

Prophet to a Nation

In Venezuela, Pentecostal pastor Samuel Olson is defending biblical faith in an increasingly socialistic society.

President Hugo Chavez has been good for the evangelical church in Venezuela, say some Christians in this South American nation. According to the theory, since Chavez assumed power in 1999 the ensuing economic uncertainty, spiraling crime rates and political turmoil have driven Venezuelans to seek God as never before.

Church leaders cite an unprecedented growth spurt to support their case. Protestants are now 17 percent of the population, up from 11 percent a decade ago. That translates into more than 1.5 million new believers since Chavez came to power.

One Venezuelan church leader Samuel Olson does not subscribe to the formula that Chavez + power = church growth. Olson sees a more fundamental reason for the current revival in his country.

"I think there's been growth of the church because the gospel has been preached," he told *Charisma*. "People are trying to find a spiritual basis for their lives. Postmodernism has not answered their questions."

Olson is pastor of Las Acacias Evangelical Pentecostal Church in Caracas and president of the Evangelical Alliance of Venezuela. His opinion carries a lot of weight, both in Venezuela and overseas. For years he has served on the International Council of the World Evangelical Alliance and as a member of the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization. Fellow believers in Venezuela consider the blue-eyed missionaries' son of Scandinavian descent their elder statesman.

He has earned the position. Born in Barquisimeto in 1942 to

missionaries Yngve and Ruth Olson, Samuel Olson has spent most of his life in Venezuela. His parents planted the first Assemblies of God (AG) congregation in the country, with seven people in attendance at the inaugural service.

Life was tough in those days for born-again believers in the officially Roman Catholic nation. Olson can recall opponents pelting the meeting hall with rocks during services to disrupt worship. Believers were sometimes thrown into jail or taken to court because of their faith.

Despite the opposition, the witness of those early believers produced fruit. Today the AG has multiplied in Venezuela to become the country's largest Protestant church movement.

Yngve Olson left the AG in 1954 and planted Las Acacias as an independent congregation. A few years later, Samuel Olson left Venezuela to pursue studies at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. He went on to earn two master's degrees, one in Spanish literature and history from Middlebury College and one in divinity from Princeton.

In 1971 he abruptly abandoned a promising career as a professor in a New Jersey prep school so he could return to Venezuela to help his father.

"My real intention was to kind of fulfill my father's work and then leave and get on to other activities," Olson said. "But when my father died, the church asked me to become the pastor. I looked back to see what the Lord had done through my life and felt that I should accept."

That year, he married Nancy Gallardo, a native of Ecuador. The couple soon had two children, sons Sammy and David.

When Samuel Olson became head pastor of Las Acacias in 1979, the church numbered fewer than 300 members. Under his leadership the congregation has experienced robust growth to become the largest evangelical church in Caracas. Currently

Las Acacias welcomes 5,500 worshipers each week to its three Sunday services and baptizes 600 new Christians each year.

A staff of 24 pastors and 130 lay workers, all of them part time or volunteer, carry on a myriad of outreach ministries to the Caracas metro area. Social service programs provide medical and legal assistance to people in crisis and literacy and vocational training for those wanting to improve their marketable skills. Las Acacias provides care to AIDS sufferers and free professional counseling and family therapy.

Weekly, 4,000 believers and seekers meet to study the Bible in 550 cell groups scattered across the city. Hundreds of Las Acacias members have completed training in personal evangelism, sacred music, liturgical dance and drama. On Saturday afternoons, talented street actors present mime and theater performances and artists display exhibits, all geared to introduce busy urbanites to the gospel.

"I feel my church grows because I make no bones about being a denominational church," Olson says. "I don't even talk about being evangelical or Pentecostal. People come and receive the Word and worship.

Church-State Relations

Relations between Venezuela's Protestants and Catholics have greatly improved since the earlier days of disruptions and lawsuits.

"In the 1980s and '90s, the Committee for Relations Between Churches and Synagogues in Venezuela kept people coming together around a meal, just to be with each other and talk," Olson explained. "[This] had a great impact on the religious leadership. There was no theological position to be argued."

Arguments have occurred between the Catholic Church and the Chavez government, sometimes with violent results.

In July 2001 a pipe bomb exploded at the Church of San Francisco in Caracas and slightly injured a young woman. Later the same week police disarmed similar bombs at the Cathedral of Caracas and the Church of the Santa Capilla.

At the time, Catholic officials were embroiled in a bitter public feud with Chavez. The fight began over deep cuts in government subsidies to Catholic schools and hospitals.

When Chavez took office these grants totaled nearly \$500 million per year. He slashed them by 80 percent, on the grounds that the state and not the church should deliver these services to its citizens.

Catholic officials responded by pointing out the deficiencies in the state's social programs and questioning the soundness of Chavez's political agenda. The president reacted by accusing the bishops of plotting his overthrow. The bombings followed his accusation.

Because no group claimed responsibility for the attacks the affair remains a mystery. Relations between Chavez and the Catholic Church remain tense, but for many reasons.

"Catholicism is a worldwide geopolitical body," Olson notes. "Its interests don't always mesh with those of the Venezuelan state." As for relations between the state and Protestants, Olson says evangelicals and the Chavez government have a "formal and respectful" relationship.

