

A Lagoon in La Laguna:  
A History of La Iglesia Luterana de El Redentor from 1950 to 2000  
Torreón, Coahuila, Mexico

Church History 331

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The city of Torreón, Coahuila, lies in the heart of the north-central Mexican desert.<sup>1</sup> With a current population of about half a million, it is the largest of three cities that make up a region known affectionately by its inhabitants as “La Laguna,” or, “The Lagoon.” Although many would call this a misnomer since the area is dry, dusty and exceedingly hot, La Laguna is so called because centuries ago this elevated valley was all under water.<sup>2</sup> For this reason the citizens of Torreón often refer to themselves affectionately as “laguneros,” or, “people of the lagoon.”

The city of Torreón, Coahuila, also lies in the heart of a great spiritual desert. With a current population of about half a million souls, it is a large city in a region of the world where one would expect to find a lagoon filled with an abundance of the water of life, the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. But this water is not so abundant here. About 90% of the people of Torreón have been literally born into a particularly idolatrous form of Roman Catholicism, and of those who are members, only a very small percentage are active. Indeed, the citizens of Torreón call themselves “laguneros,” people who have plenty of the gospel and do not need anyone to come to them with a drink. Yet just as the name “La Laguna” is more an affectionate title than an accurate description, so the people of Torreón are in reality people living not beside streams of living water, but in a dry and weary land where water is scarce.

The Lord God was not pleased when he saw this, and so in compassion he placed a well in the city of Torreón fifty years ago—a small well that has attracted relatively few people over the decades, but a well that has more than enough water for an entire city of thirsting souls.

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<sup>1</sup> See Figure 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Noticiero de la Fe*, Number 8, May 1964, personal records of David Chichía, Mexico City.

Since its formation in 1950, this well, the small church called La Iglesia Luterana de El Redentor (Redeemer Lutheran Church), testifies to the glorious grace of our Redeemer-God.

### *The Lord prepares a missionary*

The history of El Redentor of Torreón cannot be told apart from the history of its founding missionary and pastor, Pastor Juan M. Ibarra. Pastor Ibarra served the congregation of El Redentor from its beginning in 1950 until his death in 1989—thirty-nine of its now fifty years of existence. A brief recounting of Pastor Ibarra’s personal history, then, serves to magnify our understanding of the Lord’s providence for this congregation and for the city of Torreón.

Juan Ibarra was born on February 8, 1905, in the small town of San Salvador, Zacatecas. His family was nominally Catholic, but neither he nor his family attended church more than once or twice a year. He grew up during the volatile revolutionary days of Mexico’s history, and moved early in his life to the city of Saltillo, Coahuila, where he received his primary education.<sup>3</sup>

Not satisfied with schools in Mexico, young Juan moved up to the state of Missouri to study at the Missouri School of Mines. His instructors here, however, noticed a distinct talent Juan had for chemistry and so advised him to pursue chemical engineering rather than the more manual labor of mine work. Juan decided this was good advice and moved to St. Louis in the late 1920’s to further his new career.<sup>4</sup>

Life in St. Louis for a young Mexican who couldn’t speak much English was difficult, not to mention that these were the days of the Great Depression. Juan and others resorted to

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<sup>3</sup> Wilma Ibarra, interview by author, video recording, Torreón, Mexico, 5 March 1999 (hereafter cited as Ibarra).

<sup>4</sup> Ibarra.

sleeping on park benches, wrapping themselves in newspaper to keep warm.<sup>5</sup> But this period of adversity turned out to be the hand of the Lord in bringing his future servant into fellowship with Himself.

One day while they were shivering in the cold park, a Spanish-speaking friend told Juan he had learned of a nearby church that was offering worship in Spanish. At least they could be warm there. So the following Sunday Juan went to Trinity Lutheran Church in Perry County, Missouri, a church with quite a history of its own. His wife reveals that “it warmed his heart as well as his body.” Here at Trinity Juan met Pastor R. Jargo, Pastor of St. Stephen’s Lutheran church, who took him into his own home, instructed him in the gospel and confirmed him at St. Stephen’s in 1930.<sup>6</sup> Juan never forgot his cold, destitute days in the park, as will be seen in the ministry he carried out in Mexico.

Now that the Lord had brought Juan into the Lutheran church, he continued to prepare his servant for the service he had planned for him. On May 29, 1938, Juan married a young American girl named Wilma Gerling, whom he had met at St. Stephen’s. As Juan studied the Word of God, he showed an increasing maturity and understanding, which led Dr. Walter Meier to suggest to Wilma that she encourage her husband to study for the public ministry. But Wilma knew her husband, and she knew that he wasn’t ready to be pressed on the matter just yet. In fact, his interest in chemical engineering was growing and in 1944 Juan decided to take his wife and four children back to Mexico to pursue his career there.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

The Ibarra's went to Monterrey, Nuevo León, one of the largest cities in Mexico, where Juan began putting his chemical engineering skills into practice by reportedly making and marketing the first powdered soap in Mexico. His career seemed to be booming, but it was not by coincidence that the Ibarra's ended up in Monterrey, for here was located the first Concordia Seminary in Mexico. Pastor Segovia of La Santa Cruz Lutheran Church in Monterrey spoke with Juan and encouraged him to study for the ministry. After prayerful consideration, Juan came to the conclusion that he could best serve his Lord by becoming a pastor and enrolled in the Instituto Concordia de Monterrey in 1946.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Small beginnings — 1950-1954***

Meanwhile, a man by the name of José Refugio Gutiérrez had just moved his family from Monterrey to the city of Torreón, Coahuila, because his wife Josefina's health was failing due to repeated attacks of malaria in the humid climate of Monterrey.<sup>9</sup> Torreón offered not only a dry, malaria-free climate for Josefina, but it provided José with a job working for the railroads, which had put Torreón on the map in the first place as "la Estación del Torreón," or "Watchtower Station."<sup>10</sup>

But the Gutiérrez family faced a problem in Torreón. There was no Lutheran church. They had been faithful members of La Santa Cruz in Monterrey (and still have relatives there to this day), and could not in good conscience abandon the truth they had learned in the Lutheran church for the false teachings of the Catholic churches that abounded in Torreón. So José

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> *History of Torreón* (accessed 6 March 2000); available from <http://www.aytotor.gob.mx/historia/histor.htm>; Internet.

