

Argentine Evangelicals buoyed by rally, growth in spirit and numbers

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Evangelical church leaders in Argentina say they are ecstatic following a mass rally that drew over 150,000 participants to the symbolic center of the capital city in mid September. Some estimates placed the number at nearly 250,000.

Christians see the outpouring of enthusiasm as indicative of the growth, both numerically and spiritually, of the Evangelical church in Argentina in recent years.

“Many speak of a ‘before Annacondia’ and ‘after Annacondia’ effect,” says Ralph Tone, a missionary with the Latin America Mission who served in La Plata, Argentina, for nine years. “Carlos Annacondia is an evangelist mightily used of God since his conversion in the early 80’s. This is the time most people point to as the initial church growth take off point.”



Annacondia is a businessman turned evangelist who draws crowds to hear him preach “because his ministry is accompanied by signs and wonders, healings and deliverances,” observes Karin Detert who has observed Argentina’s revival. “In mass crusades thousands of people accepted Christ as Savior. Virtually every church grew.”

While much focus is placed on Annacondia, Tone adds that “the ground had been prepared previously by the Christian Community movement and its renewal minded leaders—Orville Swindoll, Angel Negro, Keith Benson and others.” The Tommy Hicks crusades in the 1950’s spiritually impacted Buenos Aires as never before or since, he notes.

Annacondia began his ministry in the 80’s but a second wave of revival began in 1992 with Claudio Freidzon, the founder of a Buenos Aires church that in four years grew to nearly 3,000 people. Freidzon felt a need to come to know the Holy Spirit. Finding that, he began speaking and holding revival services. A hallmark of his revival services has been an emphasis on worship and praise.

One leader says that Argentina is in the midst of an absolute sovereign revival unheard of in the history of that country. Others say that the Argentinean revival had links that ignited the so-called Toronto Blessing several years ago and other charismatic offshoots, including revival manifestations in Pensacola, Florida.

"I believe the last revival will be worldwide, not regional or even national," Pablo Deiros told *Religion Today* in a 1998 interview. "That revival is coming, and maybe those first drops are seen in Argentina," said Deiros, pastor of Central Baptist Church in Buenos Aires and a professor of church history at Fuller Theological Seminary. His congregation has added 2,000 members and planted 17 satellite congregations in Argentina and other countries since the revival started.

Of the country’s nearly 37 million population, Evangelicals represent around 7 percent and Pentecostals 5.6 percent. The largest denomination is the National Union of the Assemblies of God with 610,100 members and adherents as of January 1, 1999 compared to 370,800 a decade earlier. Church leaders credit decades of dictatorial and military misrule, the Argentine’s humiliating loss in the Falkland or Malvinas Islands war and economic problems as factors in making the people responsive to the Gospel.

Church growth among Evangelicals has been dramatic, with increases in every Evangelical denomination, but even more in the Pentecostal groups. In Resistencia, La Plata, and San Nicolas, prayer and evangelism have resulted in large numbers of converts and churches planted.

Meeting under the slogan "Jesus for everyone," speakers at the September rally in Buenos Aires called for unity in spirit and work. "We give thanks to you Lord, because now the denominational barriers that separated us have fallen and now we can walk upon them," prayed one of the main charismatic speakers.

A high point of the event was the reading of a document entitled "Message to the Argentine Nation." In it, the participating entities outlined their vision of the social, economic, political and cultural situation in the country and demanded a real participation by Evangelicals in the public debate and the formation of state policies related to education, social communication and human development.

The rally, convened by the National Christian Evangelical Council, which represents nearly all Argentine Evangelical churches, was broadly covered by television, radio and print media. Coverage of Evangelical events in Latin American media is rare.

The influential Clarin and La Nacion ran front-page headlines in their Sunday editions. Under the headline "A crowd of Evangelicals take their fervor to the Obelisk," Clarin, the country's largest circulation newspaper, dedicated an entire page to the act. (The Obelisk is a large monument in the middle of Buenos Aires that serves as a national symbol).

The paper's religious columnist, Sergio Rubin, wrote that the "most heavily attended evangelical act in the country" constitutes an "encouraging sign for Christianity, including Catholicism."

Proclaiming that the turnout was a surprise, Waldesian Pastor Norberto Berton, president of the Argentine Federation of Evangelical Churches, said, "Our forefathers would have dreamed of this type of show of unity." In terms of the future he affirmed that "we must be witnesses of the Kingdom of God."

"We have great joy and enthusiasm because one felt God's presence in the act in a very special manner," said Juan Pablo Bongarra, pastor of the Free Brothers Church. "It was seen in the joy, the enjoyment, the signing, embraces and testimonies," he said.

Evangelicals are encouraged by the September event and say it will continue a revival experienced by many churches across Argentina in recent years. "Nearly all churches that are growing are decidedly charismatic," Tone says. "This is especially noteworthy among Argentina's Baptist churches."

Tone cautions that there is some controversy in Argentina as to whether revival accurately describes what is going on in the country. "Regardless of how one defines revival, most would admit that the Argentine church has experience remarkable growth, especially in the past two decades," he says.

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