STORY

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The Redemption of MS-13

Country:

EL SALVADOR

Project
The Only Way Out in El Salvador

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GRANTEE

Incarcerated men at the Apanteos prison, which houses MS-13 gang members. Image by Neil Brandvold. El Salvador, 2018.

We meet the Pastor* in a Pollo Campero, the famous Central American fried chicken restaurant. It is necessary to negotiate with him to enter the neighborhood, a notorious MS-13 stronghold, and then it is necessary for him to negotiate with the gang leaders to bring us in. In El Salvador's poor neighborhoods, unofficial borderlines are everywhere. Navigating them takes a certain level of finesse.

It is tempting to think you can just drive through a neighborhood without a problem, that you can get in and out without alarms being raised. But this is not the case. The gangs see everything, and anyone on the street can be an informer. The penalty for trespassing can be death.

The neighborhood we are planning to enter is regarded by some as one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in the country. Strangely, the Pastor tells us that the neighborhood is actually relatively safe for residents, since the area is completely controlled by MS. It is the gray areas being fought over, where gangs bump up against one another, that are the most violent. When we enter the neighborhood, the Pastor jokingly says, "Welcome to the most secure place in the country."

All four windows are rolled down. Windows always need to be down in gang neighborhoods. They have to know who you are. The lookouts are everywhere. The Pastor points them out: a child, an old woman, a shopkeeper. "Everyone here is involved," the Pastor says. A young man in a baggy polo and jeans speaks on his cell phone as we pass. "Un soldado," the Pastor says. A soldier.

There are up to 60,000 active gang members in El Salvador, according to the International Crisis Group, with another 500,000 people in the country connected to the gangs. This, in a country with a population of just 6.4 million.

The Pastor is a tough-looking man, with a shaved head, solid upper body, and a gold chain dangling on his chest, clad in a polo shirt and dark jeans. He is well respected and is even able to go to other gang-controlled neighborhoods. He wanted to do a beach trip that day, but the idea of taking some of his former gang-member congregants, many of them heavily tattooed, proved too taxing.

In El Salvador's poor neighborhoods, unofficial borderlines are everywhere. Navigating them takes a certain level of finesse.

We are with the Pastor because he has agreed to take us into his neighborhood so my photographer and I can follow him as he walks the streets of the slums, trying to convince residents and gang members to become born-again Christians. In El Salvador, Jesus saves. For the young men caught up in the vicious cycle of violence perpetrated by gangs like MS-13, the church is the only thing that can save them. Embracing Jesus Christ and becoming a born-again Christian is the one way that gang members will allow one of their own to leave and strike out for a better life.

Pastor William Arias. Image by Neil Brandvold. El Salvador, 2018.

In the slums of El Salvador, in the jails, in the poverty-stricken rural villages, a revolution of sorts is happening. Based on who you talk to, it's either the only salvation for El Salvador's tens of thousands of violent gang members, or it's a con intended to stop them from facing retribution for terrorizing their fellow countrymen for years in brutal, heinous ways.

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A brief history of the gangs, how they came to be, and the havoc they have wrought across the country: El Salvador went through a brutal civil war in the 1980s between leftist guerillas and a right-wing government backed by an oligarchy and the United States. Hundreds of thousands of Salvadorans fled the country as refugees, with many ending up in Los Angeles. There were already a number of Salvadoran gangs in existence there, among them MS-13 and 18th Street, but they were small scale, sometimes just a group of friends who partied together. The gangs grew exponentially during this time with the sudden influx of poor, sometimes battle-scarred refugees, and they served as protection against black and Mexican gangs. A change in immigration law in the United States in the 1990s saw hundreds of gang members deported back to El Salvador, a country reeling from the war, which ended in 1992 and left a serious power vacuum and weak institutions. The gangs took advantage and spread out, increasing in numbers. The murder rate also rose dramatically, and in 2015 and 2016 El Salvador had the highest of in any peacetime country. For comparison, El Salvador, a country of just over 6 million people, had 6,600 murders in 2015. New York City, with a population of 8.5 million, had approximately 350 murders.

"The gangs see everything, and anyone on the street can be an informer. The penalty for trespassing can be death."

