SOCIETY

The Latino reformation
Wilfredo De Jesús leads the 17,000-strong New Life Covenant Church in Chicago, the largest Assemblies of God church in the U.S.

¡Evang...
Seeking a break with the past, a quicker assimilation into the middle class and a closer relationship with God, Latinos are pouring into Protestant churches across the U.S.

gélicos!

By Elizabeth Dias

Photograph by Marco Grob for TIME
Sunday worship at Calvary

Foursquare Church in Silver Spring, Md., starts in an empty parking lot. The congregants usually arrive on foot with well-worn Bibles in hand. They come in groups, Latino mothers and toddlers, grandparents and friends. “Que Dios te bendiga”—May the Lord bless you—each one says, offering hugs and kisses to everyone they meet. They board a refurbished school bus painted with a Bible verse and the church’s Spanish name: Iglesia Cuadrangular el Calvario. When it pulls out into the busy street, I hop in my car and follow. Twenty minutes later, the bus makes a sudden left into another parking lot—this one 15 times as large, home to Trinity Assembly of God Church—and this place is packed. A dozen men in neon yellow jackets keep the cars from fighting for spaces. At least five people tumble out of every car and van, usually families of three generations, tambourines in tow. Hearing the singing from inside my car, I follow them through the sanctuary doors.

A giant flag bearing a lion with a waving mane of orange sunbeams hangs above the nearly 500 people inside. Trumpets sound, and guitars jam the alabanzas, Spanish songs of praise. A dozen girls dressed in white costumes with red sequined sashes dance onstage, and teenage boys step in unison below. Little children race to the front to join. One woman waves a fan with long pink sash, and a man pounds his fist on the pew as he prays. Then a white-haired woman has a prophecy. The pastor rushes the microphone to her, and everyone falls silent as she screams. “The Lord will heal people in this room today,” she cries in Spanish. “Gloria a Dios! Praise be to God! The Spirit of the Lord is in this place.” People kneel at the altar, the ministers anoint them with oil, and then the fiesta begins again.

The faithful at El Calvario are not Catholic; they are Protestants: born-again, Bible-believing, Latino Protestants. They represent one of the fastest-growing segments among America’s churchgoing millions. According to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, more than two-thirds of the 52 million-plus Latinos in the U.S. are Catholic; by 2030, that percentage...
could be closer to half. Many are joining evangelical Protestant congregations. Among young Latinos, the drift away from the Roman Catholic Church is even more rapid. It is a migration that is forcing both the Vatican and the Southern Baptist Convention to take notice. While many Anglo churches are struggling to retain members, congregations like El Calvario are booming: 18 months ago, the suburban Washington, D.C., church had 400 members. Now more than 800 people attend an array of services each week, and its leaders are planning a 3,000-seat sanctuary. The newly converted faithful even have their own name: they call themselves evangélicos.

The Latino Protestant boom is transforming American religious practices and politics. Christianity Today, the country’s leading evangelical magazine, is preparing to publish in Spanish this year. Record labels in Nashville are beginning to sign Spanish Christian-music groups. Seeing its once solidly Catholic Latino faithful shift to Protestant churches, the Vatican made a bold counterstrike in early March when it named Argentine Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio as Pope—the first Latin American Pontiff and a priest blessed with an uncommon feel for the common man. Meanwhile, the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest evangelical denomination in the U.S., hopes to make a place for these new believers, setting a goal of 7,000 Baptist Hispanic churches by 2020. Today they count 3,200, but the convention’s statisticians believe the real number may be larger.

If the numbers are fuzzy, that’s in part because Latino congregations are often designed to be hidden. Many start as basement prayer gatherings. Others meet in

Gloria a Dios
Sunday services at El Calvario and La Roca are loud, dramatic and familial—and they attract hundreds of congregants
storefronts. They are often more likely to have a YouTube channel or a Facebook group than a website. Sometimes the only clues that these congregations exist are the dozens of small plastic yard signs that pop up every Sunday to guide the pilgrims. Once you start looking for them, you see them everywhere—on street corners, in yards, on the lawns of other churches. I found signs for Primera Iglesia Bautista Hispana de Maryland in Hyattsville, Md.; Iglesia de Dios del Evangelio Completo in Adelphi, Md.; Iglesia Pentecostal La Gloria de Dios; and Centro Mundial Evangelico in nearby northern Virginia.

