

Ven tal como eres! (Come as you are!): The lived experience of mujeres Latinas living in Australia and attending Hillsong Church Merrylands.

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Abstract

This study seeks to hear and understand the voices of ten *mujeres Latinas* and how their lived experience and spirituality contribute to the Pentecostal community in Australia. Australian Pentecostal *mujeres Latinas* challenge the adage that participation in a predominantly white-Western Pentecostal megachurch leads to diminished cultural inclusion and assimilation to Eurocentric or Western spirituality, by showing up and participating “as they are.” In this article, we interview ten Latinas who attend Hillsong, a contemporary Pentecostal church with the Merrylands campus located in the greater Sydney Australia area. This study examines women’s narratives of ethnocultural inclusion, as well as their experience of participation and spiritual development as a part of Hillsong Merrylands. Furthermore, the stories of women of colour provide insight into the underemphasised and often under-researched hybrid experience of the “others” within the Australian Pentecostal context. It will also demonstrate the complexity of women’s lived religious experiences, as seen through the lens of *lo cotidiano* (everyday life). This article showcases how these ten Latinas found connection and purpose, and a sense of “welcome home” at Hillsong Church, whilst navigating the migrant experience of living far from their home country. At the same time, these women’s stories address the challenges of visibility and female inclusion attending an Australian Pentecostal church, as well as the struggles of learning to navigate family life, change of language and culture, in order to participate in a new church environment, which is different from a Spanish-speaking Latina/o church.

Introduction

There is a common statement “come as you are” used in Australian Pentecostal circles, similarly, the same invitation “*ven tal como eres*” is used in Latin American *evangélico* traditions. In the context of broader evangelism this is used as a welcoming invitation to the unchurched or not yet saved, and it is an encouragement to those who feel far from God.¹ The invitation from Australia’s Pentecostals, to “come are you are” assumes that for the invitee, they can encounter or experience the Divine in the church setting, and that this experience will be the catalyst for further spiritual growth and transformation. In the Latin American context, however, “ven tal como eres” is an invitation to participate. The word “ven” (come) reflects a praxis of collaboration and participation with the Holy Spirit in the process of spiritual development and spiritual encounter with God.² The statement also carries an underlying assumption that a person will not “stay as you are.” It assumes that discipleship leads to transformation; that is, it is formative for a person’s spirituality.³ However, arguably, “come as you are” provides a unique lens into the practices and theologies that frame Pentecostal participation, diversity and *ethnoinclusivity*.⁴ This article applies Néstor Medina's understanding of interculturality or ethnoinclusion as reflective of the Pentecost event and a witness to the eschatological experience of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.⁵ Furthermore, this article aims to investigate the experience of *mujeres Latinas* in the

¹ In Latina America, the term *evangélico* “evangelical” does not carry the same distinction or denominational meaning assigned to American Evangelicalism. Instead, in Latin America the term *evangélico* is often used to distinction believers as “non-Catholic” over and above as strict denominational affiliation to Evangelical doctrines and traditions. Elizabeth Brusco, “Gender and Power,” in *Studying Global Pentecostalism*, 1st ed., Theories and Methods (University of California Press, 2010), 76. According to Allan Anderson, Pentecostalism in Latina America is still assumed under the broader evangelical banner. Allan Anderson, “Varieties, Taxonomies, and Definitions,” in *Studying Global Pentecostalism: Theories and Methods*, ed. Michael Bergunder et al., The anthropology of Christianity 10 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 17.

² This is exemplified in popular worship song by renown Latino Pastor, Marco Barrientos “Ven Espiritu Ven” (Come Holy Spirit Come).

³ Pentecostals’ description of spiritual transformation can vary, however, central to the Pentecostal narrative are the accounts of the transformational power of the Holy Spirit at work in communities of believers and the lives of individuals. This transformation narrative can also be described from the biblical text as a process of identity change, as seen in Jacob's story as he wrestles with an angel of the Lord and is renamed Israel. Jacob's name and further his actions in the narrative characterise him as a cheat, drawing on his name “heel grabber.” However, after the wrestle with the angel of the Lord, he is renamed Israel, “one who struggles or wrestles with God.” This narrative in Pentecostalism, draws up an experience with the Divine, resulting in a name change and further impacted the trajectory of Jacob's (Israel's) future and purpose. Pentecostal biblical scholar Andrew Davies argues that Pentecostals engage with the biblical text as a dialogue. They share their experiences, stories and cultural lens to the text, adding another layer or dimension to their interpretation and encounter with the biblical narrative. This demonstrates that the biblical text is used as a historical text, as well as spiritually authoritative, and used to interpret or ‘make meaning’ of one’s own story. Andrew Davies, “What Does It Mean to Read the Bible as A Pentecostal?” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 18, no. 2 (2009): 216–229, 224.

⁴ Néstor Medina, “Discerning the Spirit in Culture,” *Canadian Journal of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity* Vol. 2.1 (2011): 131-165, 142-143.

⁵ Medina, “Discerning the Spirit in Culture,” 142-143.

(Australian) Hillsong Church Merrylands campus and the participation of women in church leadership roles, as well as investigate ethnoinclusivity within an Australian Pentecostal context.

The thesis of this article is that participation in predominately white Western churches does not necessarily result in diminished cultural identity or lead to the adoption of solely Western spiritual practices. This is demonstrated in the experience of ten *mujeres Latinas* attending Hillsong Church, that provided them with a place to “come as you are” and experience an environment of “welcome.” Inclusion and welcome are central to Hillsong Church, as seen in the words of the founder and global senior Pastor Brian Houston, in the church vision statement,

“I see a church that is big enough to dream on a global scale, yet personal enough for every ONE to find their place. I see a church that beckons ‘WELCOME HOME’ to every man, woman and child that walks through the doors.”⁶

Hillsong Church today is a global church with campuses in Argentina, Uruguay, Spain, Brazil, and Mexico. The location of these campuses also reflects the ethno-inclusivity of its mission statement. Arguably, Hillsong’s contemporary style also provides an alternative Pentecostal experience to more traditional and fundamentalist Pentecostal church in Latin America. On top of creating a welcoming culture, at different points in Hillsong’s history and expansion, it has also provided the space for a felt freedom in language; or specifically, language-services and translations that have facilitated community amongst Sydney’s Spanish speaking congregants (largely located in Fairfield and Merrylands).⁷

In response to the often prioritized and elevated Anglo-Western voices in Pentecostalism, this article accents the already present, resounding voices of *mujeres Latinas* living in Australia. This therefore also contributes to the broader story of diaspora Latinas living transculturally learning

⁶ The phrase “welcome home” hangs in the doorway of every Hillsong church across the globe and is displayed in each representative language.

