

Releasing Romania's Churches

Liberty in Traditional

In

*a nation known for communist oppression, intimidation and religious legalism,
the Holy Spirit is sending a fresh wind of freedom.*

Pentecost

is a national holiday in Romania, and I celebrated it last Monday with members of Bucharest Christian Center, a growing congregation in the Romanian capital.

The church was founded by my friend Ioan Ceuta, 54, a brave Christian leader

who has served as president of the Assemblies of God since 1996. Like so many

Romanian pastors who lived through the communist era, Ceuta has walked through

fire and emerged stronger in his faith.

Ministry

was not easy for Ceuta and his wife, Emilia, during the dark days of Nicolae

Ceaușescu, the Romanian dictator who

ruled with an iron fist and built one of the world's largest buildings (second

only to the Pentagon). Covert government informants strictly monitored all

pastors during Ceaușescu's era. The

construction of church buildings was forbidden, frequency of meetings was

limited, and Bibles were blacklisted as "mystical literature."

“Because of Ceuta’s influence, about 10 percent of the ministers in the Assemblies of God in Romania are women.

‘Romanian ladies are gifted with a potential [for] leadership I have seen in few places in the world,’ ” Ceuta says.

Yet

despite intense persecution from the Securitate—the dreaded secret police—both Pentecostal and Baptist churches thrived, alongside

Brethren groups and other smaller denominations. Much of their work

was underground. After Ceaușescu was assassinated by a firing squad on Dec. 25, 1989, Romanian communism fell and the church continued

to flourish. The Word of God could not be imprisoned.

“Romanians

had lost hope that we would ever be free,” Ceuta told me.

“There were prophetic

words that said change was coming, but most people did not believe this. We had

accepted slavery like the Israelites did in Egypt. So when communism fell,

people did not know what to do.”

Today,

Romania is considered a hot spot in spiritually cold Europe. Pentecostals and

Baptists have grown steadily in numbers, and they have built theological

schools and ministry training centers. Cities in western Romania such as

Oradea, Arad, Cluj and Timisoara are known as bastions of evangelical fervor,

and passionate faith has spread among the country’s marginalized Gypsy

population.

But

despite the growth, Pentecostal churches are mired in strict religious traditions that are based on faulty interpretations of Scripture. These include:

- Separation of men and women in church services
- Requiring women to wear head coverings during worship
- Forbidding women to attend church during their menstrual periods
- Banning jewelry and requiring women to wear skirts but never pants
- Forbidding the use of birth control ("In some churches, people expect a couple to have a new child once a year," Ceuta says.) Some Pentecostals also misinterpret 1 Timothy 2:15 to teach that only women who have babies will go to heaven.
- Requiring that believers wash each other's feet either before, during or after Communion (this practice has caused numerous splits among Pentecostal groups)
- Teaching that only those believers who speak in tongues will go to heaven.

"I

will always respect my spiritual fathers for their passion for Christ, and for

their sacrifice,” Ceuta says. “But I disagree with the traditions because they are rooted in a lack of education. And the traditions hurt us because we closed the door for people to come to our churches.”

Ceuta is one of several Romanian leaders who have courageously challenged these hallowed traditions—at the risk of losing jobs or credibility. Ceuta stuck his neck on the chopping block several years ago when he insisted that women be allowed to attend the Bible University of Romania, the school he planted in Bucharest.

In Oradea, pastor Teo Ciuciui left his denomination, the Pentecostal Union, because he felt he was called to reach nonchurched people who were turned off by so many religious traditions. Today he pastors Salem Church, a growing charismatic congregation that incorporates Hillsong choruses, innovative youth ministry and a cutting-edge ministry style.

Baptists are also facing huge changes. In 2006 some Baptist leaders were baptized in the Holy Spirit, and this created a quiet wave of charismatic renewal known as the Watchmen movement. It focuses on prayer, worship and healing—but traditional Baptists who are against charismatic doctrines have opposed this.

At

Ceuta's church in Bucharest, old Pentecostal traditions have been tossed out.

Women wear jewelry, worship is contemporary and only the oldest women still

keep their headscarves. Ceuta is viewed as a revolutionary leader because of

his position on women, and this is obvious in his family: His wife is the first

Romanian woman to teach in a Bible college; their oldest daughter, Alina, leads

the first Finnish-model kindergarten in Romania; and their youngest daughter,

Stefania, leads a community outreach to children.

Because

of Ceuta's influence, about 10 percent of the ministers in the Assemblies of

God in Romania are women. "Romanian ladies are gifted with a potential [for]

leadership I have seen in few places in the world," he says.

"Because they were

raised in suffering, they were born to be leaders."

This

passion in the hearts of Romanian believers, stoked in the fires of persecution

and revival, is likely to spread far beyond its borders in the days ahead.

J. Lee Grady is

contributing editor of Charisma. You

can follow him on Twitter at leegrady. His most recent book is
10

Lies Men Believe (Charisma House).