The Pastor has been on the frontlines of this battle. The Church has always had a strange relationship with the gangs, with pastors and church groups being the only organizations allowed to work in gang-controlled communities or to advocate for gang member's rights, negotiating truces. Somewhere along the line, gang leaders decided that if a member found God, he would be permitted to leave. Gang members and church officials will both tell you that the church is one of the few things the gang respects. Often, church organizations are the only groups allowed to provide community services to residents in gang areas, with nearly all NGOs and the government prohibited from doing so.

And that is how the Pastor is allowed to spend this particular morning attempting to convince a young gang member to abandon his allegiance to MS-13 and welcome Jesus Christ into his heart without fear that he will be executed for his transgression, even going so far as to dare him to scrawl an "18" on the wall (MS-13's rivals are the 18th Street gang, which has split into two factions: 18th Street Revolutionarios and 18th Street Surenos).

The Pastor says he is friends with some of the gang members, but he can never grow too friendly. He never accepts favors. Never does favors. Never asks for money, never gives money. He has known many of them since they were little and growing up in the neighborhood. It is necessary to be on good terms with them to operate here, but that doesn't mean he does not tread lightly. "Preaching on adrenaline is not easy," he says.

He walks the streets with some of his flock to head deeper into the barrio. Paved, wide streets with murals listing the Ten Commandments turn into narrow dirt roads with unrelenting poverty. A man with a shovel tries to clear an open trench where raw sewage flows next to his home. Corrugated tin shacks with walls that are nothing more than vinyl banners of corona promotions hung on chain-link fences. Stray dogs and chickens pick through garbage-strewn streets.

The Pastor stops to talk to a mother and her son standing in the doorway of their home. The boy is young, maybe 11 years old, but this is the age when the gangs start to make inroads with young people. In a neighborhood like this, it is not very hard for them. There are few opportunities. The Pastor realizes that this is a crucial age for the boy, when the everyday decisions he makes can determine whether or not he lives to make it out of his teens. “The life of a person, if I bring God to them, if I take Jesus to them it means that something different is going to happen. It’s not going to be the same result,” the Pastor says. If the Pastor does not reach the boy, the gangs have an easy target to recruit.

"Somewhere along the line, gang leaders decided that if a member found God, he would be permitted to leave. Gang members and church officials will both tell you that the church is one of the few things the gang respects"

The next stop is a gang member who looks to be about 18 years old. He politely entertains the Pastor’s aggressive conversion pitch. The Pastor is trying to convince him he must fear God more than he fears the gangs, for it is God that truly has the authority. “Put an 18 up here,” the Pastor says to him, encouraging the boy to scrawl the mark of a rival gang on a nearby wall. “They’d kill me,” the teenager replies.

“You are afraid of them, right? You have fear that they would punish you? Yes or no?”

The teenager nods. “But you aren’t afraid that God will punish you?” The Pastor keeps going, trying to get the teenager to accept Jesus. He tells him he should accept God now, before it is too late, before he is put up on the cross to be crucified. The teen is noncommittal, and they part ways.

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The Church has always had a strange relationship with the gangs in El Salvador, and has often been seen as a somewhat neutral arbitrator. Church officials have helped negotiate gang truces and have always been on the frontlines of conflict here. Many here actually trace the key moment that began the civil war to the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero, a tireless advocate for El Salvador’s downtrodden, who was killed by a sniper while delivering mass.

Romero, unlike the Pastor and the majority of churches who work with the gangs, was Catholic. He was also a vocal proponent of liberation theology, a movement that rose up during the ’60s and ’70s in Latin American Catholicism and preached social justice, standing up against political and economic oppression. The movement came together nicely with leftist movements that were rising up in El Salvador, but soon put the Catholic Church at odds with the right-wing government and oligarchy that ruled the country.

El Salvador’s right-wing elites and the government, backed by the United States, fought a vicious war against the left-wing guerilla groups. They also promoted Evangelicalism as an alternative to Catholicism while simultaneously persecuting Catholics. Whereas liberation theology was encouraging the poor to rise up and fight for their rights, Evangelicalism focused more on having people accept their fate and leave it up to God — exactly the kind of message that would discourage participation in social justice movements. U.S. Evangelicals came down to preach in waves, and there are even accusations, never proven, that the CIA was involved in promoting the Evangelical movement. From 1988 to 2009, Evangelical Protestants went from 17 percent of El Salvador’s population to 35 percent. Estimates now put the number at 40 percent.