Refugio Gutiérrez sent a plea for help to Monterrey.<sup>11</sup>

At this time Juan Ibarra was finishing his studies at the institute in Monterrey. He was given a choice between two calls: Matamoros or Torreón.<sup>12</sup> The Lord moved him to accept the call to Torreón, and so Juan and his family returned to St. Louis one last time so that he might be ordained and commissioned in the church where he was confirmed. Pastor Ibarra was ordained on August 7, 1949 at St. Stephen's Lutheran Church by Rev. G.E. Nitz. Rev. H.A. Mayer, the Synod's Assistant Secretary of Missions, preached for the ordination service.<sup>13</sup> From there the Ibarra's made their way back to Mexico, to their new home in the state of Coahuila.

Pastor Ibarra and his family arrived in Torreón on February 14, 1950. He began his work immediately, using the humble one-room home of the Gutiérrez family as his base of operations. The small congregation worshiped and studied God's Word in this house until 1954. José Gutiérrez and his family lived literally on the other side of the tracks, away from the downtown area in one of the poorest sections of Torreón. There were no paved roads leading to their house.<sup>14</sup> A report from Rev. H.A. Mayer describes the situation in 1953:

Ibarra has many contacts in Torreón, but until now he has had services only in a very, very humble residence—a mud hut with mud floors, on the other side of the tracks—and consequently has not been able to build up a good following. He started to have classes in his own home, but there is too much complaint on the part of the neighbors and he has again discontinued his classes in his own home.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Dolores and Jesús Vega, interview by author, video recording, Torreón, Mexico, 4 March 1999 (hereafter cited as Vega).

<sup>12</sup> Vega.

<sup>13</sup> H.W. Gockel, "Candidate Juan Ibarra Commissioned to Mexican Field," *The Lutheran Witness*, no.18 (September 1949).

<sup>14</sup> Ibarra.

<sup>15</sup> H.A.Mayer, "Reports, Problems and Suggestions. Latin American Trip — Feb. - March, 1953," Concordia Historical Institute, St. Louis.

The congregation, originally called Apóstol Pablo (Apostle Paul), was made up of a small core group, among whom were José Gutiérrez, his children and several extended family members. Josefina Gutiérrez didn't become a member until years later. Worship services and Sunday School were held every Sunday morning, with an average attendance of only ten to fifteen, including Pastor Ibarra and his family.<sup>16</sup> By 1954 this number had grown to about twenty-five people attending regularly.<sup>17</sup>

Ministry was exceedingly difficult during this period. First, the size and condition of the house made it difficult to assemble for worship. Many times Pastor Ibarra would preach from the doorway while the members and visitors would crowd into the small house and try to find a seat on the bed.<sup>18</sup> It was difficult to convince the people of the city to come find out what this “mud hut” had to offer when they weren't even interested in going to their own cathedral. Secondly, the location of the house and the lack of transportation to the colony made it unlikely that anyone from outside the colony would ever come to hear the Word. Thirdly, the same problem that plagues Lutheran churches in Mexico now was even more of a problem in those days, namely, the great fear on the part of the Mexicans that leaving the Catholic Church—even if they were members in name only—would automatically condemn them to hell.

In spite of the obstacles, Pastor Ibarra kept trying to bring the gospel to the people of Torreón. He would go out nearly every afternoon and evangelize people on the streets. He visited every home in the colony where the Gutiérrez family lived. He would stop people in the

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<sup>16</sup> Ibarra.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

park and try to tell them about the Savior who died for them.<sup>19</sup>

Although the congregation did not grow very rapidly during these four years, the well was dug and the water of life became available to the citizens of Torreón. The fact that not many people were drinking from this spiritual “laguna” does not in any way minimize the grace that the Lord was holding out to them. Nor were all of the mission efforts of this congregation in vain. Pastor Ibarra’s wife still recalls a vivid example of this from these early years of the congregation. A woman who was suffering from tuberculosis came to Torreón once a month to visit a doctor there. During each visit she would come to the Gutiérrez house for worship and Bible study, and each time she would ask for a copy of the Sunday School lesson for that day. Her favorite was a lesson depicting the raising of the Jairus’ daughter. Finally her tuberculosis rendered her bed-ridden. Pastor Ibarra visited her often until one Saturday the woman, knowing that her end was near, asked with tears in her eyes, “Will Jesus raise me, too?” Pastor Ibarra replied, “You can be sure of it.” She smiled and closed her eyes and went to be with her Savior the next day.<sup>20</sup>

Recognizing their need for better worship facilities, the small church, in coordination with the LCMS, began searching for a plot of land in the downtown area. Several houses were found, but their rundown condition was little better than that of the Gutiérrez house, and they were rather expensive. Finally an empty lot was found right in the downtown area across from a city park. The land was purchased in March of 1953 for about US \$3000, which was given as a

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.



loan to the congregation through the Church Extension Fund of the LCMS.<sup>21</sup>

***In the pastor's house (1954-1959)***

Although willing to buy land at a cheap price, the LCMS wasn't yet ready to build a chapel for the small Apóstol Pablo congregation, and as a result the congregation still had to search for a place to worship until a chapel could be funded and built on the new land they had purchased. A house was finally found in the downtown area. It was bigger and in a much better neighborhood. It had a large room in front where Pastor Ibarra and his family lived, and a separate room in back with a private entrance where Pastor Ibarra could work and hold worship services and Bible classes. The church rented this house from 1954 to 1959 and held weekly worship services and Bible classes as before, with the addition of a Wednesday evening Bible class/worship service.<sup>22</sup>

The small congregation was slowing growing in membership. By 1954 they had fifty baptized souls and their communicant membership had grown to twenty-three. By 1956 six more members were confirmed<sup>23</sup>, including the Juárez family, of whom some are still members today. Pastor Ibarra continued to nurture his people and to reach out to the 128,000 citizens of Torreón<sup>24</sup> with the gospel. He records making 281 evangelism visits and 233 pastoral visits in 1956.<sup>25</sup> Although there were only twenty-eight communicants in 1956, several visitors would

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<sup>21</sup> Mayer, "Reports, Problems and Suggestions."

