

Spain's Awakening: Is revival around the corner for Spain?

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Madrid, Spain (LAMNS)--Long seen as a graveyard for foreign missionaries, Spain continues to be a country where ministry expectations are different, but where Christian leaders are all proclaiming that a revival is coming.

Bringing a Spaniard to make a public confession of faith in Jesus Christ and leading him to join a church is very difficult. "The closest thing I can compare it to is working with Muslims," explains Dayana Elásmar, an LAM missionary in the rural town of Villanueva de la Serena. "Here accepting Christ sometimes requires being rejected from your church and your community."

Viewed statistically, the Evangelical picture in Spain is bleak. "Spain has only .02 percent Christians," says Nandy Pérez, a Puerto Rican missionary who is leading a church-planting team in Puerto Real near Cadiz. "There are only 88,000 [Evangelical] Christians in Spain out of a total population of 40 million people," he explains.

"We have more than 8,100 towns in Spain, but only 650 of them have Evangelical churches," adds Pablo García, a Spanish pastor in Chiclana, near Cadiz, who leads an expanding church-planting ministry called the Kairos project. "This means that there are more than 7,000 towns without churches. Thirty million Spaniards live in places where there are no churches--no Christian witness. Egypt has more Christians than Spain!" he states.

Missionaries and church leaders consider Spain to be a strategic location in the evangelization of Europe and North Africa.

Seventy million tourists flock to the country's Mediterranean beaches each year while a million and a half Muslims cross the Straits of Gibraltar yearly to visit their families. In 1990, more than 80,000 copies of the Jesus film were distributed to transient Muslims through an inter-mission port ministry called Operation Transit.

Traditional Catholics

Missionaries describe Spaniards as very traditional, adhering to their Roman Catholic loyalties even when they no longer participate in the life of the church or even accept Catholic theology. In addition, many young people see church people as hypocritical, mouthing acceptance of Christianity but involved in an unbiblical lifestyle.

Evangelicals struggle with several erroneous perceptions. Because of the Evangelical outreach success among Spain's Gypsy groups and the growth of the Gypsy Filadelfia Church, many Spaniards feel that the Evangelical Church is only for gypsies.

Other Evangelical churches have found great success in working with alcoholics, drug addicts and people with other addictions, leading to the misconception that Evangelical churches are primarily for people who are dysfunctional.

Pastor García says that whether or not Spain is viewed as a difficult country depends on the perspective that one brings. “If I reproduce what I have heard, I would have to say yes, it is difficult. But if I reproduce what I have experienced, I have to say no. I see hundreds and hundreds of people being saved.

Dictatorship dead

Even so, an experienced LAM missionary in Spain says that portions of the Evangelical church in Spain are reluctant to reach out publicly.

Reflecting that the country suffered persecution for more than 450 years, and religious liberty has been a constitutional right only since 1978, Edwin Kerr says, “We have met attitudes among Evangelical church pastors and leaders which hark back to the dictatorship of General Franco. There was a secret police, they couldn’t say anything against the political leader, and the Catholic Church was predominant. Now it’s difficult to help people understand they can come out of their bomb shelters.”

Kerr says that Evangelical churches must overcome their fear of working publicly and their cultural shame of being separate from the dominant Roman Catholic Church if they are to make any impact on their society.

“Growth here is not what we are used to expecting in Latin America or North America,” says Dayana. She says that an average church has between 50 and 100 members. From a local perspective, there is no pressure if you have a 30- or 40-member church.

However, from the perspective of sending churches in North America, there isn’t much happening in Spain with such slow growth. “Something is happening every day in that there are more and more churches,” Dayana reports. “It’s important for someone who has a calling to Spain that they inform their churches about the type of work that’s done here and the growth--that it’s very slow.”

With all of the struggles, missionaries say that they feel the movement of God’s Spirit in today’s Spain. “Spain is living a key moment in general,” reflects Dayana. “But there are key moments in different areas (of the country). The point is not our making that key moment happen, but being alert to God’s voice and being able to move with God in each different area.”

Latin America Mission works in partnership with churches and Christian agencies throughout Latin America and supports missionaries and projects in many Latin countries as well as in Spain. LAM is seeking to place new missionaries throughout the region. The U.S. headquarters can be reached at Latin America Mission, Box 52-7900, Miami, FL 33152, by e-mail at info@lam.org, or by calling 1-800-275-8410. The mission’s web site

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Is revival around the corner for Spain?, *LAM News Service*, Feb 13, 2003