play, users perform their non-LLDM identity.

In a post titled “The Power of Memes—Not Just for Laughs,” an anonymous (deleted) user asserts that memes effectively harness popular culture to deliver commentary on power, allowing individuals to engage with complex subjects in an accessible way. The post concludes with the observation that memes can also empower people to break free from their inhibitions by encouraging them to challenge what they have been conditioned to view as sacred and unquestionable: “Memes are a way of helping people break out of their shell by inviting them to deride what was programmed into their consciousness” (u/[deleted], January 10, 2019).



Figure 24: Screenshot from r/exLLDM (https://www.reddit.com/r/exlldm/comments/altao0/not_you/).



Figure 25: Screenshot from r/exLLDM.

Another popular post titled “SMART CAMPAIGN AGAINST NJG: I want to share this idea of using images that attract the attention of LLDM, thinking they are supportive phrases, but in reality, they are messages to help reason and demand justice for the victims. Please share this across all social media platforms.”(translated to English; /u/aalmostfree). Uses the power of symbolic imagery to subvert official LLDM Media creatively. In their post, they shared these images:



*Nos prohibieron buscar información
respecto a tu caso, pero la verdad
salió a la luz.*

#CONDENAJUSTA #APOSTOLCRIMINAL

Figure 26: Translation: "They prohibited us from seeking information regarding your case, but the truth has come to light."



*Te defendí con todas mis fuerzas,
hoy se que defendía a un violador.*

#CONDENAJUSTA #APOSTOLCRIMINAL

Figure 27: Translation: "I defended you with all my strength; today I know I was defending a rapist."

As Dario shared, he felt that while he couldn't necessarily take direct action against the cult, he could "make fun of them" through the symbolism in memes. He explained that he posted various memes to encourage and motivate people to

engage in subversive conversations. He expressed, “We have a saying in Mexico: if you’re not even crying, you might as well laugh about it. As Mexicans, we try to laugh and sing through hard times. That’s a part of who I am, and I try to bring that spirit to the subreddit.” In this way, play—expressed through memes—serves as a powerful tool for ex-LLDM members to subvert the official narrative of the church while also facilitating healing through humor and laughter.

Pseudonymity as a tool for dissent

Reddit’s pseudonymous affordance is one of the platform’s most notable features, enabling it to host diverse and dissenting communities, such as r/exLLDM. This affordance facilitates the participatory culture of the subreddit, allowing users to adopt non-LLDM identities free from the strict control of the institution. In contrast, many major social media platforms reject pseudonymity altogether, with figures like Mark Zuckerberg even labeling the use of multiple identities as a sign of a lack of integrity, instead promoting the concept of “authentic identity.”¹⁹

Within the pseudonymous space of Reddit, users can openly share aspects of their non-LLDM beliefs while maintaining the privacy of their offline identities. As Chalfant notes in his exploration of atheists on Reddit, users of digital media have the ability to manage the visibility of their participation and the facets of their identity that are most relevant in different contexts (Chalfant 2012, 252). This capacity to embody one’s non-LLDM identity in a digitally mediated environment fosters a sense of agency, allowing users to present themselves as they perceive their authentic selves. As one user, Emma, aptly stated, “Because Reddit is sort of anonymous, you can share without being identified, and there’s a sense of freedom in that.”

One prominent feature on the r/exLLDM homepage is called Operation Pin Drop. According to u/Minutemann02, who initiated the project, its purpose is to demon-

¹⁹Haimson, Oliver L., and Anna Lauren Hoffmann. 2016. “Constructing and Enforcing ‘authentic’ Identity Online: Facebook, Real Names, and Non-Normative Identities”. *First Monday* 21 (6).

strate the strength in numbers of the ex-LLDM community. This online interactive map allows users to place a pin anywhere on the map without needing to sign up or create an account. Here's what the site looks like today, followed by a screenshot of a conversation thread in the comments of the post:



Figure 28: Screenshot of Operation Pin Drop website. (<https://padlet.com/thevoltaire/exlldm-6yyop927yy8d>).

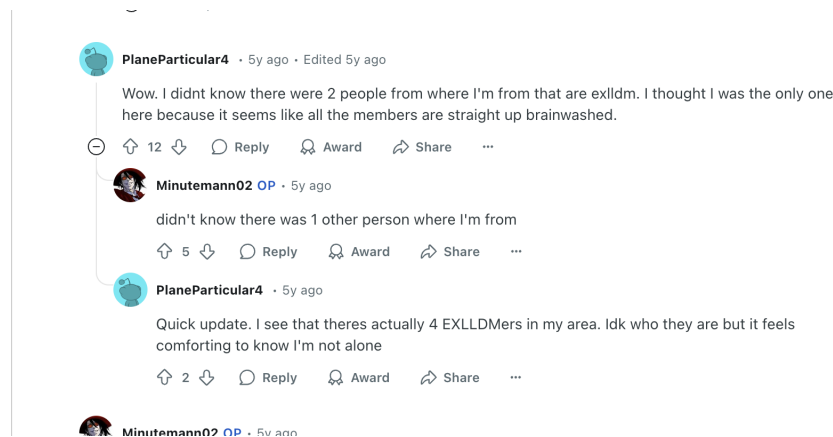


Figure 29: Screenshot of a conversation thread on r/exLLDM, post by u/Minutemann02. https://www.reddit.com/r/exlldm/comments/fxdbqv/operation_pin_drop/.

The mapping project, along with the ensuing conversations, illustrates how users draw strength from their collective presence. They leverage digital media to assert their newfound sense of agency and express their non-LLDM identities while

maintaining anonymity. This highlights the power of pseudonymity in demonstrating a sense of solidarity, allowing users to feel connected to virtual strangers without needing to know their real-life identities. This dynamic fosters a unique form of intimacy, enabling users to cultivate meaningful connections with others online through the pseudonymous interface.

However, the obfuscating nature of algorithmic culture complicates this simplified notion of agency, rendering the processes that interpellate subjects invisible. Chalfant states that the atheist online is caught in a paradox enabled by the digital interface, insisting more than ever that her identity is true and more aware than ever that her identity is a result of a mapping operation executed by inhuman forces (Chalfant, 2012). This holds true for exLLDM users as well, where their exLLDM identity feels ever more authentic, while those very identities are mediated and constructed by machinations outside the self.

In the next chapter, I will further examine the tensions between agency and identity within the subreddit, particularly in light of the growing public scrutiny and responsibility faced by its members.

