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RELIGIOUS FREEDOM  
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# Radiography of Christianity in Latin America

## Religious trends and demography

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### Abstract

This article describes the main religious trends and demography which have led to major transformations in the Latin American religious landscape since the middle of the 20th Century. Even though it is acknowledged that Christianity as a whole, and Catholicism in particular, has been, and still is, the main faith across the region, the screening of the main trends carried out along several dimensions reveals three important changes: first, from within Christianity Pentecostalism has emerged as a major influence; second, from outside, other new religious movements have emerged, and third, an increasing number of people have acknowledged to have no religious affiliation at all. This article seeks to explain that the underlying causes of the shifts are growing secularization, the opening of new and more spaces for religious experience and social apathy or the perceived irrelevance of the church in society in terms of addressing social justice issues such as income disparities, poverty and health, amongst others. Finally, the article concludes with an exposition of two major challenges facing the church, namely, the lack of unity and theological polarization.

### 1. Introduction

The Latin American region has traditionally been a Roman Catholic subcontinent. However, the prevailing monopoly enjoyed by the Catholic faith during centuries has been challenged since the 1950s by the emergence of new dynamic forces in the entire Latin American religious landscape. Indeed, new and different religious beliefs and practices have come to the fore, not

just from within but also from outside Christianity. One such phenomenon is the rise of Pentecostalism within Christianity since the 1960s, coming from the evangelical branch of the church, as well as the Charismatic Renewal Movement from the 1980s in addition to the rise of the neo-Pentecostal churches. The development of new religious movements of African origins such as the Brazilian Candomblé and the Haitian Voodoo, have also been identified as part of these new religious trends which has probed the solidity of Catholicism in Latin America. The Latin American religious landscape has also been altered by the resurgence of traditional religions in the Andean region, México and Guatemala. Additionally, the birth of a small Muslim community in 2005, in the State of Chiapas, Mexico, has added to the wave of religious pluralism now evident in Latin American. It seems that the new religious landscape has opened up a fluid space for people to experience new faiths and affiliations which in turn has resulted in a decrease in traditional church attendance.

It must also be stated that even though religion is an important aspect within the lives of most Latin Americans and Roman Catholicism is still the majority religion, disengagement with religion and its practice is increasing. This latest important trend was identified and reported by the Pew Research Center in 2014 when it noted an increase in people who profess to have no religious affiliation at all and to be agnostic or atheistic in outlook.

The complex context explained above results in a *sui generis* Latin American religious dynamic. If we consider the uniqueness of the dynamic, underpinned by secularization and competition, then it is of great importance to map out what I have called a radiography of Christianity in Latin America. The objective of this essay is to provide a general overview for the reader about the religious trends and demography in Latin America. Being descriptive in nature, the essay offers a selection of characteristic elements that account for important religious trends such as the growth of Pentecostalism, decreasing church attendance, progressive secularization and growing religious pluralism. By doing this, the essay hopes to contribute to a better understanding of the religious diversity throughout the sub-continent. In addition, this essay debunks some received wisdom regarding the nature of Catholic practice, new religious movements, mega-churches and the prosperity gospel. A screening of literature and secondary sources has been carried out in order to write this essay.

In order to explore the issues, the essay departs from an exposition of the changes in the religious landscape. Then, following a logical sequence, the essay recognizes the rise of Pentecostalism, other new religious movements and the correlated factors of church attendance as an indicator of religious affiliation. Additionally, the role of Christian education at primary and secondary school levels in the region is noted. Next, the essay continues to identify the urgent need for upgrading existing programs of theological education, including that at university level. Further, the general theological trends regarding doctrinal beliefs and practices of Protestant churches are described as well as the ethnographic and socioeconomic background of the Protestant adherents and the education level of evangelical pastors. The essay questions the growth of mega-churches as a generalized phenomenon in the region and their relationship with prosperity theology as well as church budgets and spending patterns of protestant denominations.

The essay concludes with an interpretation of Latin American church trends. In context, this section explains that, despite the fact that the church has a huge potential to impact positively in

society, it is imbued with social apathy which results in social problems being ignored. The church is weakened by its perceived lack of significance for society and this, in conjunction with a lack of unity, tensions amongst religious leaders and theological polarization results in a reduction of attendance.

## 2. Changes in the religious landscape

Two major trends characterized Latin American Christianity halfway through the twentieth century: “liberation theology” and the “charismatic movement.” These two trends divided Christianity from within. Their effects are still visible today. However, the past four decades have produced other important trends which led to major transformations of Latin America’s religious landscape. As can be observed on Figure 1, the Catholic Church no longer holds a monopoly of adherents. Instead, the current religious demography of Latin America can be described best using the concept of “religious pluralism.”<sup>1</sup>