"Our [Evangelical Council of Venezuela] lawyers are treated well when they meet with government officials," he says. "They are talking now of developing a protocol to know who to invite to official functions."

According to rumors, some evangelicals are seeking a closer alliance with Chavez and his "Bolivarian Revolution"—the name for the political reform movement he is promoting in Latin America. Some evangelical churches have added the word

“Bolivarian” to their official name, sparking speculation that Chavez is granting special privileges to them in return for their political support.

Olson does not believe the speculation and pointed out that “nowadays, anybody registering [under the 2001 constitution] must use ‘Bolivarian’ in the legal name or statute of any public organization in Venezuela.”

“That does not mean you necessarily support the government or its policies,” he says. “You are simply complying with the law. Yet people take a statement and [apply] their own way of interpreting things.”

Another rumor circulating is that the Chavez government is planning to expel foreign missionaries—at least those of U.S. citizenship. In a similar move a few years ago, the government passed a resolution denying missionaries access to indigenous areas.

In February 2006, Florida-based New Tribes Mission pulled its ministry personnel out of jungle bases here, ending more than 50 years of ministry by the group. Some missionaries remain in the country, but they no longer can reside in tribal areas.

The action was in part a backlash to the suggestion made on U.S. television by evangelist Pat Robertson that the American government should assassinate Chavez as a way to stop communism and Muslim extremism from infiltrating Latin America.

After that, Chavez’s chief of religious affairs ceased granting visas to U.S. missionaries. He later told Reuters news agency that although the government had been preparing the move for some time “these declarations have made us speed things up.”

The campaign to stop evangelical missionaries from reaching Venezuela’s native peoples has indeed been a long-term effort.

“In the 1960s and ’70s, secular anthropologists and members of the Opus Dei brought charges in Congress against New Tribes and other evangelical missions working with tribal peoples,” recalls Zabdiel Arenas, a Venezuelan whose parents were missionaries working with indigenous groups in the Orinoco basin at the time. “They said missionaries were enslaving the Indians, destroying their way of life, mining gold and diamonds. None of this was true, of course.”

The arguments did not succeed, but Arenas points out that the government used them again against New Tribes.

“It’s an odd situation,” Olson adds. “The government sent in the military, but they don’t know how to speak tribal languages as the missionaries did. We need to pray for these [indigenous] people to take the leadership. They have to run their own ship.”

Reaching Caracas Today

During the last two years Las Acacias has developed a strategic plan to deploy 1,500 trained leaders into 50 areas of Caracas to strengthen the believers and minister to the local communities. Through the church’s “Tent Stake” initiative based on Isaiah 54:2, Las Acacias is driving in “stakes” across the city to proclaim the gospel and bring healing to Caracas citizens who haven’t heard the gospel.

“We do this without establishing daughter churches,” Olson explains. “We want to grow the one church throughout the city, with a decentralized ministry.”

The leaders being deployed will seek to “shepherd, and to reach out to the hungry, the poor, the helpless and the lost through the transforming power of the Word and the Spirit of God,” Olson says.

A secondary goal of the initiative is to help Las Acacias

identify Olson's successor. Church elders want to identify 50 members from among the 1,500 neighborhood leaders with the gifts and calling for pastoral ministry. From them they will appoint staff ministers, each with a secular-profession background and formal theological training.

"If we have 12 associate pastors by 2012, the church will have a leadership team in place from which it will be able to discern its future senior leadership," Olson says.

The year after, in 2013, Chavez is scheduled to turn over power to the next president of Venezuela. Who his successor will be and what kind of political agenda he or she will pursue is anybody's guess. What is certain is that the pastor who steps into Olson's shoes will face an enormous challenge.

"Even though we are a Catholic nation by birth, basically we are a very secular, materialistic society," Olson says.

"Here, if you are a university graduate, you may have been trained under a Positivist philosophy—the background of Marxism in Latin America. For many decades of the 20th century, this was the basis for much of the political development.

"Changes occurred as Roman Catholic and Protestant Christians and other non-Marxist groups started to develop their own economic, social and political theories."

Chavez is a child of this particular history. He once considered becoming a priest and often reads lengthy passages from the Bible in his televised speeches. Yet he also credits the "ideology" of Jesus as being part of his inspiration for Bolivarian revolution.

"The humanity of Jesus, bereft of the divine and of His saving power, is understood as the Christian model for the transformation of society," Olson explains.

“There is no idea of a relationship with Jesus Christ; rather a new society and a new man are to be brought about by social and economic measures. This is being used to justify his political agenda, and it convinces some evangelicals.”

The answer to this confusing mix of politics and religion lies with Venezuela’s Bible-believing Christians, Olson says.

“The greatest challenge facing the evangelical church in Venezuela at the moment is to maintain its integrity. It must remain true to its own ethical and spiritual boundaries, based on the authority of Scripture, while being true to the historical Jesus as the incarnate Word,” he says.

So, has Hugo Chavez *really* been good for the evangelical church in Venezuela? Only time, and eternity, will tell.

David Miller and his wife, Barbara, have served as missionaries to native Andean peoples in Bolivia since 1981. As a journalist, he has written extensively about Christians who face persecution because of their faith.