Chapter 6: The Shock Factor amid the Moment of Reckoning: r/exLLDM after NJG's Arrest

Excerpt from an interview:

“It was Tuesday, June 4, 2019, when the arrest was announced and when everyone found out about it. That morning, I went to church at 5 a.m. just to get it out of the way. I wanted to spend the rest of the day reading and researching for my history work. Later, I got a text from my family group chat about an emergency. I imagined a number of possibilities—maybe the leader was making a surprise visit, or perhaps there was an urgent announcement; these things often happened.

My dad picked me up and I'm not making anything of the situation. But then he asks, “Do you know what this is?” Then he tells me the leader got arrested. I initially thought it might be a misunderstanding, perhaps an issue with legal documentation since he was always traveling.

I arrived at church and listened to the brief broadcast from the Council of Bishops. As soon as I got home, I went online instantly and within minutes, I was reading the Attorney General's report. It was that night when I became obsessed with researching things about the church, and when I discovered Reddit. I don't recall how many people were there, but I'd say a couple hundred, now it's several thousand.

I was reading... a lot. I thought it was very captivating; people weren't spilling the tea per se, but they were just talking, and I really liked it. People on there knew all the terms, like “revivals” and certain other phrases, but they were spinning it differently, in ways I had never heard before. I felt like I could use this space as an opportunity to think critically and rant. It really reeled me in.” (A.J. Perez, September 20, 2025).

“It got pretty serious pretty fast”

Naasón Joaquín García was arrested on June 3, 2019 on charges concerning human trafficking, production of child pornography, forcible rape of a minor, and other felonies. He was arrested alongside co-defendants Alondra Ocampo and Susana Medina Oaxaca, two groomers involved in perpetrating the crimes he committed. Naasón’s bail was set at 50 million, the highest ever recorded in LA County. This moment sent shockwaves through both the LLDM and ex-LLDM communities alike. As Dario mentioned, “It was like seeing an uncle get arrested; I couldn’t believe it.” His arrest pierced through the hearts of many, even those who had left the church, as it marked the first time many had seen the image of Naasón in a negative and candid light. Areli echoed this sentiment, saying, “Up until then, his portrait and pictures looked perfect; I hadn’t seen any of his imperfections until that mugshot. It felt like the love I once had for him was coming back.” From that point on, images of Naasón’s mugshot began to circulate widely across the internet.



Figure 30: Naasón during a hearing in LA County. LA Times, 2022. <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2022-09-19/la-luz-del-mundo-naason-joaquin-garcia-los-angeles-prison>

Naasón’s arrest brought unprecedented international attention to LLDM. The global spotlight that Naasón had once sought finally materialized with his arrest, flood-

ing cyberspace with articles on major news outlets. Before that day, searching for LLDM online primarily yielded official church links and websites. As Areli recounted, “I was on Google all day, refreshing. Up until then, Google displayed very positive things about Naasón. When I saw the news posts trickle in, I thought, finally, the world will know.” This newfound attention was also reflected on r/exLLDM, where a surge of new users began engaging on the platform almost instantly. A.J.’s story exemplifies this phenomenon, as he discovered the subreddit shortly after hearing the official news about Naasón’s arrest, ultimately finding an anchor of solace amidst the chaos.

The moderators of the small, developing subreddit were essentially unprepared for the surge of participation that followed Naasón’s arrest. As Moderator 1, Alex, explained, the evolution of the subreddit was significant: “It evolved from casually talking one-on-one with people to writing letters to journalists to reporting to law enforcement. A lot of it felt like I was way in over my head. But I was just doing what I thought I could do on a day-to-day basis. After the arrest, I felt scared and nervous; it was hard to know what to do at times.”

In the aftermath of the arrest, Alex distanced herself from r/exLLDM. She recounted that the day after the news broke, her inbox was flooded with hate mail, and threatening posts started appearing on Reddit. “I remember leaving class early to rush to my computer. I received frightening messages from people claiming they knew who I was and telling me I was going to hell. They made it seem like it was the subreddit’s fault somehow,” she said nervously, expressing her confusion about why some current church members were engaging in the community.

She recalled seeing posts like, “How could people do this to the most beautiful man?” despite the church warning members against engaging on Reddit. “Seeing those posts made my stomach churn; I felt bad for them,” Alex reflected. She understood their heartbreak all too well. Additionally, she felt overwhelmed by the

responsibility of monitoring posts while trying to manage her college coursework, which ultimately led to her failing certain classes. To this day, Alex avoids the subreddit because she finds it triggering; the intense language used by others is simply too much for her to handle.

“It got pretty serious, pretty fast,” Alex remarked. Over time, the subreddit gained a whole new significance, and its content began to reflect that shift. Initially, a casual space for people with shared experiences to “hang out,” the subreddit transformed into a support group, news hub, legal resource, mutual-aid organization, and lifeline. Posts detailing personal experiences with abuse and dark histories began populating the space, forming a network of support on the subreddit and attracting a diverse array of people who meaningfully engaged with the space as an avenue for alternative discourse. “We were getting view traffic in the thousands,” Emma shared. “Everyone was sharing their stories. It was a wild time.”

The dialogue within the subreddit was multifaceted, featuring dissenters, staunch supporters, and those who found themselves navigating the gray areas in between. Emma expressed her appreciation for hearing the stories of individuals whom the subreddit had positively impacted, which was a common experience. “We’d have members come in and say things like, ‘You guys are just spreading lies,’ and then later, ‘Now I see; I’ve opened my eyes,’” Emma noted. However, as the subreddit grew, it became increasingly challenging to moderate, leading to rising tensions within the digital ecosystem. This shift ultimately influenced how users redefined their subjectivity and identity beyond the confines of LLDM.

New Rules

Moderator 2 vividly recalls the wave of relief that washed over her when she heard the news about Naasón. “I received an email from Amanda that said, ‘We got him,’ and after that, the subreddit practically exploded.” Moderator 2 was referring to the prosecutor who was collaborating with the Jane Does on their criminal case.

In the early days of the subreddit, some moderators and former LLDM members played a crucial role in connecting users with law enforcement, which is why Julie maintained communication with the prosecutors. She noted that Naasón's arrest marked a significant moment for the community, prompting many to engage more actively in a space that helped them navigate their confusion and find clarity.

In the wake of the arrest, the moderators recognized the need to tighten moderation rules due to the surge in user traffic. As Emma (Moderator 3) explained, for a brief period after the arrest, they removed the post approval function to allow users to post freely. However, they quickly had to reverse this decision due to incidents of bullying and harassment. "We tried to make it so that people could post whenever and whatever they wanted, but unfortunately, some individuals resorted to doxxing others, especially LLDM members. The attacks on ALL victims have been insane," Emma stated. She mentioned needing to take a break because it became overwhelming.