These iglesias, or churches, are different in kind as well as in number. Latino Protestants are more likely to get up and dance in church than to fall asleep there. Ushers stand armed not with service bulletins but with Kleenex boxes and folded blue modesty cloths to cover women when they faint in God’s presence. The intercessory prayer list includes typical petitions for healing and comfort as well as for more earthly needs—Samuel’s papi has been missing for a week; Maria’s cousin needs immigration papers; Ernesto’s friend is facing jail time. Richard Land, a former president of the Southern Baptist Convention’s religious-liberty commission, told his pastors four years ago to ignore the Latino reformation at their peril: “Because if you left [Washington, D.C.] and drove all the way to L.A., there wouldn’t be one town you’d pass that doesn’t have a Baptist church with an iglesia bautista attached to it. They came here to work, we’re evangelistic, we shared the Gospel with them, they became Baptist.”

The evangélico boom is inextricably linked to the immigrant experience. Evangélicos are socially more conservative than Hispanics generally, but they are quicker to fight for social justice than their white brethren are. They are eager to believe in the miraculous but also much more willing to bend ecclesiastical rules to include women in church duties and invite other ethnic groups into their pews. The new churches are in many cases a deliberate departure from the countries and the faith their members left behind—but they don’t look or sound anything like the megachurches of the U.S. Evangélicos are numerous and growing fast. And they are hiding in plain sight.

### A Reformation in Maryland

**JUST 10 MINUTES AWAY FROM EL CALVARIO** is Iglesia Roca de la Eternidad—Rock of Eternity Assemblies of God Church. Some 700 people attend one of its three services each week. Flags from their home countries—El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Mexico, Colombia—line the meeting hall. At least half the congregation, Pastor Heber David Paredes estimates, are Catholic converts. Even more may be undocumented, he says, and about a third have trouble reading and writing in English. They call one another hermanos, sister, brother. “Church is what they have,” says Paredes, who is from Guatemala. “They don’t have many places where they can feel welcome. That’s what they are looking for. That’s where they have a family, a place to belong.”

La Roca is part of a revolution. Catholic Latin America experienced the first inklings of the 16th century European Protestant Reformation only in the 1970s and ’80s, thanks largely to evangelical Pentecostal television and radio programs. Catholics were 81% of Latin America’s population in 1996, while Protestants made up only 4%, according to Latinobarómetro, a Chilean polling group. By 2010, Protestants had jumped to 13% of the population, while the percentage of Catholics dropped to 70%. Says Samuel Rodriguez, president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference in Sacramento: “We are in the first generation of the Hispanic Protestant Reformation.”

Latinos are turning not just to Protestantism but to its evangelical strain for a variety of reasons. Above all, Latinos who convert say they want to know God personally, without a priest as a middleman. More than 35% of Hispanics in America

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**Leaving the Rosary Behind**

Latino Catholics, particularly

The percentage of Latinos in the U.S. is increasing

- 2011: 17%
- 2050: 29%

The longer their families have been in the U.S., the more likely Latinos are to be Protestant

- Catholic
- Evangelical
- Unaffiliated
- Total
young adults, are moving toward evangelical churches

Who are evangelical Latinos?

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<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Latino Catholic</th>
<th>Latino evangelical</th>
<th>General U.S. population</th>
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<tr>
<td>47%</td>
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<td>70%</td>
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- They attend services more often: 47% Latino Catholic, 70% Latino evangelical, 36% General U.S. population.

- They say religion is very important in their lives: 66% Latino Catholic, 92% Latino evangelical, 58% General U.S. population.

- Most are opposed to abortion in all or most cases: 52% Latino Catholic, 70% Latino evangelical, 41% General U.S. population.

- They hold particular appeal for young people: 54% favor same-sex marriage, 25% oppose, 31% Catholic, 66% Protestant.

- They are forming links across U.S. denominations:
  - 2,500 Latino Assemblies of God churches
  - 40,800 Member churches in the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference
  - 3,200 Latino Southern Baptist churches

Source: Pew Research Center; Gallup

They are forming links across U.S. denominations.

call themselves born-again, according to the Pew Forum, and 9 out of 10 evangélicos say a spiritual search drove their conversion. “People are looking for a real experience with God,” says Paredes. That direct experience comes largely from exploring the Bible. “We do the best to preach with the Bible open. When they read the Bible, they find a lot of things they didn’t know before. They may have had religion, but they did not have an experience.”