⁷ Hillsong Merrylands is one of 14 campuses in New South Wales, Australia. It was started in 2002 by an Argentinian pastor Nelson Ruggery with the purpose of reaching the Latina/o community in this area. In the year 2008, the campus went through its first transition in leadership with Chris Mendez becoming the next campus pastor. Mendez (born in Australia with Argentinian heritage) cultivated a vibrant and inclusive culture at the campus with its majority Latinos/as attendees. However, over his six years in leadership many people from different cultural backgrounds started attending the campus. At this time, Merrylands grew from one Spanish service to adding an English service to meet the needs of its diverse attendees. In 2014, the campus went through another transition in leadership, Mendez launched Hillsong Buenos Aires, and Sam Carrasco became the new campus pastor of Merrylands. Carrasco, born in the United States to Mexican parents, improved his Spanish to preach and officiate the church services in both languages. In 2018, after an entire year of the service linking to the main campus (Hills Campus) in Sydney (and some technical difficulties when it comes to translation equipment) it was clear from the growing and diverse demographic a decrease in the number of Latina/o attendees. Therefore, the campus ceased having Spanish (language) services in 2018 to become accessible for people from non-Spanish speaking backgrounds. At the end of 2020, Merrylands underwent another transition of leadership with Bryan Campos, who was born and raised in Ecuador becoming the campus pastor.

to navigate change of culture and adapting to new ways of living – here in the Australian context. Whilst recognising that Latinas do not make up the majority within the Australian Pentecostal context, they are an under-researched group when it comes to the narrative of Australian Pentecostalism. From the perspective of living in a transcultural space, diaspora Latinas living in Australia are often classed as “others” and perhaps even “outsiders” in predominantly white-Western societies. Latinas are also “otherized” in the church context, for their passion and religious zeal, as well as their marginal social status. Arguably, the following intersections of lived experience in *lo cotidiano* (everyday life) demonstrate a “hybrid” experience within the Western Pentecostal context.

Before examining the method of *Mujerista* theology and its intersection with Pentecostalism and Latina’s lived experience, the following section discusses Néstor Medina’s framework of hybridity via Pentecostal “pneumatological ethnocultural inclusion.”⁸ This Pentecostal theological framework of interculturality provides the space and access to those, historically classed outside of dominant Anglo/Western Pentecostal spaces, to fully participate and find a place of home and inclusion.

1. Pentecostal Identity Markers

For Pentecostal theologians, Guatemalan-Canadian Pentecostal scholar Néstor Medina claims, the biblical event of Acts 2 demonstrates “the quintessential eschatological event of pneumatological ethnocultural inclusion.”⁹ Ethnocultural inclusion here describes diversity and the participation of all people from diverse ethnicities and cultural groups, beyond simply the celebrations of different cultures, but Medina argues for “a categorical reformulation of the intersection between culture and faith whereby the cultural background of the people is not only celebrated but also elevated as a constitutive part of human existence.”¹⁰ The Acts 2 passage, which is considered central to Pentecostal spirituality, outlines an individual’s “dynamic experience” of the outpouring of God’s Spirit, witnessed in the inclusion of all people—“all flesh.” Medina argues that despite cultural differences or even opposing social-political views, the event of Pentecost was distinguished by the presence of many cultures, as witnessed in the many tongues *glossolalia* and the authorising outpouring power of the Holy Spirit.¹¹ Thus, a complete reading and subsequent application of the experience of the day of Pentecost should within community practices and theologies be distinguished by “ethnocultural inclusion.”¹²

⁸ Medina, "Discerning the Spirit in Culture," 142.

⁹ Medina, "Discerning the Spirit in Culture," 132.

¹⁰ Medina, "Discerning the Spirit in Culture," 142.

¹¹ Medina, "Discerning the Spirit in Culture," 153.

¹² Medina, "Discerning the Spirit in Culture," 142-143.

Similarly, Amos Yong argues that the pneumatological phenomenon anchors Pentecostalism's main distinctive as "ethnic inclusion, diversity, and the spiritual *empowerment* of men and women; young and old; slave and free (Acts 2:17-18; cf. Joel 2:28-29)."¹³ This reality is possible, but only once people become aware of their own culture, or as Medina describes, "conscious of their own cultural baggage and conditioning."¹⁴ Thereafter, individuals can develop and learn to celebrate their different cultural backgrounds by including them in the exchanges of ideas. This ultimately invites the "other" into spaces where their understanding of God and their spiritual practices are recognised and celebrated.¹⁵ He therefore proposes that interculturality or ethnocultural inclusion be examined via practices and participants in Pentecostal congregations.¹⁶ In his view, ethnocultural inclusion should not be limited to congregation-level participation, but must also be present in decision making, at all levels of leadership hierarchies, as well as roles of authority.

Therefore, the logic of Pentecostal studies informs this research inquiry. If a Pentecostal theology of ethnocultural inclusion refers to "all flesh" (as in Acts 2:17) then it must ask whether participants outside of the dominant culture in Pentecostal congregations feel this sense of ethnocultural inclusion. In other words, is the evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit witnessed in the inclusion of people from different cultures, as well as social classes, and other marginal people, especially women, in positions of spiritual authority in the church? Relevant to this inquiry, Pentecostal scholar Amos Yong argues that a shift away from North America or Western churches has been the recent focus of what God is doing through the Pentecostal movement ; and he warns,

"The upward social mobility and increasing institutionalization of classical Pentecostal denominations in North America has resulted in churches almost indistinguishable from evangelical churches on any given Sunday morning."¹⁷

In this way, the increasing growth and spread of Pentecostalism in the global South demonstrate that theological inquiry into the Pentecostal phenomena must look to those mobilising the Pentecostal movement in the West (often migrants from Latin America, Asia, Africa).¹⁸

This research therefore examines the cultural and theological exchange at one Hillsong Church campus with a specific focus on those classed as "other" with attention to the *mujeres Latinas*

¹³ Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh*, 30.

¹⁴ Medina, "Discerning the Spirit in Culture," 142.

¹⁵ Medina, "Discerning the Spirit in Culture," 134.

¹⁶ Medina rejects the comparison or word association with that of "cross-cultural mission" and argues that it is "impossible to share the gospel without its carriers sharing their own cultural universe as well." in Medina, "Discerning the Spirit in Culture," 141-142.

¹⁷ Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh*, 32.