<sup>22</sup> Vega.

<sup>23</sup> Pastor Juan Ibarra, Torreón, Mexico, to [Board for Missions, St. Louis, Missouri], 30 October 1956, Concordia Historical Institute, St. Louis.

<sup>24</sup> [Convention of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod], 20 July 1954, Concordia Historical Institute, St. Louis.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

come every Sunday, some of whom were confirmed after the chapel was completed in 1964.<sup>26</sup>

Pastor Ibarra made repeated requests for the LCMS to build them a church, but up to this time his requests were being denied. Already in December of 1954 the Church Extension Board had approved a loan request by the Board for Missions in the amount of \$35,000 for a new chapel in Torreón<sup>27</sup>, but in 1956 the Mission Board was still not ready to build on the land they had purchased three years earlier:

The Board feels that this group, still unorganized and with only twenty-eight communicants, is not in dire need of a temple. The brother ought to build a constituency before begging a church building.<sup>28</sup>

Finally in 1958 the LCMS authorized plans to be drawn up for a chapel in Torreón.<sup>29</sup> The plans were drawn up and sent to Pastor Ibarra for review, but he rejected them because they proposed a flat-roofed rectangular building that “resembled a factory rather than a church.”<sup>30</sup> This displeased the LCMS, but they were willing to allow him some liberty in finding a better design, which is exactly what he did. He drew up a building that resembles a letter “A” intersecting with a letter “M.”<sup>31</sup> He found a contractor, who polished the drawings, and was authorized to begin building.

A slight problem was encountered with the land that had been purchased, however. As

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<sup>26</sup> Ibarra.

<sup>27</sup> H.A. Mayer to W.H. Hillmer, 20 December 1954, Concordia Historical Institute, St. Louis.

<sup>28</sup> H.A. Ott, St. Louis, Missouri, to [H.A. Mayer], 20 September 1956, Concordia Historical Institute, St. Louis.

<sup>29</sup> [Convention of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod], 11 September 1958, Concordia Historical Institute, St. Louis.

<sup>30</sup> Ibarra.

<sup>31</sup> See Figure 2.

they began to dig into the ground to lay the foundation, they found meter after meter of rubbish. It so happened that the land had at one time been used as a dump, which meant they had to dig quite deep to reach solid rock below.<sup>32</sup> The final result was a sizable basement which would prove invaluable to the ministry of the congregation and would serve as the main worship facility for the congregation over the next five years.

### *In the basement (1959-1964)*

The basement of the new chapel was finished and “dedicated” on Reformation Day, 1959, in a special service.<sup>33</sup> From this date until the chapel was completed in 1964 the congregation at Torreón held all their services in the basement and stopped worshipping in Pastor Ibarra’s home.

Congregational work continued as before with a service and Bible classes every Sunday morning, and with a Bible study/service each Wednesday evening. Pastor Ibarra continued his almost daily evangelism efforts, all the more now that he had a permanent base of operations around which to work.<sup>34</sup> Remembering his long days and cold nights spent in the cold park in St. Louis, he often ministered to the poor who would sit on the park benches across from his new church. He would usually hand them a flyer he had mimeographed presenting the way of salvation. As one who could relate to their poverty and hopelessness, he was able to connect with the poor in a special way and hold out to them the priceless treasure of the forgiveness of sins through faith alone in Jesus. Although very few of the people from the park ever became members of El Redentor, the Lord used the tender heart of Pastor Ibarra to reach them with the

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<sup>32</sup> Ibarra.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

gospel and perhaps plant a gospel seed that eventually germinated and produced fruit.

In mentioning the nurture and missionary activity of Pastor Ibarra, the reader has probably noticed that little has been said of participation on the part of the lay people in the work of ministry. This has long been noted as one of obstacles in carrying out mission work in Mexico, namely, that the general consensus among pastors and laity in Mexico has been that the pastor is responsible for the work of the ministry while the laymen are responsible to come to church and listen to the pastor.<sup>35</sup> This is not a uniquely Mexican perspective of ministry, but it is perhaps accentuated by Mexican culture and by the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the Catholic Church, which for centuries in Mexico served as the sole model of how a Christian church functions.

As the work on the structure of the chapel was being done, the congregation in Torreón met with some opposition from the Catholic Church. Until this time the Catholic Church had not seen this small group of non-Catholics as a great threat. But when it became clear that this group of “dissenters” was on the scene permanently, even daring to erect a non-Catholic church building in the center of town, the Catholic Church took action. Mrs. Ibarra recalls how the Catholic bishop would drive by in front of the construction site every Saturday evening, using a loudspeaker to warn the people of Torreón not to go to the “Protestant” church<sup>36</sup>, that for any Catholic to do such a thing would be an act of high treason and grounds for excommunication.

The contractor himself was warned by his parish not to participate in the building of the chapel, lest he, too, face excommunication, but he built on until the first half of the chapel was

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<sup>35</sup> Vega.

<sup>36</sup> Ibarra.

completed.<sup>37</sup> A temporary wall was built behind the altar so that after a few more years of growth in membership the second half of the chapel could be added on behind it. And so on March 8, 1964, the new chapel, located at *Ave. 6 de Octubre No. 966 Ote.*, was dedicated to the Lord's service by a thankful congregation, whose total membership had reached nearly 100 by this time.<sup>38</sup> Most of the members view this date as the true founding of their congregation.

### ***Prosperous years in the chapel (1964-1980)***

From the correspondence that exists among the various LCMS boards and Pastor Ibarra, it appears that there was much confusion as to how much money was available for the completion of the chapel in Torreón. As stated above, a loan of \$35,000 had been approved by the Church Extension Board in 1954, but when Pastor Ibarra requested \$30,000 of this in 1958 for the building of a chapel he was informed that only some \$10,000 was then available.<sup>39</sup> This was roughly what it cost the LCMS to complete the first stage of the chapel in Torreón.<sup>40</sup> In the following years, however, when new men took over the positions in the Board for Missions and the Church Extension Board, they were under the assumption that all \$35,000 had been disbursed to Torreón and were looking for an accounting of these funds.<sup>41</sup> Where the money ended up is difficult to ascertain. In any case, it did not end up in Torreón, and as a result the chapel that was half-finished in 1964 remains half-finished to this day.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> *Noticiero de la Fe.*

<sup>39</sup> H.A. Ott, St. Louis, Missouri, to Pastor Juan M. Ibarra, Torreón, Mexico, 25 April 1958, Concordia Historical Institute, St. Louis.

