Mission in Mexico: An evangelical surge

by Lynda Kristen Barrow in the February 28, 2001 issue

The woman sitting next to me on a five-hour bus ride from Puebla to Oaxaca, Mexico, opened her Bible to the “Segunda Epístola de San Pedro Apóstol”—2 Peter. The “1” of the first chapter was circled and various verses were underlined. This was a well-used Bible. I asked, “¿Es cristiana?” She nodded and immediately asked if I was. Yes, I told her. It was like passing the secret handshake.

Her name was Grata, and we soon determined that she attends the same church in Oaxaca as the family I was going to visit, that she knew my friend Noemí, and that I knew her brother, a gifted leader of the church’s prison ministry team and occasional lay preacher.

Grata asked how many years I had been a Christian. I thought a moment and replied, “Many.” Her answer was much more precise, more in keeping with the norms of Mexican Protestantism: nine years. Grata and her church are part of the evangelical Protestant movement that is sweeping across Mexico and much of Latin America.

Congregants as well as pastors of other local churches have variously identified Grata’s church as “Pentecostal,” “neo-Pentecostal” or “charismatic.” Any of these names makes sense in terms of the church’s emphasis on the “fire” of God’s presence and baptism in the Holy Spirit, a fire that is burning away the dead underbrush of cultural Catholicism; on the outward expression of this personal experience, especially glossolalia; and on the inner work of sanctification, which preachers describe as the process of being conformed to Christ or Christ being formed within us.

But the church’s pastor emphasizes the importance of being Christian and downplays the importance of being Pentecostal, neo-Pentecostal, Protestant or a member of any denomination. “Our emphasis [is] neither Pentecostal nor charismatic, but simply Christian,” he told me; this church is a “Christian church.”

He refers to his congregants as “Christians without surname” and distinguishes between “Christians” and the “religious.”

Like other Mexican Protestants, this pastor equates “religion” with weekly rites and empty formalities—which, in turn, are associated with Catholicism—as opposed to “faith,” a way of life which centers on belief in Jesus Christ. He also refers to himself not as a “Protestant” but as a “Christian” (or an “evangelical”), an umbrella term that, according to Mexican Protestants, covers followers of Christ ranging from Pentecostals to Presbyterians to various nondenominational gatherings but excludes Catholics, Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses.

This “Christian church” has more than 1,500 members, making it the largest evangelical church in Oaxaca—and it continues to grow apace. It hosts a monthly evangelistic event which regularly attracts 400 to 500 people and claims new converts. A couple of times a year the pastor baptizes dozens of adult believers in a river. The congregation has outgrown its building and often rearranges its Sunday meeting schedule and location to accommodate the many worshipers. Recently the church enclosed part of its courtyard, enabling the overflow crowd to participate in the service through closed-circuit television. Mission groups travel outside the city to plant and nurture new faith communities. To date, according to the pastor, it has planted about 60 missions.

In the past half century, the Protestant presence in Oaxaca has proliferated from a few isolated outposts to an impressive number of house churches, church buildings and Bible institutes. Today the city has some 200 churches and an equal number of pastors, three dozen of whom belong to an association of Oaxacan pastors. Pastor Victor, the leader of this citywide organization, said that it is composed of Baptists, Methodists, Nazarenes and Presbyterians, but also the full gamut of Pentecostal groups.

According to Pastor Victor, “Oaxaca is one of those states with very strong Catholic fanaticism. At the city level, Catholicism has dominated. But in recent years the evangelical church has advanced in the establishment of groups and also in the growth of members. I believe it’s a very special time for the evangelical church with regard to its development and with regard to the founding of churches in the city, which is the goal: to have at least one or two churches in all of the neighborhoods.” The majority of these churches begin in homes, he explained. In striking contrast to the large and very visible Catholic churches, house churches and unmarked church

buildings mask to the casual observer the true extent of the Protestant presence in Oaxaca. Protestant numbers are significant enough to raise Catholic fears and Protestant hopes.

According to the 1990 census, 3.3 million Mexicans (4.7 percent of the population) identify themselves as Protestants; in states such as Oaxaca and Morelos, however, over 7 percent identify themselves as such. Some Protestant and Catholic leaders claim that the government's statistics are off and that as many as one-third of their compatriots are now "Christians," suggesting that Protestant percentages rival those in neighboring Guatemala. Regardless of the exact numbers, the Protestant rate of growth in this once-solidly Catholic country is striking. Government figures indicate that between 1970 and 1990 the number of Mexican Protestants grew by more than 280 percent. Although the 2000 census has not yet been published, all indications are that the Protestant presence continues to increase in numbers and importance.

This tremendous growth comes with conflict. The day after I met Grata, I attended a service at her church, much of which was devoted to commemorating the ministry of a pastor from the nearby pueblo of Palo Grande. Like many Protestants in the Mexican countryside, this pastor has suffered persecution. When his life and ranch were seriously threatened, he responded by placing a gun and a Bible side by side, saying he chose the latter.