During my interview with Julie in October 2024, she shared that the subreddit had amassed an impressive 1.8 million views over the past year, attracting an average of 12,000 unique visitors each month. This level of engagement was overwhelming for the moderators, who volunteered their time to ensure that the information shared on the subreddit remained as accurate and honest as possible. It was during this period that the moderators began to implement more structured guidelines. A post from June 7, 2019, titled "New Rules," by u/CasaCulturalBerea, outlined the following regulations:

"7. No low-effort content. Memes must have relevance, be witty, and make a point, without mocking regular members.

8. No posts about regular members or secretaries/helpers without providing proof that you have REPORTED. You can make a post if you send us proof of your report and have been interviewed about someone you have

reported. Use the following terms when reporting/posting about reporting: According to, Allegedly.

9. Posts about church spokespeople and ministers are allowed as long as they are based on your testimony, not rumors. If you know of criminal activity and have reported it, you can encourage others with information about that person to report as well.”

These new rules reflect how the subreddit adapted to the surge in user participation and engagement. To maintain the integrity of the shared information and foster a safe environment, the moderators recognized the need to implement measures such as post-approval and a comprehensive set of guidelines. These efforts aimed to ensure that the subreddit remained a healthy and vibrant community by establishing specific procedures for users to follow, especially when discussing specific individuals.

Moderating Subjecthood

This new approach to moderation was met with significant discontent and scrutiny among ex-LLDM users. One person who openly voiced concerns was Dario, one of the earliest members of r/exLLDM. He noted that in the subreddit’s early days, moderation was much more flexible and visible, fostering a dynamic ecosystem of diverse communication. However, as the user base grew, he felt there was an excessive amount of non-transparent filtering and censorship, and he disagreed with the need for post approval. He tirelessly advocated for reduced moderation and increased transparency, even creating two of his own subreddits—r/ExposingLLDM and r/cultrefugees—out of dissatisfaction with r/exLLDM. Dario engaged in numerous discussions with other users who were frustrated by their posts being rejected or removed, and believed that many had left the community as a result. Dario expressed the following:

“Some of the moderators have good intentions and I appreciate them dearly, but at the same time, when you’re in that position, you’re getting in the way of open conversations. For someone who is struggling with their faith or struggling to stay alive because of family abandonment or whatever, looking for a place like r/exLLDM to vent, by delaying their post or comment, you’re getting in the way of life-or-death situations.”

Dario believes that subreddits like r/exLLDM should operate with minimal moderation. He is deeply dissatisfied with the current state of subreddit culture, where “head moderators” wield ultimate authority over subreddit affairs and can remove or appoint other moderators at will. Reddit provides few tools to make moderators’ content moderation actions visible to users; while moderators can see the content they have removed, this information remains invisible to the rest of the community (Thach et al. 2022). Dario expresses frustration with this asymmetrical power imbalance, where moderators have the final say in controlling conversations and dictating the rules for acceptable discourse. Nonetheless, he emphasizes the importance of combating blatantly unacceptable comments and doxxing practices and expressed appreciation for their laborious efforts.

The subreddit features an auto-Moderator function that displays the following message under every post: “This is a reminder about the rules. Please make sure you are following them. Your post will be manually approved by a moderator when they have time; please be patient.” When a moderator removes a post or comment, it becomes visible only when a user sees the labels “removed by moderator” or “deleted by user.” Many users have expressed concerns about the invisible automatic moderation practices on the subreddit. For instance, user /u/whole-pay, in a post titled “removed,” asked, “So why are comments being removed/deleted so often? What’s going on?” (2024). In another instance, user /u/EmbarrassedRide4649, in a post titled “don’t delete my post” (2023), included a reply from Moderator 2: “Thank you for sharing your thoughts. However, please

understand that when posts are flagged by others, they are removed, and this has nothing to do with the subreddit itself. The purpose of this subreddit is to expose those who are criminal and complicit in criminal activities,” which implies a level of external invisibility in content deletion while also outlining a clear purpose for the subreddit: exposing criminals.

Scholars argue that while users can see when a moderator removes content after the fact, this still introduces a level of invisibility (Thach et al. 2022). In this context, the establishment of boundaries and rules inadvertently shapes how users interact within the platform’s architecture. By defining acceptable forms of discourse and interaction on the subreddit, moderators create a specific form of digital subjectivity. Every post, comment, joke, meme, and rant is subject to moderator approval, which, in turn, influences the culture of the r/exLLDM digital ecology.

Thus, while the hierarchical control and regulated norms within LLDM shaped members’ subjectivities, the affordances of Reddit—particularly its moderation—also play a crucial role in the process of subject formation as ex-members reterritorialize within this digital atmosphere. This process is constrained by the rules and algorithms that delineate the boundaries of their digital existence. As Chun suggests, the digital arena offers a “simpler, more reassuring analog of power, one in which the user takes the place of the sovereign, executive source code becomes law, and mapping produces the subject” (Chun 2006, 10). The underlying code and algorithms that govern digital platforms, along with the affordances provided by moderation and other interface features, function as law, dictating what is possible within the platform and shaping user behavior and interactions. Users navigate these often-invisible rules, which have a significant impact on their experiences. This suggests that how users interact with the r/exLLDM space—how they navigate, create, and share—nonetheless shapes their subjectivities. The structure of the platform, the rules that govern the community, and how users interact with it ultimately influence how they perceive themselves and their roles within that

digital environment.

r/exLLDM Alternative Information Space

Following the explosive news of Naason's arrest and the growing attention on the r/exLLDM subreddit due to its alleged association with the case, the church made repeated attempts to limit members' engagement in online spaces, seeking to shield them from any information that portrayed the Apostle in a negative light. They even went so far as to prohibit members from looking at the news, stating that it was spiritually dangerous to do so. Consequently, the subreddit emerged as a vital site for subversive discourse, facilitating the sharing of information that would otherwise be deemed unacceptable within the church. This unique hub became an arena where LLDM subjects confronted dissenting narratives about LLDM for the first time, marking a significant yet difficult moment, evident in various posts. As user /u/losingiyt expressed in a post titled "Doubts" on August 30, 2020:

"I have been looking at this reddit for a while now. I have my doubts but still being in this church I have this fear of leaving or even thinking these things. First off, I don't think it's right that we are told not to look at the news.. but I guess I understand why since that is what started my doubts.. question.. do you guys think that if NJG is proven guilty, that the church might use this as an example similar to Jesus Christ as he was innocent but was still tortured ("NJG innocent but still in prison bc Gods plan") or something along those lines? I can see people buying into it, but I just don't know anymore. I feel if he is guilty I can no longer feel this way towards church anymore. I also had this question how he is able to hear the prayers like Santa cena? Maybe being who he is gets him some more privileges? I know they get calls but I just don't know how he is able to have so much contact like phone calls and listening in behind those cells..

it's fishy to me I don't know."

