

Ecuador's evangelicals seeking more growth in second century

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

To ask an Ecuadorian evangelical why, after 100 years of evangelical presence, there aren't more evangelicals in Ecuador is akin to sticking a pin into an over-stretched balloon. The answers come rushing out like so much pent-up air.

Last year this South American country's evangelical church celebrated its centennial to mark the entrance of Gospel Missionary Union missionaries in 1896. Yet, a century later, official statistics show a minimum number of believers.

The 1993 edition of *Operation World* reports that among the country's 12.3 million people, only 3.5 percent can be called "evangelical." Local newspapers often report the figure at around five percent.

"Those statistic are low, in my opinion," said Chuck Howard, a missionary with international radio broadcaster HCJB who grew up as a "missionary kid" in Ecuador.

Jose "Chema" Reinoso, a former pastor, pegs the number of evangelicals at around eight to ten percent. Ecuadorian missionary Jorge Zambrano is quick to point out that among some Quichua-speaking indigenous communities, the number reaches as high as 45 to 50 percent.

Statistical differences aside, evangelical leaders agree that inroads in the staunchly Roman Catholic bastion have been slow in spite of 1,116 missionaries in the country, according to *Operation World*.

"There aren't many evangelicals here because of the strength of the Catholic Church and family social pressure," said Irene Arteaga, a member of the large Iñaquito Evangelical Church in Quito. "If a person becomes an evangelical, he or she is soon cut off by other members of the family."

Howard said that estimated numbers of believers, even if accurate, are "not totally out of line with what might be expected in Ecuador. Evangelical missions have been working openly in Ecuador for only 100 years," he said. "That is not a long time considering the obstacles of culture and Roman Catholic domination....Fanaticism in this country has been highly valued, and even today there are areas where the local Catholic priest will lead a band of the faithful against the local evangelical believers. Homes are still being burned in some areas and crops destroyed."

Reinoso, who works for HCJB and is the "Spanish voice" for broadcasting minister Charles Stanley and formerly was the pastor of the Iñaquito church, places part of the blame on the local churches, which, he said, have lost some of their evangelistic fervor.

In addition, Reinoso said, the churches "have concentrated their evangelical attention among the lower and middle class and have ignored the other social strata of the country.

Reinoso, a native of the Dominican Republic who is married to an Ecuadorian, said the churches have also concentrated their attention in the largest cities of the country, ignoring the rural areas.

"There are too many missionaries in Ecuador," said Americo Saavedra, a Peruvian pastor working with an Ecuadorian-based Christian education program. "In Peru, when we had many missionaries, the church did not grow. But when they left, the church up and down the rivers took responsibility for its own program and outreach and the church began to increase."

Reinoso and Zambrano both emphasized the paternalistic nature of missionary work in the country. "Most foreign missions working in Ecuador have maintained an administrative and financial paternalism," Zambrano said.

Reinoso agreed, saying that many evangelistic programs were transplanted to Ecuador without contextualization.

The presence of so many missionaries in the country, particularly from the United States, "communicated to Ecuadorians that (the evangelical churches) are a 'gringo' religion and a point of political penetration" into Latin American society, Reinoso charged.

Church leaders do not discount the strength of the Catholic Church in Ecuadorian society, however.

"The Catholic church has continued its efforts to promote Catholicism and to maintain the official status quo, especially in relationship to whatever government is in power," Zambrano pointed out. Reinoso said that the Catholic Church has maintained an "aggressive and antagonistic" presence within Ecuador.

Tensions continue to exist between Catholic and Protestant groups, especially in light of a controversial new law that mandates up to four hours of required religious teaching in public schools. This legislation was introduced by the Roman Catholic Church and fought bitterly by Protestant bodies, teacher's unions and other groups. Evangelicals charged that the law was a move by the Catholic Church to solidify its eroding political power within the country.

In an unprecedented move, however, Roman Catholic and three Protestant bodies joined for a weeklong observance of a "Week of Prayer for Christian Unity" in late January.

Over all, evangelical church leaders remain positive in the face of limited success over the past 100 years.

Zambrano points out the largely ignored success of the evangelical church among indigenous groups within the country. Making up nearly 45 percent of Ecuador's population, many of these groups have built strong churches and developed evangelistic programs of their own.

Reinoso said that many evangelical churches began to take responsibility for evangelism and outreach during the 1980s. Many of them with foreign ties have become self-supporting and self-directing and are developing programs relevant to the Ecuadorian situation.

The Ecuadorian Evangelical Confraternity, which brings together the majority of Ecuador's Protestant churches, last year launched an outreach called "100 towns, 100 churches" to carry the gospel to previously untouched cities and communities by the year 2000. In addition, new radio and television stations have been developed that, Reinoso said, will break down barriers and open new doors throughout the country. In addition to a string of HCJB-related FM stations around the country, numerous churches have begun their own stations in communities where Christian stations did not exist.

Reinoso pointed to a new desire among the country's churches to bring together pastors, missions, missionaries and lay leaders to define practical strategies for evangelism within Ecuador. "I think they want to do this from their own perspective, with their own resources, and they want to feel free to look for help where they consider it appropriate," he said.

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