And it is growing. “You could say that every day in this country, dozens of men are leaving the gangs, looking for the right path in the arms of the lords,” Pastor William Arias tells me. His numbers may be a bit exaggerated, but if there is anyone who knows the burgeoning evangelical movement among gang members, it is Pastor Arias, having been a member of MS-13 for 15 years. This is not hard to surmise, as the letters ‘M’ and ‘S’ are tattooed on his forehead. Two teardrops are under his left eye, and there’s a spider web behind his right ear. Beneath his collared shirt and blazer, across his prodigious stomach, are a host of other MS-13 tattoos including a fairly large hand doing the devil's horn fingers that has become the gang's signature hand sign.

It is a cloudy day when the Pastor introduces us to Pastor Arias. Arias is a friendly man, all smiles and handshakes, with a gravelly voice that carries years of hard living. Pastor Arias leads us to his home, a tense walk past a gathering place for some of the local gang members. Though not exactly fond of having journalists in their neighborhood, they begrudgingly accept those with the pastors as long as they are not photographed.

The house is a small two-bedroom shack, with a dirt floor. Living the life of a convert does not appear easy. These men go from being able to demand payment from anyone in the neighborhood to living in poverty, with barely enough money to feed themselves.

Arias is now heavyset and broad-shouldered, but he shows us photos of himself as a young gangster. He is thin and muscular, with his head shaven, arms crossed, and staring into the camera in front of a large piece of MS-13 graffiti. Arias is what they call an OG, or original gangster. He claims to have been jumped in to the gang in 1990 by one of the founding members in the country. He was 11 years old.

Arias's tale of getting wrapped up in gang life and later finding an exit through the Church, echoes what I've heard from nearly every former gang member I've interviewed. There are certain highlights that arise in the stories of every gang member turned Christian: a poor family, a rough childhood, and acceptance into the gang at a young age. Violence. Drug addiction. Depression. Jail. Near-death experience. Survival. Awakening.

Pastor Arias came from a poor, broken family. His mother was always working, and his father was addicted to alcohol and drugs. He took to the streets at 7, and was addicted to sniffing glue a few years after that. That's when he found himself in the company of MS-13.

"When you're young, you need someone to listen to you, to respect you. That's what I was looking for, people to fear me and respect me," Pastor Arias says. Many gang members, like Arias, speak of joining the gang as if they were searching for a family, of some sort of structure. As the writer and researcher Stephen Dudley illustrates in a groundbreaking report on MS-13, and in an op-ed in the New York Times, the gang can be thought of as a social organization more than a criminal enterprise. Dudley, who runs the Insight Crime website, says that the gangs function as a type of surrogate family.

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That's not to downplay the allure of money and power to gang recruits. These days, Pastor Arias adds, the poverty is so overwhelming in neighborhoods like his that some mothers push their children into the gang life.

Pastor Arias says the first hint of his conversion came in 1999, after serving a three-year sentence. He was still heavily addicted to drugs when he got out, but his brother, another gang member, had become a Christian. His brother tried to win him over, but he wanted none of it. "I told him I didn't need any God, that the only thing I needed was the hood and the hood was my family, and that he better not talk to me again because he had betrayed me by leaving the gang," says Pastor Arias.

At the same time, he was battling addiction and crippling depression. He was paranoid, always worried that the police or rival gang members were plotting to execute him. He remembers attending a huge party one night, and walking outside alone. “Everything was quiet, there was an emptiness,” he says. “I felt so alone, I felt like less than trash.” He heard a voice, urging him to kill himself. The next morning, he was arrested and eventually sentenced to eight years in prison.

The next few years were hell. Nobody visited him, he said, except for his mother — and God. Prison conditions were atrocious, and Arias says it was a constant battle between life and death. One night, he thought he was being set up to be murdered, and he prayed to God and swore that that if he lived he would convert to Christianity. He survived, and shortly after he was freed on a technicality. He converted when he got out.

But the transition from former gang member to law-abiding Christian was not an easy one. Former gang members face social stigma. Many in El Salvador are not so willing to forgive. It is one thing to speak of redemption when the gangs have not preyed on your community. It is another when they have targeted you and your loved ones. Pastor Arias doesn’t blame them either. “It’s hard because the gang has planted so much fear and suffering that it’s hard to forgive. Especially me. I hurt my community so bad in the past,” he says.

