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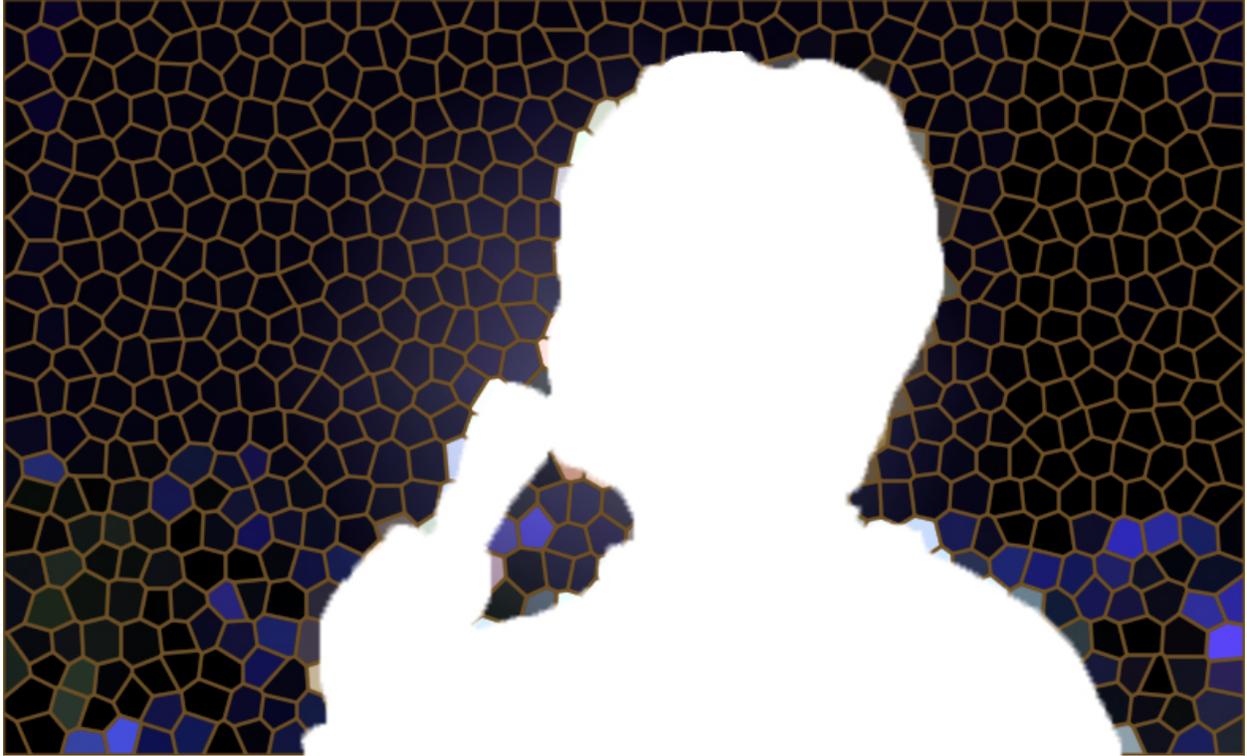
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WANDA AND ME: THE CONTINUOUS RISE OF PUERTO RICO'S GREATEST PYRAMID SCHEMER

Toa Alta, Puerto Rico would be a forgettable town if it didn't house Iglesia La Senda Antigua, the house of god's Apostle, Wanda Rolón. The church lies on the edge of the Metropolitan Area in a suburb of San Juan.

To get to it from the Luis Muñoz Marín International Airport, it takes you less than 30 minutes by car, and approximately 52 churches.

Wanda's church is massive, well not as big as Joel Osteen's 17,000 seat church in Houston, and it's nowhere as busy as Paula White's 20,000 congregates per week in Tampa. But for Puerto Rico, an island colony of 3.2 million, it's pretty damn big, with about 4,500 worshippers gathering over three services a week.

Some people say that Wanda Rolón personifies everything wrong with modern religion. Stories were told of how she would shame people who tithed less than what was expected of them, how she would say God had spoken his will directly to her to get what she wanted, or how she used the power of prayer to perform miracles, which usually included chant-like praying, hysterical sobbing, and fainting.

I had come to see for myself, to separate truth from myth and investigate why over 4,000 people gathered weekly in her temple.

