

# Parishes fail to market Catholicism to Hispanics

By LUIS GUILLERMO PINEDA

Millions of Hispanic immigrants, both legal and illegal, have flooded into the United States in recent decades, raising concerns about the impact these newcomers will have on American society and culture. What is seldom recognized in the debate over immigration, however, is the impact that American society and culture is having on Hispanics. They are becoming more American. They are taking advantage of educational and economic opportunities. Like legions of others before them, they are leaving behind the old life and creating a new one. And remarkably, for hundreds of thousands of Hispanics each year, that new life includes a new Protestant evangelical faith, a faith based not in Rome but in their own communities.

## COMMENTARY

For these new immigrants, Catholic parishes have failed to present themselves as important resources of help and information. Sure of Hispanics' traditional bond with Catholicism, these parishes fail to market their faith in a country that presents a



—Zuma Press/Jack Kurtz  
Worshippers pray during Sunday services at the Iglesia Palabra de Vida in Mesa, Ariz., May 7. There are about 300 Hispanic evangelical churches in the Phoenix area with about 15,000 members.

plthora of choices.

The beauty of a vibrant society is often seen in how it grows and metamorphoses into new practices and traditions. Yet this transition to Protes-

tantism seems to have taken American Catholic churches by surprise. Catholicism continues to be a conservative religion in terms of adapting to cultural shifts and modernization. Most Catholics like their traditions and the sense of being part of a global church. Most Hispanics see in Catholicism a link to their homeland and the families they left behind.

And they are part of a bloc that is holding to the Christian faith. In 1990, Americans classified as Christian amounted 86 percent of the U.S. population, according to the American Religious Identification Survey of the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. A decade later, in 2001, that percentage had dropped to 76.5 percent (159 million Americans), many of whom now claimed no religious affiliation at all.

But a large part of those 159 million who are still Christians are Hispanic. Around 35 million people, at least 25 million of whom identify themselves as Catholics — but there is a clear demographic shift underway.

Among recent immigrants from Latin American countries, 600,000 a year are leaving the Catholic church and becoming Protestant evangelicals. Hispanics are no longer a solid Catholic population; Hispanics affiliated with Protestant churches are growing at a faster rate than those affiliated with Catholic parishes.

The reason is that for many of those 600,000 a year, the Catholic church is too physically and emotionally distant to help them cope with the pressures and uncertainties of their new life in the United States. To be sure, the Catholic church has many social services available, but these are typically presented in a bureaucratized fashion, through special offices and agencies. They are not parish-centered in a way that makes Hispanics feel welcome and at home.

This is where Protestant evangelicals have gained the advantage. Protestant religions quickly evolved and adapted to the demands of the modern world. The Assemblies of God and other evangelical churches identified new demographic trends and devel-

oped strategies for meeting the needs of those not native to the Bible Belt — for example, by actively marketing their faith in the Spanish-language media, both in the United States and in Spanish-speaking countries.

But churches are formed by the parishioners that attend their services and Masses. A church is nothing in itself without followers, and marketing the faith is nothing more than receiving new followers into the church. By mobilizing members of their congregations to become actively involved in outreach to Hispanics, these churches marketed their faith and became an important center of group support and reassurance.

Being decentralized in the way they handle church affairs, these “born again” congregations enabled and encouraged these newcomers to take a more prominent role in the life of the church. Participation in services and church committees is something Hispanics consider less a duty than an honor. Their personal testimonies are heard in front of the congregation. They reach out to other Hispanics, leading home groups that read the Bible, share sorrows, and provide a new “family” in an unknown land.

The churches reach out in other ways too. Once an immigrant arrives in the country, either documented or undocumented, they are offered housing, free food, free health care and free English courses. The churches attend to the welfare of the newly arrived by meeting their initial needs and providing them with a network of local parishioners ready to help them find work.

The strongest resource for Hispanic immigrants is often a church filled with strangers of different nationalities united by the testimony of the suffering they left behind in their homelands.

Catholics by birth, they have discovered a friendlier and much more helpful church in Protestantism to aid them in finding solutions to their spiritual and physical needs.

Catholic parishes need to emulate this model if they hope to grow with the times. Some churches have made the laity more important in their congregation. But sadly for Catholics, these changes on a broader scale have been slow in coming.

Two thousand years ago, Catholicism emerged with the same vibrancy and outreach that evangelical Protestants are showing now. Protestants today have the advantage of the media, with cable broadcasts of their food, health care and healing programs. While maintaining Catholic principles and traditions are important, the Catholic church may find some useful ideas in the evangelical Protestant way of marketing the faith. You cannot measure something as important as the success of a religion only in terms of the numbers of Mass attendees around the world. That invites complacency. You have to keep reaching out.

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[pvm@spsmw.org](mailto:pvm@spsmw.org)  
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[Luis Guillermo Pineda Rodas is a candidate for a degree in international relations at Universidad Francisco Marroquin, Guatemala. He was a public policy intern last summer at the Hispanic American Center for Economic Research in Washington.]