Pentecostal power: Conversions in El Salvador

by Timothy Wadkins in the November 14, 2006 issue

The tomb of Archbishop Oscar Romero is all but hidden in the basement of the national cathedral in San Salvador. Though the memorial was recently beautified to mark the 25th anniversary of the 1980 assassination, no signs point to its location. Of course, San Salvador is not known for being tourist friendly; it has few signs pointing to anything. But as my students and I stood before the tomb, we could not help wondering if Romero, whom many Christians across the world regard as a saint, is an embarrassment to the government and perhaps to the church.

We also wondered why there were no other pilgrims paying homage. Save for a janitor who was mopping the floor, we were alone in the basement. If Romero was indeed murdered for speaking on behalf of El Salvador's poor, where were they? We were about to find out.

We began to hear sounds of music and shouting coming from outside the cathedral, and when we reached the street we were thrust into a massive sea of bodies—later estimated at over 50,000. The crowd was heading to Parque Libertad for a protest rally on behalf of the television evangelist and pastor Edgar López Bertrand.

Better known as Brother Toby, Bertrand is the founder and pastor of an evangelical empire known as Tabernáculo Biblico Bautista "Amigos de Israel Central." Bertrand had been arrested in Houston for passport fraud. He had tried to use a counterfeit birth certificate as proof that 20-year-old Pamela López was his adopted daughter. When confronted, he finally admitted that her original adoption was illegal. Despite a hefty fine, a guilty plea and three-months in jail, Bertrand's flock never questioned his innocence. By the day of the rally his case had become a cause célèbre and the whole city was inundated with "Free Toby" bumper stickers, yellow ribbons, billboard ads and television spots.

As we soon discovered, this was more than a protest rally. It was a carefully orchestrated expression of evangelical and Pentecostal strength. It was symbolic

that such a crowd would assemble in this park, between the towering shade of the Romanesque cathedral and the liberationist and architecturally modern Ecclesia de Rosario. Politicians, police officers and pastors from numerous fundamentalist and Pentecostal churches were present. It was rumored that President Tony Saca would arrive (he didn't) since he is friendly to evangelicals and had chosen Bertrand to pray at his inauguration.

One by one each speaker declared support for Bertrand. Most of their rhetoric, however, was directed toward spiritual revival in El Salvador. The speakers conjured up a picture of the kingdom of God sweeping over El Salvador miracle by miracle, conversion by conversion, wiping out all that had come before.

What we experienced in the square was not what we expected when we planned our trip to El Salvador. Guided by Christians for Peace in El Salvador (CRISPAZ), my students and I had listened to liberation theologians and parish priests interpret the struggles of the poor in light of their reading of the Gospels. We met with numerous social scientists who helped us understand poverty in El Salvador. We broke bread with members of several base communities, many of whom had been exiles during the guerrilla war of the 1980s, and with people whose relatives had been killed by government death squads or American bombs. We had an extended audience with Archbishop Sáenz Lacalle, a member of Opus Dei, and left the visit disturbed by the gulf between the conservative Catholic hierarchy and the dwindling number of priests and nuns who practice the preferential option for the poor.

But in the square we discovered that our conception of Christianity in El Salvador was woefully incomplete without an understanding of the evangelical and Pentecostal revival.

Brother Toby's Tabernacle boasts a membership of 80,000, and it has spawned over 40 smaller churches. Through its massive television ministry Toby's casual and North American brand of fundamentalist dispensationalism has been spread all over Central America.

The Tabernacle is only one of a handful of gigantic evangelical churches in the greater San Salvador area that have sprung up over the past two decades. Misión Elim Internacional in Ilabasco, just outside San Salvador, is the epicenter of the movement. Unlike Tabernáculo Biblico Bautista, Elim is a church of the very poor. It has an active membership of over 150,000 and is widely considered the second

largest church in the world.

Elim has an open-air auditorium that seats 8,000, and it offers six consecutive services on Sunday, numerous mid-week services and a weekly all-night prayer vigil regularly attended by over 3,000. But it provides far more than a massive Sunday worship experience. It is first and foremost a highly effective social network.

Modeled explicitly after the Yoido Full Gospel Church in South Korea, the Elim community is tightly organized according to districts, sectors, zones and cells that meet every Saturday for Bible study and prayer. Each cell and sector has an appointed leader, and each district has a pastor. The church has some 80 full-time pastors, all trained within the church community.

Elim is Pentecostal: the gifts of the spirit are emphasized, and Sunday celebrations are animated with raised hands and open weeping. The corrugated tin canopy that covers the auditorium vibrates and magnifies the shrieks, prophetic messages and tongues speech. Healings are regular occurrences. Though emotional, these celebrations are also reverential. Ushers watch over everything. Talking is forbidden. I was reprimanded for keeping my eyes open during prayer. Women are active as cell group leaders and are regularly heard in prayer, though none serve as teachers or preachers. Women also sit separately from men, and their heads are usually covered with bright white veils.