Among evangélicos, worship is adaptable and open to self-expression. You want to pray aloud in your pew? Do it at the top of your voice, even when the pastor is praying. Want to fall to your knees? Run to the altar. Sing in Spanish and switch to English at Verse 3? Go for it. “The evangelical church says this: Listen, you want to come to our church? If you are Mexican, we will show you a church where you can sing mariachi music,” explains Rodríguez. “If you are Puerto Rican, we will have salsa. If you are Dominican, we will have merengue. If you are Colombian, we will have cumbia.”

Like an earlier generation of immigrants from Europe, Latino Christians often see Protestantism as the path to a more genuine, more prosperous “American” life. “They see the move to Protestantism, particularly evangelicalism, as a form of upward mobility, and very often I think they associate Catholicism with what they left behind in Latin America,” says Randall Balmer, the chair of Dartmouth’s religion department. “They want to start anew.”

Instead of the classic three-point, German-influenced sermons found in many mainline churches, the message at La Roca is theologically raw, unpollished and aimed right at the immigrant experience. Heber Paredes Jr., son of La Roca’s pastor, preached one Friday evening about the example of the Apostle Paul’s assistant Timothy, who was half Greek and half Jew. Timothy, he preached, had a lot in common with the young Latino men in America today. “When a young man grows up without a father, being half and half, he is mocked. Usually what you see is a troublesome child. Not Timothy ... It is time that we are not just another statistic—it is time we rise up for revival.”

But music and sermons alone are not enough to draw people. A hungry person, the saying goes, has no ears. “I don’t want to say from the altar on Sunday, ‘If someone has a need, let me know,’ because I will have a line of people out the door Monday morning, needing money for rent, food. People will take advantage of that,” says Paredes Sr. “But we never let people stay in need. We are not going to be able to sleep if we know a family needs food.”

Like other evangélico churches, La Roca takes the Bible’s “feed the hungry and clothe the naked” mandate literally. At a roundtable conversation one night, a woman wept as she shared how she first met members of a La Roca family when she was a single mother. They were cleaning her office building late one night, and when they learned she did not have an apartment, they decided to move to a two-bedroom unit so she could stay with them. The church is divided into small groups called cells that meet weekly to pray and keep tabs on everyone’s needs so they can bring them to the pastor. The church has a rule: on Sunday mornings, you have to greet 10 people before you can hear the sermon.

How Choco Changed Chicago

If one evangélico church has made the leap from immigrant barrio to booming American megachurch, it is New Life Covenant Church in Chicago. New Life had just 100 members in 2000; all were Spanish speakers. Now more than 17,000 people attend one of the church’s four campuses every Sunday, making New Life the largest Assemblies of God church in the U.S. Nine of its 11 weekly services are in English. The pastor, Wilfredo De Jesús, has the support of evangelical giants like Rick Warren, the pastor of Saddleback Church and author of The Purpose Driven Life, who wrote the foreword to De Jesús’
book *Amazing Faith*, published last year.

De Jesús, 48, is tall and broad-shouldered, a straight talker with a firm handshake and a deep voice. He says his nickname, Choco, comes from his love of sweets and the color of his skin. He’s of a different genre from the pastors of La Roca and El Calvario. English is his first language. He grew up in Chicago’s Humboldt Park neighborhood during its gang-ridden days and then got a master’s degree in Christian ministries from North Park Theological Seminary. In terms of the American Dream, he has crossed the great divide.

After he took over New Life from his father-in-law in 2000, Choco bought a farm outside the city and converted it into a home for recovering drug addicts and prostitutes. Then he purchased a liquor store near the church and turned it into a café to reduce loitering and crime in the neighborhood. He recalls, “We started doing English services to reach third-generation Hispanics, who love their culture, who love their rice and beans, but prefer to hear a sermon in English. I started doing that, and the church started growing.”

New Life didn’t just grow—it exploded. Choco leased nearby Roberto Clemente High School for Sunday use and later transformed his original location into a new site for a Spanish-language service for first-generation Latinos. Five months later, a second Spanish service was added. He also started to stream services online. Now people tune in from Arizona, Massachusetts, Kentucky and other states. A pastor is available to serve the needs of online congregants.

