

Why the Pope Should Be Worried About Latin America

Pope Francis, leader of the world's Roman Catholics, arrives today in Bolivia—the second country on his three-nation tour. He will meet with President Evo Morales, visit bishops and nuns, and wave at countless adoring fans on the streets of La Paz. His visit will be upbeat, but this revered “pope of the poor” has a big concern: Millions of Latin Americans are leaving the Catholic Church to join Pentecostal groups.

Even though this popular pope is from Argentina and speaks Spanish, he is losing his grip on the region.

The Pew Research Center reported last year that 40 percent of the world's Catholics—more than 425 million—live in Latin America. Yet nearly 1 in 5 Latin Americans now describe themselves as Protestants. The Catholic population of Brazil—the largest Catholic nation in the world—has slipped by more than 20 percent in the past 13 years, according to the *Washington Times*. Today, about 40 million Brazilians are evangelicals, and this number is expected to grow to 109 million by 2020.

Guatemala was 90 percent Catholic in the mid-1950s. Thanks to a Pentecostal revival that hit the country after the 1976 Guatemala City earthquake, and subsequent waves of church growth, 1 in 3 Guatemalans are now evangelical Christians. Similar growth is occurring in Mexico, Peru, Colombia and Paraguay, where Pope Francis will end his tour next week.

I have seen this Pentecostal revival up close during the past two weeks, when I ministered in Guayaquil, Ecuador and five cities in Bolivia. The statistics don't lie. There is a spiritual hunger brewing in Latin America that outshines what I have seen anywhere on the planet.

In Ecuador I preached at Centro Cristiano de Guayaquil, an Assemblies of God congregation that has grown to 9,000 members in 30 years. It has been pastored all those years by an American couple, Jerry and Janice Smith, who built a 3,300-seat auditorium and a K-12 school that now has 4,600 students. The church ministers to more than 1,600 children every Sunday.

When I spoke at the Guayaquil church I witnessed a spiritual hunger that is rare in the United States. People jammed into the sanctuary for an 8 a.m. service, and some returned for the 10 a.m. and noon service just because they wanted to hear more of God's Word. In each meeting people came to the altar to give their lives to Christ for the first time.

I arrived in Bolivia on July 1 to work with Ekklesia Church, a movement that began in the early 1970s after a charismatic revival erupted in the capital city of La Paz. Today the church has planted congregations in dozens of cities all over the mountainous country. The pastor, Alberto Salcedo, and his wife, Silvia—who hosts the popular *Vaso Frágil* program on the Enlace Network—are training an army of Christians through cell groups, intense worship and leadership classes.

When I visited the Ekklesia church in the mining city of Potosí (which has an elevation of 13,420 feet), hundreds of people packed into a conference center near the center of town. More than 50 people came to the altar for salvation, including a man who had alcohol on his breath. When I prayed for him, he told me that it was the first time he had ever visited a church with his wife and young daughter. He prayed to receive Christ and said he wants to end his alcohol addiction.

I saw similar responses in meetings in other Bolivian cities such as Sucre, Cochabamba and Oruro. Many of the people who have joined these churches are former Catholics who now prefer a lively Pentecostal worship style and more contemporary sermons. They have traded rote tradition for relevant teaching

on family, sexual purity and the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Pentecostals in Latin America are also challenging long-held cultural traditions, including superstitious idolatry, witchcraft and male superiority. In a meeting I did in La Paz earlier this week, a man who has been regularly beating his wife came to the altar in tears to repent of his abuse.

Another thing I noticed on this trip was the striking number of youth and young adults in the meetings. In Ecuador, more than 1,700 came for a Saturday night youth service, and some literally ran to the altar when I challenged them to go deeper with God. In Bolivia, teenagers often came to the front of the church during worship so they could dance freely—and many responded when I challenged them to pursue the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

These young Latin American believers represent a new generation that is passionate for God. They want so much more than tradition. If Pentecostal churches continue to grow at the pace we are seeing today, it's likely we will witness a total spiritual transformation of the region that Pope Francis calls home.

J. Lee Grady is the former editor of *Charisma* and the director of *The Mordecai Project*. You can follow him on Twitter @leegrady. Check out his ministry at [www.leegrady.com](#). He flew home from Bolivia the day Pope Francis arrived there.