<sup>40</sup> Pastor Juan M. Ibarra, Torreón, Mexico, to [Board for Missions, LCMS], 4 November 1964, Concordia Historical Institute, St. Louis.

<sup>41</sup> W.H. Hillmer to Walter Schieber, 17 March 1966, Concordia Historical Institute, St. Louis.

The congregation prospered in their new building, however, and experienced their most glorious years from 1964 until about the early 1980's. The members of El Redentor were proud of their new building and ready to use it to attract more visitors. Pastor Ibarra published a picture of the church and the worship schedule in the local newspaper in preparation for Christmas of that same year and for Easter, 1965.<sup>42</sup> Visitors would walk in off the street to see what this new church was teaching. Another worship service was added on Sunday evening for those who worked in the morning. Pastor Ibarra began using his mimeograph to publish a weekly newsletter for his members and for the community. He called it "Enseñándoles" ("Teaching Them"), remembering the words of Matthew 28:20, "...teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."<sup>43</sup> Membership during this time grew to about 145 communicant members.<sup>44</sup> Surely the Lord was blessing their work!

In 1965 Pastor Ibarra made the decision to start a kindergarten.<sup>45</sup> This proved to be a very wise and beneficial decision for his church. Pastor Ibarra was aware that Torreón, at this time, had no kindergarten. He also had a special place in his heart for children, and since a kindergarten could serve not only as an educational institution, but also as a tool for outreach, he became excited about the idea.

The kindergarten or "Kinder" of El Redentor became a reality in April, 1965, when two unemployed school teachers came into contact with Pastor Ibarra. He set them to work

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<sup>42</sup> Ibarra.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Vega.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

immediately. They held classes every Monday through Friday morning in the church basement.<sup>46</sup> The children were not taught religious courses during the week, but nearly all of them ended up coming back for Sunday School on Sunday morning. Since there was no public kindergarten in town during the early years of the Kinder, many families sent their children to El Redentor. At its largest the Kinder grew to having five teachers with 125 children.<sup>47</sup>

Many children would have had trouble getting to and from the Kinder, except that an aging Pastor Ibarra would make the rounds twice every morning and twice every afternoon to pick up many of the children and to take them home again. He did this every Monday through Friday and again on Sunday so that they could be in Sunday School.<sup>48</sup> He truly loved the little children and wanted nothing more than to see them learning the truth of their Savior Jesus.

The Kinder brought many families into contact with the gospel, and the Holy Spirit used these contacts to bring many people into the church. Among these was a man by the name of Jesús Eduardo Vázquez, who sent all three of his children to the Kinder at El Redentor. He would occasionally accompany them to church on Sunday, but was never ready to make a commitment to study God's Word, despite Pastor Ibarra's frequent encouragement. But the Holy Spirit slowly worked on him through his many exposures to the Word, and finally, after his youngest son began attending the Kinder, he agreed to study the Bible with Pastor Ibarra.<sup>49</sup> He, his wife and his three children all became members, but that wasn't the final goal the Holy Spirit had for Eduardo. Shortly after his confirmation Eduardo decided he wanted to serve the Lord as

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid..

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

a public minister, and after several years of study, he was ordained in the spring of 1999 at La Santa Cruz in Monterrey, where he still serves as a faithful pastor.

### ***A period of decline (1980-1989)***

During the 1980's El Redentor experienced a devastating decline in membership. This occurred for several reasons.

First, the whole country of Mexico suffered an economic crisis from 1979 to 1982.<sup>50</sup> The area of La Laguna suffered especially during this crisis, and many of the businesses in the area were forced to close. This led many of the citizens of Torreón, including many members of El Redentor, to move elsewhere to seek employment. Many members of El Redentor moved to Ciudad Juárez and Baja California at this time.<sup>51</sup>

Secondly, Pastor Ibarra turned seventy-five years old in 1980. He was ready to retire, but there was no one available at the time to take his place. So he continued to work and to serve the people God had entrusted to him, and although his mind continued to serve him well until shortly before his death in 1989, he was unable to be as active as he had previously been in the nurture and outreach of his congregation. Since the lay members had never really been taught to participate in ministry, they were unable to offer much assistance to Pastor Ibarra in his ministry, which resulted in several backdoor losses.

Thirdly, there were a number of front door losses as well. A group of some fifteen people, mostly women, were growing more and more upset as they saw other Lutheran churches

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<sup>50</sup> *History of Torreón* (accessed 6 March 2000); available from <http://www.aytotor.gob.mx/historia/histor.htm>; Internet.

<sup>51</sup> Ibarra.



in the LCMS allowing women to vote in the church. When Pastor Ibarra refused to allow that practice in his congregation, this group met secretly with Pastor Domínguez of Monterrey who was the president of the Lutheran Synod of Mexico (LSM), the Mexican church body affiliated with the LCMS.<sup>52</sup> Pastor Domínguez would come monthly to Torreón in order to commune this group. When the rest of the congregation became aware of this, they put the members of this group under discipline, which eventually led to their leaving El Redentor in 1986. But before leaving, this group had stirred up the whole congregation with a petition asking Pastor Ibarra to retire.<sup>53</sup>

Finally, the congregation was suffering because of the lax doctrine and practice within its sister churches in the LSM. Pastor Ibarra was in fact looking to retire, but he had become disenchanted with the LSM to the point that he didn't trust a pastor who was trained by them. The LSM finally sent a vicar, José Ángel Hernández, to serve with him, with the goal of eventually taking over the congregation, but one day Pastor Ibarra spoke a few words of Greek to him to see what skills he had. José reportedly answered that they weren't taught Greek at the LSM seminary.<sup>54 55</sup> This occurrence coupled with other major deficiencies that the congregation found in their vicar led them to distrust the Lutheran Synod of Mexico more and more.