Puerto Rican media reports extensively on Wanda. She buys expensive clothes, cars, and jewelry, and uses her social media, especially Facebook, a powerful, powerful tool within Hispanic communities, to preach, pray, and of course, ask for money. She's at the center of gossip and conservative political activism. She's a "bad Christian", and as a person who shares that moniker, albeit for entirely different reasons, I knew I had to meet her.

Weeks prior to my visit, I had spoken to friends, church goers, about why they felt so negatively about Wanda. It all boiled down to one concept: Greed. Money. Cash.

People would tell me to look out for ATM machines in the outskirts of the temple. Or to notice how the people who sat closer to the altar are the ones who give the highest offerings. None of this was true. So if none of this was true, was she actually doing anything wrong?

As I approached the massive bright blue and orange tabernacle, the smiling faces of Apostle Wanda and her husband, Pablo Ortega, welcomed me to the house of the lord on a gigantic digital billboard that sits on the edge of the property. On the same plot as the temple were dozens of rows of parking space. It seems as though Wanda owns the entire block. Aside from Senda Pizza, the lot directly across the street houses her original church and the headquarters of her TV and radio stations. The white and blue two story building that used to be a temple looked like it could sit no more than 200 people. The old metal windows were sealed shut, and you could only peer darkness through the old stained door. The letters that once said "La Senda Antigua" have mostly falling, leaving behind an outline of their shape.

I entered through the foyer on the west side, a sterile white lobby with two vending machines in a corner, a welcoming desk at the front, and no ATM machine. I was greeted by one of Senda Antigua's many associate pastors, Zulema Flores. After I revealed to her that I was visiting out of curiosity, she assured me that it was the Holy Ghost that brought me there that day.

Browsing through the lobby, I found Wanda and Pablo smiling up at me from a welcome pamphlet. In it, the numerous acquisitions of her empire are listed as blessings from God, and all for the purpose and glory of God. La Senda Antigua follows the teachings of Matthew Chapter 28 verse 19: "*Go ye therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost,*" and they make it clear that the reason for ever expansion is to fulfill that mandate.

Then I noticed an open hole in the far back of the lobby: a gift shop, something I had only seen near the Vatican. In it, stands containing all of The Pastor Who Sings'--that's what they call her, *La pastora que canta*-- music albums, like "Casa Abierta" (Open House) and "Invicta" (undefeated). Her and other religious literature like Bibles, self-help books, and children's books are also in inventory.

As I stepped inside, I got the feeling that I was in a theater about to watch a play, not a Christian service. Hell, the service is organized in the same way a three arc play would be.

The first act: Worship. It's the foreplay of the service, it puts you in the mood for the rest of the service.

Second act is the offering. *La ofrenda*, the moment congregates give to the church for what the Lord has given them.

Finally, the climax, the service. It's when the miracles happen, when the Apostle, through God, heals. It's the moment when God truly shows off.

The worship ended. People clapped. "Gracias Dios," they yelled. *La ofrenda* was about to begin.

It was 1983, and a young gospel singer received a message from God. He was very clear: she needed to drop everything and serve him. So began a career that has spanned 30 years, and throughout it all, there were two figures that were consistent: Her husband, Pablo, and God, whom she had direct access to. She proceeded to study theology, and opened up her first church in Toa Alta with only seven members.

That small church turned into a temple that could house 2,000 people. And after a few years, Wanda received a new message from God, which she called a "huge faith challenge." In her memoir, "No Moriré" (I shall not die), Wanda recalls God telling her that this new place had to have the capacity to gather about 5,000 people. But it took nearly a decade for her and Pablo to find a plot of land, and when they did, a 5,000 seat temple they built. On July 25, 2000, she opened the doors to Tabernáculo de Alabanza y Restauración la Senda Antigua. Everything was going great, until she received a prophetic message from a fellow pastor: a moment of great trial would come to her life "through an attack directly from hell itself."

Shortly after, Wanda was diagnosed with liver cancer. According to her memoir, the prognostic was not good. Her cancer was advanced, and she needed to find a way to get on the list. Unfortunately, there is no center for liver transplants in Puerto Rico, so after receiving help from congregates, she was able to be placed on a list in Jacksonville, FL. Wanda remembers how the *Satanás* would try to penetrate her head with negative vibes, but she would try to focus on Jesus.