Stories of religious conflict of various sorts are common, especially in rural areas where Protestants are viewed as divisive forces that threaten to unravel the 500-year-old weave of Catholic and indigenous traditions. In Chiapas, where Protestants make up at least one-sixth of the population, tens of thousands have been driven from their pueblos. Noemí's grandfather, who had converted to Protestantism while living in the U.S., returned to his home in the mountains of Oaxaca state, where he converted his family and much of his pueblo, then preached in surrounding pueblos. He was threatened because of the profound changes he sparked in these Zapotec-speaking communities. (The Wycliffe Bible Translators/Summer Institute of Linguistics has since translated the New Testament into the dialect spoken there.) Protestants in urban areas are more likely to face family conflict or social isolation rather than bodily harm for practicing "not-Catholic" Christianity.

Urban Catholics express more puzzlement than overt hostility regarding what their church leaders call the invasion of the "sects." And, like their leaders, they tend to lump all non-Catholic Christians together, expressing little understanding of the

distinctions between, say, members of the Church of Christ and the Jehovah's Witnesses who knock on their doors. The latter have prompted some Mexicans to post signs that say, "This home is Catholic—we don't accept propaganda." A Protestant in the city of Cuernavaca told me that the (Catholic) men with whom he plays soccer respect him but keep their distance. Such distance is likely to be due to a combination of factors, including Protestant proselytizing and censure of certain Catholic beliefs and practices.

The practices of Mexican folk Catholicism center on saints and manifestations of the Virgin Mary. Churches bearing the names given to these manifestations—Carmen, Guadalupe, Soledad—feature large images of the Virgin. Through fiestas each locale celebrates its patron saint's day, with lively bands, dancing, drinking, fireworks and, often, a carnival-like atmosphere. Protestants censure such activities and have on occasion been arrested for failing to support them, since their refusal to buy candles and liquor or to otherwise join in the festivities is considered divisive and harmful to local economic interests.

Despite their differences, members of Protestant churches generally accept one another as "hermanos" (brothers and sisters), "cristianos" (Christians), "evangélicos" (evangelicals) or "creyentes" (believers). This identity may best be understood as "not-Catholic." For Protestants, "Christian" means "evangelical" and points to three interrelated characteristics, all of which serve to define Mexican Protestantism over against Catholicism. First, for them faith is a conscious and personal decision. Becoming a Protestant (or "Christian") requires a second birth, a rupture in one's worldly identity. Like Grata, most Protestants can recall precisely when this decision was made.

Second, Protestants act on the belief that they are called to share the "good news" with Catholic family, friends and co-workers. This evangelistic imperative may create considerable tension with those on the receiving end of personal testimony, books, cassettes and invitations to evangelistic events. Third, Protestants take the Bible as the supreme authority in matters of faith and practice. The fastest growth is occurring in noncreedal congregations with little or no religious hierarchy—that is, among Pentecostals.

Missing in Protestant churches are all images and symbols. Though some prominently display Mexican flags or verses of scripture, none has a cross, let alone a crucifix, and few Mexican Protestants wear crosses. There are no candles, bells,

incense or liturgical colors. Pastors do not wear religious vestments. Services have very low or no liturgy even for communion, which is served infrequently.

In a sense, Protestants are turning the historical tables on Catholics. Much as Hernán Cortés sought to convert the indigenous people to the Christian faith, Mexican Protestants seek to convert Catholics to their vision of true Christianity. The phenomenal success of Protestants' efforts, in fact, has been likened to a second spiritual conquest. Other observers refer to the surge of evangelical Protestantism as Latin America's Reformation.

The depth of this reform represents a challenge, not just to the prevailing faith but to the prevailing culture. In Mexico, these Protestant churches run counter to the still-pervasive Catholic culture and thus represent a break in the link between religion and culture. Their refusal to participate in religio-cultural festivals separates them from family members who do. Men do not take machismo's exaggerated masculinity as their model for behavior, which isolates them from friends who do. Finally, Protestants break with two of Mexico's primary national and cultural symbols, the Virgin of Guadalupe (the patron saint or "mother" of Mexico), who is said to have appeared to a Mexican peasant in the 16th century, and the pre-Hispanic plumed serpent-god, Quetzalcóatl.

Protestant-Catholic antagonisms in Mexico are disturbing on at least two levels. They represent an obstacle in Mexico's slow and fitful progress toward religious (and political) tolerance. And they reflect an exclusive brand of Protestantism. I was able to gain an immediate "in" with Grata because I had learned to give the "right" answers in Bible studies. I knew that telling her I was an elder in my church would probably hurt my chances of acceptance, since she and her fellow believers do not ordain women. I also knew that they would consider my home church as too "religious." Even after we had spent months worshiping, praying and studying together, Mexican Protestants would ask me, as I asked Grata, "¿Es cristiana?" I had to constantly reassess what it means to be a Christian.