Can he forgive himself, I ask. He finds comforts in the Lord’s words. He does not hold onto your sins, he says, he throws them away.

The issue of earning a living is a bit more challenging, especially when your only means of income have been violence and drugs. There are few government programs, and it’s almost impossible for former gang members to get normal jobs. Pastor Arias recalls not being able to pay his bills. “When you’re in a gang, it’s basically easy. Money, whatever you need. I would only need to go out in the corner and people would give me money,” he says. The temptation to go back to the gang life is ever present.

Now, though, things have changed. Whereas at one point his own family did not think he would last six months as a law-abiding convert, local parents trust him to take their children to Sunday school. “When He forgives you, He doesn’t hold on to your sins. He throws them away deep, he doesn’t remember what you did,” says Pastor Arias. “That comforts me, even though society doesn’t believe in me, even though they don’t approve the change, because you are aware that your past life doesn’t exist anymore.”

His own daughter is about to graduate from secondary school, where she studies accounting, and go to college next year. Her photo and various awards she’s won are everywhere in Pastor Arias’s tiny living room. He calls her the pride of the family. “She’s a great example for me,” he says.

The following Sunday, Pastor Arias invites us to his church service, located down a dirt path from his home.

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Outside the church, a boy catches my eye. He looks to be about 14 years old and is dressed the way that young gang members do. I’m told that he’s a lookout, keeping an eye on the foreign journalists with the cameras. It is unnerving, and I start to wonder just how accepted outsiders are in the barrio even with the consent of the pastors.

A short time later, two suit-wearing men approach the teenager from inside the church and drape their arms around him. They escort him into the church and have him kneel right below the podium. He is joined by another young teenager who seems far more willing. Pastor Arias is preaching from behind the podium, extremely animated, screaming and sweating, his gravelly voice echoing through the room. “The easiest prey for the devil is the youth!” he booms into the microphone. The crowd nods enthusiastically.

Both teenagers are about to receive Jesus, to be born again, in front of the congregation. One teenager begins to cry. Pastor Arias blesses them. “You know what the devil is saying today? Now those two escaped me! Only a little more and I would have had them but I couldn’t because the hand of Jesus saved them!” The crowd applauds. A small victory for Pastor Arias.

The young lookout walks outside the church and hugs his grandmother, who is also crying. I approach him to talk, but he is nervous and says he can’t be seen talking to us. A few minutes later, two active gang members walk by, clearly sent to investigate the situation. The boy is nervous. Now he may be the target. While the gangs mostly accept the evangelical route of escape, it does not mean that it is something they all celebrate.

As Pastor Arias explains to us, “It’s the only way out of the gang since the gang has only three exits: One is prison, two is a hospital, and three is death. The only way out alive is through God, and the gangs know perfectly that there isn’t another way.”

Like Pastor Arias, most gang members only come to realize this while incarcerated. Prison is where the majority of reformed gang members find it in their hearts to find Jesus. The Apanteos prison is located about an hour outside of San Salvador. It is an MS-13 prison. In El Salvador, the prisons are divided by gang membership. Mixing the two together is far too dangerous. Gotera, an 18th Street prison, has become famous for its Christian converts, with some saying it numbers over 1,200.

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On a balmy day in May, we’re led into a section of prison where approximately 300 former members of MS-13, clad in white shirts and white shorts, alternate between praying fervently and listening to fiery preachers deliver sermons. It is quite a compelling scene. To say the men are enthusiastic would be an understatement. They sing hymns as loud as their voices will let them. They clap so hard their hands must throb. Some have tears streaming down their tattooed faces.

Incarcerated men at the Apanteos prison, which houses MS-13 gang members. Image by Neil Brandvold. El Salvador, 2018.

The government of El Salvador has initiated a program called Yo Cambio, or “I Change,” in the prisons. It is part of a massive effort to teach gang members new skills like forestry, basic carpentry, sewing, and masonry, and how to be productive members of society. We watch team-building exercises, the kind of things you'd see at a corporate retreat. Trust falls. A dance performance. There are nice gardens being kept in an open courtyard. The young men are smiling, laughing, and generally having a good time. It is not the type of thing one expects to see in prison in El Salvador, though the productions are clearly staged for our benefit. We are not allowed into the sectors where active gang members are housed. And while we are at this prison, rumors swirl of grievous human rights violations occurring at the maximum-security prisons where gang leaders are held and journalists are not allowed. At one point during the reporting trip, a local journalist shows us a photo alleged to be of a gang leader locked up. The man is rail thin, and accusations are made that the prison system is starving him and other gang leaders. There is only the carrot and the stick here. Nothing in between. Repent or die.

