

A Cry from South of the Border

A lively charismatic church in Mexico City set out to provide social services to its community. But today it is shaking an entire nation.

The sounds of exhilarating praise resound on the walls of the auditorium. A young boy with Down's syndrome dances in front of the platform. Soon people of all ages join in, and together they move in what could be mistaken for well-rehearsed choreography. Devoid of restraint or embarrassment, the crowd is lost in unabashed praise and worship.

In a nation steeped in tradition, the liberty in this worship service is unique. But Centro Familiar Cristiano (Family Christian Center) in Mexico City is used to being different. Known for its social programs and Pentecostal message, the ministry—pastored by 41-year-old Benjamín Rivera and his wife, Lucero—has braved fierce opposition in a region bound by Catholicism and veneration of the Guadalupe Virgin.

But the church has seen tremendous breakthrough in recent years, with the number of born-again Christians in the nation soaring, and high-ranking government officials and prominent entertainers coming to Christ. Beginning with four families who were committed to simply meeting their community's physical needs, the church is now impacting their nation with more than 2,000 members and thousands more in cell churches throughout the country.

Pastor Rivera, who operates an assistance program for street kids and is a former director of the Christian Broadcasting

Center, helped organize historic events such as Let Us Cry Out to Jesus and Homage to Jesus, which brought 100,000 people into a public facility—a miracle in Mexico, where the lines between church and state have been clearly drawn.

The move of God in Mexico is not something Rivera is willing to dub a revival, but it keeps the praise at this church energetic as members see God answering prayer and transforming their nation.

Ministry Without Walls

Founded in March 1985 as Renovación Integral de la Familia A.C. (Integral Renovation of the Family, Civil Association), Family Christian Center was initially an effort to provide social services to the community. Using missionary funds, the Riveras and three other couples—Ricardo and Yolanda Robles, Omar and Esther Domínguez, and Donald and Melba Exely—purchased an ejido, a communal land typically used for cultivation.

On it they installed a 250-person tent that piqued the curiosity of the few neighbors because of the loud praise during the evening services. During the daytime, the couples visited those who came to the night meetings.

When an earthquake shook Mexico City on Sept. 19, 1985, they organized medical aid groups, gave away food and clothing and even built 30 houses to give to the victims who had lost everything. But as they were responding to this shaking in the

natural, they began to feel the aftershocks of the shaking taking place in the spirit.

In centuries past the city of Culhuacán, where the church is located, was ruled by the Mexicas (also called Aztecs), an Indian tribe that worshiped pagan deities by performing human sacrifices. These ancestral roots ran very deep.

For four years, the church was inundated with resistance from those they were trying to help. Attackers tried to burn down the tent, but it refused to burn. The church caretaker was shot at six times point blank, but miraculously the bullets did not enter his body.

The church was robbed three times, the thieves taking with them all the belongings of those assembled. Traditional Catholics rejected them, and the property's former owner's children trespassed frequently, believing they still had rights to the land.

"It was a very intense three- or four-year process before we were able to establish ourselves, but little by little the difficulties were overcome, and we finally stayed," Rivera said.

Before Rivera and his group came to the area, 56-year-old Juan Ramírez and other believers had been praying that one of God's servants would raise up a church in that very spot because they did not have the funds to do so.

Ramírez, who today is one of the intercessors and pastors of the church, knew that God could change his community. He'd

seen God transform his own life only three years before the church was founded.

“I had an uncle who was a pastor and would always encourage me to draw near to God because I was almost blind, nearly paralyzed,” Ramirez says. “My body was swollen, I was full of vices and problems, and I had thought about taking my life by throwing myself in front of the subway.”

“I finally went to his church, fell on my face before God, and I told Him, ‘Lord Jesus, come help me. I can’t take it anymore.’

“And I saw something like a chain made of gold that shattered into a thousand pieces in heaven. When I left there, the streets seemed to have been newly painted, very beautiful. I felt as if I was walking over a very beautiful carpet.”