Soon even the high school became too small, so New Life bought another property in now gentrifying Humboldt Park last August. There will be 1,000 seats in the main sanctuary, with overflow seating for at least 300 more. (Choco wants the sanctuary’s new stage to be able to hold a live elephant and feature harnesses for flying angels—part of his sermons-as-drama series.) At the same time, Choco has branched out, opening a church in Oakwood, which is attracting a largely African-American congregation. Diversity, for New Life, is a recipe for growth. “Latino evangelicals have forced white evangelicals to own their own deepest convictions,” explains Grant Wacker, professor of Christian history at Duke Divinity School, “to embrace the neighbor, to embrace the other without regard to social, economic or ethnic distinctions.”

**The Evangélico Effect**

**One reason the Latino Protestant movement is important to watch is that it is largely charismatic. Charismatic connotes a belief in miracles, healing, divine intervention, speaking in tongues and an active spirit world. Its most fervent extremes are enough to give even a devoted believer pause. At El Calvario, a woman was praying so hard that she vomited (or exorcised a demon)—which is not that uncommon: ushers stood prepared with plastic bags to help her. Several others collapsed on the floor in convulsions when they felt God’s presence. Sermons aren’t drawn from headlines; instead, they often sound like news itself. Eliud Ruiz, El Calvario’s pastor, has preached against Russia because, he believes, “Russia is going to lead the Islamic republics against Israel. It’s in the Bible.”

Then there are the miracles, which can seem almost commonplace in Hispanic churches. An El Calvario woman waved two medical reports—one from when she was diagnosed with osteoporosis, another from the day doctors said it had disappeared. A restaurant cook testifies that God stopped her 12 years of migraines after she fasted with the church for three days, and another woman says her internal bleeding stopped when the pastor poured oil on her forehead and the people prayed.

This kind of church treads on shaky theological ground. But it’s important to remember that most evangélico churches are relatively new, still sorting out their place in a country where many in the congregation aren’t yet citizens. And with the exception of the rare leader like Choco, many evangélicos pastors rely more on experience than on any formal training in college, much less divinity school. There isn’t much extra cash lying around in grassroots churches for courses on biblical history, and even if there were, the pastors face more immediate needs. Evangélico churches are often de facto healing centers for a population with limited health care benefits. They act as food banks for people with empty refrigerators. They house people avoiding street violence. There’s a lot more going on there than just saving souls.

Ruiz, Paredes and Choco all preach against premarital sex, drugs, curing and alcohol. None of them drink, and they ask their volunteers and staff to similarly abstain. At the same time, evangélicos are often willing to put women in the pulpit. That’s a huge advance from many of their white evangelical siblings, who still tend to relegate women to music or children’s ministries. Ruiz and his wife Lucia co-pastor El Calvario. Women solo-pastor some of the most dynamic Latino churches.

Evangélico churches often face immigration policy head-on. Choco preaches against the deportation system because it breaks up families, and Paredes is planning an immigration conference for La Roca members this spring. Those efforts help explain why some white evangelical church leaders are quietly urging Republican lawmakers to get behind comprehensive immigration reform. “When groups appear that are similar to one’s own but with some striking ethnic or musical or cultural differences, they can appear threatening as well as promising,” explains Mark Noll, a historian of American Christianity at Notre Dame. “I think it would be very positive for the evangelical world to look at issues of social concern—immigration, environment, employment—as theological issues.”

**A New Rock of Ages**

**The Catholic Church now has 4,800 parishes with Latino programs of various kinds across the U.S.** According to the U.S. Council of Catholic Bishops, up to half of Latino Catholics in America are...
expressing their faith much as the evangelical community does—praying with hands raised, speaking in tongues, expecting the miraculous. One attempt to keep those members in the fold has been the Catholic Charismatic Renewal movement, which has gathered steam over the past few decades. But it may not be enough. Only 15% of all new priests ordained in the U.S. are Latino. “The challenge for the Catholic Church is to make the parish structure very flexible, very family-oriented,” explains Alejandro Aguilera-Titus of the bishops’ cultural-diversity office. “To the degree that we fail to do this ... we will continue to lose a significant number of Hispanic Catholics to other religious groups, mostly Pentecostals.”

The Catholics and the megachurches have little choice but to adapt. By the year 2050, Latinos will make up nearly a third of the U.S. population. By then, the first-generation iglesias like El Calvario and La Roca will be third-generation churches. If they follow even part of New Life’s path, their pastors will be preaching in English and merging their new strain of Protestantism with the largely white evangelical mainstream. Warren realized years ago—thanks to his ministry’s location in Southern California—that the Latino influx meant he could not stand still. Over the past decade, he has helped launch 35 Spanish-speaking congregations in Orange County alone. “The greatest growth of all is coming in the Pentecostal or charismatic churches,” he says. “It is the untold story.”