Aware of all this, it is still hard not to be impressed. We are accompanied by only one guard and the prison director, a short, middle-aged woman. We are surrounded by one-time members of the most fearsome gang in the Americas, and there are no issues or concerns for our safety as we wander around this section of the prison.

We ask the prison director to speak to the most fearsome reformed gang member she could think of. Jaime Salvador Ceron Orlanna has been sentenced to 71 years and has served nine years of his sentence. He speaks with a tic that makes him constantly blink. He was a gang member for 25 years, he says. "When I look at myself in the mirror, I never thought I could ever change having done those evil deeds in the gang," he adds. He thought he would die a member.

Jaime describes his previous life of "parties and murders," of having seen an "infinite" number of young teenagers killed simply for not obeying a gang

member. He now calls himself a “recycled human,” adding that before finding Jesus, he was “human garbage.” Asked whether or not he thinks society can forgive him and his fellow converts, he’s unsure. He swears he is sorry and recognizes he’s been a part of his homeland’s destruction “for having been the root of this evil that now takes over the country.”

He shows off a giant MS-13 tattoo on his back that contains satanic images and references to the Illuminati, which he used to believe in. There are always talks among the former gang members of making deals with the devil, of the devil taking over a person. The occult figures somewhat into MS-13 lore, from the devil horn signs to other more satanic imagery. For these men, with some of the things they’ve done, the devil and his work is more a than metaphor. It’s real, whispering in their ears, convincing them to commit heinous acts and now perhaps trying to convince them to go back to their old ways. What better way to stave off the devil than to commit to Evangelicalism?

Nearby, the prisoners have broken into groups of 15 or so people, with various preachers and pastors in training practicing sermons to a small audience. A short man with intricate tattoos crawling up his throat warns of not falling victim to temptation. “The word of God says that Satan, the devil, took Jesus to the desert to tempt him, and the will of the enemy is to tempt us with hollow things. Maybe when we leave here tomorrow someone will say, ‘I have a deal’ or ‘You can steal that car and nothing will happen, you ask God’s forgiveness later and everything is okay.’ Those are the hollow temptations of the enemy, and how they’ll try to seduce us.”

The incarcerated converts are all aware that remaining on the path on the outside is not as simple as it is on the inside. Temptations are found in abundance, and rehabilitation programs are not. A frequent complaint heard from former gang members is that there are little to no options for gang members once they are released. They say the government provides no training or job placement program, and social stigma prevents them from gaining employment in a country that already has a lack of opportunities for even upstanding citizens without criminal records.

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Wilfredo Gomez is painfully aware of the circumstances that converted gang members face upon release in El Salvador when he greets Jorge Luis Migran, a young former member of 18th Street who was just released a week prior after serving three years of what was initially an 11-year sentence. Migran was initially sentenced for homicide, extortion, and a host of other charges, though many were dropped. He says he made a pact with God to get off drugs and after failing the very next day, he got sober after that and has now been clean for five months. What saved him was being transferred to a prison with more converts and gaining better treatment. “I looked at the future and I wanted to be someone,” he says. “I was tired of crime.” He is worried, though, about getting a job and providing for his 3-year-old son, who he was only recently able to meet. And he is worried about the lure of women and drugs.

Gomez oversees a program that will house Migran and help him stay on the straight and narrow path. He lives in and runs a rehabilitation center in the Eben-Ezer Church inside the notorious 18th Street neighborhood known as La Dina, an area so notorious for gang violence that even hardened Salvadoran crime journalists were apprehensive to venture inside last time I went. The church is an oasis in a crime-plagued neighborhood, though even with permission from the local 18th Street clique to visit it's unwise to venture more than a block or two in any direction.