This user is clearly grappling with the effects of seeing external information about LLDM for the first time, leading to significant confusion, and even acknowledging that their doubts stemmed from exploring the subreddit. Given the subreddit's role as a crucial information space in contrast to the strict narrative control imposed by LLDM, ensuring the clarity and accuracy of information became a major concern for the moderators. As Alex explained, "After the arrest, I feel like one of the other things we were worried about was misinformation. How do you combat that?" Alex felt a profound sense of responsibility to uphold the integrity of the information shared within the subreddit. Attempts at guarding the space's information integrity are evident in a Post by /u/Cmmntynsnty in 2019:

"LLDM screams discrimination, and perhaps there truly are some instances, and those instances are not the correct response either. The beautiful thing about this subreddit is the integrity of information, the warmth of the members, and the wisdom used in sharing information."

The information shared on the subreddit was vital for both moderators and users. As a means of unraveling their previous LLDM subjectivity, access to this information served as a saving grace, opening up a window to new possibilities. The ability to disseminate and engage with transformative insights on the platform was something many felt needed to be safeguarded, particularly in opposition to the church's efforts at suppression. One post by /u/Hallehallehalle1 posted on September 18, 2021, showcases concern for the church's attempt to dominate the narrative of Naason's arrest through external media, as this post highlights:

"Today I've found two digital newspaper articles claiming that the trial got postponed because the evidence against Naason is all set as a trap. I read the one from 'El Debate,' and all the information comes from the church and members of the church. The editor who wrote it is Carolina

Solis, from Guadalajara. Then came another one hours later from ‘El Sol de la Laguna’ saying the same thing. The Facebook page of LLDM shared both news. Is this true? How can they post such things without even mentioning what happened in the hearing? I reported the Debate post on the Facebook page of LLDM as ‘fake news’ since there’s no reliable information source in the article. I invite you to do the same.”

Furthermore, many users began to express frustration with the misinformation and gossip being perpetuated on the subreddit. A post highlighting discontent for gossip was made by /u/LightThatBlinds1 titled “Chisme (gossip) does NOT equal news/information,” says:

“Some of these posts are very reminiscent of the dark gossip that fills the benches of the church. Remember that disseminating incorrect or personal opinions on the character of some members/leaders without facts is toxic to the validity of this sub. Don’t pollute this sub with your personal vendetta against leadership either. If you have information, share it, but don’t spread ‘I think’ statements without proof. This comes from people bashing Rachel Stadler and her sisters. I personally knew them. It hurts to hear some of these comments that aren’t true. Stop. If you have important information, share THAT, not your personal hatred. I could not believe that comments about her in a bathing suit by a pool were a topic. Since when is that a sin? We all have been to pools and beaches” (Dec 06, 2021).

These posts emphasize the need for accurate information, highlighting how “gossip” has infiltrated the subreddit. Additionally, there were efforts to mobilize and confront LLDM’s information control in person, as demonstrated by user u/Elmono14’s post titled “Spreading The News,” which states:

“Ok so, I’ve been seeing a lot of you saying how the church is suppress-

ing its members' ability to know information about the arrest. And what I think should happen is that we go ahead and tell them what's going on. That way, the members will be informed and could possibly weaken lldm's grip on them. Now, I know you don't want to go back to the church when you left, but those who still go but are mentally out, or those who are there for the 24/7 prayer, try and find ways to spread the news. Don't try to get caught. I doubt that they are allowing the members to use their phones or anything, but if you somehow read this, find ways to spread the news. Hide pieces of paper, tell loved ones who are likely to believe you, be creative. As long as the members know, LLDM will lessen its grip. But if you don't want to do this because you're concerned for your safety or other reasons, that is fine. I'm only throwing what I think out there"(Jun 04, 2019).

This post emerged shortly after the news of Naasón's arrest and the church's implementation of 24-hour 'consecration' prayers. While this particular user advocates for in-person mobilization, it reflects a broader sentiment within the subreddit that r/exLLDM serves as a vital source of accurate information and a platform for activism.

Court Digests

As Naason's criminal case progressed, the subreddit became a vital hub for sharing court-related information, facilitating discussions, and in-depth analysis. This network of information sharing stood in stark contrast to the church's stance, which prohibited members from accessing any unauthorized information, particularly regarding the Apostle's legal situation. Between Naason's arrest and his eventual plea deal, the subreddit became one of the most important resources for ex-members seeking updates on court proceedings.

One of the most popular posts on the subreddit, titled "If you're still in LLDM,

you should read this. This has the evidence you might be looking for,” was authored by /u/mysignumfidei (2022). This post detailed explicit court transcripts that outlined Naasón’s extramarital affairs, his acknowledgment of sexual relationships with minors, and his guilty plea. Given the complexity of legal information and the church’s efforts to distort the narrative surrounding the case, users found comfort in the thorough explanations provided by various members who were knowledgeable about the law.

A particularly well-regarded contributor on the subreddit was /u/VirginiaBeckett, who received significant praise for their ability to clarify complex legal issues related to Naasón’s case. Many of my informants acknowledged this user’s expertise, although their account has since been deleted. Over the course of their participation from 2017 to 2025, /u/VirginiaBeckett made a total of 44 posts, all detailing specific information regarding Naason’s legal affairs. Here is an example of a post made by /u/VirginiaBeckett in 2022 titled “Pleading guilty does not imply guilt —except it does—:”

“This frustrates me to no end, but I still decided to make a post about it because you will likely hear these sorts of really ludicrous arguments in your conversations with your loved ones who are still in the church, and it’s important to set the record straight. The lady in this video, who apparently is a lawyer and a member of TLOTW, basically claims that a plea deal is not an admission of guilt and that the only reason why the prosecution offered one is because they acknowledge that Naason did not commit any offenses whatsoever. We know for a fact—from the transcript of the hearing where Judge Coen took Naason’s guilty plea on June 3rd, 2022—that he advised Garcia that by pleading guilty, he was saying that he was guilty. He went on to explain that he had a right against self-incrimination and specifically asked him whether or not he waived that right, to which the defendant said YES.”

