

A Different Kind of Revolution

In Nicaragua-a nation once ravaged by Marxism-Christians are celebrating and churches are growing at an unprecedented rate.

Nicaragua experienced a civil war during the 1980s that divided politicians, families and churches. Today the largest but most sparsely populated country in Central America is experiencing a move of God that is influencing politics, igniting a holy passion among a younger generation and causing unprecedented growth of evangelical congregations.

"I believe Nicaragua is in the midst of one of the greatest and last revivals of history," says pastor Augusto Marengo, 43, of 65,000-member Apostolic Ministry Center, the largest church in Nicaragua.

Although predominantly Roman Catholic, the Latin America country-which is about the size of Iowa and borders the Caribbean Sea and the North Pacific Ocean between Costa Rica and Honduras-is seeing explosive growth among Protestant churches, especially in poor or remote areas.

For example, the Assemblies of God had 80 churches and fewer than 5,000 members in 1980, according to the U.S. State Department's International Religious Freedom Report. As of April 2004 there were 860 churches and approximately 200,000 baptized members, according to church leader Saturnino Cerato.

In poorer neighborhoods, the small evangelical churches are filled to capacity nearly every evening, while nationwide the Catholic Church is adding members but growing much less

quickly. As much as 19 percent of Nicaraguans are evangelical, and of the estimated 1 million evangelicals nationwide-out of a population of 5.3 million-at least 70 percent are Pentecostal, Cerato said.

In December, Charisma witnessed firsthand the growth and influence of Pentecostals during a visit to Managua for Fiesta de la Esperanza, or “Festival of Hope” (FH), which included the participation of more than 100 mostly Pentecostal churches.

Sponsored by Argentinean-born evangelist Alberto Mottesi, the festival was part of a three-week evangelistic campaign that included 150 crusades throughout Nicaragua. The last three days of the campaign took place in Managua’s Plaza de la Fe (“Plaza of Faith”), during which Mottesi preached and praise and worship was led by Marcos Witt, a contemporary Spanish singer-songwriter, and Rojo, a Latino Christian rock band.

Thousands thronged to the 26-acre plaza, and more than 180,000 attended the last night of the crusade. The festival attracted thousands of young people, including many volunteers for the large event.

“Ninety percent of the people here are young,” says Maricella Ramirez, 43, who with her husband traveled to Nicaragua from California as part of Mottesi’s team. “This is amazing.”

During one of his sermons, Mottesi, 63, prophesied and prayed that “the youth of Nicaragua would go to the world to preach the gospel.”

“I declare that 1,000 worship leaders like Marcos Witt would

be raised up from the young people," he told the large crowd. "I declare that at least 1,000 preachers like Luis Palau would be raised up. I declare that the world will know that Nicaragua is the territory of revival."

Marenco's daughter, Rachel, says the Holy Spirit is moving among many of the young people of Nicaragua, where the median age is 20.

"The youth are showing up at church to get delivered from drugs and gangs," Rachel, 19, told Charisma. "They do not have peace. They are turning to the Lord in desperate measures. They are tired of sin, tired of suffering and tired of living a fruitless life. God is giving them a motivation and purpose in life. The Lord is sending a revival to the youth to bring salvation to all of Nicaragua."

About 65 percent of the members of her father's church, located in Managua, the capital, are ages 12 to 35. In fact, almost all the Pentecostal churches in Nicaragua comprise mostly young people, according to Rafael Arista, 54, pastor of Jubilee Christian Church in Managua.

"The new generation is definitely carrying the torch and they're doing a great job," says Arista, local organizer of the festival. More than half his 500-member Assemblies of God (AG) congregation are young people.

Emmanuel Espinoza, who founded Rojo and ministers throughout Latin America with the band, has noticed an intense passion for God in Nicaragua's young people. "I think Nicaragua is one of the few places where the younger generation saw and lived through the civil war," Espinoza, 29, told Charisma. "It's

awesome to see their spiritual awakening. There's a great spark of knowing that something is going to happen. The young people are realizing what revival is."

Walner Blandon, who wants to be a preacher, says young Nicaraguans are getting "on fire for the Lord."

"I believe the Lord is preparing to raise up great preachers, evangelists and worship leaders with my generation," Blandon, 22, says. "This is the time of God for Nicaragua."

Mottesi says there is "a big difference spiritually" in Nicaragua since he held his first crusade there in January 1984. The country had been in the midst of a civil war since 1979 when the Marxist Sandinista guerrillas came to power.

The Sandinistas allowed Mottesi to use a small bullfighting arena for his crusade, but it was closely monitored. Two hours before the crusade, authorities told Mottesi that he had to use a stadium instead. The evangelist's small team scrambled to the new site, but the service started without a sound system and outdoor lights.

Nevertheless, about 15,000 people came the first night. The next night, dozens of heavily armed Sandinista thugs were sent to the stadium to disrupt the crusade.

"When they arrived, the people turned and prayed for them," Mottesi told Charisma. "They dropped their weapons. It was supernatural. Many of them got saved."

On the last night of the crusade, the crowds had swelled to

80,000.

"God moved sovereignly. We came to hold a crusade for 2,000 people," Mottesi recalls, adding that 36,000 Nicaraguans accepted Christ during the weeklong crusade. "The whole city was impacted by God. When I left Managua, people were praying on their knees on street corners. That crusade filled Nicaragua with great joy."

During that time the country's political climate also began to change. Nicaraguan guerrillas known as "Contras" began a war to overthrow the Sandinistas. Nicaraguan aid to leftist rebels in El Salvador caused the U.S. to sponsor the Contras through much of the 1980s. After the end of the civil war, free elections in 1990, 1996 and 2001 resulted in the Sandinistas' losing power.