The U.S.—and the entire Latino world—is changing. The rock on which God is building his Latino church all over America is a blacktop parking lot in suburban Maryland and a low-income high school in Illinois. Right now, they may be hard to find. But as Jesus teaches in Matthew, May they who have eyes see.
THE HORROR UPSTAIRS

THE LARGEST KNOWN MASSACRE OF GAY PEOPLE IN U.S.
HISTORY REMAINS UNSOLVED AND LITTLE UNDERSTOOD

BY ELIZABETH DIAS WITH JIM DOWNS

FRANCIS DUFRENE LIVED FOR SUNDAY NIGHTS. TALL AND LEAN with a pile of blond hair, the 21-year-old would take two buses from his home in the New Orleans suburbs to make it to the Upstairs Lounge by 5 p.m., when the French Quarter bar held its weekly beer bust—two hours of all-you-can-drink drafts for $1.

From the outside, the Upstairs didn’t look much different from the other gay bars on a particularly seedy stretch of Iberville Street. But up 13 steps on the second floor was a refuge: three adjoining rooms, decorated with red wallpaper and frilly curtains, where people could laugh, love, even worship without fear. The Metropolitan Community Church (MCC), a national Christian denomination founded to serve gays and lesbians, often held services in the bar’s back-room theater. At other times the space was used for the elaborately costumed drag cabaret performances that regulars called “nelly dramas.” “It was my safe haven,” says Dufrene.
Thirty-two people were killed in the Upstairs Lounge blaze. The Rev. Bill Larson's body was visible in the window for hours.
The beer bust on June 24, 1973, was typically festive. A pianist from the nearby Marriott played Broadway and ragtime tunes as patrons sang along. Dufrene was there, as usual, this time on a first date with Eddie Hosea Warren, a “husky country boy” he met at a hamburger joint near the Upstairs. Warren’s brother James and mother Inez came with him. Duane George Mitchell, an associate pastor at the MCC known for his Queen Victoria impersonation, and his partner Louis Horace Broussard stopped by after dropping Mitchell’s sons off at a movie. The bust prices ended at 7, but at least 65 people were still hanging around nearly an hour later when the door buzzer went off. It kept ringing, even though no one had ordered a taxi. The bartender sent a regular to check it out. When he opened the door, a fireball burst through as if shot from a flamethrower.

An updraft sucked the fire in, and within seconds the walls were aflame. Panic erupted inside. The bartender, Douglas “Buddy” Rasmussen, called for people to follow him and led at least 20 of them to safety through a back exit and onto adjoining rooftops—before closing the door behind them when he didn’t see anyone else coming to prevent the fire from spreading. Many raced to jump out of the three large windows that were covered by metal bars. Dufrene was one of the few who squeezed through, body on fire.

“The small people seemed to get through the window, but the bigger people just couldn’t get out,” a survivor told the New Orleans Times-Picayune.

One of those trapped was the MCC’s pastor, Bill Larson, who struggled to push an air-conditioning unit through the window to escape. His head, torso and one arm made it halfway out before the glass pane above collapsed, trapping his body. In the street below, his friends heard him scream, “Oh, God, no!” as flames consumed him. His body was left in the window for hours, with his watch, stopped at a few minutes after 8, a haunting relic.

And then it was over. Firefighters extinguished the blaze 16 minutes after receiving the alarm. Twenty-nine people burned alive that night; three more died soon after. Many could be identified only by dental records. A Times-Picayune headline called the scene “Hitler’s Incinerators.” But it made little more than a ripple in the national consciousness. Neither the mayor nor the governor spoke out, local religious leaders were mostly silent, and only one congregation in the French Quarter ultimately agreed to hold a memorial service. A two-month police investigation turned up a can of lighter fluid at the scene and a thrown-out patron overheard threatening to “burn this place down,” but no one was ever prosecuted. Dufrene puts it bluntly: “I guess they figured, They were gay—so what?”

The scale of the tragedy was immense: it remains the deadliest fire ever in New Orleans and is believed to be the largest killing of gay people in U.S. history. And yet it is little discussed, barely acknowledged by the city or seen as a milestone in the gay rights movement. Today the site is marked only by a square brass plaque on the sidewalk where the bar’s entrance used to be. It’s easy to miss unless you’re looking for it—a fitting commemoration for an event not everyone wants to remember.