Figure 1. Christianity in the Western Hemisphere

| Country                | Pop 2017    | Christians  | Chr%  | Orthodox  | Catholic    | Protestant | Independent | Evangelical | Renewalist  |
|------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------|-----------|-------------|------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Anguilla               | 14,900      | 13,400      | 89.9% | 0         | 750         | 11,200     | 760         | 2,600       | 2,100       |
| Antigua & Barbuda      | 93,700      | 86,800      | 92.7% | 0         | 8,300       | 65,000     | 4,200       | 22,500      | 18,800      |
| Argentina              | 44,272,000  | 39,867,000  | 90.1% | 167,000   | 35,726,000  | 2,521,000  | 2,689,000   | 2,068,000   | 9,181,000   |
| Aruba                  | 105,000     | 100,000     | 95.9% | 0         | 80,100      | 11,300     | 4,400       | 5,700       | 8,900       |
| Bahamas                | 397,000     | 370,000     | 93.1% | 490       | 52,400      | 273,000    | 37,000      | 123,000     | 64,000      |
| Barbados               | 286,000     | 271,000     | 94.9% | 460       | 10,800      | 179,000    | 24,900      | 118,000     | 64,400      |
| Belize                 | 375,000     | 342,000     | 91.4% | 0         | 268,000     | 106,000    | 23,700      | 43,500      | 58,100      |
| Bermuda                | 61,400      | 53,900      | 87.9% | 0         | 9,300       | 35,600     | 10,200      | 11,200      | 13,600      |
| Bolivia                | 11,053,000  | 10,253,000  | 92.8% | 5,400     | 9,663,000   | 1,244,000  | 699,000     | 1,063,000   | 1,859,000   |
| Brazil                 | 211,243,000 | 191,724,000 | 90.8% | 242,000   | 149,834,000 | 35,765,000 | 25,728,000  | 33,726,000  | 111,068,000 |
| British Virgin Islands | 31,200      | 25,700      | 82.3% | 0         | 790         | 18,600     | 2,500       | 7,800       | 4,800       |
| Canada                 | 36,626,000  | 24,580,000  | 67.1% | 1,161,000 | 15,595,000  | 4,063,000  | 1,377,000   | 2,139,000   | 3,087,000   |
| Caribbean Netherlands  | 25,700      | 24,300      | 94.5% | 0         | 19,800      | 3,700      | 690         | 1,400       | 1,400       |
| Cayman Islands         | 61,600      | 49,800      | 80.9% | 0         | 8,100       | 24,600     | 6,200       | 7,400       | 8,200       |
| Chile                  | 18,313,000  | 16,144,000  | 88.2% | 460,000   | 13,030,000  | 505,000    | 5,345,000   | 580,000     | 7,246,000   |
| Colombia               | 49,068,000  | 46,657,000  | 95.1% | 10,100    | 42,911,000  | 1,692,000  | 1,848,000   | 1,054,000   | 14,994,000  |
| Costa Rica             | 4,906,000   | 4,680,000   | 95.4% | 0         | 4,016,000   | 549,000    | 413,000     | 480,000     | 706,000     |
| Cuba                   | 11,390,000  | 7,013,000   | 61.6% | 52,900    | 6,092,000   | 498,000    | 409,000     | 371,000     | 1,126,000   |
| Curacao                | 160,000     | 149,000     | 93.4% | 0         | 124,000     | 27,500     | 6,400       | 11,600      | 10,900      |
| Dominica               | 73,400      | 69,300      | 94.5% | 0         | 42,200      | 34,100     | 3,500       | 22,300      | 20,700      |
| Dominican Republic     | 10,767,000  | 10,215,000  | 94.9% | 0         | 8,772,000   | 1,058,000  | 521,000     | 621,000     | 1,737,000   |
| Ecuador                | 16,626,000  | 15,866,000  | 95.4% | 2,100     | 14,416,000  | 731,000    | 894,000     | 801,000     | 1,932,000   |
| El Salvador            | 6,167,000   | 5,924,000   | 96.1% | 0         | 4,736,000   | 1,013,000  | 1,282,000   | 709,000     | 1,829,000   |
| Falkland Islands       | 2,900       | 2,400       | 81.7% | 0         | 730         | 1,400      | 14          | 360         | 290         |
| French Guiana          | 283,000     | 239,000     | 84.5% | 0         | 223,000     | 12,900     | 8,800       | 7,300       | 16,600      |
| Greenland              | 56,200      | 53,900      | 95.8% | 0         | 130         | 36,500     | 830         | 2,700       | 6,100       |
| Grenada                | 108,000     | 104,000     | 96.5% | 0         | 54,200      | 45,800     | 6,700       | 15,800      | 19,300      |
| Guadeloupe             | 472,000     | 453,000     | 95.8% | 0         | 404,000     | 37,600     | 18,600      | 22,600      | 25,100      |
| Guatemala              | 17,005,000  | 16,548,000  | 97.3% | 162,000   | 14,034,000  | 2,707,000  | 2,041,000   | 2,293,000   | 8,664,000   |

<sup>1</sup> See Steigenga Timothy & Cleary Edward L. (eds.) (2007) *Conversion of a Continent: Contemporary Religious Change in Latin America*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press. According to Steigenga, “[r]eligious pluralism has fundamentally altered the social and religious landscape of Latin America and the Caribbean. From Mexico to Chile, millions of Latin Americans have abandoned their traditional Catholic upbringing to embrace new and different religious beliefs and practices;” Steigenga Timothy J. (2010). Religious conversion in the Americas: meanings, measures, and methods. *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 34 (2) p. 77. Retrieved from <http://www.internationalbulletin.org/issues/2010-02/2010-02-077-steigenga.html>; Althoff defines religious pluralism as “the spread of Pentecostalized Christianity -Catholic and Protestant Alike- and the growth of indigenous revitalization movements;” Althoff Andrea. (2017). Divided by Faith and Ethnicity: Religious Pluralism and the Problem of Race in Guatemala. *International Journal of Latin American Religions*, 1, p. 33. Retrieved from <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s41603-017-0026-1>.

| Country                 | Pop. 2017   | Christians  | Chr%  | Orthodox  | Catholic    | Protestant | Independent | Evangelical | Renewalist |
|-------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------|-----------|-------------|------------|-------------|-------------|------------|
| Guyana                  | 774,000     | 428,000     | 55.3% | 10,700    | 63,100      | 289,000    | 95,300      | 127,000     | 193,000    |
| Haiti                   | 10,983,000  | 10,344,000  | 94.2% | 0         | 7,389,000   | 2,178,000  | 682,000     | 1,580,000   | 1,906,000  |
| Honduras                | 8,305,000   | 7,943,000   | 95.6% | 7,400     | 6,261,000   | 1,429,000  | 700,000     | 989,000     | 1,582,000  |
| Jamaica                 | 2,813,000   | 2,377,000   | 84.5% | 2,100     | 78,300      | 1,134,000  | 340,000     | 725,000     | 605,000    |
| Martinique              | 396,000     | 381,000     | 96.2% | 0         | 363,000     | 37,600     | 17,100      | 23,900      | 21,100     |
| Mexico                  | 130,223,000 | 124,869,000 | 95.9% | 117,000   | 113,620,000 | 4,745,000  | 7,235,000   | 2,779,000   | 15,940,000 |
| Montserrat              | 5,200       | 4,700       | 90.7% | 0         | 410         | 4,500      | 540         | 1,200       | 1,400      |
| Nicaragua               | 6,218,000   | 5,904,000   | 95.0% | 0         | 5,300,000   | 1,405,000  | 680,000     | 1,027,000   | 1,575,000  |
| Panama                  | 4,051,000   | 3,659,000   | 90.3% | 1,700     | 2,802,000   | 596,000    | 239,000     | 458,000     | 733,000    |
| Paraguay                | 6,812,000   | 6,491,000   | 95.3% | 11,900    | 6,024,000   | 298,000    | 572,000     | 265,000     | 687,000    |
| Peru                    | 32,166,000  | 31,023,000  | 96.4% | 7,400     | 27,313,000  | 2,341,000  | 2,521,000   | 1,735,000   | 4,507,000  |
| Puerto Rico             | 3,679,000   | 3,521,000   | 95.7% | 1,200     | 2,766,000   | 495,000    | 466,000     | 400,000     | 1,129,000  |
| Saint Kitts & Nevis     | 56,800      | 53,700      | 94.5% | 0         | 4,800       | 42,900     | 4,400       | 8,900       | 10,100     |
| Saint Lucia             | 188,000     | 180,000     | 95.9% | 0         | 125,000     | 55,000     | 5,300       | 27,800      | 28,000     |
| Saint Pierre & Miquelon | 6,300       | 6,000       | 94.7% | 0         | 5,900       | 80         | 24          | 13          | 120        |
| Saint Vincent           | 110,000     | 97,400      | 88.6% | 100       | 7,800       | 76,200     | 29,200      | 30,800      | 40,900     |
| Sint Maarten            | 40,100      | 36,100      | 90.1% | 0         | 24,100      | 8,500      | 2,100       | 3,500       | 3,200      |
| Suriname                | 552,000     | 281,000     | 50.9% | 0         | 168,000     | 89,400     | 14,400      | 20,000      | 19,200     |
| Trinidad & Tobago       | 1,369,000   | 869,000     | 63.5% | 10,800    | 386,000     | 380,000    | 85,900      | 239,000     | 196,000    |
| Turks & Caicos Is       | 35,400      | 32,300      | 91.0% | 0         | 600         | 19,700     | 4,500       | 6,000       | 6,200      |
| United States           | 326,474,000 | 252,719,000 | 77.4% | 7,116,000 | 73,648,000  | 56,452,000 | 72,143,000  | 52,579,000  | 73,201,000 |
| United States Virgin Is | 107,000     | 101,000     | 94.4% | 480       | 33,100      | 54,200     | 14,800      | 23,200      | 26,600     |
| Uruguay                 | 3,457,000   | 2,183,000   | 63.1% | 40,300    | 1,887,000   | 111,000    | 242,000     | 65,700      | 384,000    |
| Venezuela               | 31,926,000  | 29,502,000  | 92.4% | 31,000    | 26,491,000  | 1,956,000  | 1,679,000   | 1,500,000   | 6,297,000  |