¹⁸ Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh*, 32.

participating in these spaces. A history of white Euro-centric theologies and traditions has shaped and dominated most mainstream churches, theological dialogue, within this Latin American social-political and religious framework.¹⁹ This article recognises that the Latina voice, which historically and culturally has often been silenced, is indispensable to the topic of Pentecostal theology and its practices.²⁰ The history of religious acculturation and colonisation in Latin America is extensive, as the Spanish conquistador forced *la gente indigena* (indigenous people) to adopt European practices as well as forced conversion to Roman Catholicism. This period known as the “Spanish Evangelisation” resulted in the loss or displacement of cultural identity, diversity, and visibility for those classed as “other” in the new hybrid societies of the Americas.²¹ Medina uses the term hybridity or multiple identity spaces to describe the process of Latin Americans incorporating into Western social context, such as Canada.²² For *mujeres Latinas*, the history of imperialism and forced conversion has arguably had the greatest influence on the Latin American cultural structures of *machismo*.²³ *Machismo* is characterized as extreme male dominance; the literature describes it as “culturally constructed aggressive masculinity” which often entails abdications or lack of domestic involvement of males in Latina/o households.²⁴ Women (and children), in particular, have often experienced the harshness and severity of this social-religious matrix of *machismo* that prioritises men in the role of “*el padre*” (the father) over

¹⁹ A critique of spirituality is recognising its limitations as a discipline and remembering that “all spiritual experiences are determined to some degree by culture.” This is to say, as much as Pentecostalism is a global movement, it is contextual to its dominant culture. In other words, Australian Pentecostalism provides a spotlight on Australian culture in a similar manner that the history of Roman Catholicism and colonialism speaks to the dominant Latin American culture. Philip Sheldrake, *Explorations in Spirituality: History, Theology, and Social Practice* (New York: Paulist Press, 2010), 41.; Virginia Nolivos and Eloy H. Nolivos, “Pentecostalism’s Theological Reconstruction of the Identity of the Latin American Family” *Pentecostal Power* (January 1, 2011): 205–226, 209.

²⁰ Isasi-Díaz, *En La Lucha/ In the Struggle: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology*, Kindle Location: 3044.

²¹ C. René Padilla, “Latin America,” in *Global Evangelicalism: Theology, History and Culture in Regional Perspective*, by Donald M Lewis and Richard V Pierard, (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2014), 96; Néstor Medina, “Discerning the Spirit in Culture: Toward Pentecostal Interculturality,” *Canadian Journal of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity* 2.q (2011): 131-165, 132; Ada María Isasi-Díaz, “Lo Cotidiano: A Key Element of Mujerista Theology,” *Journal of Hispanic / Latino Theology*, 10:1 (Aug 2002): 5-17, 5.; Virginia Nolivos and Eloy H. Nolivos, “Pentecostalism’s Theological Reconstruction of the Identity of the Latin American Family,” *Pentecostal Power* (January 1, 2011): 205–226, 209.

²² He uses the concept of hybridity to describe how Latina/os incorporate cultural elements from their country of origin with elements of their new social context. He argues that this complex process of incorporation, adaptation, and re-configuration is also demonstrated to be present among Pentecostal Latino/a-Canadians. Néstor Medina, “Hybridity, Migration and Transnational Relations: Re-thinking Canadian Pentecostalism from a Latina/o Perspective,” *Global Pentecostal Movements* (January 1, 2012): 211-226, 218-220.

²³ C. René Padilla, “Latin America” in *Global Evangelicalism: Theology, History and Culture in Regional Perspective*, by Donald M Lewis and Richard V Pierard, (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2014), 96.

²⁴ Elizabeth Brusco, “Gender and Power” in *Studying Global Pentecostalism*, 1st ed., Theories and Methods (University of California Press, 2010), 6 and 86.

and above women.²⁵ In light of this history, *la mujer* Latina is often rendered “powerless.”²⁶ As a result, *mujeres Latinas* have had to learn to navigate multiple identity spaces and to negotiate between inclusion and exclusion, as well as power/authority and powerlessness.

The following section examines the cultural and religious exchange that takes place for Latinas through *Mujerista* theology and how these methods may apply within a Pentecostal framework, before the paper attempts to locate Latinas in the Australian Pentecostal context at Hillsong Church Merrylands.

2. Method: *Mujerista* Theology

The unique theological and cultural perspective through which Latinas theologise in light of their personal and cultural experiences is best articulated via the lens of *Mujerista* theology (Hispanic Feminist theology). *Mujerista* theology was developed by Cuban American Catholic theologian Ada María Isasi-Díaz. She argues that Latinas use the narratives of their everyday lives to interpret scripture and make sense of God in their current reality.²⁷ To do so, *Mujerista* theology applies various methods, but primarily ethnography and narrative, to interpret women’s religious experiences. Additionally, it “seeks justice and visibility for women.”²⁸ Isasi-Díaz argues that Latinas theologise from *lo cotidiano* (everyday life) and its *luchas* (struggles) and therefore, *Mujerista* theology views Latinas as agents of change and “persons who seek to know the meaning of their lives and their daily struggles.”²⁹ In this way, Latinas’ spirituality, as examined through *lo cotidiano* (everyday life), provides the lens into Latina women’s struggles of navigating cultural barriers, including, navigating *machismo* and female subordination in the home and society. Here, Pentecostalism contributes to this matrix of lived religion. This study also draws upon other practice-based approaches to “women’s lived religion” such as used by sociologist Meredith McGuire. Because of the overlapping intersections of popular religion, culture, and formal church traditions, McGuire suggests, women’s spirituality and religious practices are both informed by and adapted in light of these different, intersecting realities.³⁰

In order to contextualise these women’s religious experience, this article will first provide a summary Pentecostalism and the Latin American context. Next, this article will explore the history of women in Australian Pentecostalism. Subsequently, then this article will provide a

²⁵ V. Nolivos and E.H. Nolivos, "Pentecostalism's Theological Reconstruction of the Identity of the Latin American Family," 209.

²⁶ Loida I. Martell-Otero, Zaida Maldonado Pérez, and Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, *Latina Evangélicas: A Theological Survey from the Margins* (Cascade Books, an Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers, Kindle Edition), 35.

²⁷ Isasi-Díaz, *En La Lucha/ In the Struggle*, Kindle Locations 1491-1492.

²⁸ Isasi-Díaz, "Lo Cotidiano: A Key Element of *Mujerista* Theology," 5.

²⁹ Isasi-Díaz, *En La Lucha/ In the Struggle*, Kindle Location 1455.