As a result of these and other difficulties, El Redentor had gone down from 145 communicant members to only about twenty.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Vega.

<sup>54</sup> Ibarra.

<sup>55</sup> Vega.

<sup>56</sup> Paul Hartman, "The Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Church in Mexico: A Church in Transition,"

*From the LSM to the CELC (1989-1990)*

Meanwhile, La Santa Cruz in Monterrey, the church where Pastor Ibarra had belonged while he was studying during his own seminary days, had recently resigned from the LSM and had affiliated itself with the WELS in 1984, becoming a member of the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Church of Mexico (CELC).<sup>57</sup> Pastor Ibarra's son Luis remained a member of La Santa Cruz and spoke positively of the changes that had been made there since they left the LSM.

Finally on January 9, 1989, the leaders of El Redentor sent a letter to the CELC requesting membership.<sup>58</sup> This request was met with a degree of caution on the part of the CELC/WELS, since it was feared that the congregation in Torreón hadn't definitively severed its relationship with the LSM, and because there was some fear that the congregation was breaking from the LSM for personal rather than doctrinal reasons.<sup>59</sup> Correspondence was sent back and forth, the CELC affirming that it would not begin official talks with the congregation until such time as the ties were completely broken with the LSM and until the LSM recognized their resignation.

Meanwhile, Pastor Ibarra's health was rapidly deteriorating. In July of 1989 he announced his retirement. He could no longer function as pastor. In the two months that followed his health grew worse and worse. During the last few weeks of his life he was unable to drive anymore, but kept insisting on going to his office at the church. When his family would

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sent to Wayne Laitinen, November 1989, personal records of Paul Hartman, El Paso.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Paul Hartman and Pastor Larry Schlomer, "Summary of relation between El Redentor, Torreón and the CELC," September 10, 1990, personal records of Paul Hartman, El Paso.

<sup>59</sup> Paul Hartman, El Paso, Texas, to Wayne Laitinen, 28 April 1989, personal records of Paul Hartman, El Paso.

take him there, he couldn't remember why he had come. This happened several times with the same result. Pastor Ibarra died on October 4, 1989, having served his congregation and his Lord faithfully for thirty-nine years.<sup>60</sup>

Pastor Ibarra's family and his congregation asked the LSM to send someone to perform a funeral service. No one would come. Hurt by this loveless response, Luis Ibarra asked his pastor, Pastor Daniel Pérez of La Santa Cruz, to come to Torreón to officiate. Pastor Pérez agreed, but advised the family that if a representative from the LSM should arrive, he would defer to the LSM pastor. The family agreed, but no one ever came from the LSM.<sup>61</sup>

A week after his death, the leaders of El Redentor were cleaning out Pastor Ibarra's office. Tucked away in his desk drawer they found a letter. It was a letter that Pastor Ibarra had written months earlier declaring the congregation's resignation from the LSM. The leaders of the church proceeded to sign the letter and dropped it in the mail.<sup>62</sup>

On October 16, 1989, the mission council of the WELS sent a letter to the members of El Redentor, stating that they could now meet with the congregation since they believed the break with the LSM to be clear and tacitly recognized by the LSM. A meeting was proposed between them and the congregation, but it was emphasized that the WELS was not in any way interested in fighting a battle over the church building with the LSM.<sup>63</sup>

Shortly before this meeting took place, a letter arrived at El Redentor from the LSM acknowledging the separation of the "signing members" of El Redentor from the LSM, although

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<sup>60</sup> Ibarra.

<sup>61</sup> Vega.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Hartman, "Summary of Relation."

nothing was mentioned about the building.

On November 14, 1989, the meeting took place between the WELS mission council, the Executive Committee, the president of the CELC and the members of El Redentor. The following items were discussed: 1)It was recognized that El Redentor had no ties to any other church body. 2)It was agreed that the current church building would continue to be used until it could be established who had the rights to it. 3)It was agreed that the congregation would give up the building if its continued use would involved a prolonged and shameful fight. 4)The purpose of the WELS mission in Mexico was discussed, as were the essential differences between the WELS and the LCMS. 5)It was agreed that the WELS would offer the services of Vicar Otoniel (Oto) Rodríguez to the congregation for a one-year period. Over the first five months of his stay there he would lead the whole congregation in study of doctrine, at the end of which time it would be decided if they were truly in agreement with each other based on God's Word.<sup>64</sup> The Executive Committee for Latin America reported:

A Lutheran church in Torreón requested affiliation with our Mexican national church. After a meeting with our missionaries, Mexican national church leaders, and this executive committee, they consented, as a congregation, to go through a course of instruction in order to better understand the doctrinal position of our churches. It is our prayer that the Holy Spirit lead us to unity based upon his Word.<sup>65</sup>

Vicar-Pastor Oto arrived in Torreón the very next month, on December 3<sup>rd</sup>, and began studying with the members of El Redentor. The progress of the congregation is noted:

The former Mexico Synod congregation at Torreón is progressing well with their instruction under Vicar Otto. Attendance is increasing at Sunday morning worship, too.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Paul Hartman, "Report of the Executive Committee for Latin America to the Board for World Missions," January 1990, personal records of Paul Hartman, El Paso.