It was posts like these, along with many other in-depth analyses, that earned this user widespread respect within the subreddit. Consequently, r/exLLDM became a crucial source of information amidst the disinformation campaigns propagated by LLDM.

In addition to the court information, the subreddit features a wealth of informative posts that contribute to its rich knowledge base. You'll find titles such as "Religion vs. Spirituality: What Is the Difference?", "Can You Identify the Subtle Signs of Mind Control?", "Anti-Catholicism in LLDM", "10 Reasons Why LLDM Is a Cult", "Life After LLDM: Resources", and many more. These posts aim to educate and inform individuals about various aspects of the religion. This, in turn, creates a culture of information on r/exLLDM, encouraging users to engage in complex debates and discussions. It also gives users a common narrative framework in which to understand their past experiences and reconstruct their lives post-membership.

A New Light: r/exlldm Support Network

Another remarkable aspect of the subreddit is its role as a therapeutic support group. Many individuals turn to this space as a refuge from ideological turmoil, seeking both companionship and material assistance. The impact of the subreddit on shaping and articulating subjecthood and community identity stands in slight contrast to the ritualistic, performative nature of subject-formation LLDM. As noted in the previous chapter, authenticity and raw emotions through participatory discourse are highly valued in this community. However, even passive engagement, such as browsing, can have a significant impact. As Alex explained, "You didn't have to participate in the subreddit to be impacted by it, which is very different from the church. People are more encouraged to make changes in their 'offline lives'; their lives are influenced by what they read here" (Alex, Moderator 1). Thus, by participating in the space, reading information, and interacting

with others who share similar experiences of navigating the ex-LLDM world, the subreddit positions itself as a unique support network.

Amid the deluge of posts highlighting the profound isolation often experienced after religious deconversion, the subreddit has emerged as a vital space for meaningful alternative community building—specifically, a community that stands in opposition to the church’s pervasive surveillance. Emma Padilla (Moderator 3) expressed her feelings of loneliness before discovering that many others had also left LLDM: “Before knowing there were so many other people that had left, I felt so alone.” For her, finding the Reddit represented an opportunity to connect with others, something she had longed for during her time in LLDM. This virtual community eventually blossomed into real-life relationships.

Padilla recounted how engaging with a group of ex-LLDM members online led her to discover a few individuals living nearby, prompting her to meet them in person. Despite her initial fears of the unknown, she recognized the importance of this connection: “There’s healing that comes from that. Having that support is a huge thing.” She also reflected on a friendship from her past, recalling someone she had met in a church Yahoo chat room in the early 2000s, whom she later found on the ex-LLDM subreddit. Looking back, she noted, “It’s been fun despite the harassment and bullying I’ve received for being open” (Emma, October 2024). As someone who never quite fit in as an LLDM congregant, Padilla adeptly navigated the digital landscape to forge resilient networks of solidarity with fellow outsiders who could relate to her post-LLDM life and identity, effectively participating in her own counter-assemblage.

The support network is vital, especially because leaving the church involves extreme isolation, delegitimization, and suppression. “The church does a really good job at isolating you, and having a space where you can talk to others who relate has been so important,” said Emma. The church makes its followers believe that leav-

ing the religion results in unamenable consequences. Therefore, merely knowing others have left without experiencing extreme danger is healing. The subreddit served as a forum for building relationships outside of the tight-knit community they once had in LLDM. A post by /u/JTwentyTwenty July 03 2023, titled “Building a support system of friends,” outlines this phenomenon:

“Hey all, I’m 28 and living in LA. I’ve been out since 2017 and realized this was all a cult in 2019. I fell into a deep depression and developed severe anxiety. Up until now, I’ve been very avoidant about all this and have closed my world off to be super small. I’d love to connect with some of you and build new friendships outside of the church with people who have similar experiences to mine. I grew up in the church and was super active, so after leaving, I really lost my purpose and sense of self-worth. I’m trying to pick it all up now. I’m into photography, filmmaking, writing, nature, and reading. I’m also gay :) so anyone out there... it would be nice to not feel so alone.”

The supportive nature of the subreddit is also exemplified by some users’ courage to effectively dismantle their pseudonymous identities, hoping to forge meaningful connections with people through this. A Post by /u/wuts-goingon states:

“Hi everyone! I’ve been anonymous on this subreddit for 2 years now. I initially made this Reddit account as a doubting LLDM member. As you can tell by my Reddit name of wutsgoingon, I was a confused LLDM member trying to find some sense within the chaos lol I just want to express my gratitude to this amazing community. Because of this community and the work done by Virginia Beckett, I left LLDM in February 2021. It’s been a long journey to say the least. But I have grown so much in my personal development and I am so proud of myself! I had the courage to speak about my experience this past March on TikTok.

Many of you support me and I'm incredibly thankful! I recently started a YouTube channel to document more of my life and I would love to have you all check it out! My name is Sarah Manjarrez Thank you for reading and I hope you have an amazing day!! ” (Oct 05 2022).

Additionally, the subreddit was a novel space where people were directed to resources and support around finding ways to report abuse. As this Post by /u/Less-Meat, titled: “Hello Exlldmers need advice,” states:

“Still in church I'm physically in but mentally out, what a wonderful supportive group I'm so glad I found you all. I'm also a victim and really thinking about speaking up. I took the first step by signing up here and I want to take it slow but I'm so grateful I found you all! I really don't know if I should talk to my parents now or after the trial so they will believe me,”(Feb 26, 2020).

In sum, many members of the subreddit express gratitude for having the space and the community to comfort them. As User /u/ihatecilantro666, says:

”I just wanna say thank you to all of you. My heart is full of hope for once. Thank you to those brave souls who started this group. You guys have filled a hole in my heart with the support I receive here. I read your posts and everything, and they gave me so much hope during a time where I thought it was impossible. I know this is no celebration, but I'm so eternally grateful for this group and the closure y'all have given me. Thank you”(Jul 16 2019).

The supportive network offered by the subreddit was undoubtedly one of the most powerful forces that fueled the energy behind its momentum. People experiencing hurt and trauma found a forum where they felt heard, understood, and comforted, especially in the face of the church's rejection of dissenters. “I didn't make any

relationships with people in person, nor do I plan to, but it doesn't take away from the usefulness of the subreddit," Dario explained, "Making relationships after the cult is difficult. I think we all share that same sense of loneliness," Dario said. This aspect of the subreddit made the group a community in the way that people came together to offer resources and companionship.