It serves as a base and home for the recently released converts to live and work. It also doubles as a bakery, where the converts who lack employment opportunities bake pastries daily to sell at local shops. Bakeries have become something of a typical business for former gang members, so much so that police officers crack jokes about yet another gang-run bakeshop. It allows the gang members to earn a living, just a couple of dollars a day. Entering the church most days, we were met by cheery former gang members, giant 18s tattooed across their face, basting freshly made pastries with syrupy concoctions.

Gomez himself is a former gang member who now preaches at the church and oversees much of the operation. If there is a biography that captures the life cycle of El Salvador's gangs, it is most definitely Gomez's. Born in the country, at age 10 he fled with his family as refugees during the civil war of the 1980s and ended up in South Central Los Angeles. Gomez describes how he thought everything would be OK when he reached the states, but he soon found himself in a neighborhood where violence and poverty dominated the environment as well.

A born-again member of the 18th Street gang now living in the Eben Ezer evangelical church. Image by Neil Brandvold. El Salvador, 2018.

His family life soon fractured. His parents divorced, and Gomez often found himself alone. He was also bullied by others in the neighborhood for being Salvadoran. "Being in the States and being Salvadoran, not knowing the language or the culture, it put pressure on me, and I found a way to fit in or to belong or to feel part of by having different types of friends. That's how I initiated friendship with gangs and gang members and girls that sympathized with gangs."

Gomez estimates that there were 20 different gangs in his junior high. He lived on the corner of 18th Street and Union in Los Angeles, the birthplace of the 18th Street gang, though he had yet to join them when he was assaulted after school one day because rival gang members had suspected he was already a member of 18th Street. Members of 18th Street in his neighborhood saw him banged up and took him under their wing, going with him to get revenge and offering protection in the future.

From there, he was a full-fledged member. Arrests and incarceration soon followed, with Gomez going in and out of institutions until he was deported in 2006. When he arrived back in the country, it had been 20 years since his family fled. Police met him at the airport, took photos, and warned him that the situation down there was different, that because of his tattoos he would be targeted.

Life back in El Salvador wasn't easy. Gomez was living in a cheap motel and unable to find work. He ran out of money, and felt himself drifting back into a life of crime. He had no connections to the gangs back in El Salvador though, and considered himself unaffiliated. He was scared to leave the motel, scared he would be kidnapped and killed by any gang that saw his tattoos. Fed up one night, he went to a bar and got drunk. There, he met members of 18th Street who asked him to go with them and join up. Skeptical at first, he gave in when they showed him their various "18" tattoos.

A few months later, he was back in prison. "I lasted like three months and twenty days free out here [El Salvador]. I got sentenced to ten years in prison for strong-armed robbery. I went to prison out here and believe me, prison out here ain't no joke, nothing like the States," he says.

In prison, there were eight beds for every 50 people. The conditions were awful. The food inedible, the bathroom situation so atrocious he won't even begin to describe it, and he constantly had fungal infections. But he had a bit of notoriety due to his status as a deportee and his size. He fell into the prison life, sometimes using his size to his advantage, and won respect from other gang members. But five or six years into his sentence, he got horribly sick.

"In prison, there were eight beds for every 50 people."

The sickness was Gomez's wake-up call. The other gang members, sensing his weaknesses, mocked him and treated him poorly. The Christians inside kept trying to pray for him but he turned them down. His body kept breaking down. He later found out he had tuberculosis.

One night, he was coughing up more fluids than usual, feeling a great "white heat" on his body. "I was crying, and I remember one of them [the Christians], he whispered to my ear, and he was like, 'Do you want to receive Jesus as your Lord and Savior? He wants to heal you. He wants to save you. You're not going to die.' Dude, I don't remember but I told him, 'Yes, I do.' Then I received Jesus as my lord and savior that day, and here I am, what four years later? Healthy as a bull, with a different mentality, with a different life, and now I know God is real."

Gomez started preaching in jail, seeing it as his newfound purpose. Because of his previous notoriety, he developed a reputation of sorts; the badass, fierce deportee who woke up one morning and found Jesus. Other prisoners were touched by his story. "I'm a leader again, but not for the darkness, not for evil," he says. "I'm a leader now for the light, for the good."

The idea for the program at Eben-Ezer Church came to him the day he was released. Not expecting anyone to be outside the prison waiting for him, Gomez was shocked to find members of the church there. "Here comes this pastor and he tells me, 'We've been waiting for you. We heard what you've been doing in there, and we heard what God is doing in there, and we're here to help you.' I was like, wow. I never had a family. I never had nobody waiting for me when I got out of prison, not even in the States."

