



From Central America to Grand Rapids: A Journey of Faith and Service

Story by Juan Carlos Farias-Gonzalez | Photograph by Jesús Sánchez-Parada

For more than 25 years, Luis Anleu worked as a manager in the textile industry in El Salvador. However, at age 60, he found himself at a crossroads: Without job opportunities in his home country, he decided to emigrate to the United States. Today, from Grand Rapids, he is a layman committed to faith formation and service to his community.

Luis was born in Guatemala to a deeply Catholic family. His parents, servants of the Church, instilled in him a genuine love for God. Formed by

the Jesuits, his faith took hold over the years, but it was in 2002 when he experienced a personal encounter with Christ that transformed his life. For 16 years, he actively participated in the charismatic community that facilitated his conversion.

His father, born in Guatemala, served in the U.S. military during World War II and obtained American citizenship. After returning to his country, Luis's father made a career in accounting at the age of 50 and worked as an accountant and English teacher. Luis was the oldest of four brothers, two men and two women, and developed his working life in the textile industry, serving as a manufacturing manager in El Salvador for 27 years. And after a prayer experience in which he felt God's call, he decided to immigrate to the United States. Luis tells us: "This decision came one night praying when I asked the Lord to give me a sign. Auditively I heard that he said to me: United States. It was there that I immediately changed the chip and I told my wife Pilar the next day what I heard, and with conviction I told her, I'm going there. Luckily my younger brother had already lived here in Grand Rapids. And within two weeks I was here. Then I started doing all the steps with the government to get me a social security and a work permit to work."

A New Beginning in the United States

Getting to Grand Rapids was a challenge. With no work experience in the U.S. or English proficiency, Luis started as an operator in a plastics factory. With effort, he was promoted to supervisor and then production coordinator. But his vocation went beyond work: In 2019, he joined the parish of Santa

María as a reader and minister of the Eucharist. His desire to serve better led him to enroll in the Leadership Institute in the fall of 2022, where he has been acquiring tools to strengthen his pastoral work.

His experience in the Church of El Salvador contrasted with that of Grand Rapids. “I felt sad not to see that passion for Jesus that I lived in my home community. I asked myself, ‘Why did God bring me here?’” Luis recalls. It was then that he felt a deeper call to ignite the flame of faith in his community.

Over time, he assumed a more active role. Today she coordinates faith formation for children, teenagers and adults, also serving as part of the staff with a part-time job at St. Adalbert’s Basilica and St. Mary’s Parish in downtown Grand Rapids.

The 'Families of Faith' Program: A Space for Growth

Pope Francis insists on the importance of the formation of the laity: “The laity are simply the vast majority of the People of God. At the service of this people there is a minority: The ordained ministers” (Evangelii Gaudium, 102). Inspired by this vision, Luis collaborated with Drew Anderson of the Basilica of San Adalberto, assuming the formation of children from both communities. He observed that many of St. Mary's parents lacked religious formation, and he proposed to bring them closer to Jesus through the model of the Domestic Church.

Together with Father Ron’s approval, they implemented the “Families of Faith” program, seeking that the catechesis were not only in the parish, but in the daily life. Currently, Luis coordinates child formation in the Basilica, in both English and Spanish, communicating with Hispanic and American families and supervising seven volunteer catechists. Three Sundays a month he works with Hispanic parents and children, while an American catechist attends to English-only families who are part of the program.

The Spanish program of a Familia de Fe takes place in the Basilica due to the lack of space in Santa Maria, bringing together 37 families. In four months, the parents have deepened their relationship with Jesus and strengthened their family bond. Many were unaware of the use of the Bible, but now they have incorporated it into their daily lives. Luis comments with great joy: “I conducted a survey among all the families, and they tell me that, for the first time, they are approaching their children in every way, not just in faith. They are interacting with them from a religious, human and family dimension. In everyday life, everyone is busy with their affairs, studies, cell phone; but now they have 40 minutes a week to be together as a family, working on aspects of faith. At least, that is the intention: To bring them closer to Jesus as a family.”

He adds that community activities have also been carried out, such as a Living Rosary that brought together 95 people, a workshop on the Advent Crown with 10 additional families and a cohabitation inspired by the Wedding of Cana. The program lasts four years, and although not all families will remain the whole time, Luis hopes that, after receiving the sacraments, they will continue to grow in the faith and participate actively in the life of the Church.

Pope Francis' Call and Luis Anleu's Invitation to the Formation of the Laity

In *Christus Vivit*, the Pontiff urges the laity to take on their role in the Church seriously: “The laity are part of God’s holy faithful people and are therefore protagonists of the Church and of the world” (CV 239). In addition, in his address to lay leaders in 2015, he recalled that “a Church without active lay people becomes a clericalistic and closed institution.”

Luis shares this vision and is convinced that the key to a more living and evangelizing Church lies in the preparation of its faithful. “If we want a vibrant community, we must train and train others,” he says.

The Catholic Church of Grand Rapids through its Office of Hispanic Ministry affirms that the testimony of Luis Anleu is a reminder of the commitment and dedication that each lay person can bring to the Church. His history inspires us to respond courageously to the call, to service and to always seek an integral formation in order to be better witnesses of the Gospel. As Pope Francis says: “No baptized person can ignore the commitment to proclaim Christ” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 120).