³⁰ Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 52.

grounded analysis of the ethnographic stories of ten Latina women and their experiences in Pentecostalism by looking at 1) their cultural background, 2) what attracted or brought them to Hillsong Church, 3) their current involvement, 4) people or Biblical passages that have inspired or mentored them in their spiritual development. The final section provides a discussion around the benefits and limitations faced by these Latina women in their framework/context. This provides insight into the Australian Pentecostal experience and the complexity of the statement, “come as you are” as reflective of a Pentecostal theology of ethnoinclusion and “interculturality.”³¹ It will demonstrate the marginal space from which Latinas live, and the intersectionality of their ideal spirituality and lived religion.³²

This study is limited to the contextual experience of only ten *mujeres Latinas*, amongst the hundreds attending Hillsong (exact numbers are hard to ascertain as the church does not currently keep data on race/ethnicity). However, this article also recognises the growing population of Latina/os living in Australia.³³ From its origins in Sydney Australia, Hillsong church has now partnered with and planted churches across the global south, including Latin American countries such as Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil. Any overview of Hillsong Latina women’s experience in other regions of the globe, as well as in other Australian Hillsong campuses, would also be impacted by the social and cultural context of those areas. With that being said, dominant White-Western culture is a widely acknowledged reality of the Australian context of greater Sydney.³⁴ The next section examines the impact of Pentecostalism in Latin America and the resultant impact on identity for diaspora Latinas living in Sydney, Australia.

3. Latina History and Identity

³¹ Medina defines “interculturality,” “as a categorical reformulation of the intersection between culture and faith whereby the cultural background of the people is not only celebrated but also elevated as a constitutive part of human existence. in Medina, “Discerning the Spirit in Culture,” 142.

³² In Méndez’ research of Canadian-Latinas, women often forfeit positions of traditional authority, as pastors or speaking from the pulpit, to safeguard their cultural and religiously reinforced images and roles of ideal womanhood, wife and mother. This is exemplified in how women elevate and give spiritual authority to the role of wife and mother, calling it their spiritual calling. Comparatively, this is largely influenced by Latin America’s social and religious influence of Roman-Catholicism’s high theology and veneration of the Virgin Mary.

³³ At the 2006 Census 86,156 Australian residents declared that they were born in South America (69,157), Central America (12,959) or the Caribbean (4,040). Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Table 20. Birthplace, 2016*.

[http://www.censusdata.abs.gov.au/ABSNavigation/prenav/ViewData?breadcrumb=POLTD&method=Place%20of%20Usual%20Residence&subaction=-1&issue=2006&producttype=Census%20Tables&documentproductno=0&textversion=false&documenttype=Details&collection=Census&javascript=true&topic=Birthplace&action=404&productlabel=Country%20of%20Birth%20of%20Person%20\(minor%20groups\)%20by%20Sex&order=1&period=2006&tabname=Details&areacode=0&navmapdisplayed=true&](http://www.censusdata.abs.gov.au/ABSNavigation/prenav/ViewData?breadcrumb=POLTD&method=Place%20of%20Usual%20Residence&subaction=-1&issue=2006&producttype=Census%20Tables&documentproductno=0&textversion=false&documenttype=Details&collection=Census&javascript=true&topic=Birthplace&action=404&productlabel=Country%20of%20Birth%20of%20Person%20(minor%20groups)%20by%20Sex&order=1&period=2006&tabname=Details&areacode=0&navmapdisplayed=true&)

³⁴ James Forrest and Kevin Dunn, “Constructing racism in Sydney, Australia’s largest EthniCity,” *Urban Studies* 44, no. 4 (2007): 699-721, 700.

This section outlines relevant work on Latina/o Pentecostalism which is pertinent to the diaspora community. Latin America is made up of 33 countries across the Americas that speak multiple languages and dialects.³⁵ It is shaped by the traditions of several different indigenous people groups, as well as various political structures. It is recognised as the Global South; a region of the world peripheral to Europe and North America and characterised by its great majority of low-income status, political instability, and cultural marginalisation.³⁶ In contemporary times, the Global South has become known as the centre of Christianity worldwide. According to the World Christian Database (WCD), the population of Christians in Latin America grew by 877 percent between 1900 and 2010, with two countries surpassing 100 million professing Christians (Brazil 177 million and Mexico 106 million).³⁷ It is difficult to say with clarity how many of these Christians are Pentecostal. However, preeminent scholar Andrew Chesnut has argued that more than two-thirds of that population identify as Pentecostal.³⁸

Elizabeth Brusco's research in the Colombian Pentecostal movement outlined that Pentecostalism challenges existing practises of *machismo* by supporting the domestication of men—after conversion men tend to give up the vices of the streets and participate in their home.³⁹ Brusco called this the “feminisation or domestication of machismo.”⁴⁰ Brusco argues that Pentecostalism acts as a social transformational agent that brings order “*al hogar*” (*to the home*), this order can also be perceived by the coming to faith and by “*caminar en los caminos de Dios*” (walking in the ways of God) of the members of this women's family, especially their children.⁴¹ Similarly, Mira, Lorentzen, and Santos present the idea that Pentecostalism offers a space for Latino men to experience spiritual transformation where the ideals of *machismo* are exchanged for new values, beliefs and behaviours that reflect the “liberating” paradigms of Pentecostalism.⁴² Cristina Rocha writes of a similar experience of freedom from the experience of Postmillennial Brazilians in attending Hillsong Church and its college. She argues that in this contemporary Pentecostal church, middle-class Postmillennial Brazilians find a home because Hillsong's seeker-friendly ethos promotes inclusivity and acceptance with the hope that the Holy

³⁵ Nour Dados and Raewyn Connell, “The Global South,” *Contexts* 11 no 1 (2012), 12.

³⁶ Nour Dados and Raewyn Connell, “The Global South,” *Contexts* 11 no 1 (2012), 12.

³⁷ Philip Jenkins, “Changes and Trends in Global Christianity” in *The-Globalization of Christianity Implications for Christian Ministry and Theology* (McMaster Divinity College Press, 2014): 39-63, 42-45.

³⁸ Andrew Chesnut, “Pentecostalism and Changes in the Global Religious Economy,” *Centre for Religion and Civic Culture*, (January 19, 2011) <https://crcc.usc.edu/pentecostalism-and-changes-in-the-global-religious-economy/>.

³⁹ Brusco, “Gender and Power,” 77-78.

⁴⁰ Brusco, “Gender and Power,” 77-78.

⁴¹ Brusco, “Gender and Power,” 3; 79-80.

⁴² Jose Leonardo Santos, *Evangelicalism and Masculinity: Faith and Gender in El Salvador* (Lexington Books, 2012), 81-81.; Rosalina Mira and Lois Ann Lorentzen, “Women, Migration, and the Pentecostal Experience” in *Peace Review* Vol. 14, No. 4 (2002): 421-425, 423.

