

In the Land of the Savior

El Salvador, a nation devastated by war only a decade ago, is now a land of faith and spiritual renewal.

Machismo defines the culture of El Salvador. Most women struggle financially, and many suffer silently from domestic abuse. Women typically don't own businesses or take leadership roles.

The same is often true of Christian women, who tend to fade into the background of El Salvador's growing evangelical churches. In this male-dominated culture, women are expected to serve the church in menial ways while the men run the show.

But Cristina Hasbún, a 35-year-old pastor's wife living in the capital city of San Salvador, does not play by these rules.

Ordained as a pastor alongside her husband, Juan Carlos, Cristina sparked a quiet revolution two years ago when she rented a stadium and organized a conference that attracted thousands of Salvadoran women. Many of them stared in disbelief when Cristina donned a wireless microphone and preached several sermons during the first daylong event.

Women don't preach in El Salvador. But the Hasbúns are blazing trails for a new generation of Christians here.

"I never asked for this anointing. I never asked for this calling," Cristina told Charisma after preaching at her second national women's conference last July. "But it all came to me because I spent time with God."

Held at the huge Magico Gonzales Stadium in downtown San Salvador, the second conference attracted more than 11,000 women from all 14 provinces in the country. Cristina raised more than \$200,000 to rent buses to bring the women—many of them poor domestic laborers—to the capital.

She preached so forcefully that day that she lost her voice. But it was worth all the sacrifice, she says, to see so many women from her nation respond to the gospel and find true spiritual freedom in Christ.

“It was a miracle,” she says of the Second National Congress of Women. “It was the first time in the history of our country that people from different denominations gathered together.”

Her 36-year-old husband is also a risk-taker who isn’t afraid to break religious traditions. He says miracles are becoming more common in El Salvador as Christians leave their mark on secular society.

Evidence of an evangelical awakening is everywhere here. Just 13 years ago, before the civil war ended, only 5 percent of the country’s population was born-again. Today it is estimated that 30 percent of Salvadorans are evangelical Christians. One church in the capital has 100,000 members.

The Hasbúns, former youth pastors in the Assemblies of God, started their independent church, Iglesia Kemuel, in 1998. Their first meetings were held in a garage, and for the first four years they had only 80 members.

The congregation has grown to about 450 members today—and a majority of them are students and young professionals who are

taking their faith into the marketplace. But what is most amazing about the Kemuel church is that it finances some of the largest Christian events in the nation.

Hasbún has sponsored healing crusades with evangelists Benny Hinn and Franklin Graham and worship celebrations with recording artists Marcos Witt and Marco Barrientos.

“We have had a total of 250,000 people in these events,” says Cristina, marveling at the way God has covered the costs through their relatively small church. “The whole church is crazy with us.”

Taking a Whole Nation

Part of the Hasbúns’ vision is to influence Salvadoran culture with the gospel all the way to the top, in the halls of government. And they have seen amazing progress in that arena since 2004 when the country got a new president, Antonio Elías Saca González. He acknowledged God in his inaugural address last summer and told Charisma in July that the country’s evangelical churches were the key to his election victory.

Saca, 43, a former sports broadcaster, says his faith in God was a factor in his early opposition to communism. During El Salvador’s difficult civil war, which lasted for 12 years, the nation was ravaged by clashes between leftists and anti-communists. Yet today, El Salvador is one of the most pro-American governments in Latin America.

Saca’s election was considered a minor miracle. When the campaign began he was 17 percentage points behind his opponent, Schafik Handal, chairman of the leftist FMLN party.

Yet on election day, Saca won with 60 percent of the vote.

“I have no doubt in my mind that it was the work of God—what happened on March 21, 2004,” the president says. “It was the evangelical Christians who defined what happened.”

In past elections, Saca noted, evangelicals have been less inclined to get involved in politics. But because they felt so endangered by Handal, they mobilized. About 75 percent of the population voted in that election.

“They had never been so threatened,” Saca says of the Christian population. “[Handal] is not only a communist, like Fidel Castro, but he is an avowed atheist.”

Evangelicals were impressed by Saca’s faith, even though he is a Roman Catholic. “Christians believed my story of faith, and today they know that I did not deceive them. It was not a political facade to win votes,” Saca says.

Hasbún sees Saca’s election as another indicator that God has visited El Salvador in a special way. But the pastor also acknowledges that the Salvadoran church must overcome serious obstacles of religiosity and small-mindedness.

The pastor is especially concerned that Christian leaders here have dictatorial tendencies, and they abuse people through what Hasbún calls “the spirit of Saul.”

“Many missionaries came here and planted God’s Word,” Hasbún says, “but the leaders tended it as though they were the owners. They aren’t—the land belongs to God. We cannot

establish Christ's kingdom as the kingdom of men."

Noting that 75 percent of El Salvador's population is under the age of 35, Hasbún says the church must learn to think progressively in order to reach the younger generation.

"The future of the gospel is here, among these younger people," he says. "But our church structures don't allow them to breathe. The structures don't allow growth."

With those strong convictions, Hasbún and his wife intend to continue to break religious rules even if it means offending the evangelical establishment. They are willing to pay any cost to see a whole nation transformed.

J. Lee Grady, editor of Charisma, traveled to El Salvador last July.