"There's a lot more freedom and democracy in Nicaragua today," says Mottesi, who has held several crusades in the country. "The churches are growing and exploding like never before. The No. 1 radio station in the nation, secular or religious, is a Pentecostal radio station. This is a miracle in Latin America."

The Nicaraguan government is also more open to evangelicals. When he was in Nicaragua in December for Festival of Hope, Mottesi was invited by the National Assembly (the equivalent of the U.S. Congress) to speak during the lawmakers' session. After he was given a special recognition plaque, he preached for about 30 minutes-the first time in Latin America that legislators had heard the gospel while in session.

"This has been a milestone. The National Assembly listened to God," says pastor Marengo.

"It was not Alberto Mottesi. It was Jesus Christ who took the lordship in the National Assembly," says Mirtha Osorno, wife of Guillermo Osorno, a National Assembly member and AG minister. "There was opposition and spiritual battle. God used Alberto to break down the curses over our nation."

Two former Nicaraguan presidents invited the evangelist to their homes, and current President Enrique Bolaños met with Mottesi and local Christian leaders in his office for 30 minutes.

They spoke about the political corruption in Latin America, family values, God and faith. Accompanied by Witt, who pastors the Spanish congregation at Joel Osteen's Lakewood Church in Houston, Mottesi also prayed for Bolaños, a devout Catholic.

Mottesi believes it's a "new day" for Nicaragua. "Just a few years ago, we wouldn't even dream about meeting with government officials or the president," he observes. "It's definitely God's favor."

When Mottesi and Witt asked Bolaños what they could pray for, the 77-year-old president requested peace and tranquility for his nation and for the end of poverty.

"Thirty years ago, Ireland was the poorest country in the world," Bolaños told his visitors. "Today, Ireland is the second-richest country in the world. I believe the same thing can happen to Nicaragua."

With low per-capita income, massive unemployment and huge foreign debt, Nicaragua is the second-poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere, behind Haiti. Half the population live below the poverty line, with the average family earning

approximately \$1 a day.

With that in mind, Mottesi said he felt prompted by God to take an offering during Festival of Hope. It marked the first time he had done that for his evangelistic meetings in Nicaragua.

"Nicaragua has been in poverty," he explains. "All of the evangelists who come here come with money. The mentality is: 'You're too poor; we'll supply everything.'

"God spoke to me and said: 'You have not permitted them to sow a seed. In order to break their spirit of poverty, they must give.'"

During the festival, Mottesi asked forgiveness from those in attendance for not allowing them an opportunity to give.

"The devil has made them believe that they'll always be poor," he says. "I went against the curse of poverty in Nicaragua. I declared a new wave of prosperity."

Mottesi then took an offering, and to his surprise the total collected came to the equivalent of thousands of dollars. He called the amount "historic" and believes the sacrificial giving will help release the people from a poverty mentality.

Guillermo Osorno, who has served on the National Assembly for eight years and formed the political party Partido Camino Cristiano, or "Christian Path Party," agreed.

"I believe Nicaragua is one of the nations that has suffered the most," Osorno, 49, told Charisma. "God wants to answer the desperate cries of the people of Nicaragua over our wars, earthquakes, tidal waves, droughts, floods and extreme

poverty.”

Osorno, who ran for president in 1997 and finished third, is one of only six Christians on the 92-member assembly. Despite being in the minority, the group has influenced the nation, Osorno believes.

For example, he successfully lobbied three years ago to have the Day of the Bible-the last Sunday in September-recognized as a national holiday. His evangelical colleagues have also succeeded in defeating proposed measures to allow homosexual marriage, gay adoption and legalized abortion. In 2003 they were instrumental in convincing the assembly to pass a law that enabled churches to be tax-exempt.

“In 100 years of Christianity in Nicaragua, churches were never tax-exempt,” Osorno says. “Churches had to pay for everything or depend on politicians for favors.”

Although the Christian population in other Latin American countries is growing, Mottesi believes the influence of evangelicals in Nicaragua will increase.

“In 20 years, Nicaragua will have more Christians and churches involved in the cultural, social and political arena,” Mottesi says.

Pastor Arista echoed his point, noting that there is “a great awakening for evangelism in Nicaragua.”

“The way it’s being done is through the cell-group model,” Arista explains. His 500-member congregation has 24 such

groups. "The traditional churches that don't embrace this move of God are not growing. But the churches that do embrace it are growing. Every cell-group member brings one non-Christian to the cell. It's one-on-one evangelism."

Pastor Marengo concurs. Twenty-three years ago he started Apostolic Ministry Center with 40 people. Today the church has 78 pastors and more than 2,000 cell groups. Four years ago it planted a church in Miami with the same name, and the congregation now has about 150 members.

Marengo expects his congregation to grow to 100,000 in the next five years. Many other evangelical churches are poised for long-term growth, he adds.

"Christians in Nicaragua are taking advantage and reaching out to the visitation of the Holy Spirit," Marengo told Charisma.

Alan Killingsworth, a missionary sent to Costa Rica by a Spirit-filled Presbyterian church in Virginia, has visited Nicaragua six times in the last three years. Killingsworth has noticed a spiritual hunger among Nicaraguans that he does not see among the people of Costa Rica, located south of Nicaragua.

"I sense in my spirit more openness to the Lord here," says Killingsworth, 52, who plans to move to Nicaragua this year with his wife, Susan. "God is moving in the hearts of Nicaraguans and drawing them to Himself."

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