

Hundreds of Latin Londoners Flock to Nightclub to Dance for Jesus

Comunidad Cristiana de Londres claims 4,000 members, making it one of England's largest Spanish-speaking churches

Long after the salsa dancers have vacated The Coronet—a popular nightspot in London's Elephant and Castle district—another massive wave of Latin revelers sweeps into the art deco building. Party time starts all over again.

The feel-good factor still runs high. But this group dances to a different beat from the Saturday night crowd. They raise the roof with the sound of triumphant Christian praise and worship—as only the Hispanic community can.

Through Sunday services and cell groups, Comunidad Cristiana de Londres (CCL) claims to attract about 4,000 Spanish speakers. They come from not only London but also as far away as Leeds in the north and Brighton in the south.

Now in its 20th year, the church has a lively worship team comprised mainly of professional musicians—some have played sessions in Bolivian recording studios—as well as intercessors and speakers with deep passion and conviction.

Before anything else has been said, a number of women take to the stage and pray loud, long prayers. That might be to the accompaniment of a lone trumpet, being played sensitively in the background.

But when a line of dancers joins them, the drums kick in and the noise level hits the decorative ceiling. “Fill this place up with your presence,” cries one of the women. “Santo, Santo ... Cristo vive!”

What follows is a packed program of intense worship tinged with Latin rhythms and an epic-length sermon on holiness. The talk is turbo-charged with deep emotion by Doris Mendoza, a member of the leadership team.

She speaks boldly of “the power to bring the multitudes” and spurs her audience on with statements such as, “Every person who has had an encounter with God will never be the same!” When it’s all over, still the people ask for more.

Visitors are drawn into the energy and excitement of the three-hour-long service. At least a dozen of them respond to Mendoza’s gospel appeal. This is Billy Graham-style reaping—served amid the richness of Hispanic culture.

It was in August 1979 that CCL’s pastor Edmundo Ravelo arrived in London with his family from their homeland Peru. They had meant to stop over en route to Spain, where they intended to be missionaries.

But it wasn’t to be. “All the doors closed to us in Spain,” said Ravelo’s son Marcos, now CCL’s youth pastor. Realizing that there was a growing Spanish-speaking community in London, they decided to set up a church there instead.

As a result, CCL started at the Ravelos’ home in England’s capital. “I never imagined myself living in London and leading a church here,” the 58-year-old Edmundo Ravelo recalled,

sharing his memories on the church's Web site.

Their congregation remained a modest size for many years. Then in the 1990s, Ravelo explored different cell-church models—from pioneers such as Ralph Neighbour to Korean-style small groups.

As a result, CCL grew to 200. But the Ravelos were hungry for more. Another pastor from Latin America introduced them to the "G12" concept, which was popularized by Colombian pastor César Castellanos and encourages churches to mentor believers in groups of 12.

They saw rapid growth and dramatic changes in people's lives and among the leaders of the church. Within a year, their number exploded to 1,000. "It was everything that Dad was looking for in a cell model," said Marcos Ravelo, who is 26.

The church has been growing ever since. Now they meet at two venues in London, and run cell groups, youth events and family gatherings.

In its early days, The Coronet used to host shows by local boy Charlie Chaplin, one of the great kings of comedy. Now it hosts services for the King of kings. And while there's still plenty of fun, there is a serious intent.

"Our church [aim] is to win people—and make them into disciples," Marcos Ravelo explained.

Edmundo Ravelo's initial vision has also been realized. They have planted a church in the Spanish capital, Madrid. In

addition, some former church members have returned to South America and started churches and cell groups there.

Clive Price in London