Source: World Christian Database (2017).<sup>2</sup>

Latin America continues to be a Christian subcontinent. Depending on the country, between 75% and 95% of the population self-identifies as Christian. Only Uruguay (63.1%) and Cuba (61.6%) have a smaller Christian population, but even there Christianity is the majority religion<sup>3</sup>. However, inside Christianity is where most changes in religious affiliation occurred. In Central American countries and in Brazil, Protestants constitute between 20 and 35% of the total population. In South America, Protestants are less numerous and generally account for just over 10%. In Mexico, only 7.6% of the population is Protestant, with a large concentration in the State of Chiapas where close to 30% declares being Protestant.

Tensions between Catholics and Protestants continue to exist. Catholics consider Protestants as “separated brothers” and Protestants often consider themselves to be the only true Christians. For this reason unity between both groups is a challenge. Ecumenical initiatives do exist, but often unite believers who adhere to liberation theology, and are generally more social than religious in nature.

Over the past forty years, Latin America has seen the emergence of so-called “New Religious Movements” (NRM) both within and outside Christianity, of which Pentecostalism is the most visible expression. In fact, the majority of Latin America’s Protestants belong to some type of Pentecostal, neo-Pentecostal or Charismatic church.

Apart from the NRMs, two other important trends should not be neglected: decreasing church attendance in combination with the steady secularization of society. In fact, statistics of religious

<sup>2</sup> Johnson Todd M. & Zurlo Gina A. (Eds.) (2018). *World Christian Database*. Leiden/Boston: Brill.

<sup>3</sup> Some of the publications often used by scholars and Christian leaders for statistical information on religious affiliation in Latin America may contain inaccurate reports and projections based on false assumptions, especially when the authors of these publications extrapolate data at five or ten year intervals into the future using erroneous average annual growth rates. This is the case with David Barrett (2001) *World Christian Encyclopedia* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.); Peter Brierley’s (1997) *World Churches Handbook*; and Johnston Patrick & Mandryk Jason, *Operation World* (all editions)

affiliation do not say much because of the fluidity of religious conversion and the fact that many self-declaring Catholics rarely attend mass. The majority of Catholics in the continent belong to the category of “non-practicing,” even though 69% of adults identify themselves as being Catholics.”<sup>4</sup> The election of an Argentinian pope, in spite of his popularity, did not encourage non-practicing Catholics to become more devout.

One of the population segments in Latin America that has grown considerably since the 1960s are those who tell pollsters that they have “no religious affiliation,” or are agnostics or atheists.<sup>5</sup> The majority of those who now belong to secular society were previously Roman Catholic adherents, but joining them during the past few decades are many former evangelicals – especially those who were between 18-29 years old– who deserted the ranks of their former churches.<sup>6</sup>

The category of “non-practicing evangelicals”, which was virtually nonexistent until recently is slowly growing. For this reason, church attendance is a more reliable indicator of religious affiliation, a variable which will be discussed below. The steady secularization of society is shown by the relatively large group that does not adhere to any religion. In most Latin American countries, around 10% of the population declares not to belong to any religion at all, with three important outliers: Cuba (>40%), Uruguay (>40%) and Ecuador (>20%).<sup>7</sup> This group is much less visible because by definition they do not gather in massive events or mega-churches, but should not be neglected as an important trend in religious demography.<sup>8</sup>

### 3. Pentecostalism and other “New Religious Movements”

The concept of “New Religious Movement” (NRM) is rather vague term that is usually defined as recent religious groups (most of them appeared after the 1950s) operating outside mainstream religions and who present themselves as alternatives to official religions. NRMs also refer to renewal movements within traditional religions or movements that have eventually become mainstream religions themselves. In the Latin American context, NRMs are often associated with “pneumacentric” cults and faith healing. In general, the “success” of NRMs is considered a sign of the vitality of Latin American religion.

In Latin America, Protestants are generally referred to as “cristianos” or “evangélicos,” regardless of their denominational affiliation. Within Latin American Protestantism, a minority is formed by mainline Protestant churches, most of which are affiliated to the *Consejo Latinoamericano de Iglesias* (CLAI), the Latin American chapter of the World Council of Churches.

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<sup>4</sup> See % who say they attend religious services at least once a week in figure 2 below; *infra* note 16.

<sup>5</sup> Pew Research Center. (2014). Religion in Latin America. Widespread change in a historically Catholic region. p. 125. Retrieved from <http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2014/11/Religion-in-Latin-America-11-12-PM-full-PDF.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> See *infra* note 29.

<sup>7</sup> Pew Research Center. (2014). Religion in Latin America. Widespread change in a historically Catholic region. *Supra* note 5, pp. 4 - 12

<sup>8</sup> See general statistics in Religion in Latin America. Widespread change in a historically Catholic region. *Supra* note 5.

Pentecostalism, considered as the main exponent of NRMs, has grown rapidly since the 1960s and now the vast majority of Latin American Protestants belong to Pentecostal denominations of both established congregations (Assemblies of God, Foursquare Church, etc.) and so-called independent churches that are not affiliated to any denominational organ.

New Religious Movements also include the Charismatic Renewal Movement within the Catholic Church, which is currently the most visible expression of Catholicism. The Charismatic Renewal Movement, also present in other parts of the world, remains true to traditional Catholicism, but borrows much of the religious beliefs and practices of “pentecostalized religion.”<sup>9</sup>

Finally, outside Christianity, the New Religious Movements also include African-diaspora religions such as Brazilian Candomblé and Haitian Voodoo which have many followers in many countries. Interestingly, organized crime groups are frequently involved in occult practices, which they use to advance their interests.<sup>10</sup>

In parallel, in some countries of the continent a revival of traditional religion<sup>11</sup> can be witnessed. This is particularly the case in countries with an important indigenous population in the Andean region (Bolivia, Ecuador and Colombia) but also in Mexico and Guatemala. This revival generally goes along with ethnic movements, demanding recognition of their cultural heritage and political rights.

Another trend, whose scope should not be exaggerated but that is noteworthy because of its peculiarity, is the emergence of a small Muslim community in the Mexican State of Chiapas. Founded in 2005 by representatives of a Sunni Murabitun sect, according to Open Doors field reports this community now counts 500 adherents and has its own mosque. Most of its adherents are indigenous Mexicans to whom Islam is both historically and culturally foreign<sup>12</sup>.

