

How Pentecostal Churches Are Radically Redefining This Gang-Infested Country

Among rising dictators and a burning desire to see justice restored, Central America is primed for revival.

In El Salvador, a country that once led the globe in homicide rates, God is on the move.

“This is something that started in a prison up in the northeast of the country when a couple hundred gang members sort of declared they wanted to move to a different part of the prison and conduct Christian services and cut ties from the—you know, the rest of the gang members in this prison. It has now sort of spread to the outside,” reporter Sarah Esther Maslin tells NPR. “And, you know—whereas before, you’ve always seen individual, ram-shackled churches throughout the country that will take in, you know, a gang member, let them come to the services. But what’s new is the quantity.”

El Salvador led the world in homicides per capita in 2015 and 2016, according to the Latin America Working Group. But homicides dropped from 104 per 100,000 in 2015 to 81 per 100,000 in 2016.

The report cannot determine if the drop is sustainable, as September and October 2017 both saw homicidal increases, as well as high rates of extortion, robbery and other crimes. The government attributes the recent drop in homicides to its intensified policing efforts and the “extraordinary measures” applied to jailed gang members, but Maslin says it may be something else.

Church communities, Maslin writes for *The Economist’s* 1843 magazine, offer gang members the belonging they seek and a

fresh power as they seek to activate the kingdom.

As Maslin explains:

Nowadays, more than 40 percent of El Salvador's population is Protestant. Poor communities favor Pentecostalism, which shuns pomp and hierarchy and emphasizes personal transformation, Scripture and discipline.

Rehabilitating gang members demands filling the void that drove them into gangs. Pentecostalism offers a compelling mix of boot-strapping individualism and tight-knit community. Domineering gang leaders may refashion themselves as pastors. Obedient soldiers can serve as "sheep", as the Gotera prisoners call themselves. Religion can provide comfort and forgiveness to those who've committed heinous crimes. Some 95 percent of gang members interviewed by Cruz's team said that their relationship with God was very important to them. More than half said that joining a church was the best way to leave a gang.

Some swear it is the only way. Gangs stay in power by maintaining a large standing army; defectors undermine their projection of strength. Members know sensitive information: the location of weapon stashes and clandestine graves, the gang's leadership structure and its extortion network. Gangs need to manage this risk, so leaving entails a delicate process of negotiation. Older gangsters who have proved their trustworthiness have an easier time, as do churchgoers who avoid alcohol, drugs and other activities associated with la vida loca. Religion serves as a kind of ankle tag that lets the gang keep an eye on its former members.

For gang members attempting to leave the past behind, church—Pentecostal churches, specifically—truly exemplifies redemption.

Within these congregations, men who have committed unspeakable

sins bask in the forgiveness of their Savior.

The fire is spreading, and the Holy Spirit can't be contained.

"The thing that the Pentecostal churches have in addition to access because there are so many of them—they pop up sort of in holes in the walls in these little slums. The other thing they have going for them is the by-the-bootstraps emphasis on individual transformation. So these gang members feel like they've really been marginalized from mainstream society. And, you know, for whatever reason, the Catholic Church has symbolized that for them as well," Maslin tells NPR.

"On the other hand, the Pentecostal churches tell you you don't need to know the Bible in and out. All you have to do is show up and sincerely believe and believe that you can change. And the other thing is these guys really feel that they've had strong transformations that hit them all of a sudden in the prisons for the most part. That belief of a come-to-Jesus moment has, I think, impacted a lot of them," she says.

Several Pentecostal denominations have planted churches in the country and have seen incredible growth.

Assemblies of God churches, for example, started with 100 members and 10 pastors, and now boast 1,700 organized churches, 2,200 affiliate pastors, 70 missionaries around the world, 55 Christian schools with approximately 30,000 students and one Assemblies of God university.

Assemblies of God missionaries Mike and Jessica Brown say they receive special treatment from local gang members because of their denomination status.

As Crux reports:

Mike and Jessica Brown, missionaries from the Assemblies of God who live in the Salvadoran city of Santa Rosa an hour outside San Salvador, confirmed that being authentically

religious engenders surprising admiration.

Mike said he felt a call from God roughly 18 months ago to do mission work in El Salvador, so he, Jessica and their four children sold their home and all their possessions in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, raised money to found a mission, and moved into a gang-infested neighborhood.

A former member of the American Navy, Brown has launched a sort of boot camp experience for young Salvadoran males, attempting to reach young people before they're enrolled in a gang. A former construction worker, he and his missionary team also build houses for the poor, including some gang members.

"Once they find out you're a man of God, they don't bother you," he said. "They show great respect."

That's not to say pastors in El Salvador, whether foreigners or locals, don't run real risks. A police official said that in 20 years of experience, he's not aware of a Catholic priest being targeted by the gangs, but he does know of cases of Protestant pastors who were killed for cooperating with the police.

Were a Catholic priest to do the same thing, he has no doubt the gangs would lash out.

Mike tells the Catholic news site that he sees evidence of the Holy Spirit moving all around him.

Mike told the story of a gang leader named Enrique that he befriended. At the time they met, Enrique's wife had just had a baby, and Brown said he invited him to bring the child to church so they could pray for his safety.

Mike and Jessica made a habit of visiting Enrique's home, bringing gifts for the baby and expressing a genuine interest in his welfare. Enrique began attending church, they said,

and is trying to turn his life around.

Asked whether he favored dialogue with the gangs aimed at producing a new truce, or the “iron fist” approach advocated by more conservative sectors of Salvadoran society, Brown suggested a third possibility.

“Have they tried love?” he asked. “I’m telling you, in my experience it’s the only thing that really works.”

The results are so astounding that academic writers have begun to take note.

Timothy Wadkins of Baylor University penned *The Rise of Pentecostalism in Modern El Salvador: From the Blood of the Martyrs to the Baptism of the Spirit* last year to explore the phenomenon.

“El Salvador has experienced a dramatic religious transformation over the past half-century. In what was once an almost exclusively Catholic nation, more than 35 percent of the people are now evangelical Protestants, mostly identified as charismatic or Pentecostal,” according to a book synopsis.

“While having some roots in Protestant missions from North America and Europe, the religious renaissance overtaking El Salvador is both homegrown and closely related to the nation’s social, cultural and economic upheavals. Since the end of the Salvadoran Civil War, the traditional social order—which was established in colonial times, ruled by elites, enforced by the military and supported by the church—has been overturned. Once a world of haciendas, plantations and old-merchant firms, El Salvador is now home to new factories, shopping malls, fast food restaurants and call centers. Modernization has brought new ideas too—about asserting individual rights and making choices, forming communities, voting in elections, consuming material goods, employing technology and engaging with global culture,” the synopsis continues.

It appears the kingdom is at hand in this small Latin American nation.