"I couldn't die at a time when the ministry was growing in large dimensions. I chose to live and not die. I clung to God's promises with all my strength," she wrote.

Wanda knew her miracle was going to happen, and believes it was prayer—and not money—that gave her her desire. After months, God had told her she would get a Godly liver. An acquaintance's cousin, the daughter of a pastor, had died, and her family decided that they wanted the liver to go to Wanda. Death is not a tragedy for the Christian, Wanda said. She got a Godly liver, and decades of life.

And as her ministry kept growing, so did her her assets. Rolón slowly built a media and entrepreneurial empire unlike any other in Puerto Rico. Besides the temple, the two radio

stations—92.1 FM and 104.1 FM—, TV station Cadena de Restauración Senda Broadcasting Network (SBN) Channels 15 y 48 — that includes a “blessed” satellite that makes reaching other countries possible. Two private academies: Academia Cristiana Yarah, off the road of the main temple, and Colegio Universitario La Senda Antigua (C.U.S.A.) —located inside the main temple, one retreat site—Centro de Retiros del Caribe La Senda Casona off an unnamed road in Bayamón, and finally, a counseling center, Movimiento Conciliar de Restauración La Senda Antigua, Inc., with no undisclosed location or employees. Rolón had slowly built a media and entrepreneurial empire unlike any other in Puerto Rico.

But Apostle Wanda remains a controversial figure in the faith community in Puerto Rico. Her prosperity gospel and severe ties to local politics have created a myth, a warning to small children, a bad Christian.

Wanda all but trademarked the theological conservatism that demonizes behavior that isn't Christlike. She's made it her mission to see through it that God's plan for Puerto Rico is fulfilled through her. To do this, she's made powerful allies in conservative politicians. With their help—and the expansive reach of her social media—

Wanda has advocated for laws that criminalize LGBTQ people, fiercely advocated for a religious freedom bills that prevent Christians from being discriminated upon in the workplace over the summer, and helped shoot down the gender perspective curriculum that would touch on LGBTQ subjects, gender equality, and gender violence that the Department of Education was going to implement back in 2014.

But Wanda Rolón is not the first to walk down this path, especially in Puerto Rico.

After centuries of colonization from Spain and the United States, the island once filled with pagan nature gods is now 97% Christian, around 45% Catholic, brought by the Spaniards, and closely behind is Protestantism, with 42%, brought and fortified by the Americans.

And like Wanda, Puerto Rico has seen its fair share of mega-pastors. The Fonts used to be the first family of mega-churches in Puerto Rico. The patriarch, Rodolfo Font, is known for his outlandish charisma, and head turning projects, like a massive, 20-story building called the *Museo de la Biblia* or bible museum, with a creationist theme and a huge T-Rex model outside. Then, there are the Raschkes, where father, Jorge, became an international preacher and a household name in the island for spreading conservative evangelical views and attending protests in the name of the lord, and daughter, Kimmy, was a member of the Senate representing the statehood party and supporting bills that aligned with her father's views. Finally, there are the Guidinis, led by matriarch Elizabeth, who established her ministry in the 80s, much like Wanda, and has managed to create one of the largest followings in the Metropolitan area, preaching about healing and salvation.

Although they all shadow compared to Wanda, they were not pioneers, but merely followers.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BgRxSLIRunw&feature=youtu.be>

Before The Beatles forever changed pop culture appreciation in the 60s, there was Aimee Semple McPherson. During the 1920s, Aimee was a superstar, drawing crowds of thousands and using charisma to deliver the word of God. A Canadian-American citizen, Aimee is [ac]credited as the first superstar preacher, using unconventional methods like driving cross country in “gospel van” preaching and marching down the streets of Los Angeles with Hollywood celebrities to her church to draw attention, and that she did. It’s said that her arrival at train stations would gather more people than Presidents. When she inaugurated her church in 1923—which seated over 5,000 people—thousands gathered to see her, and many called her their queen.

Since the inception of megachurches and superstar pastors, the reliance on communications has always been synonymous with growth and expansion, and it all started with her. She was the first woman in the United States to obtain a radio license, and not only changed the way people use media today, but changed the way religions get their messages across. Aimee Semple McPherson is the mother of the megachurch, and left behind a legacy that serves millions of people today.