<sup>66</sup> Paul Hartman, "Report of the Executive Committee for Latin America to the Board for World

After studying the teachings of the WELS and the CELC, the members of El Redentor concluded that these were the teachings of Scripture, and so about five months after they had begun studying with Pastor Rodríguez, on April 29, 1990, the members of El Redentor were accepted into the CELC and into fellowship with the Wisconsin Synod. Pastor Rodríguez was installed the same day in a two-hour-long service of celebration and praise at which 70 people were in attendance.<sup>67</sup>

A brief, but ugly battle ensued over the rights to the church building. Both the congregation and the LSM attempted to get the local government to recognize their ownership. One Sunday a group of LSM pastors entered the church and sat down in back during a worship service. One of them then stood up and walked to the front and began preaching. The leaders of the congregation were forced to escort the preacher and his companions out of the building.<sup>68</sup>

The matter was finally put to rest, if not settled, in a meeting held in El Paso on September 10, 1990. Among those present were Pastor Larry W. Schlomer and Pastor Paul Hartman (missionaries to Mexico), Pastor Duane Tomhave (Administrator for the WELS Board for World Mission), Dr. Glenn O'Shoney (World Mission Executive for the LCMS), some pastors from the LSM, Pastor Oto Rodríguez and Jesús Vega (president of El Redentor). The LSM and LCMS accused the WELS of proselytizing and of theft. Pastors Hartman and Schlomer listened patiently, but carefully pointed out that the WELS had never sought out the Torreón congregation nor made any attempt to initiate discussions with them. In fact, they had

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Missions," 25 April 1990, personal records of Paul Hartman, El Paso.

<sup>67</sup> Hartman, "Summary of relation."

<sup>68</sup> Vega.

encouraged the congregation to settle matters with the LSM before they were even willing to discuss relations. Furthermore, the WELS did not previously or presently own the property or the church building, and so should not be considered guilty where there was no guilt, nor should they be asked to give up what they didn't own.<sup>69</sup> Finally Pastor Schlomer indicated to the LSM representatives that if they thought they had a right to the building, they should pursue it with the Mexican government according to Mexican law, which recognized the congregation as the owner of the property. Although the LSM and LCMS representatives were not happy at the end of the meeting, they ceased to pursue the matter any further.<sup>70</sup>

### ***El Redentor as a member of the CELC (1990-)***

The relationship between the WELS and El Redentor has been extremely positive. Pastor Rodríguez served as pastor of El Redentor from 1990 until the spring of 1996, when he took a call into another field. Immediately the members of El Redentor noticed a difference. They were supplied with Bible study materials in Spanish, something they had been lacking for several years when the LCMS had stopped sending materials.<sup>71</sup> The laymen also started participating more in the work of the church: simple things at first, like reading the lessons in front of church on Sunday, but then on to being involved in the outreach and ministry programs of the church.<sup>72</sup> By 1996 the membership was up to 43 communicants, 63 baptized.<sup>73</sup> Unfortunately, many of the

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<sup>69</sup> Paul Hartman, interview by author, e-mail, 16 March 2000.

<sup>70</sup> Vega.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Steven Wagenknecht, interview by author, video recording, 4 March 1999 (hereafter cited as Wagenknecht).

church records that Pastor Ibarra had kept were destroyed by fire during these years.<sup>74</sup>

When Pastor Rodríguez left in 1996, there were no national pastors available to fill the vacancy in Torreón. To aid the congregation and to maintain the bond of trust the WELS had established with them, it was decided to send a missionary to fill the vacancy until a national pastor could be trained. In May of 1996 Steven Wagenknecht was assigned to Torreón from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. He was installed in August of that year and served faithfully until the Spring of 1999, when he accepted a call into another field.

During Pastor Wagenknecht's short stay in Torreón he built up a close bond of friendship and trust with the members of El Redentor. The Lord also graced him and the congregation with a special blessing toward the end of his ministry there. Several of the members of the group that had split off from the church back in 1986 over the roles of men and women recognized their error and came back to El Redentor. One of the great joys of Pastor Wagenknecht's ministry in Torreón was being able to lead these former members through reaffirmation courses so that they might rejoin their brothers and sisters at El Redentor.<sup>75</sup> A few others from that original group returned since Pastor Wagenknecht left. They received instruction and were reintegrated into the fold on January 1, 2000, amid tears of repentance and joy.<sup>76</sup>

The members of El Redentor are truly grateful to the WELS for all the assistance and fraternal encouragement they have received. They truly consider the members of the WELS their brothers and sisters in Christ and are happy to be walking together in the truth of Jesus.<sup>77</sup> Jesús

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<sup>74</sup> Wagenknecht.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibarra.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

Vega reflects, “We are very thankful to the WELS and to Pastor Steve [Wagenknecht] for all the help they’ve given us. Now, with the Lord’s help, we plan to move forward, to reach out to our families and to our community with the gospel.”<sup>78</sup> El Redentor, along with the other congregations of the CELC, is currently involved in a five-year plan to reduce the amount of subsidy they receive from the WELS and is working toward that goal, hoping to be entirely self-supporting within eleven years.<sup>79</sup> This will be important as they try to avoid the indifference often caused by dependency, which they experienced for many of their years of existence. Few members felt a need to practice personal stewardship when they were being given everything from the LCMS, including the very building in which they worship. Through the planned reduction in subsidy, the WELS is trying to help the CELC one day become a truly indigenous church that is able to support itself as it reaches out to its country and beyond with the gospel of Christ.

Since the beginning of 2000 El Redentor is being served by a recent graduate of the CELC seminary named Pastor Esequiel Eliú Sánchez, who was ordained in the Spring of 1999. After several years of decline, the Lord has graciously begun to rebuild El Redentor. As of April, 2000, there are seventy-six baptized members of El Redentor, forty-eight communicants. Pastor Sánchez hopes to increase the communicant membership to sixty-eight by the end of 2000, a goal which seems realistic since he currently has fourteen enrolled in confirmation courses. He and the members of El Redentor have also recently begun to reach out in the nearby city of Gómez Palacio and hope to start a mission in that city in the near future. Pastor Sánchez

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<sup>78</sup> Vega.

