

# Small Nation, Big Faith

**In Guatemala—a country of only 14 million—pastor Jorge López broke with small-minded tradition when he built the largest church building in Central America**

While several hundred construction workers scurry around the site of his new 13,000-seat church building, pastor Jorge López dons his hard hat and peers over a balcony into the almost-finished sanctuary. Amid the deafening noise of jackhammers and hydraulic equipment, López surveys the scene with quiet satisfaction.

“Finally we will have something big enough for us!” López says, referring to what can now be called the largest auditorium in Central America. Besides being a showpiece of Latin American ingenuity, the edifice will be the principal meeting place for Fraternidad Cristiana de Guatemala, or Christian Fellowship of Guatemala—the church López founded in 1978 with 25 people.

Years ago the church was lovingly nicknamed “Frater” by members and friends. But now that the congregation of 20,000 is set to move into the cavernous new facility—which also features Central America’s largest parking garage—it has been dubbed “Mega Frater.”

This building is definitely “mega.” It has a 300-square-meter stage, a baptismal chapel and room for 3,000 children in 48 Sunday-school classrooms. The seven-story parking garage can hold 1,847 cars. An entire kilometer of highway had to be constructed around the building. There’s even a heliport on top of the parking garage.

When construction began in March 2001 in the San Cristobal sector of Guatemala City, business leaders in the capital were buzzing about the church's cost—\$20 million, paid in cash. One secular trade magazine, Obras, devoted an entire issue to the construction project and interviewed López as well as the architect and building managers. Obras called the church an *infraestructura monumental*—a monumental infrastructure.

Impressive indeed. But monumental faith was required for López and his congregation to arrive at this moment. The 52-year-old pastor, a quiet-natured man who speaks perfect Spanish and English, said he told God 25 years ago that he wanted to build the largest church in the nation. He drew encouragement from his friendship with David Yonggi Cho, pastor of the world's largest church—600,000-member Yoido Full Gospel Church in South Korea.

“Every city needs a church that can catch the attention of the people,” López says.

Now that Mega Frater has changed the skyline in this city of 3 million people, the church is catching more attention from high-level government leaders (at least one top official is a member), and it is poised to bring the gospel to every level of society.

But this feat wasn't accomplished overnight, López notes. It required him to make several risky decisions that have forever altered Christianity in this developing nation.

**Breaking Tradition**

Raised in a tiny house with no running water in Guatemala's capital, López says his first memory of Christianity was his parents' Baptist church—a congregation founded by Canadian missionaries. But after the church was influenced by a Pentecostal revival that swept Guatemala in 1963, his Baptist denomination soon broke with the past and became known as El Calvario, a fast-growing movement fueled by youth evangelism.

Favored because he had studied English in Miami and blessed with unusual pulpit abilities and contagious faith, López was elected by his peers in 1976 to serve as president of the Guatemalan Association of Evangelical Ministers, or AMEG. But once he was on the path to becoming a religious bureaucrat, López began to feel troubled about the direction he and the rest of the Guatemalan church were headed.

“I saw that the evangelical church in Guatemala was totally geared toward poor people,” López told *Charisma*. “I observed that very few middle-class people would even come to church. We had created a stereotype that said only the ignorant and the poor could be evangelicals.”

In the early 1970s that stereotype was quite accurate. Those in high levels of business, government and education were Roman Catholics. The majority of evangelicos—members of Protestant churches—were poor, uneducated and more focused on getting to heaven than on changing Earth. Typically legalistic in their views about clothes, hairstyles and entertainment, the evangelicals developed a religious bent against prosperity.

“We were told in those days that ministers should not own property and that if you had money you were materialistic,” López explains. “But something inside me did not buy that. So

I decided to swim against the current.”

That’s when López took his biggest leap of faith and started a new church that had only loose ties to El Calvario. When he announced that the congregation would hold Sunday services in a hotel ballroom, his ministry colleagues told him he was crazy.

“The idea back then was that if you went to a hotel to hold church meetings you were sitting in the place of sinners,” López says, laughing at the old mind-sets that still keep many churches small and invisible. López suspected that if he held a meeting in a more sophisticated environment, such as a hotel, people from the middle class would be more prone to visit.

He was right. His small congregation of 25 doubled quickly, then doubled again. And again. They built their first building with cash because López wanted to break another unwritten rule that said Guatemalan churches must struggle financially—and depend on foreign donations. He built his first church and the next expansion with money from his own members.

Until the congregation moved into the Mega Frater building in November, they met in a 3,500-seat building with inadequate parking. The church had to have three Sunday morning services and a Saturday evening service to pack everyone in. López’s goal now is to fill the Mega building several times on Sundays. If he does that, his congregation could grow to 50,000 or more in the next few years.

Many of those who fill the seats today at Mega Frater are there because López was willing to challenge another

antiquated evangelical tradition: He reached out to Roman Catholics. Typically, evangelicals in Guatemala—as in most of Latin America—view Catholics as the enemy and often preach about the errors of Catholic doctrine. López decided early in his ministry that he would not use what he calls “the attack approach” to deal with Catholics.