For decades, and unbeknown to those born after the 1950s, Aimee set an example that spawned pastor after pastor into the spotlight. Like Wanda, many of these rely on the use of telecommunications and in the last decade, social media, to preach.

Tammy Faye Bakker and her husband Jim Bakker created a PTL (Praise the Lord) in the 1970s, a television program later turned ministry where the couple preached prosperity gospel. They used over the top entertainment to preach the word of God, and generated more than \$120 million annually.

In 1987, Joyce Meyer and her husband Dave founded Joyce Meyer Ministries, a non-profit organization that seeks to . The couple currently uses digital live streams, television programs, podcasts, conferences, books, CDs, and humanitarian missions to

More recently, there’s Paula White, Trump’s pastor, and possibly the most famous female pastor of the decade. White’s gospel is simple: spreading the word of God. And very much like Wanda, Paula uses her power and political connections to create a media empire that reaches millions worldwide.

The Great Commission. The mandate to go and spread the word of God through all nations is the basis of most super pastors' excuse to continue acquiring and expanding their mediatic empires. With the help of social media and changes in telecommunications, Wanda, Joyce, Paula, and Aimee have done God’s work.

To achieve the status of megachurch, there needs to be a steady weekly attendance of at least 2,000 members. For years, researchers have been trying to understand the appeal of megachurches, and have come up with several theories.

Theories have come up, like how attendees are excited about what they experience that they tell their friends or how they thrive in secluded suburban areas—like Toa Alta—where people need to find connections because of the seclusion.

But Wanda didn't build La Senda Antigua, the megachurch of Puerto Rico, for either of these reasons. She built it to give.

As the worship group exited the altar and dozens of little girls clad in *danza* gear headed back to their seats, I anxiously waited for the service to get to the good part. *La ofrenda*. The offering.

Then came the announcements, and Pastor Elizabeth Torres called for all the first-time guests to stand up. And I did.

By 11 a.m., around 300 people had congregated at the front of the church, on the edge of the stage-like altar. The room is dark, the lights dimmed. For years, church goers and theologians have discussed the dimming of lights during worship, and many believe it's to get people in the right headspace.

The darkness of the room makes the decorations hard to see, but the room is mostly dark gray, white, and red. The roof is made of foam tiles, with cement beams holding rows of silver and crystal chandeliers. The red carpet that adorns the entrances and rows leads to the stage, about four to five feet above eye level. At the center lies a podium with the church's logo, a dove with a crown engulfs the Earth with its wing.

In biblical lore, offering is compared to harvesting, and the gist of the metaphor she was preaching was simple. The seeds you plant now will give fruit which will be harvested. And when you reach heaven, those seeds WILL be counted. It's a gospel based fear and guilt.

Dozens of ushers stood among the rows with massive baskets in their hands, waiting. Another group of ushers passed back and forth between the congregation, waving check envelopes around like a lottery ticket salesman.

The screens displayed the ATHMóvil account where people could digitally transfer money: Alaba7. The number of people was now in the 600s. As the worship group sang about giving, hundreds lined up after each other to deposit the money in the baskets. Some danced as they waited in line, or walked back. Many praised the Lord.

According to pastora Zulema, the money would be used to fund the tv station, the radio station, the conferences. All in the service of God. She thanked all who gave, who sacrificed.

"God will bless you tenfold. Don't give up on your prayers until you see what God has for you."

They thanked her. Away they gave their money, their income, their sustenance, all in hopes that they would be blessed.

Minutes later, Pastor Zulema took over the stage and began the most crucial moment of the service. It was time for the *ofrenda*.

For prosperity preachers, what happens to you is based on how hard you believe. How strong your faith is. How good your *ofrenda* is. If you pray hard enough, and sacrifice your money, God will bless you and yours with wealth. If you're sick, put yourself in the hands of the Lord, and

When you're in heaven, God will hold you accountable for what you gave on Earth. Giving is a privilege. Give, and your house will be blessed. Give, and your life will have worth. Give, and you will help fund Wanda's mission. Pastora Zulema's plea for offering lasted 15 minutes. I was enthralled. Here, the real message and purpose of the church was bursting at the seams.

"*Ofrendar* is a life principle," she said. "*Ofrendar* is life."