With no apparent relation with the Sunni Murabitun sect, there appears to be some jihadist activity in other parts of Mexico. According to the Washington Times in 2010, “with fresh evidence of Hezbollah activity just south of the border [in Mexico], and numerous reports of

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<sup>9</sup> See Steigenga Timothy (2007). The Politics of Pentecostalized Religion: Conversion as Pentecostalization in Guatemala. En. Cleary Edward L & Steigenga Timothy (Eds). *Conversion of a Continent: Contemporary Religious Change in Latin America*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, pp. 256-280.

<sup>10</sup> Petri Dennis P. (2012), “Interfaz de las Iglesias y el Crimen Organizado en América Latina”, World Watch Unit, Open Doors Internacional. I favor a broad definition of religion that includes cults. Thus, Fox’s definition of religion is helpful. According to Fox, “religion seeks to understand the origins and nature of reality using a set of answers that include the supernatural. Religion is also a social phenomenon and institution that influences the behavior of human beings both as individuals and in groups. These influences of behavior manifest themselves through the influences of religious identity, religious institutions, religious legitimacy, religious beliefs, and the codification of these beliefs into authoritative dogma, among other avenues of influence;” Fox Jonathan. (2007). *An Introduction to Religion and Politics. Theory and Practice*. New York: Routledge, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup>Traditional religions refers to indigenous religions (ancestral religions) – the religions of the original native population of the Americas.

<sup>12</sup> “Praying to Allah in Mexico. Islam is gaining a foothold in Chiapas”, *Spiegel Online*, 05/28/2005. Retrieved from <http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/praying-to-allah-in-mexico-islam-is-gaining-a-foothold-in-chiapas-a-358223-druck.html>.

Muslims from various countries posing as Mexicans and crossing into the United States from Mexico, our porous southern border is a national security nightmare waiting to happen.”<sup>13</sup>

There is not a single explanation for the extraordinary growth of NRMs, but scholars generally agree there have been major changes in “the religious market”, simply with a much larger supply of religious “options”. On the demand-side, major social changes such as urbanization, industrialization, internal displacement, inequalities and poverty make NRMs attractive to people seeking social insertion within a group of peers. Part of the attractiveness of NRMs can also be explained by the fact they offer restoration, healing and prosperity – an answer to the difficulties of daily life.<sup>14</sup>

Though the growth of NRMs has been impressive, it should not be exaggerated nor its social impact overestimated. Although Catholicism has indeed declined, it remains the most important religion in Latin America. Catholicism has also proven to be very vital, as the “success” of Charismatic Renewal Movement within its core demonstrates.

Moreover, the rapid growth of the NRMs (Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches, Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Afro-diasporan movements) has in many contexts reached a steady state. Though there are some exceptions, the percentage of Protestants has not increased much since the 1990s.<sup>15</sup>

Additionally, conversions in Latin America present a particular level of fluidity. Gooren<sup>16</sup> even speaks of “conversion careers”, referring to the recurrent pattern of people “shopping around” different religions and religious experiences. Conversions seem to be less intense, and are rarely permanent. Noting the increasing degree of fluidity of religious affiliations is important to avoid hasty conclusions. Similarly to political party disaffection described previously, the same occurs with religious affiliations.

## 4. Church attendance

As stated previously, because of the great number of “non-practicing Catholics” and even “non-practicing evangelicals”, church attendance is a more reliable indicator of religious affiliation than self-identification in opinion polls or censuses. Figure 2 presents the results of a survey about religious practice in Latin America.

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<sup>13</sup> “Borderline Obama. National security is not the president’s interest”, *The Washington Times*, 08/04/2010. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2010/aug/4/borderline-obama/>.

<sup>14</sup> Steigenga Timothy & Cleary Edward L. (2007). Understanding conversion in the Americas. *Supra note 8*, pp. 3-32.

<sup>15</sup> Steigenga Timothy & Cleary Edward L. (2007). *Supra note 8*.

<sup>16</sup> Gooren Henri. (2007). Conversion careers in Latin America: entering and leaving church among Pentecostals, Catholics and Mormons. In Steigenga & Cleary (2007). *Supra note 8*, pp. 52-71.

Figure 2. Weekly Worship Attendance  
(% who say they attend religious services at least once a week)

|                    | <b>Total</b> | <b>Protestants</b> | <b>Catholics</b> | <b>Difference</b> |
|--------------------|--------------|--------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Venezuela          | 26           | 67                 | 17               | 50                |
| Bolivia            | 41           | 76                 | 35               | 41                |
| Argentina          | 20           | 55                 | 15               | 40                |
| Brazil             | 45           | 76                 | 37               | 39                |
| Uruguay            | 13           | 47                 | 9                | 38                |
| Paraguay           | 32           | 66                 | 29               | 37                |
| Chile              | 19           | 51                 | 14               | 37                |
| Panama             | 48           | 77                 | 44               | 33                |
| Ecuador            | 38           | 67                 | 34               | 33                |
| Mexico (2016)      | 55           | 85                 | 54               | 31                |
| Peru               | 35           | 60                 | 30               | 30                |
| Puerto Rico        | 47           | 68                 | 39               | 29                |
| Mexico (2014)      | 45           | 72                 | 44               | 28                |
| Dominican Republic | 48           | 75                 | 49               | 26                |
| Nicaragua          | 55           | 72                 | 47               | 25                |
| Colombia           | 50           | 73                 | 49               | 24                |
| US Hispanics       | 40           | 62                 | 40               | 22                |
| Costa Rica         | 51           | 69                 | 49               | 20                |
| El Salvador        | 61           | 79                 | 60               | 19                |
| Guatemala          | 74           | 87                 | 72               | 15                |
| Honduras           | 64           | 76                 | 64               | 12                |

Source: Pew Research Center (2014); RIFREM (2016).<sup>17</sup>

Figure 2 indicates that in most Latin American countries the numbers of Roman Catholics who attend Mass at least once a week or more are between 25-50% of the national population, whereas the rest of the Catholic population only attends Mass a few times a year or not at all. This suggests that the majority of Catholic adherents in any country of Latin America can be considered “nominal” or “inactive” parishioners. Many of the active Catholics in a given country are probably participants in the Catholic Charismatic Renewal movement, which has led to more active attendance in the weekly mass and other religious activities, such as Charismatic conferences, retreats, prayer groups and home Bible study groups.<sup>18</sup> In absolute numbers, in some countries there are effectively more church goers among Protestants than among Catholics.

<sup>17</sup> Pew Research Center, Religion in Latin America. Widespread change in a historically Catholic region. *Supra note* 5, p. 43; RIFREM. (2016). Encuesta nacional sobre creencias y prácticas religiosas en México. Retrieved from <http://www.rifrem.mx/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/INFORME-DE-RESULTADOS-EncuestaNacionalMexicoCreenciasyPracticasReligiosas-2017-05.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> De la Torre Renée & Gutiérrez Zúñiga Cristina. (2007). Tendencias towards plurality and diversification of the religious landscape in contemporary Mexico. *Soc. Estado*, 23 (2). Retrieved from [http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S0102-69922008000200007&lng=en&nrm=iso&tlng=es](http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0102-69922008000200007&lng=en&nrm=iso&tlng=es).



