

Indigenous church stand out in Quito community

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

La Iglesia Nueva Vida (New Life Church) stands out as the tallest building on the edge of the low-income Quito barrio of Comite de Pueblo Dos. The three story structure is still being finished, but the members of the church are justifiably proud of not only the edifice, but the ministries that they hope to carry out from their new location.

One of the capital city's nearly one hundred evangelical churches, the New Life congregation is unique in that its congregation is made up entirely of members from the Otavalan indigenous group from northern Ecuador.

This zealous church began nearly thirty years ago when Luis Camuendo moved his family to Quito to pursue their business selling tapestries and other artisan products. "There wasn't any other indigenous church in the city when we started to meet with four or five other people in our home," he says.

Camuendo's son, Pablo, says that his people's Evangelical Christian roots go back to the church planting by Christian and Missionary Alliance missionaries in Ecuador's Imbabura province, 80 miles north of Quito. "There were many churches in Imbabura, most of them from the Alliance, but none in Quito."

As Otavalans migrated to the city to pursue business interests, they brought their evangelical faith with them. Today the church counts around 150 members, and has already run into a seating problem in their spacious new building. "We have enough room," Pablo Camuendo says, "the problem is that we moved our pews from the old church and there aren't enough of them to accommodate all those who want to come."

On a recent Sunday morning the church's youth sat on make-shift benches along the side of the sanctuary while adults and small children squeezed into every available pew space. The church's two hour service is a mixture of Spanish and Quichua languages--many of the young people no longer speak the language of their forefathers while a few of the older members never learned Spanish.

"We don't want to minister only to the indigenous community," says Pastor Jose' Manuel de la Torre. "We plan to start a Christian day-care center here which will serve everyone in this community." De la Torre foresees the day when the church may have to have two services, one in Quichua and another in Spanish to accommodate all who want to attend.

The evangelical growth among the Otavalan indigenous group reflects a similar pattern among some of Ecuador's other native groups. "Evangelicals account for between five and ten percent of Ecuador's total population," says Ecuadorian pastor Jorge Zambrano. "But among the indigenous groups some estimates are as high as forty or fifty percent."

It took more than 50 years for evangelical Christianity to take hold among the Quichua-speaking population of Colta in Ecuador's southern Chimborazo province. It was not until after the publication of the Bible in the Quichua language in 1954 that the first believers stepped forward and were baptized.

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 79,500 believers and a constituency of over 100,000.

Evangelicals make up the majority of the indigenous population in Chimborazo province according to Pastor Jose' Naula, director of the Quichua language service at Christian short-wave radio station HCJB in Quito.

In addition, indigenous evangelical Christians are also exerting a political influence. "There is racism and discrimination against the indigenous people, especially in the 'campo,' (rural areas)," says Pastor Naula, a native of Chimborazo province.

"Government money has been poured into the cities and into towns where mestizos (people of mixed race) and European descendants live, but not into the indigenous communities of the mountainous provinces," he said. "Therefore, the indigenous people have risen up to protest this injustice. This movement has been led by the evangelical indigenous people."

These groups have banded together in an organization, FEINE (Ecuadorian Evangelical Federation), to support candidates for political office and represent indigenous positions before government policy makers. Naula says that out of 80 members of congress, three or four are from indigenous groups. Naula says he is considering running for congress in the next elections. Quichua speaking people make up 40% of Ecuador's population.

Mentioning the large number of community services provided to the residents of Chimborazo province, Naula says many of them were constructed by 'mingas' (community work projects, similar to a North American 'barn raising'). "These projects were organized by community leaders in the province, all of whom are evangelicals," he said.

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.

While the indigenous evangelical church is growing rapidly and developing national leadership, Naula laments the divisions between it and the 'mestizo' or 'Spanish' evangelical churches.

"We are united spiritually, but there are many divisions," he says. Culture, customs, language, dress, and style of living, all contribute to a distance and lack of harmony.

"For example, when I go to the country, I sit on the floor to visit and to eat. We don't need a table. When city people come to our communities, they are very uncomfortable without a table, they don't like the food, they don't speak the same language. This is a big cultural barrier," Naula said.

Naula says that the Spanish churches, which are located primarily in the urban areas, never have participated in the evangelization of the indigenous communities. "That has always been done by foreign missionaries," he said. Much of the initial mission work among the Chimborazo communities was carried out by missionaries of the Gospel Missionary Union (GMU).

On the contrary, Naula says, in the rural areas, it has been the indigenous churches which have evangelized the mestizo population.

On a positive note, Naula says that the animosity between Roman Catholic churches and the indigenous evangelical churches is a thing of the past. "Before, they

called us devils, heretics and evil. In the past, we could not share water, food or work together in a 'minga,' but now, recently, we have broken down that barrier and we are united in common tasks. Now I can greet them, talk with them, interview them on the radio."

Some indigenous groups, such as the Saraguro and Salasaca indians have not yet responded to the influence of the evangelical churches. Naula attributes this to either a strong Catholic presence (such as among the Saraguro where OMS has worked for many years), or the lack of evangelical missionary presence.

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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