Spirit will bring spiritual and behavioural transformation, which includes a more relaxed dress code and visible gender equality in comparison to Brazilian Pentecostal churches.⁴³

This spiritual transformation comes from the realisation that conceptualisations of *machismo* are flawed, divisive, harmful, and inefficient to lead a family. To use stronger words, *machismo* is a pathology and conversion is the cure.⁴⁴ This spiritual transformation includes being delivered from vices in men's character via harmful behaviours such as unfaithfulness, alcohol, and drug abuse, family neglect, waste of money, and being physically abusive towards their wives and children. This new attitude of the male in the family creates an overall improvement in the social and economic position of the family after his conversion.⁴⁵

However, although the Pentecostal movement in Latin America is majority female, there is a disproportionately low number of female leaders in its movement compared with male leaders. Pentecostal women are encouraged to "obey the Bible" and accept a subordinate role under their husbands, which continues to support an inferior view of women and the refusal of women in roles of leadership over men. Finally, some Latina/o Pentecostal churches continue to enforce traditional gender roles of women, including the way women dress; for example, women must wear skirts or dresses and are not allowed to wear pants or other items considered to be men's clothing. On top of this, women are expected to uphold visible ideals of traditional womanhood, such as the "stay at home mother" and take care of different household chores, thus limiting opportunities for women to pursue and develop their careers outside the home.⁴⁶ It is between the extremes of *machismo* and masculine spiritual transformation that we encounter what Bernice Martin called the "Pentecostal Gender Paradox." Martin asks the question "why are women converting or leaving one type of male-dominated or patriarchal tradition and going to another tradition that seemingly imposes the same restrictions on women?"⁴⁷ She proposes that Pentecostalism is attractive for female followers as a movement charged with "Liberationist" motivations that give priority to the marginalised, the poor and the oppressed.⁴⁸

Brusco expands these ideas to assert that *mujeres Latinas* might be drawn to Pentecostalism because it acts as a social transformation agent bringing order *al hogar* (to the house). That is,

⁴³ Cristina Rocha, "'Living the Dream': Post-Millennial Brazilians at Hillsong College" in *Australian Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2020), 219.

⁴⁴ Santos, *Evangelicalism and Masculinity: Faith and Gender in El Salvador*, 81-81.; Mira and Lorentzen, "Women, Migration, and the Pentecostal Experience," 423.

⁴⁵ Mira and Lorentzen, "Women, Migration and the Pentecostal Experience," 423.

⁴⁶ Brusco, "Gender and Power," 78.

⁴⁷ Martin, "The Pentecostal Gender Paradox: A Cautionary Tale for the Sociology of Religion," 53-54.

⁴⁸ Martin, "The Pentecostal Gender Paradox: A Cautionary Tale for the Sociology of Religion," 58.

because of Pentecostalism, men return home from what is perceived as immorality in Christianity (adultery, alcoholism, gambling), feeling better equipped to lead their family in the ways of God and thus ending domestic abuse.⁴⁹ Here Brusco cites Miller and Yamamori's research, adding "the patriarchal bargain" to her previous research.⁵⁰ She notes that the Pentecostal movement gives *mujeres Latinas* space to escape the domestic and use their gifts through social entrepreneurship like social relief programs, education, medical assistance.⁵¹

Mira and Lorentzen argue that "gendered roles are not dismantled" within Pentecostalism but the church provides the opportunity for the reordering and redesigning of some of the commonly perceived "male-only" roles.⁵² Similarly, gendered roles are forced to shift, as migrant families must learn to survive in a new country. Both parents are often required to work to survive and therefore men and women share the responsibilities of caring for the family. The church often helps carry this burden for new families.⁵³ Thus, women gain access to positions of leadership that they have usually been denied access to. In this way, Pentecostalism offers a particular experience for its followers: on one hand a spiritual experience, and on the other hand, a social transformation that encourages female believers.

The following section will explore the context of Australian Pentecostalism and women's contribution to its growth and how it relates to Latina women living in Australian and participating in a Pentecostal church.

4. Lived experience: Latina Australian Pentecostal Women's Narratives

To further situate this study, we look specifically at the history of Pentecostalism in Australia, particularly as related to women. Denise Austin and Jacqui Grey describe women as paramount to Pentecostalism's growth in Australia.⁵⁴ Eleven of the first eighteen Pentecostal churches in Australia were planted by women.⁵⁵ Looking to the present, Shane Clifton argues that in the twenty-first century Pentecostalism in Australia has undergone rapid and exponential growth and transformation.⁵⁶ He demonstrates that much of Australian Pentecostalism's growth is the result of the change in church authority and leadership structures. He notes that as churches

⁴⁹ Brusco, "Gender and Power," 3; 79-80.

⁵⁰ Brusco, "Gender and Power," 3; 79-81.

⁵¹ Brusco, "Gender and Power," 3; 79-81.

⁵² Mira and Lorentzen, "Women, Migration and the Pentecostal Experience," 424.

⁵³ Mira and Lorentzen, "Women, Migration and the Pentecostal Experience," 424.

⁵⁴ To provide context, in 1925 eleven of eighteen Pentecostal churches first started in Australia were led and pastored by women, in a time when women could not even open bank accounts without permission from their husbands. Austin, and Grey, "The 'Outback Spirit' of Pentecostal Women Pioneers in Australia," 206.

⁵⁵ Austin and Grey, "The 'Outback Spirit' of Pentecostal Women Pioneers in Australia," 204.

⁵⁶ Shane Clifton, *Pentecostal Churches in Transition: Analysing the Developing Ecclesiology of the Assemblies of God in Australia* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 20 May. 2009), 4.

have opted for a more corporate style of leadership, this also led to a predominantly male pastoral leadership.⁵⁷ However, weekly attendance in Australian Pentecostal churches is second only to the Roman Catholic church and far exceeds other Protestant denominations' weekly attendance.⁵⁸ These attendees are disproportionately female, coinciding with Martin's theory of "Gender Paradox" as seen in the female majority in Pentecostal churches in Latin America.⁵⁹

Tanya Riches examines the nature of female empowerment in ministry and ecclesial roles at Hillsong Church. She uses Moghadam and Senftova's definition of empowerment, as "a multidimensional process of civil, political, social, economic, and cultural participation and rights" to frame a nuanced argument of empowerment and gender in Hillsong Church Sydney, demonstrating the complexity and challenges of women's ideal spirituality versus their lived-experiences.⁶⁰ Through a collection of women's stories, Riches goes on to showcase how Hillsong has provided and even pioneered several spaces and opportunities for women to develop and grow their gifts.⁶¹ This is demonstrated in the high representation of female pastors, leaders and, evangelists (e.g. Darlene Zschech, Christine Caine) that have come from Hillsong. In addition, she documents Hillsong's Global Senior Pastor Bobbie Houston's role as the founder of *The Sisterhood Movement* and CEO of Hillsong's global women conferences. Riches demonstrates that women within this movement feel supported in both more traditional roles (as a mother and/or wife) but also to pursue roles/careers as pastors, evangelists, board members, entrepreneurs and businesswomen.⁶² With that being said, Riches argues that women's spiritual empowerment at Hillsong centres around this example of Bobbie Houston, and her primary role as a wife and mother.⁶³ This exemplifies or elevates traditional roles of womanhood at Hillsong. It can also create a vacuum effect or feeling of displacement for single women, or women without children, which will be further discussed in the analysis section.