As enormous as Tabernáculo Biblico Bautista and Misión Elim are, even greater numbers of Salvadorans belong to one of the thousands of tiny evangelical congregations. Don Triplett, an Assemblies of God missionary and founder of the Castillo Del Rey evangelistic program, reported that in his denomination alone there are some 15,000 congregations throughout the country, with a cumulative membership of about 300,000. Frequently, as we walked through poor barrios, sometimes on our way to a base community meeting or mass, we could hear the pulsating music and shouts from one or more of these upstart, often half-finished concrete churches. It did not take us long to realize that the Pentecostals constituted the most visible Christian presence.

Miguel Cruz, former director of the University of Central America’s Public Opinion Institute (IUDOP), noted that over the past decade Roman Catholic allegiance in El Salvador has dropped by one-third to an all-time low of 55 percent of the nation. The population of evangelicals, some three-quarters of whom belong to Pentecostal

churches, has swelled to over 30 percent.

Part of the problem for Catholicism is the dearth of pastors. With an average of one priest—often foreign-born and foreign-educated—for every 10,000 parishioners, the church simply cannot compete in the religious marketplace. Except in the case of some strong urban parishes and the few thriving Christian base communities, most Catholics do not regularly attend mass. This means that on any given Sunday, and on many evenings of the week, more Salvadorans are experiencing the gospel in the context of a Pentecostal meeting than through the sacraments of the Catholic Church.

Many explanations of Pentecostal growth follow a familiar social-science argument: revival is an expression of the alienation stemming from rapid modernization and the breakup of traditional ways of life. While these analyses are compelling, they often focus on abstract social forces and overlook the power of personal conversion, the phenomenon that lies at the heart of this revival.

We interviewed numerous converts and found their stories remarkably similar. Prior to “getting saved” they suffered from the effects of depression, gang violence, drugs, marital strife, drinking or promiscuity. Their lives began to change only when they took responsibility for their predicaments, acknowledged the saving work of Christ on the cross, and received the healing power of the Holy Spirit.

Their testimonies were laced with talk about heaven and the future cessation of suffering, but they also spoke fervently about new life in the present. Conversion did not eliminate all their problems, but it did change their outlook and behavior. They no longer ran with gangs. They stopped going to bars and brothels. They began to invest themselves in family life and gainful employment. They were optimistic about the future. They also joined communities of like-minded believers, where, lashed together like logs in a godly ark, they now felt able to navigate the perilous seas of poverty and corruption and the currents of temptation that potentially could pull them under.

The converts we interviewed are not only awash in the emotional waters of their conversion experience. They have also broken rank with the old order and have been baptized into new eschatological enclaves, where the future kingdom of heaven is now beginning on earth—with healings, charismatic signs and wonders and the safety net of mutual support. It is clear that the support they find in these

godly communities is more than just personal nurture. Conversion produces important social capital.

Mario Vega, the senior pastor at Elim, told me that “we take care of each other,” and he meant this in both spiritual and financial terms. “If someone has a need [that cannot be taken care of] within the cell, [it] gets taken to the sector, then to the zone, and finally to a full-time deacon who oversees a large budget for taking care of the needy.” If this church really functions as described, it represents an amazingly large alternative society of the converted functioning in the midst of an urban jungle where the poor are otherwise isolated from economic assistance.

Scholars such as John Burdick, who has investigated evangelicals in Brazil, have shown that as individual evangelical converts develop moral responsibility, family life becomes more stable and the family unit becomes more productive. Moreover, as converts develop social and leadership skills within their churches, they become trustworthy and responsible workers who enter the secular world invested in healing social ills. Paradoxically, withdrawal leads to reentry on fresh terms. So for poor individuals, conversion has the potential to lead to social uplift and the remaking of social structures from the bottom up.

The question for evangelicals and Pentecostals is whether they will seize the political implications of conversion. So far the indications are few. The cult of personality, as well as the prosperity gospel so prominent in U.S. evangelical and Pentecostal pulpits, is also prominent in El Salvador. Many of the Pentecostals we met clearly prefer the world of signs and wonders over serious political engagement. And this is taking place at a time when almost 60 percent of Salvadorans earn less than $2 a day, and when every day over 800 Salvadorans flee to the U.S.

Nevertheless, there are signs of hope that this is changing. We encountered evangelical churches and organizations that are heavily involved in relief work and educational initiatives. Although some of this is evangelism with props, some groups are moving in more political directions. “It is not enough just to save souls or give aid to the poor,” Vega told me. “We must speak out against and attempt to change those conditions that cause poverty.” A few theologians, such as Juan Sepúlveda and Douglas Peterson, have published serious rationales for such evangelical and Pentecostal engagement that build upon the conversionist paradigm.

What intrigues me in these instances of evangelical social praxis is the positive, if qualified, attention given to some of the more radical things that liberation

theologians have been saying for almost four decades. Could the two sides of this traditional theological divide find commonalities in their prophetic concern to apply the gospel to El Salvador’s crushing social reality? In terms that Pentecostals might use, we must wait for the movement of the Spirit.