

More Latin Americans Are Going Abroad as Missionaries to Europe

In London and Paris, Latin immigrants are finding hope, fellowship and opportunities for evangelism

At one of the most vibrant churches in London, the “king’s English” is a foreign language. The friendly greeting you’ll hear at the door of Christian Community Church of London won’t be a customary British “Halloo!” but a traditional Spanish “Hola!”

That’s because Christian Community Church of London is thoroughly Latin American. The charismatic congregation of 1,500 members, led by pastor Edmundo Ravelo, is composed mostly of Latin immigrants. The Ravelos themselves came to London as missionary immigrants from their native Peru in 1981.

Seeking to minister to Spanish people who had left their homelands, the Ravelos joined an immigration movement that began in the early 1970s, during which South Americans began streaming into Europe seeking political asylum or economic opportunity.

“This great migratory movement has only increased since then,” said Raúl Hernández, an Argentinean who serves as Latin America director for Christian Aid, a Charlottesville, organization that supports indigenous missions worldwide.

The Ravelos and the missions agency who sent them, AMEN

(Association of Missionaries for Evangelizing the Nations), saw this wave of immigration as a chance to reach their own people for Christ. People far from their own culture, they believe, often are more open to the gospel.

The Ravelos sought out Latin

Americans who worked at the lowest paying jobs—as dishwashers, cooks, janitors. In a costly city like London, people in such vocations often live in desperation, barely able to pay rent.

Many of them hungered for friendship and gladly received the good news from the Ravelos. Through one-on-one evangelism, the couple gathered believers and started weekly meetings in 1983.

Growth has continued steadily. The structure of the church's home-

fellowship groups allows for close relationships of mutual accountability and encouragement. Home-group members plan evangelistic outreaches to their neighbors and co-workers, and Bible studies and activities for children. While in London, Hernandez attended the Christian Community Church of London that met in a rented warehouse at the time.

"As I entered, greeters approached me with smiling faces," he said. "I basked in the atmosphere of joy and love. No wonder it is such an attractive place for Hispanics in the midst of a culture that can seem cold and indifferent."

Hernandez found that much of the congregation gathered an hour before the service for prayer, huddled in small circles of 10 to 15 people. The service filled the large facility to capacity.

Hernandez next visited Kerygma, an AMEN church in Paris that owes much to its sister church in London. Pastor Eliseo Soto Alfaro trained with the Ravelos in London before starting the work in Paris in 1983. Kerygma has had trouble building a base, but now has 160 committed members.

Both Soto in Paris and Ravelo in London live on at the same low economic level as their church members. They receive no support from Peru now and rely on the tithes of their congregations.

Meeting in a shabby former movie theater, Kerygma attracts African immigrants and French natives, as well as Latin Americans. According to the missions resource Operation World, evangelical Christians in France are “few, scattered and split up among more than 120 Protestant denominations and nearly 3,000 congregations.” Few are publicly proclaiming the good news.

Kerygma is one of the churches that is spreading its faith.

“We are taking the gospel to the streets because much of the gospel in the evangelical churches of Europe is inside the buildings,” Soto said. “The Latin Americans are the ones who are taking the gospel to the people.”

The young people, especially, are committed to evangelism, going out in teams to parks and public places. They perform Peruvian folk-style music and start up conversations with passersby attracted by their evangelistic music group. Always on hand is a pushcart full of Bibles and gospel literature for distribution. So many French-speaking people now

attend the meetings that the sermon is translated into French.

Small groups of believers, both Hispanic and French, who have heard about Kerygma are begging Soto to provide them with pastoral covering. Among them is a small French fellowship in Brittany. A couple from that group who were visiting Kerygma told Hernandez, "The pastors in our area are so liberal that they don't care about anything related to the Bible."

At the end of the meeting that Hernandez attended, some French church members approached him.

"We thank the Lord for the Latin Americans that came to reach out to their own," one said. "We attend this church because this is where we see God's love in action. This is where we see Christ's life and hear His Word preached."