**Persecution Days**

The jokes began almost immediately. The Rev. Troy Perry, founder of the MCC, flew in the morning after the fire and remembers a radio host asking on air, “What do we bury them in?” The punch line: “Fruit jars.” The police department’s chief of detectives reinforced the homophobic climate when he told reporters that identifying the bodies would be tough because many patrons carried fake
identification and “some thieves hung out there, and you know this was a queer bar.”

Despite the city’s reputation for tolerance, there were consequences to being gay there in 1973. One victim, a teacher, was fired while in critical care at Charity Hospital after his school learned that he had been at the bar. He died days later from burns. Many of those killed and injured were effectively outed when the papers published lists of the victims. Two survivors appeared on television on the condition that their names and faces would not be revealed. Others had to go to work on Monday morning as if nothing happened.

Duane Mitchell, then 11, and his 8-year-old brother Steve knew something was wrong when their father never came to pick them up. They watched a movie, Disney’s The World’s Greatest Athlete, seven times before realizing he wouldn’t show, Duane says. Mitchell had escaped the blaze by following Rasmussen out the back door, but he ran back in to retrieve Broussard. Police found their bodies fused together, dead in each other’s arms. “We didn’t even know that he was gay,” Duane, now 51, says of his father. In 1973, he adds, such things were barely discussed. “A lot of people didn’t even claim their relatives,” he said. “I guess they were so ashamed of it.”

When Perry tried to find a site to hold the memorial, churches closed their doors. New Orleans was then 47% Catholic, but the archdiocese refused to help. Baptist churches hung on to him. An Episcopal church led by a friend of Larson’s held a prayer service but declined to host the memorial after the presiding bishop received dozens of angry phone calls and letters of protest. “It was like that over and over again,” Perry, now 72, says. “My biggest disappointment as a Christian minister to this day was the churches, the way they responded to me.”

Just months earlier, two less deadly fires in New Orleans received far more attention. In November, six died in a blaze at the Rault Center, and eight died in a January arson at a downtown Howard Johnson’s. In both cases, Mayor Moon Landrieu and Governor Edwin Edwards issued statements of condolence. Philip Hannan, the city’s powerful Catholic archbishop who eulogized President John F. Kennedy and later presided over Jacqueline Onassis’ funeral, offered his support. After the Upstairs fire, Hannan was silent, while public officials limited their statements to calls for improving the city’s fire code.

For the gay community, Larson’s mannequin-like body, which remained visible in the window past midnight, became a symbol of the city’s indifference toward them. Given that reception, it’s understandable why so many were skeptical of the police investigation.

A Trail Runs Cold

Homicide detectives interviewed survivors at Charity Hospital shortly after the fire was put out. They spent nearly 12 hours on the scene and soon had more than 30 officers assigned to the case. Witness accounts were conflicting, which was not surprising given that many people were badly injured, traumatized and still drunk, but those who saw the fire erupt all used language consistent with arson to describe it—one compared it to a fireball, another to a Molotov cocktail. Police found an accelerant: a 7-oz. can of Ronsonal lighter fluid, left empty in the stairwell. A clerk at a nearby Walgreens said someone purchased an identical can of lighter fluid not long before the fire started, but she couldn’t identify the person.

The investigation lasted two months. At the end of a 64-page report issued in August, the department concluded, “Although there is speculation of arson, as of the writing of this report, there is no physical evidence to indicate anything other than this being a fire of undetermined origin.” The coroner classified all 32 deaths as “accidental fire fatalities.” Three bodies were never identified. Sam Gebbia, then 26, was a lead investigator on the case. He says today that the chief of detectives’ inflammatory statement about the Upstairs patrons was taken out of context (the department apologized soon after) and that the police put its full weight behind the case. “In my whole experience in the homicide division, that never played into anything,” he says. “That was one of the biggest multideaths that I had ever been on the scene of. We pulled out every stop.”

A teenager, David Dubose, confessed to the fire but quickly recanted. He was cleared after his alibi was confirmed, and he passed a polygraph test.

The police focused on a second suspect, Roger Nunez, who was kicked out of the bar before the fire after fighting with another patron, according to the statement that patron, Michael Scarborough, gave to the police. On his way out, Nunez said...
“something to the effect of ‘I’m going to burn this place down,’ or ‘I’m going to burn you out,’” Scarborough told police.