## 5. Christian education at primary and secondary school levels

Since the late colonial era, the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America has had a great influence on society, especially in the area of education: both in public schools and in private primary and secondary schools and universities, which were often subsidized by the government. These educational institutions and programs were largely founded, staffed and administered by religious orders until the Independence era when many of these schools were taken over by the government in some countries, such as Mexico. However, in the majority of countries today, the government has continued to subsidize Catholic schools because they are an integral part of the nation's educational system and because treaties (concordats) with the Vatican require it.

Catholic schools (also called Parochial Schools) are distinct from their public school counterparts in focusing on the development of individuals as practitioners of the Catholic faith. The leaders, teachers and students are required to focus on four fundamental rules initiated by the Church and school. This includes the Catholic identity of the school, education in regards to life and faith, celebration of life and faith, and action and social justice.

Prior to 1960, most of the larger Protestant denominations and missionary societies had established Christian schools at the primary and secondary levels in many countries of Latin America, especially countries with large urban populations, such as Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Peru, Ecuador and Colombia in South America; Cuba, Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico in the Caribbean; Guatemala, El Salvador and Costa Rica in Central America; and Mexico.

During 1960-1961, the evangelical Foreign Missions Association (EFMA), with headquarters in Washington, DC, conducted a survey of Protestant Mission Agencies at work in Latin America and the Caribbean for the purpose of producing a statistical summary of evangelical work "in the hope of determining the unreached areas, as well as seeing what has already been accomplished" since 1937, when a similar survey was conducted by the Committee of Cooperation in Latin America and published as the *Evangelical Handbook of Latin America* (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Protestant Education in Latin America (1960)

| COUNTRY        | PRIMARY     | SECONDARY  | COLLEGE   | NORMAL SCHOOL | BIBLE INSTITUTE | SEMINARY  |
|----------------|-------------|------------|-----------|---------------|-----------------|-----------|
| CUBA           | 86          | 13         | 2         |               | 9               | 4         |
| DOMINICAN REP. | 31          | 2          |           |               | 4               |           |
| PUERTO RICO    | 37          | 6          |           |               | 3               | 2         |
| BELIZE         | 18          |            |           |               | 2               |           |
| COSTA RICA     | 18          | 2          | 1         |               | 4               | 1         |
| EL SALVADOR    | 3           | 1          |           | 1             |                 |           |
| GUATEMALA      | 28          | 2          |           | 1             | 9               | 1         |
| HONDURAS       | 12          | 2          | 1         |               | 6               | 1         |
| NICARAGUA      | 44          | 3          |           |               | 4               | 1         |
| PANAMA         | 13          | 2          |           |               | 6               |           |
| MEXICO         | 49          | 7          | 5         |               | 23              | 7         |
| ARGENTINA      | 56          | 10         | 1         | 1             | 6               | 7         |
| BOLIVIA        | 243         | 5          |           | 1             | 20              | 2         |
| BRAZIL         | 858         | 45         | 11        | 14            | 29              | 12        |
| CHILE          | 100         | 8          | 2         | 1             | 8               |           |
| COLOMBIA       | 180         | 14         | 3         | 4             | 10              | 2         |
| ECUADOR        | 26          | 1          |           |               | 5               |           |
| PARAGUAY       | 11          | 2          |           | 1             | 7               |           |
| PERU           | 37          | 3          |           |               | 13              | 1         |
| URUGUAY        | 13          | 2          | 1         | 1             | 3               |           |
| VENEZUELA      | 25          | 3          |           |               | 5               |           |
| <b>TOTAL</b>   | <b>1888</b> | <b>133</b> | <b>27</b> | <b>25</b>     | <b>176</b>      | <b>41</b> |

Source: PROLADES (2013).<sup>19</sup>

## 6. Theological education

After the establishment of the first major jurisdictions of the Roman Catholic Church in each country, the various European Catholic religious orders (priests and friars) and congregations began to recruit and train new members (novices) from among the local population in their convents and monasteries, which later led to the establishment of formal theological education programs to train local parish priests (secular) and religious priests (members of male religious orders). The first such formal theological institutions were called “seminaries” or “theological institutes,” and later similar programs were offered in the growing number of Catholic universities in Latin America.

Within the Protestant movement in Latin America since the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the larger denominations and missionary societies began to establish programs of theological education for their respective pastors and church leaders, as well as interdenominational programs and institutions. Today there are many national and international organizations that coordinate and develop theological education programs throughout Latin America (Figure 4).

<sup>19</sup> Holland Clifton L. (ed.) (2013). *Church Trends in Latin America*. San José, Costa Rica: PROLADES, p. 11. Retrieved from <http://www.prolades.com/blog-prolades/documentos/Essay%20on%20Church%20Trends%20in%20Latin%20America%20-CLH-rev4.pdf>

Figure 4. Seminaries, Bible Institutes and Universities in Central America (1984-2012)

| Countries    | Seminaries |           | Bible Institutes |            | Universities |           |
|--------------|------------|-----------|------------------|------------|--------------|-----------|
|              | 1984       | 2012      | 1984             | 2012       | 1984         | 2012      |
| Belize       | --         | --        | 5                | 6          | --           | --        |
| Costa Rica   | 5          | 10        | 24               | 35         | 1            | 4         |
| El Salvador  | 3          | 10        | 14               | 21         | --           | 3         |
| Guatemala    | 5          | 14        | 32               | 38         | --           | 3         |
| Honduras     | 1          | 7         | 16               | 26         | --           | 1         |
| Nicaragua    | 4          | 14        | 8                | 38         | --           | 3         |
| Panama       | 2          | 2         | 10               | 18         | --           | 1         |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>20</b>  | <b>57</b> | <b>109</b>       | <b>182</b> | <b>1</b>     | <b>15</b> |

Source: PROLADES (2013).<sup>20</sup>

Although in many countries of Latin America Protestant denominations and missionary societies have provided adequate programs and institutions of theological education for their pastors and church leaders, there is still a serious problem in some countries of failing to provide accredited programs at various academic levels, such as in the Republic of Panama. An urgent need exists in many Latin American countries to upgrade existing programs of theological education to include government approved and accredited programs of university-based theological education. Also, many church leaders cannot afford pursuing advanced theological education without a scholarship.

One of the countries in serious need of outside assistance is Cuba, where a great need exists for textbooks for programs of theological education. Although some evangelical leaders and directors of programs of theological education have access to e-mail accounts, most do not have Internet access and, therefore, are unable to download onto their computers available materials for their respective programs.

## 7. General theological trends

The so-called mainline Protestant Churches are broadly evangelical but may not adhere to specific conservative doctrines or practices. They preach from the Bible and believe it to be very important, but may not hold so strongly to the sufficiency and ultimate authority of the Bible. They might have a more tolerant attitude to women in positions of leadership authority in the church. Many of them have a long denominational history of being moderate or liberal in theological, social and political spheres in their respective countries. They have a more intense and focused concern about social justice, racial-ethnic-gender equality, human rights and ecological-environmental issues in modern society. They are associated together in ecumenical fraternal organizations, such as CLAI (Consejo Latinoamericano de Iglesias, the Latin American chapter of the World Council of Churches).