"Other prisoners were touched by his story. 'I'm a leader again, but not for the darkness, not for evil,' he says. 'I'm a leader now for the light, for the good.'"

He was inspired to start doing the same for other ex-gang-members-turned-Christians getting out of jail. There's now 11 of them staying at the church. Gomez sees it as a halfway house, to help those recently released get started and adjust so they don't fall back into the same traps. They provide food, shelter, and guidance, and the hope is that the newly released will soon be on their way. But many gang members no longer have family members willing to take them in or are not able to gain any sort of employment, especially those with many tattoos. "If they have no family, if they really have no family, they have no economy [economic prospects], no one to help, they can stay," Gomez says.

Others are scared of threats, and the church provides a refuge. Becoming an evangelical Christian, however, is not a panacea for gang members looking to escape retaliation for previous acts of violence in general, though being a church member does afford some protection. Reformed gang members can still be targeted by rival gang factions and on occasion even by members of their own gang who are upset they have left too abruptly or think that they have converted to escape a debt or internal punishment.

Former gang members must never be seen wavering from their commitment to Christ. If a gang member is seen out hitting on women at a bar or drinking or doing drugs, anything that may give cause to suspect the commitment to living a pure lifestyle, it can set them up for a death sentence. There is also the matter of police, many of whom think once a gang member always a gang member, or who suspect anyone with tattoos as being an active member.

Because of this Gomez keeps all members of his church under strict rules. They are forbidden from doing anything that could put the church in jeopardy and make it appear as if he and his congregation are harboring active gang members. Any violation of the rules, and a gang member can be kicked out. He doesn't blame anyone for being suspicious, either, but he knows in his heart they are on the right path.

"I used to love the gang, I used to say the gang was in my blood," he says. "I used to hate MS-13. I used to think about destroying them, dropping a bomb on them like Hiroshima. But now, all I want to do is preach to them and tell them Jesus loves them."

When Gomez converted, he says there were maybe only a few dozen members of 18th Street that had converted to Christianity. Now in the 18th street prison Gotera, there are upward of 1,000. "Something's happening. Something is really happening," he says with an incredulous chuckle. "I dream one day of having an area or a building where I can house both of them, where I could have MS-13 and 18th Street together worshipping the Lord without any restrictions, without any fear in their hearts."

As I speak to Gomez, the former gang members are doing errands around the church's common spaces, sweeping and mopping up the floors, cooking for one another, and getting ready for church services. It has the feel of a frat house, albeit one filled with well-behaved frat boys. Some are retiling the floor, others painting some of the walls. As the church service start draws near, those with more egregious tattoos apply makeup to cover their faces while others take out their nicest button-down shirts and iron them, stopping to apply cologne.

With the men joking around and laughing as they clean and get ready for the day, it's hard to reconcile the scene with the knowledge of their crimes. What to make of the men here, or the converts in general? Some of whom have killed, not just killed in a war or for profit or shot a man in the head, but tortured, butchered, chopped up men into little pieces, and now tell you that he found love in Jesus and is a changed man? Men with 666 tattoos on their foreheads basting pastries, mopping floors, and smiling as they bring you coffee and ice cream cake to celebrate a roommate's birthday? Is redemption even possible?

When the church service begins, a steady rain is pouring down. A warm-up band wails on electric guitars as their singer, dressed in emo fashion with windswept bangs, sings emotional pop-punk odes to Jesus. Men with full faces of tattoos sing along next to old grandmothers from the neighborhood. Wilfredo is nervously studying his notes for a sermon he will give. One former gang member holds his newborn baby in his tattooed forearms, a bandage over an eye that was shot. The bullet is still in there.

That night, Jorge Luis Migran is welcomed to the group. All the former gang members line up to shake his hand and welcome him to the flock. There are smiles and tears. He won't have an easy time adjusting, but for now he looks to have escaped El Salvador's vicious gang wars.

A few weeks later, a member of the program is gunned down right outside the church. The rumor is that it was a hit by MS-13. Later that month, another recently released convert is brought to the church.

**Some details, including the name of this Pastor, have been withheld for safety reasons.*

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