Not a United Front

While the communities formed through digital networks hold significant promise, they inevitably face limitations in bridging the gap left by departing from a close-knit community like LLDM. Padilla's experience as an outsider within the social dynamics of LLDM contrasts sharply with those who depended on the church as their primary source of relationships and a broader sense of belonging. This discrepancy is frequently highlighted in discussions on the subreddit, as user u/josue804 expresses:

"I'm 27, and I left LLDM when I was 18. Like many of you, I lost all my friends, family, and community pretty much overnight. My parents eventually left LLDM, too, a few years after me, which I am incredibly grateful for. Now, I'm a successful professional with 7 years of experience at a high-paying job, and I have not been able to build any kind of community like what I had in La Luz del Mundo. I came from a very poor family, as was the case with most LLDM members, so I have extreme difficulty relating to the well-off white people that I usually interact with every day because of my career. I want to be grateful. But I end up just missing my friends and family, wishing that I could trade my success to have those connections again. I feel like I'm so far away from where I started that I don't recognize myself anymore. Can anyone relate?"(u/josue804, 2022).

As highlighted in u/josue804's post, individuals whose community ties are deeply intertwined with the LLDM social fabric often struggle to recreate that sense of

belonging elsewhere. While r/exLLDM serves as a counter-public and a platform for community building, the digital realm does not always compensate for the social losses experienced in the physical world. LLDM, as an institution of socialization, fosters an environment where members can strengthen and maintain their social connections exclusively within its confines. When individuals choose to step away from this network, those connections can quickly deteriorate. Alex (Moderator 1) shared her own challenges as a dedicated moderator, shedding light on the platform's limitations: "I failed a couple of classes in college. Everything was affecting my mental health, and I didn't really have a real-life support system. Having support from people on my phone was one thing, but I realized I hadn't made any real friends. I lost all my childhood friends I grew up with in the church" (Alex, Moderator 1, October 2024).

Although r/exLLDM was a powerful community of support, it wasn't nearly as homogenous, organized, or united as some outsiders may suggest. While Naasón's defense attorneys tried effortlessly to demonstrate that r/exLLDM was a group maliciously conspiring against him, the moderators highlighted that it was highly exaggerated and misleading. My ethnographic research reveals that the subreddit developed as a space for casual conversation, with discussions of abuse emerging organically from its dynamics rather than as a coordinated effort.

Some moderators even suggested that the subreddit wasn't a community at all. As Alex shared, "I feel weird calling it a community, because the church definitely tried framing it that way. And I don't necessarily think that's true. It was pretty disorganized to be honest"(Alex, Moderator 1). Others shared this same sentiment, some not even wanting to identify with the larger "ex-LLDM" narrative. As Dario shared, "I had a friend who said, 'I'm not Ex LLDM, I'm anti-LLDM'; we just got out of a group, right, we didn't want to necessarily want to fall into another one"(Dario). This illustrates that for some individuals, even the act of identifying with the subreddit triggers a reflexive resistance to becoming part of

another cohesive ideology.

There is ultimately a variety of ideas, beliefs, religious identities, and political affiliations among the group. Some r/exLLDM members display a fatigue for religion completely, embracing a more agnostic or atheist identity, while some are still firm believers in God and identify as Christians. This is also the case politically and ideologically; in essence, there is no shared epistemological view among ex-LLDMers. This variation in opinions is part of what makes the group as dynamic as it is. For instance, a post by /u/New-Door-3148 says:

“My personally biggest problem that I had with LLDM was how much they supported Latino culture more than the doctrine- 1) Predominately Democrats (most Latinos are Democrats); my minister’s wife accused President Trump without backup of information, passed out flyers in support of Hillary Clinton, supported vaccine mandates, and had COVID vaccines given out on church property, continuing mask-wearing, claiming it was ‘from the ministry of health who was appointed by the SOG.’ 2) Helped church members who were in jail for immigration violations, knew about illegal immigration situations, and supported undocumented immigrants to marry members who were U.S. citizens in order to get citizenship. 3) Blamed women for anything and everything that went wrong; the man could do anything, and the boy child can hit the mom while the girl child has to take care of the babies. 4) A real Godly woman makes and serves all the food. 5) Only served Latino food; I was kicked out of a food group just because I wanted American food. 6) Only preached and sang in Spanish, even in the USA! Didn’t really care about the English-speaking souls! I was once kicked out of the USA choir in GDL ONLY because I kept singing in English in the USA (Dec 30, 2022).”

This post elicited both opposition and support, highlighting the complex dynamics

within the subreddit and its members. I present this post to illustrate the diverse forms of discourse that are acceptable within the community. Many comments on this particular post were negative, indicating to the original poster that such discussions are generally not favored in the subreddit culture. Additionally, this example demonstrates how subreddits, including the bilingual and multicultural r/exLLDM, can reflect the broader, predominantly white, and often toxic user base of the platform.

A Digital Counter-Public

Therefore, it is not a shared epistemology that unifies ex-members of La Luz del Mundo; their ideological beliefs are diverse and complex. Instead, they are united by their collective opposition to the dominant structure of La Luz del Mundo, as my ethnographic work illustrates. The subreddit r/exLLDM functions as a counterpublic that challenges the authoritative structures and mediated discursive norms of the La Luz del Mundo Church, creating a space for alternative modes of subject formation and meaning-making, all of which are influenced by the platform's algorithmic architecture.

Michael Warner, in *Public and Counterpublics* (2005), describes a public as a reading public—a collection of strangers self-organized around a text or other representational objects, existing in relationship solely by virtue of being addressed by that object, giving it their attention, and recirculating discourse around it. Building on Warner's framework, Chalfant argues that a counterpublic is fundamentally a public that reshapes the most intimate dimensions of subjectivity around co-membership with indefinite others in a context of routine action (Chalfant, 254).

In his analysis of atheists on Reddit, Chalfant posits that they form a counterpublic organized around r/atheism, framing pseudonymity as a preferable and more intimate alternative to conventional forms of public identification. He notes, "They

seize upon a particular affordance of Reddit's interface—the pseudonymous nature of user profiles—as a means of cultivating a specific affect of stranger intimacy. This intimacy does not serve as a vehicle for integration into the dominant public sphere; rather, it functions as a counterpublic that offers an alternative space for the expression of (non)religious identity, existing in a realm that is neither fully public nor entirely private” (Chalfant, 246). Similarly, the ex-LLDM offers an alternative space for circulating dissenting forms of discourse that would be unacceptable and a place to express one's non-LLDM identity authentically.