Furthermore, as will be seen, *mujeres Latinas'* experiences are not easily categorised in binary terms such as positive or negative, restrictive, or liberating.⁶⁴ Their experience of faith and spirituality is often conceived as meeting their needs for survival and working towards their flourishing. Thus, as their social context or environment changes (or progresses), what may have

⁵⁷ Clifton, *Pentecostal Churches in Transition*, 4.

⁵⁸ Clifton, *Pentecostal Churches in Transition*, 2-3.

⁵⁹ The 2016 Census recorded a total of 260 558 attendees in Australian Pentecostalism of those, 140775 are female and 119785 male. Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Cultural Diversity: Census of Population and Housing (Table Builder)*, 2016, ; Martin, "The Pentecostal Gender Paradox: A Cautionary Tale for the Sociology of Religion," 58.

⁶⁰ Tanya Riches, "The Sisterhood: Hillsong in a Feminine Key" in *The Hillsong Movement Examined*, edited by Tanya Riches and Tom Wagner, (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 85-86.

⁶¹ Riches, "The Sisterhood: Hillsong in a Feminine Key," 85-86.

⁶² Riches, "The Sisterhood: Hillsong in a Feminine Key," 86.

⁶³ Riches, "The Sisterhood: Hillsong in a Feminine Key," 86.

⁶⁴ Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 170.

served as an example of liberation for another person can feel like shackles. The following section provides insight into the complexity of *mujeres Latinas'* experience in Australia and demonstrates the hybrid space of marginality and the intersectionality of ideal spirituality and lived religion.⁶⁵

5. Lived experience: Latina Australian Pentecostal Women's Narratives

As mentioned earlier, this article reviews the transcultural experience and narratives of Latinas living in Sydney, Australia via ethnographic interviews with ten current/former attendees of the Merrylands campus of Hillsong Church. The names of these Latina Australian women attending Hillsong Merrylands have been changed to remain anonymous. All revealed that they preferred the contemporary and hybrid spaces that Hillsong provides over exclusively language-based, Latina/o cultural churches in Sydney Australia. They considered the style and accessibility of Hillsong to offer various benefits, including 1) freedom from legalism and the limitations imposed by it, 2) space and activities focused on their families, especially programs catered for their young children and teenagers, 3) opportunities of involvement and volunteering at church which helps them develop their (spiritual and organisational) gifts; a space where their contribution is cultivated and celebrated as meaningful, 4) finding a community that eventually becomes like *familia* and friends who speak their language, and 5) examples of female role models that encourage self-belief, activism, and participation through their life's example.

On the other hand, however, these *mujeres Latinas* also expressed some limitations in Hillsong church, mainly when reflecting on the limited female representation in senior church leadership, and fewer opportunities to lead (roles were often instead assigned to men or reserved for women of certain marital status). They described being far removed from those who hold the decision-making power. Therefore, the phrase "come as you are," although as an initial invitation for membership into the community, was ultimately limited in application. Participants were of the view that certain positions are still reserved for specific groups of people (most namely, men). These organisational limitations expressed by some of the women reflect Martin's theory of the "Gender Paradox" of "limited" or even disempowering structures,⁶⁶ that is, limitations that conflict with the values and theologies that Pentecostalism offers. These themes will now be explored in more depth.

⁶⁵ In Mendez' research of Canadian-Latinas, women often forfeit positions of traditional authority, as pastors or speaking from the pulpit, to safeguard their cultural and religiously reinforced images and roles of ideal womanhood, wife and mother. This is exemplified in how women elevate and give spiritual authority to the role of wife and mother, calling it their spiritual calling. Comparatively, this is largely influenced by Latin America's social and religious influence of Roman-Catholicism's high theology and veneration of the Virgin Mary. Virginia Nolivos and Eloy H. Nolivos, "Pentecostalism's Theological Reconstruction of the Identity of the Latin American Family," *Pentecostal Power* (January 1, 2011): 205–226, 214.

⁶⁶ Martin, "The Pentecostal Gender Paradox: A Cautionary Tale for the Sociology of Religion," 53-54.; Brusco, "Gender and Power," 80.

6. Lived experience: Benefits that Australian Pentecostal churches offer to *mujeres Latinas*

The first area that is experienced as empowerment for this group of *mujeres Latinas* is freedom from legalism and the limitations imposed by it. When interviewing Andrea and Luciana, both had found freedom in Pentecostalism's encouragement to choose their purpose in life as a person independent from their husbands. This defied any idea that the sole purpose of women is as "*la ayuda idonea*" (suitable helper) for her husband. Andrea stated:

The way they lead back home, it will be more like... this family has a calling or really "this guy has a calling and then his family will support him in that way". And when we decided to come to Australia, I felt that it was my responsibility to support my husband... doing ministry. It was nothing that I wanted to do personally...I enjoyed my career. So, at the time, it was a sacrifice that I had to make to support my husband because he was called to ministry, but being in Australia and being in Hillsong church... opened so many doors of possibilities for me, not feeling called to be a pastor, but still understanding that I had a place in the church that I could still build the church ... I mean, I felt trapped back home... I was trapped in this pastor's wife role... but now I know that I don't have to do what my husband is doing, that I can choose to be a professional. And I can still build the church from that place.⁶⁷

Similarly, Luciana shared how her experience at Hillsong revolutionised her life as she was able to engage in the work of ministry. She found a space where she could exercise her spiritual gifts and she was included in authoritative leadership positions. The fact that a woman was in a leadership position presented its own cultural barriers. Luciana describes that it was difficult for members of their Latina/o community to embrace a collaborative model of spiritual authority; however, she notes that their example and remodelling was helping break down cultural barriers and diminishing mindsets. This is evident when Luciana affirms:

It was just interesting because we've taken Latinos out of a normal kind of small Latino church, and we brought the beautiful Hillsong culture. Right. And so, some of the mindsets that the small Latino churches have, like around power and authority... you know, the pastor, he's the one that has to say everything. He's the one who has to visit everybody. He's the one to pray for everybody. We were breaking that down and going on like a distributed leadership model. And so, people really did struggle with that. It took a long time for them to come on board with us.⁶⁸

Luciana added that in Hillsong she found freedom from traditionalist expectations around dress code, and a place that embraced her culture and Latina roots—especially in how to

⁶⁷ Dorothy Mendez and Samir Eljagh. *Interview with Andrea*. July 8th, 2021.

