

Brazilian Apostle Targets Houston for Next Megachurch

The apostle bellowed in Portuguese to a packed crowd in a rented Astoria, Queens, church.

“Get out, spirit of death. Now you are burnt, now you are plucked out by my God!”

A blood-curdling shriek rose from one of the front pews, but Apostle Valdemiro Santiago, founder of the Worldwide Church of God’s Power, didn’t flinch.

“Don’t be afraid, church, by these screams,” Santiago reassured the crowd. “They are the evil spirits being defeated.”

Fourteen years after he started out in the countryside outside Sao Paulo, Santiago sits at the helm of a booming Pentecostal church in Brazil, the world’s fastest-growing evangelical country. He now leads 4,000 churches, including 10 in the United States, where fiery worship and exorcisms form part of the appeal.

Like many missionary churches, the Worldwide Church plans to proselytize and attract the local Brazilian diaspora and America’s growing Hispanic population and non-immigrant whites, as well.

“These Pentecostal reverse-mission churches are going to realize, when white faces start walking in the door, that they’ve got the potential for growth but that they need to fine-tune their message,” said Nick Street, senior writer with the Center for Religion & Civic Culture at the University of Southern California who’s studied the reverse-migration trend in Nigeria, India, and Brazil.

They will also need to become more “seeker-friendly” at a time when Protestants no longer represent a majority of the population. Instead of pandering to people’s pocketbooks and egos with the same old prosperity gospel, the Worldwide Church will need its own hook.

Despite Santiago’s vast personal wealth, the movement’s relative poverty and simplicity may be its greatest asset, Street said.

“They won’t have movie nights or giant facilities with PowerPoint presentations,” he said. “The main thing they offer is this fiery worship of the Holy Spirit.”

It may be just what the spiritual doctor ordered for many of America’s newly unaffiliated and disenchanted believers.

The Worldwide Church appears on 25 million Brazilian television sets, with up to 22 hours of daily programming. But its growing network will face stiff competition from better-established Pentecostal churches catering to America’s Spanish-speaking and African-American communities, argues Baylor University religion scholar Paul Freston, who notes that most Brazilian churches’ rhetoric of inclusion rarely matches their reality.

“I find it very hard to imagine that Valdemiro is going to manage to break the mold,” Freston said.

Yet the Worldwide Church of God’s Power stands out as the only successful breakaway from the larger Universal Church of the Kingdom of God—headed by Santiago’s former mentor, Bishop Edir Macedo, who has since accused Santiago of working for the devil.

Santiago’s charisma and man-of-the-people mystique has allowed the movement to grow, said Cecilia Loreto Mariz, a researcher with the Center for the Study of Latin American Pentecostalism.

Jovial, boisterous, irreverent and ever mindful of his teenage years living on the streets as a bricklayer, Santiago likes to cast himself as a backwoodsman (with a special fondness for cowboy hats), whose church is an extension of that ruggedness. Speaking to Brazil's largest news daily, the Folha de Sao Paulo last year, he admitted that his "people do not search for sophistication, luxury, glamour, or a church fashioned of marble or gold."

They search for small miracles to ease their troubles, such as when the apostle relieved an Orlando, Fla., man's rheumatic pains and alleviated another's reliance on a walker. These healings are why people lined up an hour before the Astoria service to present themselves for an apostolic laying on of hands.

"You who were in pain," Santiago commanded, "check again." The crowd murmured in amazement.

The apostle waded among his massed followers, mopping his sweaty brow with handkerchiefs that he threw into the sea of straining hands. Three camera crews broadcast everything back to crowded churches in Brazil.

Despite reports in the Brazilian press of the apostle's \$3 million mansion, his private jet and helicopter, and his recent fine for illegally endorsing a political candidate, the crowds still come. An estimated 3 million showed up in Sao Paulo in January 2012 to commemorate Santiago's newly completed 150,000-seat temple.

The largest evangelical megachurch in the United States, by comparison, is Joel Osteen's 50,000-member Lakewood Church in Houston—situated just 12 miles from a brand-new branch of Santiago's Worldwide Church of God's Power.