Thus, ex-LLDM members constitute a counterpublic, where subaltern agents organize around the subreddit and leverage the pseudonymity afforded by Reddit's digital architecture to express their non-LLDM identities and form virtually intimate relationships. This counterpublic position fosters a collective identity among ex-LLDMers and influences how these digital subjects articulate their own subjectivity through participation and discourse. There are many things that ex-members disagree about, but most would perceive themselves as resisting or exposing the ideological hegemony of LLDM. A post by /u/Wmt17 encapsulates this rearticulated collective identity:

“We, the members, made LLDM a church. What was always a criminal organization, we—not the Joaquins, not the ministers, and definitely not the apostle—made it into a church. We were kind to each other. We built and paid for our churches. We kept the lights on. We made it a beautiful place despite the evil regime. We created our communities. We helped each other out. We taught our kids right. Our time in LLDM was not a waste because we decided to be good people. And now that we have seen what Naason and his evil friends were doing, we decided to leave. Then we decided to fight back. A lot of members have seen the truth, and the ones who were harmed the most are speaking out. Because we were beautiful people. There will be a time when LLDM will cease to exist.

But we will always be exLLDM” (Dec 18, 2022).

“We will always be exLLDM” captures the essence of this counterpublic. It is a public space for alternative discourse, participation, and community building, where users organize around their shared identity of belonging to a non-LLDM community.

Ex-LLDM Discourse and Participation as Agency

Thus, users, as subaltern agents, rearticulate the modes of ritual and discourse they once practiced within LLDM. This dialectic—facilitated by the participatory culture and the pseudonymity afforded by Reddit—enables ex-LLDM members to exercise a unique form of agency.

In their examination of gender performativity, Judith Butler argues that rule-governing discourses shape subjects, and signification is an ongoing process of repetition. They contend that “the subject is not determined by the rules through which it is generated because signification is not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition that both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantializing effects” (Butler, p.185). In this sense, all signification occurs within a framework of compulsion to repeat, suggesting that “agency” can be found in the potential for variation within that repetition. If the rules governing signification impose restrictions while simultaneously allowing for the emergence of alternative realms of cultural understanding, then identity subversion can occur through the practices of repetitive signification.

While the r/exLLDM subreddit is governed by moderation and rules that shape the processes of signification, it simultaneously provides a space for alternative forms of subject articulation. In this space, users engage in practices of repetitive participation and signification, opening up the possibility to reimagine their identities outside LLDM. In this context, the subreddit disrupts institutional norms

and discourses, serving as a platform for exercising agency—not merely through direct action, but through the ways in which discourse and rituals are subverted and transformed within this digital environment.

Although the r/exLLDM subreddit is subject to rules, norms, algorithmic culture, and a slight hierarchical structure, the space it offers for agents to subvert norms through ritual and discourse is significantly broader than what was available within LLDM. It functions as a counterpublic space, where users are liberated from the hegemonic forces of LLDM authority. This platform allows them to advocate more freely for shaping the rules and norms that govern their new digital ecology, granting them a sense of sovereign subjectivity.

The Dream Didn't Last

Multiple people I interviewed spoke about their once-vibrant dreams of creating something truly meaningful through the r/exLLDM digital ecology, viewing it as a beacon of hope in the diminishing light of LLDM. However, this utopian vision proved fleeting. The collective, energetic movement that once characterized the subreddit has now dissipated into the void of cyberspace. As Dario said, “There’s not much going on anymore; it doesn’t have as much influence now.” Many informants discussed the subreddit as an ephemeral and unprecedented experience that ultimately changed them forever. “We didn’t even know what we were doing, but we made a difference,” Dario said.

This reverie of hope can be described as a mystical product of computation. As Chun brilliantly states, “The linking of rationality with mysticism, knowability with what is unknown, makes it a powerful fetish that offers its programmers and users alike a sense of empowerment, of sovereign subjectivity, that covers over — barely — a sense of profound ignorance” (Chun, 18). The allure of the unprecedented realities of digital media provided r/exLLDM users with a sense of mystical possibility.

This raises important questions about the inherent affordances of platforms, where moderation, censorship, and algorithmic design shape specific user experiences. Dario voiced his concerns about how major social media platforms restrict the types of communication that can occur. “The people in power are not allowing us to have conversations. If we can’t engage in these discussions on X, Reddit, or Facebook, then where can we?” he asks.

Notably, the pseudonymous nature of the subreddit and its participatory culture allowed former LLDM members to engage in a more authentic expression of themselves. The mere conversations of people coming together with a sense of freedom and clandestinity led to resistance against a powerful leader. If platforms allow for spaces where subjects feel sovereign, social relationships can be transformed.

Although the dream ultimately deteriorated, ex-LLDM members are not weighed down by the knowledge of what might have been. Instead, they take pride in having engaged in a transformative process that has changed the lives of thousands. This subreddit has fostered a new lifeworld, defined by a common narrative framework that allows those whose foundations have crumbled to begin reconstructing their lives—limited only by the imaginative capacities of its members.

Conclusion

Summary of Findings

LLDM, now the most internationally prominent Pentecostal church in Mexico, has established a significant place in the nation's history. Founded by former military officer Eusebio Joaquín González in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution, the church's foundation is deeply influenced by his background as a revolutionary militant. His militaristic values and political connections have shaped the social reality of LLDM, enabling the church to transition from a marginalized religious position to a key player in the nation-building project of the Mexican state. This alignment allowed LLDM to collaborate with the state in constructing an authentic Mexican citizen—one who embodies both Christian values and civic responsibility. As the church evolved, particularly under the leadership of its second leader, Samuel, it expanded its reach beyond national borders, transforming into an international institution. In less than a century, LLDM has aspired to become a beacon of light for the world, reflecting its commitment to spreading its message and values on a global scale.

Under Naasón Joaquín García's leadership, LLDM experienced a significant transformation, ushering in a "new era" characterized by the strategic use of digital media to legitimize his authority and advance the church's cosmopolitan aspirations. The church's proactive embrace of new media, particularly digital technologies, has positioned it as a globally oriented institution, utilizing these tools to shape its evolving identity and reinforce Naasón's leadership among its followers. This digital engagement has also strengthened LLDM's surveillance mechanisms, where monitoring discourse and behavior plays a crucial role in maintaining hierarchical control. This shift illustrates how religious institutions are adapting to the rapidly changing media landscape, leveraging new media to enhance their influence and reach in an increasingly interconnected world.

