

Wealth gospel propels poor Guatemalans

'Prosperity theology' is empowering people to help themselves out of poverty.

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Guatemala City - Doris Cuxun will never forget the words that shook her out of a daze one Sunday morning during a service at Showers of Grace, a Neo-Pentecostal megachurch here. "Who here wants to own your own business? Lift your hand!" the pastor hollered.

"I want to, I want to," she whispered amid the dancing and chanting.

"Me? My own beauty parlor?" she thought to herself giddily, incredulously. Could a woman who had grown up in a house made of wood and tin sheeting somehow build a successful business?

A year later, her answer is clear. "God opened the door for me," she says unequivocally while rolling pastel pink paint on the walls of her new salon located next to one of the most upscale malls in Guatemala City.

Like so many here, Ms. Cuxun was born Roman Catholic. Like so many today, she converted to Pentecostalism, a Protestant Christ-ian faith that is sweeping the religious landscape worldwide.

Just half a century ago, if you were born in Latin America, it was assumed you were Catholic. Today, more than 13 percent of the region's people are Pentecostal, according to the World Christian Database. Of all the countries in the region, none has a higher percentage of Pentecostals than Guatemala. According to a 2006 study by the Washington-based Pew Research Center, 20 percent of Guatemalans are now Pentecostal out of a population that's estimated at 30 percent Protestant.

The first Protestant missionaries came here at the end of the 19th century, but Pentecostal growth did not accelerate until decades later. After the country's devastating earthquake in 1976, American missionaries flocked here, says Paul Freston, an expert on the spread of Pentecostalism in Latin America at Calvin College in Michigan.

Early Pentecostals reached out to the poor with the idea that poverty on earth would lead to riches in heaven. They gained a reputation for being concerned only with the "otherworldly." But the movement has unabashedly adopted a new ethos: God doesn't want anyone to be poor.

This message, known as "prosperity theology" or "health and wealth gospel," is most often associated with the newer Neo-Pentecostal branches of the religion where adherents, mostly upper and middle class, fill massive megachurches. But in Guatemala even the more traditional denominations are adopting a message of social mobility, making the words "self-improvement" and "ascent" part of the daily lexicon.

In churches like Showers of Grace, Pentecostals are told that poverty does not equal humility. They are offered business classes, taught how to save money, and encouraged to be community leaders.

They believe they are among the most important agents of social change, helping to bridge a divide between rich and poor, a task they say the government all too often has been unable or unwilling to undertake. Cuxun says that Pentecostalism has brought her out of poverty, and for that the government must give thanks.

"Our purpose is to bring people with few resources to different levels," says Nestor Mendez, a pastor of Showers of Grace, whose desk is cluttered with books such as "First Time Manager," and "Let Your Dreams Soar." "I believe we can change not only their lives but the country."

At a recent service at Showers of Grace, whose members are mostly poor, men dress in jeans but carefully slick their hair back. Women, some in indigenous dress, clutch their skirts as they spin around in a dance. They all sing and clap to an eight-piece rock band, working into a frenzy of "hallelujahs." And then they sit down to listen to a sermon on the importance of using their God-given talents. "God says this is a principle from the kingdom of heaven," says the pastor, "that we have to put to work the talents that God has given to us. It implies that each of us has some capacity. And if we put to work those capacities – our way of being, our capital, what we are – they are going to multiply themselves."

Edmundo Guillen, the head pastor of Showers of Grace, explains their mission: "Our greatest dream is that they all become entrepreneurs."

To that end, Showers of Grace, like so many other Pentecostal (and Catholic) churches, has its own primary school. Some of the largest churches have opened universities. Many offer business courses and scholarships, and their bookstores are filled with paperbacks that range from biblical study to business management.

Many say Pentecostals are sowing seeds for a cultural shift, especially for future generations. "The greatest benefit they've had [on society] has been to change the mentality of the people from that of victim to people who are responsible for their lives," says David Suazo, a professor at the Central American Theological Seminary in Guatemala City.

Living the dream

Cuxun was chosen for an entrepreneurial program at her church, during which she was taught how to market herself, balance a budget, and understand the basics of accounting, with the promise of a loan to help launch a business afterward.

Life did not start auspiciously for Cuxun. Her father was murdered when she was 8, and the family was left with nothing. She dreamed of a different life, she says, even though her mother always put her down: "Poor daughter, when are you going to give up those dreams?" she grew up hearing.

She says that without the practical help of the church she'd never be able to start her own business, but the emotional support has been more fundamental to the process. "God made me feel that I was worth something," she says.

While the Catholic Church has traditionally emphasized community work for the common good, Protestant churches put more of a focus on individual ascent, say scholars.