⁶⁸ Dorothy Mendez and Samir Eljagh. *Interview with Luciana*. July 21st, 2021.

celebrate/party and in the ways that she thought about “*el mundo espiritual*” (the spiritual world).⁶⁹ Luciana notes:

I went to lots of little local Spanish extension services and found them to be quite religious, a lot of spiritual abuse, a lot of mystical kind of Pentecostal stuff. Everything had a demon ... They were very religious about how you can dress. And I remember going to youth in summer [and a Hillsong pastor] would wear a top that her shoulder was showing. At first, I was like “Ohh”, but it was really liberating because it helped us to sort of dress in a freer way... it was cool to see 60-year-old ladies buying tight jeans and leather jackets and stuff... it was them going we are freer and that was really cool to see at that time... and the pastors at the time really embraced our culture and they actually would run Friday nights based on different cultures. And so, we had about three Friday-Latino nights; like we had salsa nights at youth.⁷⁰

The second area experienced as empowerment for this group of mujeres Latinas was the space and activities Hillsong provided for families, especially infants and teenagers. María mentioned that she lost contact with her daughter for a few years as she was involved in using “hard drugs like marijuana and cocaine.” We almost cried with her at the testimony of how the church provided the place where her daughter found a new way of life. She remembered how for three years she did not hear a word from her and when she connected with her again, she asked her to take him to church where he “encountered Jesus” and found freedom from addiction through the pastoral support of the community. Today, Flavia volunteers at church on Sundays and leads a connect group. She explained, “She is a new woman in Christ, I cannot thank God and the church enough for everything they have done for my family... to see what God has done for Flavia is the biggest proof of God for me.”⁷¹ For María, the focus and support of the church towards her family also made it a safe place for her.

These interviewees viewed the church as an organization where families could be restored and united, and where the needs of both adults and the young can be met in one place. Marcela shared how the energetic children’s and youth ministry eventually attracted her children to church, and faith played a key role in the development of her convictions and transformed their family faith dynamics.

It was strange going to church by myself while my husband and children stayed at home...[but] When my kids started visiting (Hillsong), we found a place where they could have a good time and grow in their faith... then I decided to move with them to this location.⁷²

⁶⁹ Freedom in these areas is restricted in Pentecostal churches in Latin America (and therefore most traditional Latina/o Pentecostal churches in Australia) because such things are perceived as against Biblical etiquette or sinful.

⁷⁰ Mendez and Eljagh. *Interview with Luciana*. 2021.

⁷¹ Dorothy Mendez and Samir Eljagh. *Interview with María*. July 14th, 2021.

⁷² Dorothy Mendez and Samir Eljagh. *Interview with Marcela*. July 28th, 2021.

The third area that was experienced as spiritually empowering was the opportunities available for these women to volunteer at church. Hillsong provides a space for Latinas “*para servir a Dios y las personas*” (to serve God and people); a place where they can use their talents and skills based on their interest and feel like they are making a meaningful contribution. Karen is a great example of this:

I've been volunteering for four years now... we developed a service producer role for Merrylands because that's what we were lacking (the communication between pastors and the creative team)...I love it. And I'm so thankful and grateful for it... I'm a service producer at Merrylands, which is chaotic but it's fun at the same time because I am very task orientated. I love the crazy... I just love putting a service together.⁷³

Another example of how this group of Latinas is connecting their gifts, talents, skills and personality with the needs of the community appears in María's story. María mentioned that although she probably was one of the oldest participants, she feels like an integral part of the Merrylands community due to her involvement in different teams that welcome people to the church on Sundays and usher newcomers to connect with other members of this body of people.⁷⁴

The fourth area that is experienced as empowerment for this group of mujeres Latinas is the possibility to find a community that eventually has become *familia* and where they can speak their language. Hillsong offered this group of Latinas a space where they have built significant relationships; among them some have found spouses and friends, and all of them *una familia* of faith to which they feel attached. An example of this is Catalina's experience at the Merrylands campus, where she met her husband José as well as a group of Latinas that have become not only their friends and confidants, but also mentors and guides in their Christian faith.⁷⁵ Although the Pentecostal experience presented in Acts 2 includes *glossolalia* (phenomena manifested in speaking in different languages), *mujeres Latinas* keep their native tongue, Spanish, as their primary element of communication and bonding. This is evident in former Hillsong attendee Natalia's narrative:

I came to Australia in 2017. At that point, they still had Spanish services and it was very easy to connect to the community. But I'm telling you, in the beginning, the language was a barrier to connect with other people... I was volunteering in the kids' ministry, but then they decided to do kids ministry only in English. That's when I decided to move to another campus. And that's where I met a great number of people that speak Spanish, but I wasn't

⁷³ Dorothy Mendez and Samir Eljagh. *Interview with Karen*. August 4th, 2021

⁷⁴ Mendez and Eljagh. *Interview with María*. 2021.

⁷⁵ Dorothy Mendez and Samir Eljagh. *Interview with Catalina*. August 18th, 2021.

volunteering at Kids anymore. I started connecting with younger women, Latinas in their great majority because it was easier for me to connect with them. Then, we started a group of Latinas where we used to pray together.⁷⁶

Karen adds to this narrative when she mentions how important speaking in Spanish at Merrylands was for her family to come to the Christian faith and stay.

My family met someone that was going to Hillsong Merrylands, and my mom doesn't speak English. And so, they're like, hey, this Hillsong Merrylands has a Spanish service, come check it out...We went a few Sundays and they got plugged into some type of community group. Everyone spoke Spanish, which is very comfortable for them, and they felt like home and family... to be honest, I'm slightly attached to it... for me, it's home, that's for sure.⁷⁷

Finally, the fifth area that is experienced as empowerment for this group of *mujeres Latinas* is the chance to find role models that help them to believe in themselves as women leaders. When asked, "Is there a person who has influenced you or inspired you in your discipleship journey or a person you look up to as an example? Andrea shared about the women at Hillsong who exemplified leadership and pastoring in such diverse ways.

Right now, I'm going to say, Donna Crouch. Yeah, she's my hero... The fact that she was the first [woman] to be in leadership positions across Christian organizations within Australia; the fact that she was the first [female] youth pastor that a big church ever had in Australia and just how much she has shaped the course of our church. And then she keeps doing it in different capacities and she's not constrained to "you're only going to do this." She has done so many things. She's been our campus pastor. She's been a creative pastor at some point. Now she helps the church with aiding the government and connecting the church with influential people in this country. I love how flexible and how strong she has been in her position as a woman of God, but also how strong she is a mom and how she supports her husband in what her husband does (separate to her role) and the whole way that they have balanced marriage and church in their family ... church is something that they want to build. And they have found different ways to do it, but ... she continues to be someone strong in the church.⁷⁸

In the same way, Luciana provided another example of a role model in Hillsong church:

I wouldn't probably be the person I am today if it wasn't for Karly and Sam Carrasco. I've known them for many years, and I look up to them a lot from being my youth pastors.