Wanda's preachings are what's known as prosperity gospel, which centers around how God's will for his people is linked to their financial well-being, but being a controversial topic, the church sells itself a little differently. La Senda Antigua, or the ancient path, is a reference to the christian church in its early stages a call for bringing things back to the way they used to be. But the church's neopentocostal style suggest that they want to move into the future.

They've shunned away the restricting rules of traditional Puerto Rican pentecostalism, like no never cutting your hair or not using any makeup, and embraced a more modern take on Christianity. Up on the stage, worship leaders wear sneakers, women wear pants, leaders use their phones instead of Bibles. They've made church cool.

It all started thousands of years ago, when dozens of cultures like the Greeks or Aztecs would sacrifice animals—or people—as offering to their superior beings, in search for protection or as a way to say thank you.

When God himself sacrificed his own son in the cross so that the sins of the people were washed away—an act commemorated today through the symbolic eating of bread and Jesus' blood in communion—the standard for offering was set. You had to give everything you had.

For almost 2,000 years, Christianity has been a source of hope and a model of life for millions of people, and at the core of it lies offering, a sacrifice done with the intent of a higher purpose and a long history.

As for tithing, which is when a one-tenth part of something is offered. It stems from Old Testament lore, when Abraham gave a tenth of his winnings to king Melchizedek after he

blesses him. After several other mentions in different versions of the Bible, tithing became the norm for Christians, who give 10% of their income as an offering to the church.

But unless the church where they congregate has a democratic congregation—where the congregation forms part of a board that runs the church—most people don't know where their offerings end up or how its spent.

And when churches that practice prosperity gospel, like Apostle Wanda, a huge chunk of their service is dedicated to the process of offering.

Prosperity gospel is certainly not new, and most definitely not going anywhere. It stems from a mid-19th century concept: New Thought, which believes in mind-healing based on religious faith. Prosperity preachers believe that one's well-being and wealth are directly tied to the strength of the faith and the quantity of sacrifice.

The movement is attributed the rise of the evangelical campaign the Healing Revival spreading throughout a post WWII United States in the 1950s. Revivalists believe in divine healing, meaning that God healed all ailments through prayer. The fathers of the movement, William Branham and Oral Roberts conducted crusades throughout the US and Latin American, Asian, and African countries, performing miracles wherever they went.

Although the practice died out in the late 50s, the charisma that's tied to the movement lives on in modern prosperity preachers like Joel Osteen, Paula White, and of course, Wanda.

But opposition to this movement is strong within communities of faith. What if you're poor, or sick, and God doesn't grant you wealth or health. Religious critics abhor the practice because the preachers take verses like 2 Corinthians 8:9 "For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that ye through His poverty might be rich," out of context. They swear the context of the verse goes beyond monetary wealth.

To theologians, prosperity gospel is false because it demonizes the poor. They believe God can heal, but if he doesn't, then people blame themselves for not believing hard enough or not giving enough money to the church.

Pastor Nicolás McDonald called prosperity gospel "the worst pyramid scheme ever". To him, the scheme depends on the success of the "guy" on top, is told to desperate people, and "feeds into our idolatry."

The sermon could not be more boring. The preacher, a young bald man who called Wanda his spiritual mother, gave an hour long lackluster message about Lazarus' revival as a testimony of faith and holding out hope. But instead of going into the reasons why Jesus revived Lazarus, he focuses on his testimony, and how his spiritual mother gave him a chance to thrive.

The message was about her and what God has sent her to do. There was no cross in sight, but Wanda was everywhere. In the entrance. In the pamphlet. In the bookstore. Everywhere you turn, Wanda is there. And even in her absence, the worship never ceased.

I was confused. Wanda was not around, but the idolatry was persistent. I wanted to hate it, i wanted to criticize and

But the unease in my stomach didn't come from the absurdity of it all. My head kept going back to one specific moment.

During the announcements, when pastor Elizabeth had asked the first timers to stand up. As they read my name out loud, people began to clap. They were urged by their pastor to come forward to hug me and bring me the Lord's love. An usher came over and gave me two CD's with sermons from the Apostle and a guest pastor. I felt good for having visited.

Thinking back to that moment brings me joy. Feeling the love of the congregates, getting showered with gifts. I was applauded, made feel like I was special.

I considered everything. Yes, Wanda had the radio stations, TV stations, the pizza place, the schools, the retreat space, and the counseling center. Sure, she lacked the jet. But her church had one thing I never expected, the Lord's love.