Conservative non-separatist evangelicals are the most numerous group in Latin America. This group includes both evangelicals who are non-Pentecostal and Pentecostals. The parent denominations of this group and independent churches merged with the Free Church movement in Europe and North America before their arrival in Latin America as the result of immigration

<sup>20</sup> Holland, Clifton L. (ed.) (2013). *Church Trends in Latin America*. *Supra note 19*, p. 15.

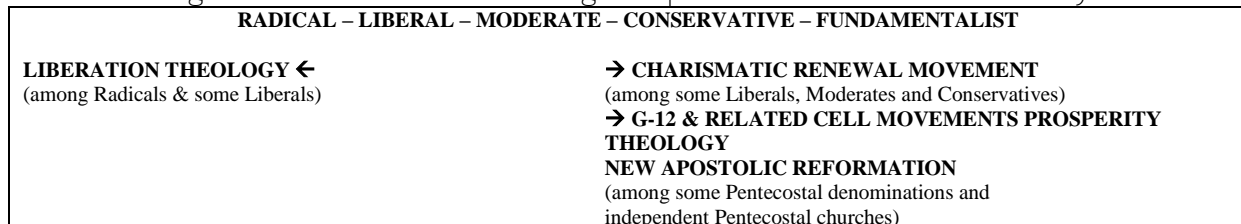
or missionary work in each country prior to 1950. This group is strongly represented in the founding of national denominations and independent churches that were derived from foreign denominations and/or missionary societies. They are conservative theologically and socially, but want to work together in unity with those with a broadly similar theological, social and political perspective and agenda. They are the most active participants in the various evangelical councils, federations or fellowships in each country, as well as in international organizations such as CONELA (Consejo Evangélico de Latinoamérica) and the World Evangelical Alliance.

Conservative separatist evangelicals are uncompromising in their doctrinal beliefs and practices, and often refuse to have fellowship with others who differ from their rigid positions, even when the “other believers” are within the same “Family of Churches” (such as the Baptist Family of Denominations and churches). Examples of denominations in this group are the so-called “Primitive Baptists” and “Landmark Baptists” who believe in the exclusive validity of Baptist churches and invalidity of non-Baptist churchly acts and profess to be non-Protestant Baptists who have always existed throughout church history and represent “a trail of blood” (blood-line) from the Apostolic era to the present time.

The Independent Fundamentalist Family of Churches is the most representative of these groups, many of whom are anti-denominational and anti-missionary society, and only relate to other local churches in “fellowships” of independent or autochthonous churches. This is true of most of the Plymouth Brethren-type groups and those groups of churches that can be classified as part of the Restoration Movement of independent Christian churches and churches of Christ. Most of the denominations and churches that are part of the Adventist Family of Churches belong in this category. Many separatist evangelical groups do not participate in the various evangelical alliances, federations or fellowships in their respective countries. An exception has been some of the church associations historically related to the Central American Mission in Central America and Mexico, which was one of the first nondenominational mission agencies at work in Central America beginning in the 1890s.

Based on the available information, it is nearly impossible to provide accurate estimates of the size of each of the presented groups of Protestants. Generally speaking, the older mainline Protestant churches tend to be small, while various recent evangelical (both Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal) movements have experienced important growth over the last decades (Figure 5).

Figure 5. The Protestant Theological Spectrum in Latin America Today



Source: PROLADES (2013).<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Holland, Clifton L. (ed.) (2013). *Church Trends in Latin America*. *Supra note* 19, p. 19.

It is impossible to do justice to the diversity of Latin American Pentecostalism due to space restrictions. In this section, only a few trends within Pentecostalism will be highlighted. The first is the G12 Vision & Strategy and related “cell group” movements. Whereas some of the churches that implemented these programs of discipleship prospered and became “mega-churches” in their respective countries, some of the leaders and members in other churches strongly objected to this new model and characterized it as a “modern marketing strategy” that ran counter to their denomination’s traditional methods and organizational structure.

Other Pentecostal leaders, both those within the traditional Pentecostal denominations and churches and those who identify with the neo-Pentecostal Movement (originally this term was used to identify the Charismatic Renewal Movement in Latin America, but it later was applied to those leaders and their followers who now are part of the New Apostolic Reformation), have developed their own versions of the G12 strategy within a democratic congregational framework, as opposed to an abusive authoritarian structure.

This emphasis on naming modern-day “apostles and prophets” later became known as the New Apostolic Movement, so named by Dr. C. Peter Wagner who became one of the major gurus of this movement after his “conversion” to the neo-Pentecostal movement and his association with the founder of The Association of Vineyard Churches, the Rev. John Wember (now deceased) in Anaheim, California. Today, there are many so-called New Apostolic Reformation networks that are led by self-appointed Apostles or their disciples who have received their “anointing” from a Senior Apostle.<sup>22</sup>

Another theological trend in Latin America and elsewhere has been the teaching of the so-called “Theology of Prosperity” or “Prosperity Gospel” that emerged mainly within neo-Pentecostal circles during the 1980s and 1990s and has continued to be controversial today. The Prosperity Gospel has been propagated by some of the leading Pentecostal TV personalities, especially on their TV programs and networks. The major proponent of the “Prosperity Gospel” has been the Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN, called *Enlace* in Latin America).

## 8. Ethnographic and socioeconomic background of Protestant adherents

This kind of information is difficult to find for most Latin American countries because of a lack of reliable scientific research of recent origin. However, Mexico is one exception because of research conducted by the National Census Department, some of the nation’s major universities, and other social scientists since the mid-1990s.

In recent years, especially since the 1950s, some regions of the country have had a transformation of religious affiliation due to the growing presence of various Protestant, evangelical and Pentecostal movements. In the Southeastern region of the country, formed by the States of Chiapas, Tabasco, Campeche and Quintana Roo, where indigenous populations are

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<sup>22</sup> Wagner Peter. (2012). The new apostolic reformation. *Renewal Journal*, 13 (15). Retrieved from <https://renewaljournal.blog/2015/01/24/renewal-journals-volume-3-issues-11-15/>

concentrated and where Catholic missions were less present than in the rest of country, Protestantism has managed to conquer significant proportions of the population.

It is a fact that in Mexico a person defined as indigenous (based on the language indicator) presents greater probability of belonging to non-Catholic Christian groups. For example, “of every 10 Pentecostals, two speak an indigenous language.” This is because “all the indigenous groups in the country without exception have shown a tendency to change their religion over the past two decades.”<sup>23</sup>

It is significant to recall that in this region the *Summer Institute of Linguistics missionaries* started an intense work beginning in the 1940s. The Pentecostals have a greater number of indigenous believers (274,000), with the largest presence among populations of speakers of Maya and Nahuatl languages. But from another angle, among all indigenous peoples there is a greater religious presence of Pentecostal adherents: “19% of the indigenous population declared itself Pentecostal, which tripled the national average in the country” between 1990 and 2000.<sup>24</sup>

The Northern Border States of Mexico also are distinguished as having large concentrations of Protestant adherents, although the indigenous population in this area is not large but it is characterized by extreme poverty, intense urban development, rapid industrialization, and high population growth due to internal migration from other parts of the country (“the northern migration stream” toward the U.S.-Mexican border).