The normalization of authoritative discourse and the routinization of ritual practice within LLDM create a subjectivity that is deeply influenced by the church's hierarchical structures. The discourse emanating from the highest levels of the religious hierarchy significantly shapes the identities of its members, establishing the conditions under which they articulate their beliefs and experiences. Similarly, the routinization of ritual practices reinforces these identities by embedding members within a structured framework of expectations and behaviors. Understanding how church members navigate their subjectivities within these frameworks is crucial, particularly in light of how digital mediations disrupt traditional power dynamics and enable ex-members to articulate alternative forms of identity.

Specifically, these digital mediations create opportunities for reinterpretation and fluidity in discourse, regardless of the influence of church leaders. New media presents significant challenges to religious authority, rapidly increasing the flow of religious knowledge and goods outside of the institution's direct oversight. As the discursive landscape shifts from LLDM to platforms like Reddit, the nature of subjectivity transforms, leading to the reinterpretation, rearticulation, re-signification, and restructuring of discursive modalities.

Platforms are not merely spaces for code execution; they are designed to facilitate communication, interaction, and commerce, thereby sanctioning specific modes of engagement and expression. All platforms engage in moderation, which inherently shapes the norms of discourse and cultural production. Whether it's top-down platforms like Facebook or more decentralized ones like Reddit, moderation decisions play a critical role in shaping user interactions. Decisions made regarding moderation—or the lack thereof—are themselves political acts that affect user engagement and the platform's overall culture.

The transition from the authoritative discourse of LLDM to the more fluid and participatory nature of platforms like Reddit marks a significant shift in how members

express their identities. The digital landscape has created a space for reinterpretation and re-signification, empowering ex-members to challenge the narratives imposed by church leaders. The r/exLLDM subreddit offers users a shared narrative framework to make sense of their past experiences within LLDM and to reconstruct their lives after the disintegration of their previous identities. By utilizing the pseudonymous nature of the platform, users are able to craft new identities, embracing a sense of liberation in the process. This transformation underscores the potential for alternative agency within digital spaces, as individuals reclaim their voices and reshape their identities beyond the constraints of institutional authority.

The evolution of the subreddit reflects the complexities of digital community-building. Initially characterized by low-level moderation and a culture of authenticity, the subreddit fostered intimate connections among users, enabling vulnerable storytelling and participatory meaning-making. However, as the community matured, it also began to mirror the authoritative structures that its members sought to escape, illustrating the dual nature of digital spaces: both exhilaratingly liberating and invisibly constraining.

The unprecedented nature of Naasón's arrest brought profound confusion among LLDM members, prompting them to seek information and refuge in digital spaces. This search for understanding led them to the subreddit, where they found a community grappling with similar doubts and discontent. In this new digital environment, the deeply ingrained ideologies of their formative years began to unravel, allowing for a re-examination of beliefs and identities.

Implications for Future Research

The findings of this study open several avenues for future research. First, further exploration of the role of digital media in religious contexts can provide insights into how other marginalized communities navigate crises and identity transforma-

tions. Understanding the dynamics of online religious communities can shed light on the broader implications of digital engagement for faith-based organizations.

Additionally, examining the impact of moderation practices on user interactions and community culture can deepen our understanding of how authority is constructed and contested in digital spaces. Future research could explore how different platforms shape discourse and influence the formation of identity among users, particularly in the context of religious or ideological movements. Reddit has been at the forefront of moderation issues and controversies, as its moderation is delegated to volunteers rather than platform employees, causing much friction among moderators and users. Other digital ethnographies of Reddit have showcased how community-reliant moderation can further silo vulnerable marginalized voices due to the non-transparent nature of moderation practices (Thach et al. 2022). Having voluntary moderators carry the burden of moderation without having the appropriate software tools or support can be detrimental, especially for smaller subs like *r/exLLDM*. In fact, Reddit's underinvestment in community moderation support contributed to a large-scale exodus of users and volunteers from the platform in 2023 (Struett et al. 2024, 5607).

As we reflect on these challenges, it is essential to examine how online platforms can be designed to foster public spaces that facilitate dynamic conversations and contribute to vital community formation. The question arises: How do you enable community by design? In an era where the internet is increasingly restricted, privatized, and surveilled, we must envision a future where online platforms are reimagined in a decentralized, non-hierarchical manner, allowing for open public discourse and the potential for resistance against oppressive structures.

Decentralized social media already exists in the form of the “Fediverse” – a portmanteau of “federation” and “universe (Rozenshtein 2024, 178). As social media becomes more and more embedded in our everyday lives, it is critical to reimag-

ine the future of the online public space for civic engagement, community building, healing, and simple conversation. Threats to federated spaces of civil discourse, including challenges inherent to distributed governance, commercial platform capture, inclusive access, moderation at scale, reputational assaults by commercial competitors, and neoliberal technoromanticism. These threats must be addressed collectively and proactively by Fediverse stakeholders in an ecosystem whose guiding values include non-commercialism, decentralization, open source, free association, and wariness of traditional governance (Struett et al. 2024, 5607).

Vulnerabilities stemming from moderation include the difficulty of scaling, aligning moderation with community values, and treating moderation as an afterthought in the creation of a civic space. Moderation is an expression of power, continually renegotiated between the moderator and the moderated (Thach et al. 2022). With increased transparency and visibility, those being moderated can more confidently appeal to the moderators and question these structures of power. In conclusion, the future of online platforms hinges on our ability to rethink and redesign them in ways that prioritize community, inclusivity, and open discourse.

Final Thoughts

The subreddit's role in creating an ecosystem that challenges the authority of a mega-church leader is a remarkable phenomenon that users often find difficult to articulate. By examining the modes of engagement and interaction within the subreddit as expressions of agency, we can gain insight into how digital media disrupts religious authority in the digital age. Digital media is not only transforming social relationships and information exchange but also redefining how we create meaning and resist oppressive structures. Cases like r/exLLDM illuminate toxic power dynamics that often remain hidden; with digital technology serving as a mediator and information hub, society can more effectively expose hierarchies of oppression. Furthermore, these online spaces are essential for fostering supportive net-

works, articulating identities, asserting sovereignty, and exercising agency—each of which has the potential to transform lives and reshape social realities. These therapeutic groups offer a shared narrative framework for understanding and interpreting personal experiences, validating individuals' feelings and making their experiences comprehensible within their lives. This environment fosters a sense of belonging and collective understanding, enabling members to navigate their journeys together. While faithful LLDM members continue to practice and express their piety, LLDM's social reality has undoubtedly been disrupted; a digital movement has emerged and flourished from the seeds once planted by the man named Aarón.

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