Pentecostals tend to be more hopeful about their future financial prospects than nonrenewalist Christians, according to a 2006 survey by the Pew Research Center. In Guatemala, 23 percent of Pentecostals said their future financial outlook will improve a lot, compared with 19 percent of those from all faiths.

That is not to say that the Catholic Church is not helping individuals, says Alejandro Aguilera-Titus, who observes the Latin American church as associate director for the Secretariat for Hispanic Affairs at the US Conference of Catholic Bishops. "Because of Catholic social teaching, the Church is compelled to provide leadership on how society treats its members, particularly the most vulnerable," he says. "The Catholic Church in that sense is a very consistent and resourceful institution."

For poor Guatemalans like Cuxun, however, the immediate, individual help is a more practical response than she would have expected from a catholic church, she says.

Yet, despite the success of Cuxun and many like her, experts debate whether Pentecostals are actually raising standards of living in a lasting and significant way in the region.

"There is virtually no evidence I know of that shows Pentecostals benefit [economically] from religious participation," says Edward Cleary, expert on Evangelicals in Latin America at Providence College in Rhode Island. "The idea that they become Pentecostals and go right up the socioeconomic ladder does not hold up. The fact is they are held back by a lack of education and entrepreneurial spirit. Faith doesn't make up for those things."

Still, in many ways, elements of their faith lead to economic betterment, say scholars. Their strict moral code alone – which includes no drinking, gambling, or promiscuity – leads to behavior changes that play important roles in family economics. "If a group of people change their behavior, work harder, save money, don't drink, show interest in education – all of which Pentecostalism encourages – from one generation to the next, the consequences are very simple: social mobility," says Peter Berger, a noted sociologist and theologian at Boston University. "You begin to have a Protestant middle class."

Fostering greed?

While all Pentecostals follow these social conventions, the brand of "prosperity gospel" that is preached by many pastors continues to be divisive. At its most basic the message is this: God will reward the faithful; if you give to God, God will give back.

But some say the call for money is simply extortion.

Mario Equite, a young pastor who leads a more traditional Church of God congregation in a small community outside Guatemala City, calls it manipulation, and says it has dangerous implications for the poor.

Often, he says, when believers continue to live in poverty, they are told they aren't praying hard enough. "It's a trick. All churches need resources, but we [donate] to give thanks, not give to God so that he pays me," he says.

Cuxun disagrees. She admits that the first time she heard about "prosperity gospel," she was suspicious.

She had saved, over many years, just enough money to purchase her own home, where she moved her entire extended family and shouldered most of the financial burden.

A single mother, she never had anything left at the end of the month, selling creams and soaps and giving pedicures to neighbors to make ends meet.

After her conversion, it took her three years to start giving the 10 percent, or tithe. Now she would never consider not giving it.

"I was afraid to give, because I thought I'd end up with nothing," she says. "I talk to some people in the church and they ask, 'Why do we have to give to the pastors, when they already have enough and I have nothing?' But I realized that you have to plant to get a harvest."

Neo-Pentecostal churches have been criticized for being self-serving and too inward-looking, not embracing structural changes that might benefit the poor or indigenous populations. They start schools, but mostly for their members, critics say.

They help their own people, but they are largely absent in the broader social movements of the country, say many observers. Their churches are massive, what some call audacious.

A new model of church

Exhibit A, for critics, is the Christian Fraternity of Guatemala, also known as the Mega Frater, which was inaugurated this summer. It is the largest building in Guatemala and one of the largest in Central America.

It seats 12,000, provides parking for over 2,500 cars, boasts 50 Sunday School classrooms, a heliport, and a price tag that topped \$33 million. Pastor Jorge Lopez argues that the building is a symbol and example of modernity for all of Guatemala.

At a recent service, ushers guide visitors to their seats. For those in the back, massive movie screens hang from all angles, airing infomercials for upcoming events. It is a rambling service that is in large part a Christian rock concert.

"My position as a pastor is to let them know what I see in the scriptures: 'To be poor is not a blessing,' and I don't think that to be poor is the will of the Lord," says Mr. Lopez.

He says Pentecostals are forging paths to modernity for all of society. Above all, he says, that means breaking away from a culture of dependence.

Cuxun, for one, could easily have lived her life seeking handouts. She left home at 16, and quickly got pregnant. She never finished school. When she became a Pentecostal, she slowly started signing up for committees and heading projects in the church. She wondered what was keeping her back in her life outside the church.

"I said, 'If everyone says that God is the owner of silver and gold, why can't I have it?' I started writing out a business plan, and prayed," she says. Other church members noticed her dedication, and chose her for the entrepreneurial program.

"Nobody believes me when I tell them I used to make [and sell] tortillas," Cuxun says. "But I know. I keep pinching myself, is this really happening?"