⁷⁶ Dorothy Mendez and Samir Eljagh. *Interview with Natalia*. July 20th, 2021.

⁷⁷ Mendez and Eljagh. *Interview with Karen*. 2021.

⁷⁸ Mendez and Eljagh. *Interview with Andrea*. 2021.

They have been there from day one as well and through every life season... to think from high school to now...they always encouraged me...they mentored me through my faith... like in moments that I had to make some big decisions and hard decisions they helped guide me and fight with me.⁷⁹

7. Limitations that Australian Pentecostal churches offer to *mujeres Latinas*

In the interviews, the women also shared experiences where they felt restricted in the Australian Pentecostal church. These reflections were demonstrated in examples of limited opportunity to lead beyond roles assigned (primarily) to men or reserved to those who are married. Some of the role assigned to these women, yes are positions of leadership, however they are far removed from those who hold the actual decision-making power. For instance, two out of the ten women shared about the disproportionate gender disparity among women in senior leadership positions at Hillsong church, which points to a potential growth hinderance.

Luciana observed:

I mean, if you think about who the women in leadership are embraced, in our world, Bobbie would be the only one... Donna (Crouch) preaches from the platform.... And Cass (Langton) too. You take those three women out. Where are we?... Yeah, every other woman looks at what they're doing.⁸⁰

Javiera adds to this narrative explaining that representation in leadership is often favoured towards married couples and men, and that there is little to no examples of women “like her” (Latinas) participating in church leaderships roles.

I still think here is this gap or discontinuation of a core belief, more of where I see the church giving a voice to or an influence on women over the community. It is usually between a lot of couples. Or on a stage, teaching the Bible, the majority are men. And, there is little to no young woman that I've ever seen or a single woman at all.... I think the biggest factor is that I don't see other people that I can resemble or that I feel like or are similar to me doing what is in my heart to do. For example, like I was saying before, in a paid role as a pastor, in the church (there are few single women).⁸¹

On top of the visible majority of men or married couples in pastoral positions of leadership in the church, Luciana also shared her experience of powerlessness in her role, as a female. The multiple layers of leadership hierarchy results in the displacement or lack of female voices, inclusively the lack of women of colour or of “other” status contributing to the decision-making of the organisation. Luciana observed that there are “many layers of filtration between the top and us”

⁷⁹ Mendez and Eljagh. Interview with Luciana. 2021

⁸⁰ Mendez and Eljagh. Interview with Luciana. 2021.

⁸¹ Dorothy Mendez and Samir Eljagh. Interview with Javiera. July 6th, 2021.

and in that way her contribution "just didn't have much effect"⁸² to the organisational culture of the church.

To summarise the ethnographic research, we turned to a familiar slogan at Hillsong— “come as you are.” This phrase is representative of an open invitation from Hillsong to Latina members with some of the benefits described as: providing a sense of *familia* between members, and space for growth and escape from legalism as found in predominantly Latin expressions of church. However, despite these strengths of the church and the free invitation to participate, Latinas (particularly those who are unmarried) described the lack of participation at Hillsong in the visible representation of the church and decision-making power. Two key issues were identified: 1) certain positions are still reserved to specific groups of people, and the largest representative leadership group is white English-speaking men, 2) The “separateness” or organisational limitations that speak of gendered-roles and “the patriarchal bargain” inherent in structures described as disempowering.⁸³

Conclusion

Hillsong Church Merrylands provides a space for *mujeres Latinas* to exercise their spirituality, provides the space to develop their gifts, and provides a place of welcome and inclusion that acts as a place of reprieve from strict legalist customs and cultural limitations on womanhood; however, its “empowerment” of women in positions of leadership and authority is limited in application.⁸⁴ There appears to be an inherent paradox at the heart of Pentecostal praxis where the liberating theologies are limited in scope when applied to organisational structures and opportunities for advancement. These women's narratives from Hillsong Church offer a unique insight as those often excluded from the spaces of power, but also provide insight from those who contribute their zealous spirituality and resilient faith to what distinguishes Australian Pentecostalism. However, in some instances, the ideals of Pentecostalism’s pneumatology praxis of ethnocultural inclusion are upheld, but in other instances, the experiences of these women demonstrate the conditional application of Pentecostalism's Spirit empowerment of “all people.”

⁸² Mendez and Eljagh. Interview with Luciana. 2021.

⁸³ Brusco, “Gender and Power,” 80.

⁸⁴ Likewise, in the context of North America, Joy Qualls argues that Pentecostalism as witnessed in the history of the Assemblies of God in the USA flourished in the early twentieth century because of its countercultural and radical practices defying social and cultural norms, as such women were at the forefront of this movement, in roles as missionaries, revivalist and church planting, remarkably during a period where women did not even have the right to vote. However, Qualls argues that the Assemblies of God in the USA forfeited their opportunity to be a catalyst for changing the practices and perceived view of women in Christian society, and instead of openly creating a place for the role of women in religious ministry, the AOG chose to stay with their brothers (and sisters) in more conservative Christianity.

Joy Elizabeth Anderson Qualls, “*God Forgive Us for Being Women*” in *Rhetoric, Theology, and the Pentecostal Tradition*, Frameworks, interdisciplinary studies for faith and learning (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, an imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2018), 51.

Despite, the contrast of contemporary Australian Pentecostal organisational practises with the history of Australian Pentecostal women pastors and pioneers (many of them single), who navigated what Grey and Austin call the challenges of “the outback,” early Australian Pentecostalism is still distinguished by women’s participation and unyielding faith and perseverance.⁸⁵

In reflection upon these women’s stories, it is important to mention that we endeavour to validate and recognise the limitations experienced by each woman as arising within a specific Australian context, in which *mujeres Latinas* are a minority group. As Riches mentions in “The Sisterhood: Hillsong in a Feminine Key,” while women describe a lack of Latina representation in Australia, this is likely not the case in Latin America where Hillsong has placed women like Lucy Méndez as a co-lead pastor of the region’s Hillsong churches.⁸⁶

“Ven tal como eres!” for *mujeres Latinas* is still exemplified in the inclusion of female pastors, leaders and role models who have been part of Hillsong Church and indispensable to Australian Pentecostalism’s narrative. Pentecostal *mujeres Latinas* living in Australia and attending Hillsong church can find “home” away from home. The experiences of powerlessness, lack of social mobility or lack of visibility is subverted by their experience of attending and participating in a church where they can contribute whole-heartedly and develop their giftings and grow spiritually.

⁸⁵ Austin and Grey, “The ‘Outback Spirit’ of Pentecostal Women Pioneers in Australia,” 204.

⁸⁶ Riches, “The Sisterhood: Hillsong in a Feminine Key,” 85-86.

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