Testimonies like these are growing more and more abundant. Five years ago, Yuri, a Mexican singer who had been called the “Spanish Madonna,” was healed of growths in her vocal cords and saved from committing suicide. Since then she has given the Lord her career and ministers worldwide. She believes God is purging Mexico.

“The walls in Mexico will fall like those of Jericho,” she told Charisma, “the hosts of evil, idolatry, witchcraft and astrology that have followed us since the days of our ancestors.”

Fields White Unto Harvest

Today's harvest in Mexico is attributed to the numerous missionaries that in the last century have come from Europe and the United States to this country, which is roughly three times the size of Texas. Pastor Rivera's own father, Antonio Rivera, met the Lord through an Assemblies of God ministry and was one of the pioneers of the work in Durango, the fourth largest state of the Mexican Republic. While there he helped distribute evangelistic literature from the light aircraft belonging to missionary pilot Jerry D. Witt, which crashed in April 1964 in the Mexican desert.

Years later, a move of the Holy Spirit began among Catholic charismatic groupss, from which many Christian groups were birthed. One of them was Amistad Cristiana (Christian Friendship), led by Idilio and Rosa María Pardillo.

At Amistad, the pastors changed their methodology to attract the unchurched. Instead of using terms such as "brethren," "pastor" and "church," they opted for "general director" and "the group." They used this strategy in their outreach to avoid alienating visitors

Says Rivera: "Even today from their pulpits one hears them proclaim: 'This is not a religion; it is a relationship with God. We don't want you to change your religion; we study the Word.'"

Thanks to Rivera's vision and fiery style, young leaders have been raised up throughout the nation who possess higher levels of education and have devoted themselves to working in civic arenas, such as social services, politics, education and

economics. Heriberto Galindo, the Mexican Ambassador to Cuba, and Gov. Pablo Salazar of Chiapas are both committed Christians occupying key political positions.

A significant breakthrough for the church in Mexico occurred in 1992 when then-President Carlos Salinas de Gortari conferred legal status on the church. By allowing churches to be officially recognized, congregations were able to form religious associations and have legal representation.

Now Christians have become a sector of the population that is attracting the attention of businesses and governments. Out of almost 100 million residents, some estimate that as many as 20 percent are Christians, though official numbers hover below 10 percent.

The secular community, however, is noticing that some of the best civic programs are run by Christians. Many unsaved families send their children to Family Christian Center's bilingual elementary school. Though the Bible is not taught directly, the Christian staff teaches biblical values and principles. When parents see the positive change in their children's behavior, Rivera says, most accept Christ.

The recent changes in the country's political arena have brought hope to a people who have for many years suffered the ravages of corruption. For the first time in 71 years the Institutional Revolutionary party lost the presidential election to the right-wing National Action Party.

The new president-elect, Vicente Fox, who was to take office in December, has declared that he will mobilize churches to

reach people through social programs. Fox also told Hispanic magazine that he expects public employees under his administration to show “a change in attitude and behavior.”

Despite the spiritual breakthroughs he has witnessed, Rivera doesn't believe what Mexico is experiencing should be called “revival.”

“What is really happening is reform,” he says. “These are changes in the structures that shape the external image that the world has of Christianity...[But] I have yet to see convincing evidence of mass conversions and of social impact such as was manifest in the Spirit's movements of yesteryear.”

One of the church's biggest challenges has been establishing a nontraditional model, Rivera says. But they are committed to giving their pastors and worship leaders the liberty to flow with the move of the Holy Spirit.

Back at church the worship team is singing, and the people are still praising God. “Who is like You, Jesus, who woos me / Who is like You, Jesus, who transforms me / The love You give is eternal and complete.”

That's the love Rivera seeks to show his community, and he believes that love will continue to change his nation.

Brenda M. Teixeira is managing editor of Vida Cristiana, the Spanish-language edition of Charisma magazine.