<sup>79</sup> Esequiel Sánchez, interview by author, e-mail, 11 April 2000 (hereafter cited as Sánchez).



describes his method of outreach and nurture for the future:

I knock on doors every day. I try to reach out through contacts made by members, through their friends and families. I ask them to introduce their unchurched relatives to me. In the entryway of the church I've set out a form so that the members can write down their prospect information. I also continue to look for the Lutherans in Torreón who no longer have a church here, who were abandoned when the LSM left last year. To build up the members of El Redentor I preach the gospel and administer the sacraments. That's where the power is. I pay a lot of attention to the Bible classes I teach. I don't want my members to be filled with knowledge only, but that the classes serve them in their Christian life...Our congregation sees the future as an awakening, recognizing ourselves as the true salt and light of Torreón. Our dreams are to grow and to go to the neighboring cities and to start up new missions there...When I was installed in January, the average Sunday morning attendance was between forty-two and fifty. As of April that number has risen to fifty-seven. The gospel does it all. We must share the promise with those who surround us.<sup>80</sup>

Together Pastor Sánchez and the members of El Redentor still face a city that in many respects resembles a spiritual desert. Yet, although they are small and poor, they are rich in the grace of God. They, like the members of the WELS, are certain of eternal life because of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. They, like the members of the WELS, are fully convinced that the Lutheran Confessions accurately summarize the doctrines of Scripture. And they, with the members of the WELS, pray that the Lord might use them to bring the water of life to their neighbors, so that through them the Lord might truly create a spiritual lagoon in the desert region of Mexico known as La Laguna.

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<sup>80</sup> Sánchez.