“I have taught people here not to attack the error but to preach the truth,” the pastor says. “It’s more effective than clashing against what is not common faith. This has given us more favor.”

For example, rather than bashing the Virgin Mary from the pulpit, López speaks about her positive qualities—without encouraging people to venerate her as the mother of God, as most Guatemalan Catholics do. Rather than condemning rosary beads or rote prayers, he teaches people how to pray from Scripture.

What’s more amazing is that López has often encouraged Catholics who attend his church to continue going to Mass if they want to. “But most of them decided to cut ties [with the Catholic Church] because they wanted the teaching from the Word of God that they receive here,” he says. That explains why former Catholics make up 90 percent of his congregation.

It may also be the reason Catholic church leaders are admitting that they are losing the race for converts in Latin America, which once was considered Catholicism’s most formidable stronghold. The same week Charisma visited Mega Frater, in July 2003, the results of a study were released showing that evangelicals now outnumber practicing Catholics in Guatemala.

## A Nation Transformed

Mega Frater is certainly not the only church in Guatemala that has broken with tradition and experienced unprecedented growth in recent years. It simply reflects a larger trend: Evangelical churches in Latin America are growing at the rate of 400 per hour, and Catholic leaders have noticed—and are worried.

Evangelicals make up more than 30 percent of the population of Guatemala. The Assemblies of God alone has planted more than 1,300 churches in a nation that is roughly the size of Tennessee.

Though Pentecostalism made its most dramatic inroads here in the 1950s, a significant wave of evangelism and charismatic revival jolted the country after a devastating earthquake hit the capital in 1976. More than 20,000 people were killed, but in response, foreign missionary organizations sent teams of relief workers, who left a spiritual deposit. Many of the nation's fastest-growing independent charismatic church networks, including Lluvias de Gracia (Showers of Grace), Casa de Dios (House of God) and El Shaddai began after that pivotal period.

Many of these churches have exerted political influence in recent years—quite an amazing feat in a country that has been controlled for centuries by Catholic politicians with foreign interests. So far, however, evangelicals have not done a good job of representing Christian values.

Guatemala's first evangelical president, Efraín Ríos Montt, who came to power in 1982 after a military coup, was a member

of Verbo Church, a charismatic congregation in Guatemala City started by American missionaries in the mid-1970s. Yet Montt's dismal human rights record ruined his reputation: His army was responsible for thousands of civilian deaths during Guatemala's 36-year civil war (see related article on page 46).

Another Pentecostal, Jorge Serrano, a member of the huge Elim Church, served as president of Guatemala from 1991 to 1993. His election forced Vatican officials to face the unavoidable fact that Guatemalan evangelicals have become a powerful voting bloc. But Serrano's presidency was marred by corruption and scandal, and foreign journalists were eager to pounce on his indiscretions.

Montt's and Serrano's track records show that even though evangelical Christians have been elected to the highest office in the land, Guatemalans have yet to prove that a born-again Christian can overcome the corruption that has tainted politics in this nation for so long.

Meanwhile, many other serious problems plague Guatemala. Drug smuggling has reached an epidemic level. Drug lords control whole sectors of the capital. Economic despair has led to a current rash of kidnappings and bandit activity, which in turn has discouraged foreign investment. And the government, reluctantly facing the ugly problem of machismo, has been asked to investigate thousands of unsolved murders of women.

"Six women in my church have been kidnapped recently for money," says pastor Harold Caballeros of 9,000-member El Shaddai Church in Guatemala City. "And the drug trafficking has increased dramatically. Recently police found \$14 million in one house where drugs were being sold."

But Caballeros is fighting back aggressively by organizing one of the most ambitious prayer campaigns in the nation's history. So far, more than 30,000 intercessors from all over the nation have signed up to participate in Jesus Is Lord of Guatemala, a movement Caballeros launched 12 years ago. Through radio broadcasts on 25 stations, he is calling on the nation's Christians to view their current situation as a national emergency.

"When you look at the Guatemalan church you see big numbers," Caballeros says. "But we have passed the point of focusing on the numbers. The point is that we Christians have not transformed society."

Though he is realistic about the problems of poverty, crime and entrenched corruption, Caballeros is full of hope for the future—partly because he is seeing such openness to evangelism in Guatemala today. His own church has planted more than 20 satellite congregations in the country (plus many more in other countries), and the conversion statistics in Guatemala are rising. This is particularly true in the western part of the country where indigenous Mayans have been flocking to new churches.

"I believe this country will be saved," Caballeros says with confidence. "In fact, I believe we can reach the entire nation by the year 2020. The Holy Spirit is telling us that we are going to see a social earthquake here. We are trusting God to intervene."

López agrees, and he expects a sweeping revival to influence the highest level of government—even though previous Christian presidents have been a disappointment.

“We evangelicals are coming to the place where the leaders of the nation will come to us for advice,” López says.

Actually, López has already had private meetings with top officials from the capital. He gave private counsel to Serrano during his administration, and in more recent years López has met with President Alfonso Portillo—who visited the Frater church in 2000 after the 1999 election.

