

Pentecontalism Spreading in Small Italian Community in Canada

Pastors in Montreal say churches are growing and Italians in the city are embracing Pentecostal teaching

Pentecostal ministers within a small Italian community in Montreal say they are seeing cautious church growth and people set free from lives of crime and demonic oppression.

Though the 300,000-strong Italian population in Montreal has deep roots in Catholicism and religious tradition, pastors say they are slowly seeing walls fall as people embrace faith in Christ.

“God works in mysterious ways,” said David Mortelliti, pastor of 510-member Fabre Street Pentecostal Church in Montreal.

“When someone is willing to go beyond that which is business as usual or tradition, and is willing to look for the truth in the Word of God, that person is close to making a decision for Christ.”

Here, pastors say, each decision for Christ is miraculous. “When you look at it numerically, it does not convey the reality of what’s happening to anyone outside of our context,” said David DiStaulo, pastor of 700-member Emmanuel Pentecostal Christian Church. “It’s like comparing a church in Texas to one conversion in Israel. One baptism there is like baptizing 1,000 in America.”

DiStaulo said Catholicism in the Italian culture is strongly associated with superstition and even witchcraft. He said his church has seen many people set free from demonic oppression, as well as from lives of crime.

“A large percentage of our church is of Sicilian background,” DiStaulo told Charisma. “A lot of these people got saved because a family member—sometimes a parent—killed someone and the resulting consternation drew them to the Lord.”

In the 1920s Italian immigrants began moving from California to Chicago, then on to Hamilton, Ontario, and Toronto, and later to Montreal. DiStaulo said that after a few years of house meetings, the first Italian Pentecostal church—Fabre Street Pentecostal Church—was built in 1926. In 1944, the Italian Pentecostal Church of Canada (IPCC), now a national fellowship of about 20 churches, was formed.

Though few Italians are currently immigrating to Canada, there are about 300,000 in Montreal. Of these, 75,000 do not speak English, and only 2,500 are non-Catholics. “For Italian Catholics, their life revolves around their church. Every one person who is saved faces a high price to be paid,” DiStaulo said, adding that many converts have had their lives threatened.

Though most of the Italian Pentecostal churches in Montreal have bilingual services and ministries, the congregations are becoming increasingly diverse and “less Italian” with each new generation. John DellaForesta, pastor of 200-member Laval Christian Fellowship, said ethnic groups in Montreal hold on to their roots more strongly than ones in the United States. “We don’t want to ignore that reality,” he noted, “but we don’t want to be a predominantly Italian outreach. It’s a

tightrope.”

Although Fabre Street also extends its ministry to everyone, Mortelliti noted, “If Italians don’t reach Italians, it will be harder for others to reach them.”

At the Leonardo da Vinci Cultural Centre in the heart of Montreal’s Italian community, the IPCC churches hold joint evangelistic events and hand out gospel tracts. The churches also get together regularly for retreats, rallies, national conventions, pastors meetings, youth activities and special events.

Mortelliti and DellaForesta both say the most effective outreach method is friendship evangelism. “People won’t come to church just because of a bumper sticker,” said Mortelliti, whose church also has radio and TV broadcasts. “We have to allow people to explore our lives and to come up with the hard questions.”

One of the challenges the churches face, DellaForesta said, is the fact that Montreal “is the most evangelically depressed area in North America ... but inroads are being made.” One of his church’s long-term goals is to plant other churches. “I believe the Lord would be happier with 10 churches of 200 people than one church of 2,000,” he said.

DellaForesta’s personal dream is to see the area’s churches enjoy “genuine fellowship that goes beyond denominational ties,” he said. “I’d rather have 10 magnets in a bag than 100 marbles. If the bag breaks, the marbles will disperse. But the magnets will stick together.”

Ann-Margret Hovsepien in Montreal, Quebec