It is worth mentioning that, although conversion to Protestantism in indigenous populations occurs in small household units, in the urban centers of greater population density conversion to marginal Christian groups occurs in highly institutionalized churches, such as the Mormons, the Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Light of the World Church (a sect). The latter is a distinctly Mexican denomination, whose international headquarters are in the city of Guadalajara, the capital of the West-Central region, which is characterized by the highest levels of Catholic population at the national level. In urban settings, believers are drawn to institutionalized churches because of their “marketing” efforts. In rural (indigenous) areas, the “house church model” is more prevalent because the highly institutionalized Protestant churches are much less present and accessible.

In general terms, Mexico has been characterized as having a “non-Catholic religious geography of misery and marginalization.”<sup>25</sup> Although in recent days, the Charismatic movement has begun to be accepted among sectors of the middle and upper classes in the largest cities of the country.

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<sup>23</sup> Garma Navarro Carlos & Hernández Alberto. (2007). Los rostros étnicos de las adscripciones religiosas. En De la Torre Renée & Gutiérrez Zuñiga Cristina (Eds.). *Atlas de la diversidad religiosa en México (1950-2000)*, pp. 203-226. México: Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social (CIESAS)/Colef/Secretaría de Gobernación/Colmich, pp. 204-205; Gutiérrez Zuñiga Cristina, Janssen Eric, de la Torre Renée & Rosa Aceves Ana. (2007). Los rostros socioeconómicos de las adscripciones religiosas. En de la Torre Renée & Gutiérrez Zuñiga, Cristina (Eds.). *Supra note 2*, pp. 187-202. Retrieved from <http://www.asociacionesreligiosas.gob.mx/work/models/AsociacionesReligiosas/Resource/70/1/images/cap6.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> Garma Navarro & Hernández. (2007). *Supra note 21*.

<sup>25</sup> Bastian Jean-Pierre. (1997). *La mutacion religiosa de America Latina. Para una sociología del cambio social en la modernidad periférica*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, p. 18.

## 9. The education level of evangelical pastors

There are few pieces of research on the education level of evangelical pastors, but this topic was included in this review because there is a general lack of theological preparation of a great number of evangelical pastors. There are important exceptions, but increasing the education level of evangelical pastors, is a critical weakness of Latin American churches.

Protestant missionary Duane E. Anderson's late-1990s study of evangelical pastors in Costa Rica gives an overview of the educational level of "The Costa Rican Pastor, His Person and His Ministry." This study showed that the leadership of most Costa Rican evangelical churches is young. The average age of pastors is 41.6 years. Most pastors are between the ages of 36 and 40. This study showed that currently 40.6% of pastors have been or are in Bible Institutes and that 51.9% have been or are in Seminaries.<sup>26</sup>

## 10. Average church size of Protestant congregations

The proportion of evangelicals in Central American countries is generally higher than in South American countries. It is not clear what the reasons are for this difference. However, the difference may be related to the proximity of Central American countries to the United States from where a great number of missionaries come. Below are presented a series of tables about the average church size in a few Central American countries where data is available. Although comparable information for South America is not available, trends are roughly comparable.

The next table provides an overview of the growth and size of protestant churches in Central America. One essential finding of the information presented in Figure 6 is that, the mega-church phenomenon is certainly characteristic of the Latin American church, but the majority of the churches in the continent are small communities.

Figure 6. Historical overview of Protestant Church Growth in Central America (1935-2010)

| COUNTRY                       | 1935                                |               |                | 1950                              |               |                |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------|----------------|-----------------------------------|---------------|----------------|
|                               | CHURCHES                            | MEMBERS       | AFFILIATED     | CHURCHES                          | MEMBERS       | AFFILIATED     |
| GUATEMALA                     | 172                                 | 15.943        | 40.657         | 303                               | 19.080        | 47.700         |
| BELIZE                        | 129                                 | 10.235        | 21.350         | 91                                | 5.766         | 25.000         |
| EL SALVADOR                   | 70                                  | 4.130         | 7.260          | 113                               | 5.220         | 13.050         |
| HONDURAS                      | 88                                  | 4.181         | 9.490          | 235                               | 8.230         | 20.575         |
| NICARAGUA                     | 75                                  | 6.242         | 19.301         | 196                               | 11.000        | 27.500         |
| COSTA RICA                    | 24                                  | 1.553         | 3.550          | 60                                | 4.500         | 11.250         |
| PANAMA                        | 72                                  | 9.139         | 28.543         | 256                               | 22.300        | 55.750         |
| <b>TOTALS</b>                 | <b>630</b>                          | <b>51.423</b> | <b>130.151</b> | <b>1.254</b>                      | <b>76.096</b> | <b>200.825</b> |
| <b>AVE. CHURCH SIZE</b>       | <b>79.0 members per church</b>      |               |                | <b>60.7 members per church</b>    |               |                |
| <b>FORMULA: A / M = RATIO</b> | <b>Members X 2.086 = Affiliated</b> |               |                | <b>Members X 2.5 = Affiliated</b> |               |                |
| COUNTRY                       | 1960                                |               |                | 1970                              |               |                |
|                               | CHURCHES                            | MEMBERS       | AFFILIATED     | CHURCHES                          | MEMBERS       | AFFILIATED     |
| GUATEMALA                     | 566                                 | 35.628        | 80.371         | 1.986                             | 150.080       | 355.114        |
| BELIZE                        | 85                                  | 6.467         | 28.238         | 190                               | 11.398        | 34.194         |
| EL SALVADOR                   | 400                                 | 18.506        | 43.078         | 853                               | 48.628        | 108.579        |

<sup>26</sup> Anderson, Duane. (1999). *The Costa Rican Pastor: His Person and His Ministry*, a Doctor of Ministry Dissertation for Columbia Biblical Seminary and School of World Missions, Columbia, SC. Retrieved from <http://www.prolades.com/cra/docs/chip/chipdiss.htm>.