But before the police could interview Nunez, he had a seizure and was taken to Charity Hospital. He was admitted to the hospital and released without the police being notified. It took months for police to find him, and once they did, he denied setting the fire and said he wasn’t sure if he had even been at the Upstairs that night. Nunez killed himself nearly a year later. People who knew him claimed he had confessed to a nun and also, while drunk, to a friend that he started the fire.

Gebbia says many arson investigations are easy to solve but hard to prove. “There are a lot of times you’ll know, you as an investigator will know what happened, and you know who did it. But legally, if you don’t have any teeth to sink in to arrest someone, you just have to wait,” he says. “I’m sure in my heart of hearts this is the guy that set our fire.”

A Place to Pray

A week passed before Perry finally found a church willing to hold the memorial—St. Mark’s United Methodist Church. It was a brave move; the year before the Methodist denomination had decreed that homosexuality was “incompatible with Christian teaching.” The day of the service, Perry promised mourners that their identities would be safe—he would not allow cameras inside the church. Midway through the final hymn, someone alerted him that television crews had set up outside. He offered mourners the chance to leave through a rear door to escape notice, but no one accepted. Then, as the Times-Picayune reported, “the mourners sang the last verse of the hymn over again and, with the existence of press cameras outside the church still in doubt, they all filed out. None was seen leaving through the rear.”

That moment helped launch a new gay religious movement. The MCC was only five years old, but the Upstairs fire was the third fire in an MCC meeting place that year—arson had leveled the headquarters in Los Angeles, and a firebomb had torched a church in Nashville. Yet Perry continued to start other churches. Gay Christians needed a place to worship, he argued. “They could hurt us, they could murder us, we could die,” Perry recalls telling his fledgling congregations. “But as Christians, we have to remember this Scripture, ‘To be absent from this body is to be present with the Lord, so we can never fear death.’ No matter what happens, this is serious, and we are not going to stop our struggle in this fight.”

Those were what Perry calls the church’s “persecution days.” Perry helped organize a fund for the Upstairs victims. Small checks came in from tiny gay organizations all over the country, from big cities like San Francisco to small towns in South Dakota. Morty Manford, whose mother had founded PFLAG—Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays—just two months earlier, flew to meet Perry in New Orleans to help. So did Morris Kight, president of the Gay Liberation Front, and two other clergy.

An Apology

Forty years later, much has changed. Today the Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Unitarian Universalist Church all ordain gay clergy. “I praise God more and more every day,” Perry says. “We still have a battle there, there’s still a fight going on, based on women and GLBT people, but we are going to win, and I know we are, and that’s that.” Yet even today, the fire is too difficult for many survivors to discuss. Many of those touched by the Upstairs fire were not militants for the gay-rights cause but just innocent victims. Rasmussen left New Orleans in 1991 for rural Arkansas, where he lives quietly with his partner Billy Duncan. They will soon celebrate their 40th anniversary, and they spend their time growing vegetables, volunteering at food banks and enjoying a simple life on their back porch. Warm but guarded, Rasmussen declines to talk about the fire. When history is written, he says, “they should leave that chapter out.”

To its credit, the Catholic archdiocese apologized for its silence on the fire in a statement to Time. “In retrospect, if we did not release a statement we should have to be in solidarity with the victims and their families,” New Orleans Archbishop Gregory Aymond said via e-mail on June 17. “The church does not condone violence and hatred. If we did not extend our care and condolences, I deeply apologize.”

As for Dufrene, he still lives in the same small house where he was born and where he recovered from the fire. He now attends Harahan Baptist Church and says that while he identifies as gay, he has left the gay community. The fire, he admits, didn’t start the gay revolution. “That was coming anyway,” he says. But he says it helped to give gays in New Orleans a voice they didn’t have before.

It is easy to forget that the GLBT movement is still young in the long arc of U.S. history. Events like the Stonewall riots have entered the canon while other, equally significant moments are little known. As Harvey Milk said not long before his assassination in San Francisco in 1978, “A reading of the Declaration of Independence on the steps of a building is widely covered. The events that started the American Revolution were the meetings in homes, pubs, on street corners.” In a month that marks a potentially landmark Supreme Court ruling on same-sex marriage, the little-known and long-forgotten fire at the Upstairs is one such event.

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FROM THE STREET BELOW, THE PASTOR’S FRIENDS COULD HEAR HIM SCREAM, ‘OH, GOD, NO!’ AS THE FLAMES CONSUMED HIS BODY
Third Piece: please judge the article at the link below.