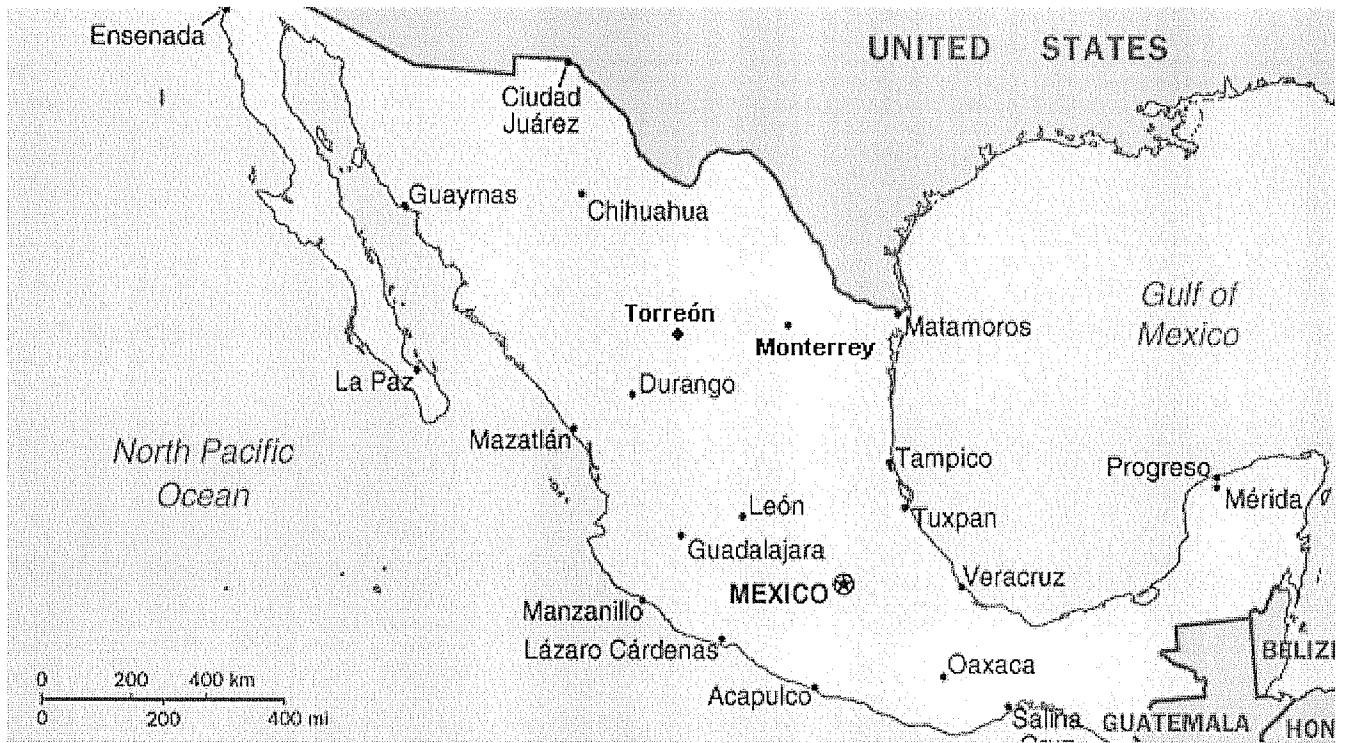


Figure 1: Map of Mexico showing Torreón and Monterrey

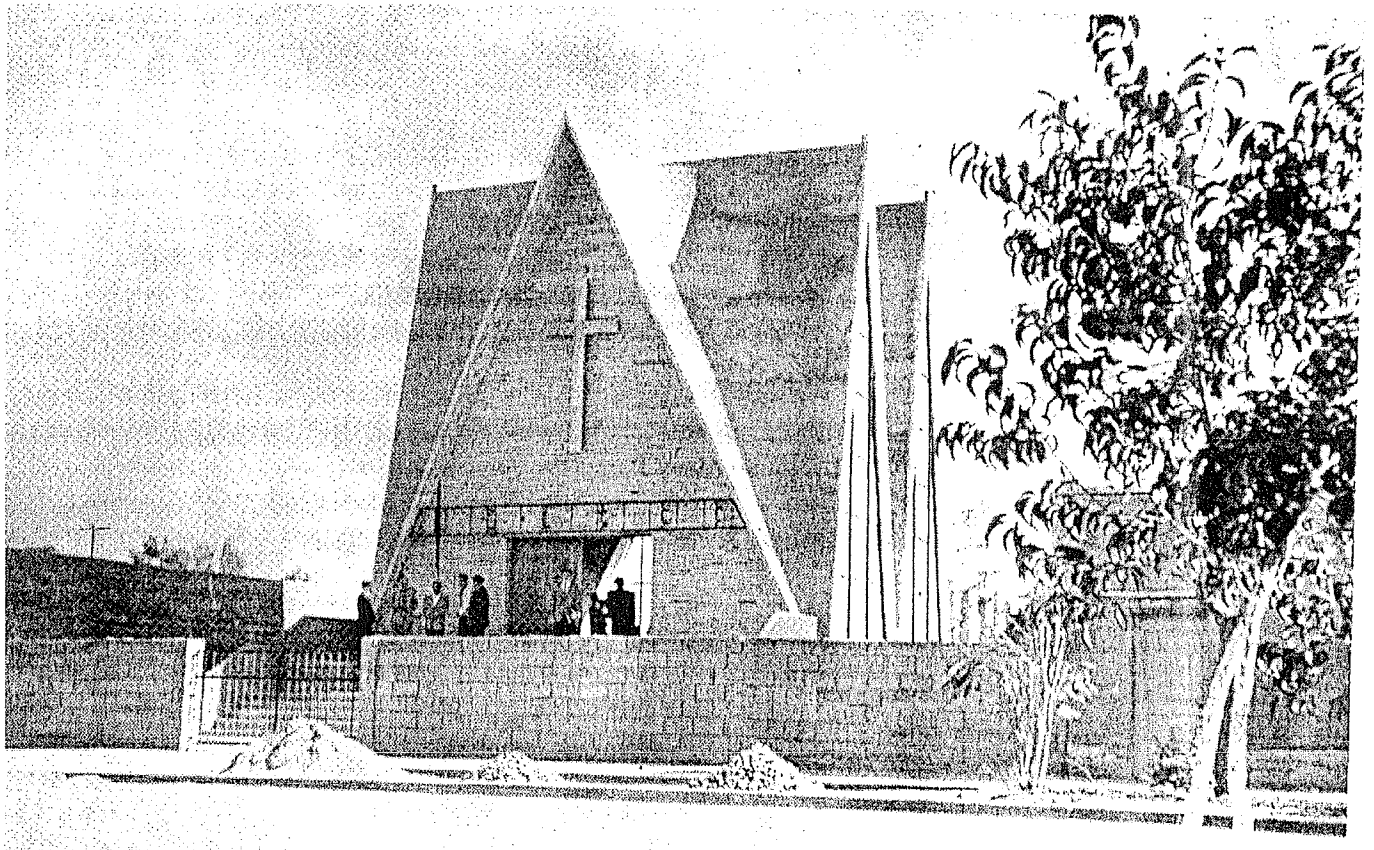


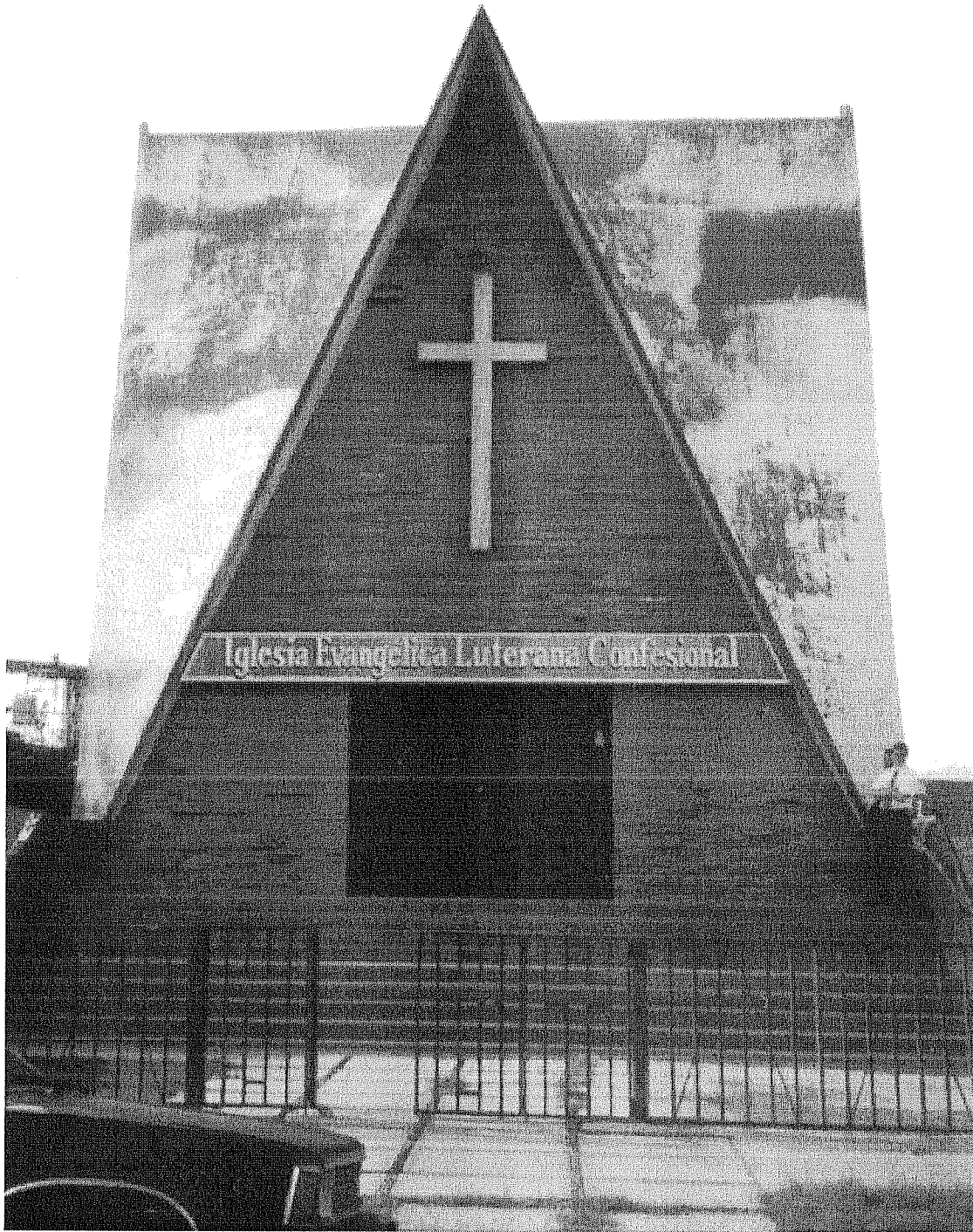
Figure 2: The new building completed March 8, 1964



**Figure 3** (not referred to): Inside the Torreón chapel in 1999.



**Figure 4** (not referred to): Mrs. Ibarra in 1999 celebrating the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the chapel.



**Figure 5** (not referred to): The chapel in Torreón in 1999.

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