

Dispute simmers over closing of 80 Evangelical churches in Costa Rica

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

San José, Costa Rica—A simmering dispute over the closing of dozens of evangelical churches by the government broke into the open here when a leading evangelical member of congress staged a protest by climbing and sitting on the country's principal monument.

Carlos Avendaño spent several hours on the statue in one of San José's main parks until government officials agreed to negotiate with him and evangelical church leaders.

The protest followed the closing of an evangelical church, one of nearly 80 closed by health officials in the past year. Officials claim that only 37 churches have been closed because they do not provide adequate sanitary facilities (bathrooms) or the noise from their services exceeds certain legal limits. Avendaño, a former Pentecostal pastor, said that the number closed is closer to 80.

Evangelical church officials and the Costa Rican Evangelical Alliance Federation (FAEC) charge that the massive closure of evangelical churches, while no Roman Catholic churches have suffered the same fate, is religious persecution.

Church officials point out that while freedom of religion is guaranteed under Costa Rican law, evangelical churches are not allowed to incorporate as a religious organization but must register as an "association." That difference places the evangelical churches in a different status, therefore they are not afforded the same legal protection as officially designated churches.

Avendaño's dramatic protest was precipitated by the closing of an evangelical church just before Palm Sunday. "The church was not notified of the action," he said. Noting that the church was closed during a service, Avendaño said that "the authorities did not wait until the service finished or the people left to close the church."

"It is not possible for Holy Week to arrive and the evangelical Christians are not able to practice their faith because their church has been closed. It is a systematic persecution of Christians."

Typical of those churches that have been closed is the Holy Seed Church in San Isidro, Puntarenas that has held services for 22 years. The church has been closed since December following a complaint from a neighbor who alleged that the noise levels coming from the church exceeded legal limits.

"A neighbor, a foreigner, organized a local committee which forced the closing of the church, a retirees association and a medical clinic," said Alvaro Porras, one of the pastors of the church."

Porras said that in spite of support from the town's mayor who recommended to governmental authorities that the church be allowed to reopen because of their "excellent

social-spiritual work,” and their ministries with drug addicts, prostitutes and alcoholics, health officials refused to reconsider the case.

The church is currently meeting in another location while their large church building sits empty.

According to government statistics, 96 percent of evangelical churches in the country do not have sanitary facilities that the government requires. Many of those churches are small congregations that often meet in store fronts, remodeled buildings of private homes.

Officials defend their action against noise complaints, pointing out that many evangelical churches meet in residential neighborhoods, while most Roman Catholic churches are in commercial areas and are often surrounded by public parks or other open space.

Avendaño’s protest brought fast response from government officials. Delia Villalobos, Costa Rica’s vice-minister for health, agreed to negotiate with Avendaño and FAEC officials.

In their agreement, the government agreed to allow all of the closed churches to reopen if they agree to provide necessary facilities by a specific deadline. In turn, church officials agreed that their churches would lower the volume of their speaker systems to the government regulated guidelines.

Evangelical churches had protested that many of them were too small to have the resources to provide facilities common in large Catholic cathedrals.

Church officials had charged that it was easier in Costa Rica to close an evangelical church than to close a bar, strip club or house of prostitution.

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