Before the most recent elections, López met with four presidential candidates to discuss Guatemala’s future, and the pastor has been asked more than once to consider running for the presidency himself. Many believe López could do a better job of running the country than the politicians whose names appeared on the ballot in November.

López won’t rule out the possibility that he will run for president some day. But for now he is content to build a thriving community of faith that has the potential for national impact. After stretching his faith to see God build the largest church in Guatemala, he’s eager to see what will happen when his 20,000 members stretch theirs.

“Someday others will visit our churches in Guatemala and try to find out how we did it,” López says, dreaming of the future. “In the next 20 years the evangelicals here will have a platform to send missionaries to the world.”

### Healing the Scars of War

After he endured the hell of civil war, pastor Otoniel Morales witnessed the transformation of his nation.

Ask Otoniel Morales about the violence that scarred his village 20 years ago and he will look away to hide his grief. His memories of Guatemala's civil war are vivid because communist guerrillas controlled the eastern region of the country where he has pastored since 1980.

"There was so much killing when the anti-communists began fighting the communists," says Morales, 43, known as "Pastor Otto" to everyone in El Rosario, a small community near the city of Zacapa.

"There were so many killed. There are no numbers," Morales adds, wiping away tears. "There was torture on both sides."

Guatemala's 36-year civil war was the longest and bloodiest in Latin American history. It began in the 1960s when leftists challenged military dictators and the ruling elite's feudal land policies. The government responded with a "scorched earth" policy that wiped out 400 entire villages and sent 1 million peasants to refugee camps in Mexico.

When the war finally ended in 1996, an estimated 100,000 Guatemalans had died. Human rights organizations estimate that as many as 40,000 people disappeared—many of them probably killed by anti-communist civil defense patrols.

Morales' church, Iglesia Nuevo Visión (Church of New Vision), was caught in the crossfire of the conflict. Because a key leader of the communist insurgency lived in El Rosario, government-backed, anti-communist forces often targeted the peaceful community. Many innocent people from the Assemblies of God congregation died.

“Some women were dragged out of their homes and shot in front of their husbands,” Morales says. Once, a man stormed into the church with a pistol and demanded an audience.

“I wondered if I would die that day, but when the man took the microphone he told us he wanted to convert to Christ,” Morales says.

Conversion, in fact, has been a more common occurrence in El Rosario in recent years. Morales estimates that 90 percent of the village made professions of faith in Christ in the early 1980s. “El Rosario became a place where many people came to God,” he says.

Morales was an unlikely candidate to lead such a revival. Born into poverty in the town of Saspán in the Chiquimula region, Morales grew up in a mud-brick house with his alcoholic father. He was befriended by a Catholic priest and later was born again at a Methodist church.

But like many Christians in Guatemala today, he embraced Pentecostal faith in the late 1970s when the nation was experiencing a revival that had been sparked, in part, by the 1976 Guatemala City earthquake.

Since he arrived in El Rosario, Morales has memorized the names of every man, woman and child in the village, and he speaks to everyone he meets on the street and often offers to pray for them. Because of his own experience with poverty during childhood, he has a special concern for the destitute families who live on a mountainside on the edge of town.

One of these families—with 10 children—lives in a one-room mud

hut with an outdoor kitchen. Although the average Guatemalan makes only \$290 a year, this family survives on much less.

“One day we will feed lunch to these children at least once a week,” Morales says, pointing to some barefooted children who are playing with sticks in the dirt while dogs and turkeys watch.

Morales’ church already operates a grade school and will open a vocational training center next year. The pastor’s ultimate goal is to send missionaries from his village to nearby areas where, he says, witchcraft and idol worship keep people in ignorance and poverty.

Ultimately, Morales believes, God will lift this village out of its despair and heal the wounds of the past. He knows that his own life story is a reflection of what God is doing for the entire nation of Guatemala.

“We are seeing transformation and restoration,” he says. “Guatemala loves God today. One day we will go to other nations and spread the gospel.”

**By J. Lee Grady in El Rosario, Guatemala**

## **GUATEMALA**

Population: 14 million

**Language:** Spanish is the official language, but 40 percent of the people speak one of 41 other Indian languages. The Bible is available in less than half of those languages.

**Economy:** Predominantly agricultural, with 2 percent of the population owning 80 percent of the land. Nearly 80 percent of the people live below the poverty line.

**Number of people who died in Guatemala's recent civil war:** More than 100,000.

**Growth of evangelical Christians:** Only 3 percent of Guatemala's population was evangelical in 1960. In 2001 that number had grown to exceed 2.9 million.

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J. Lee Grady is the editor of Charisma. He visited Guatemala last July and plans to return this summer to lead an outreach in the Zacapa region.

If you would like to contribute to pastor Otoniel Morales' effort to feed the children of El Rosario, send tax-deductible gifts to Christian Life Missions, Attn: Guatemala Feeding Project, P.O. Box 952248, Lake Mary, FL 32795-2248.