

Fire on the Paramo; Indigenous church grows in Ecuador

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Quito, Ecuador--Across Ecuador's vast mountain ranges the broad expanses of grassy tundra roll over ridges and dip deep into valleys. Far above the tree line, in the region known as the Paramo, where bitter winds blow and snow occasionally covers the land, even on the equator, communities of indigenous people dot the landscape. Isolated for generations by the impenetrable nature of the terrain, these groups were separated from the introduction of evangelical Christianity to the region's coastal cities and to towns which grew up in the broad valleys between the two ranges of mountains which mark the sierra.

While the indigenous residents of the sierra were difficult to reach, those in the Amazon region, known as the Oriente, were just about impossible to evangelize. There, the difficulties were those of the jungle--insects, disease, mud and wide flowing rivers and the ability of the inhabitants to hide themselves so well in the forest that a missionary team could walk right past an entire village and never see it.

When missionaries finally did penetrate these isolated villages and tribal groups they found the hearts of the people almost as difficult or impossible to reach. The story of the Quichua-speaking indigenous people in the town of Colta in Chimborazo province, south of Quito, is one of decades of frustration followed by rapid growth and a rich harvest.

The first evangelical missionaries, Julia Anderson and Ella Ozman of the Gospel Missionary Union moved into the Chimborazo province in 1904. Ozman died several years later and Anderson retired in 1953. But, it wasn't until after the publication of the Bible in the Quichua language in 1954 that the first believers stepped forward and were baptized. More than fifty years of work were needed before a true believer was identified.

Yet the growth of the Colta church since 1954 has been nothing short of remarkable. By 1958 the first evangelical church in the area had been built. In 1961 a Christian radio station took to the air in Colta. In 1971 three Quichua speaking pastors were ordained. By 1988, the estimate of the number of baptized Christians was between 30,000 and 50,000 believers. And in 1991 there were 335 churches numbering 78,500 believers and a constituency of over 100,000.

Dr. Jake Klassen who lived among the indigenous people of the northern province of Imbabura attributed the sudden influence of the evangelical church in Chimborazo to the publication of the Bible in the Quichua language and the indiginization of music.

Klassen and other missionaries have also noted that, when the indigenous churches became self-supporting and self-directing, membership began to grow at a rapid pace. Other factors included a land reform program in Ecuador which boosted the self-image and independence of the indigenous population and the popularity of Bible conferences and campaigns which built on the indigenous tradition of community fiestas.

Political and social factors played a role as well. "There is racism and discrimination against the indigenous people, especially in the 'campo,' (rural areas)," says Pastor Jose Naula, a native of Chimborazo province and director of radio station HCJB's Quichua language department.

"Government money has been poured into the cities and into towns where metizos (people of mixed race) and European descendants live, but not into the indigenous

communities of the mountainous provinces," he said. In response, Naula says that the indigenous people have been more likely to be independent and not follow the Roman Catholic pattern of the rest of the country.

"In addition, the Roman Catholic church never developed a strong influence among the people of Chimborazo in the same way they did in Imbabura and among other indigenous groups which count fewer evangelical Protestants and a stronger Catholic presence."

Naula points to the strong evangelical infrastructure among the Chimborazo indigenous communities including hospitals, radio stations, clinics and schools as an influence on their decisions to become part of the Evangelical church. In Chimborazo, the evangelical population accounts for 40-50 percent of the inhabitants, compared to between 5 and 10 percent throughout the country as a whole.

To the north, the well-known Otavalan people of Imbabura province are recognized around the world for their handcrafts and music. Missionary work began among this group in 1916 when two Christian and Missionary Alliance missionaries moved into the Otavalan region. After 22 years of faithful service, the first two believers were baptized, and the evangelical movement began in earnest.

In addition, many Otavalans who are moving to the city to establish business contacts have carried their church with them. "Before I was born, my parents moved here to Quito and began meeting together with some five or six other people in a small group," said Pablo Camuendo, an Otavalan business man and a leader in the New Life Alliance church in a Quito suburb. "There were many churches, most of them from the Christian and Missionary Alliance church, in Otavalo at that time, but none here in Quito."

Camuendo said that the missionaries were responsible for starting churches in the Otavalo area of Imbabura province. The missionaries also taught the believers how to read and write in their own Quichua language. Today the New Life Alliance church counts approximately 150 members, and nearly 15 percent of the Otavalan indigenous people are evangelical Christians.

For further information on the growth of the evangelical church among Ecuador's Indigenous population, read:

Maust, John, "New Song in the Andes," William Carey Library, Pasadena, CA., 1992

Reichert, Richard, "Daybreak Over Ecuador," Sunrise Press, Quito, Ecuador, 1991 (available from HCJB, Box 39800, Colorado Springs, CO 80949)

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