|                               |                                     |                  |                   |                                     |                  |                   |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------|-------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| HONDURAS                      | 296                                 | 9.401            | 28.593            | 931                                 | 34.943           | 91.297            |
| NICARAGUA                     | 384                                 | 21.461           | 57.034            | 863                                 | 45.388           | 123.667           |
| COSTA RICA                    | 215                                 | 16.157           | 47.361            | 589                                 | 29.635           | 61.755            |
| PANAMA                        | 311                                 | 27.102           | 61.054            | 665                                 | 53.868           | 115.743           |
| <b>TOTALS</b>                 | <b>2.257</b>                        | <b>134.722</b>   | <b>345.729</b>    | <b>6.077</b>                        | <b>373.940</b>   | <b>890.349</b>    |
| <b>AVE. CHURCH SIZE</b>       | <b>59.7 members per church</b>      |                  |                   | <b>61.5 members per church</b>      |                  |                   |
| <b>FORMULA: A / M = RATIO</b> | <b>Members X 2.566 = Affiliated</b> |                  |                   | <b>Members X 2.381 = Affiliated</b> |                  |                   |
|                               |                                     |                  |                   |                                     |                  |                   |
| <b>COUNTRY</b>                | <b>1980</b>                         |                  |                   | <b>1990</b>                         |                  |                   |
|                               | <b>CHURCHES</b>                     | <b>MEMBERS</b>   | <b>AFFILIATED</b> | <b>CHURCHES</b>                     | <b>MEMBERS</b>   | <b>AFFILIATED</b> |
| GUATEMALA                     | 6.216                               | 286.129          | 1.161.600         | 9.278                               | 761.860          | 1.862.366         |
| BELIZE                        | 275                                 | 16.775           | 50.183            | 326                                 | 21.176           | 63.529            |
| EL SALVADOR                   | 2.059                               | 98.224           | 334.000           | 4.786                               | 333.307          | 779.350           |
| HONDURAS                      | 1.869                               | 77.054           | 300.000           | 3.782                               | 175.650          | 490.010           |
| NICARAGUA                     | 1.531                               | 78.387           | 281.000           | 3.452                               | 211.875          | 562.358           |
| COSTA RICA                    | 725                                 | 44.829           | 141.000           | 2.171                               | 153.683          | 272.807           |
| PANAMA                        | 1.034                               | 72.700           | 218.000           | 1.451                               | 134.604          | 339.620           |
| <b>TOTALS</b>                 | <b>13.709</b>                       | <b>674.098</b>   | <b>2.485.783</b>  | <b>25.246</b>                       | <b>1.792.155</b> | <b>4.370.040</b>  |
|                               |                                     | <b>adjusted</b>  | <b>1.685.245</b>  |                                     |                  |                   |
| <b>AVE. CHURCH SIZE</b>       | <b>49.2 members per church</b>      |                  |                   | <b>71.0 members per church</b>      |                  |                   |
| <b>FORMULA: A / M = RATIO</b> | <b>Members X 3.688 = Affiliated</b> |                  |                   | <b>Members X 2.438 = Affiliated</b> |                  |                   |
|                               | <b>Members X 2.5 = Affiliated</b>   |                  |                   |                                     |                  |                   |
|                               |                                     |                  |                   |                                     |                  |                   |
| <b>COUNTRY</b>                | <b>2000</b>                         |                  |                   | <b>2010</b>                         |                  |                   |
|                               | <b>CHURCHES</b>                     | <b>MEMBERS</b>   | <b>AFFILIATED</b> | <b>CHURCHES</b>                     | <b>MEMBERS</b>   | <b>AFFILIATED</b> |
| GUATEMALA                     | 13.158                              | 1.085.320        | 2.678.690         | 26.530                              | 2.033.343        | 4.409.031         |
| BELIZE                        | 433                                 | 29.275           | 83.096            | 705                                 | 65.086           | 153.574           |
| EL SALVADOR                   | 6.910                               | 494.635          | 1.188.670         | 7.700                               | 989.507          | 2.842.333         |
| HONDURAS                      | 4.994                               | 243.116          | 680.357           | 13.247                              | 720.740          | 2.856.327         |
| NICARAGUA                     | 4.864                               | 296.790          | 766.410           | 7.414                               | 731.008          | 1.550.524         |
| COSTA RICA                    | 2.779                               | 283.356          | 685.832           | 4.871                               | 413.708          | 912.708           |
| PANAMA                        | 1.763                               | 168.610          | 428.250           | 3.102                               | 310.161          | 817.395           |
| <b>TOTALS</b>                 | <b>34.901</b>                       | <b>2.601.102</b> | <b>6.511.305</b>  | <b>63.569</b>                       | <b>5.263.553</b> | <b>13.541.892</b> |
| <b>AVE. CHURCH SIZE</b>       | <b>74.5 members per church</b>      |                  |                   | <b>82.8 members per church</b>      |                  |                   |
| <b>FORMULA: A / M = RATIO</b> | <b>Members X 2.503 = Affiliated</b> |                  |                   | <b>Members X 2.573 = Affiliated</b> |                  |                   |

Source: PROLADES (2013).<sup>27</sup>

During the period 1950 to 1970, the Protestant movement experienced considerable growth in Central America, which produced a situation where the number of those attending church services was far greater than the number of communicant or regular members. By 1980, the average church size had dropped to about 49.2 members per church during a period of accelerated church growth nationally and regionally. The 1980s was a time of the consolidation of results from the previous period of rapid church growth in most countries, which caused the average church size to increase to about 71 members per church by 1990. Thereafter, the average church size has continued to increase each decade: 74.5 members per church in 2000 and an estimated 82.8 by 2010. In Mexico, currently there are about 75 members per church nationally (estimates, 2010).

However, the 2010 data for Central America is considered a low estimate because of the growth and development of Protestant mega-churches in this region, which were much smaller in size in 2000 and most were founded during the 1990s or later. After factoring in the growth of the mega-churches (defined as having at least 2,000 people in attendance at the combined church worship services on a given Sunday) in each country, the average church size can be expected to increase nationally, especially in the larger urban areas where the mega-churches are located. To date about 33 evangelical mega-churches have been identified in Central America (Figure 7).

<sup>27</sup> Holland, Clifton L. (ed.) (2013). *Church Trends in Latin America*. *Supra note* 19, p. 30.



Figure 7. Ranking of Mega-Churches in Central America

| Size (members) | Number    |
|----------------|-----------|
| +25,000        | 3         |
| 10,000-24,999  | 5         |
| 5,000-9,999    | 9         |
| 2,000-4,999    | 16        |
| <b>TOTAL</b>   | <b>33</b> |

Source: PROLADES (2013).<sup>28</sup>

The review of the Latin American church trends reveals a number of commonly accepted myths. It is a myth that most converts to evangelical Christianity belong to poorer classes. On the contrary, many wealthy Latin Americans have joined the Pentecostal movement. The mega-church phenomenon cannot be generalized either. Not all mega-churches are Pentecostal and not all Pentecostal churches follow prosperity theology.

## 11. Church budgets and spending patterns of Protestant denominations

It is very difficult to obtain information on church budgets and spending patterns of Protestant denominations. The general rule is that the larger the membership size or attendance in a local church, the larger the church budget, the size of the facilities and the church staff. If the average church size was about 83 members per church for all countries in the entire Central American region, then the average church budget can be expected to be relatively small by comparison.

In 1980, there were only a few local churches in each country of Central America that had 1,000 members or more, but with the passing of each decade the number of +1,000 member congregations grew in keeping with urban population growth patterns in each country, especially in the largest urban areas.

Traditionally in Central America, Protestant church growth resulted from the multiplication of small churches (50-100 members) throughout the country, starting in the major cities and expanding into the surrounding communities. In most countries of Central America today, there are local Protestant churches in nearly every district of every municipality of every province or department (state).<sup>29</sup>

Most of the new evangelical churches in outlying areas have been planted as “daughter churches or missions” by other churches of the same denomination, usually by large urban churches that train and send out church planting teams to begin home Bible study and prayer groups in communities without a local evangelical church; to conduct evangelistic crusades; to distribute Bibles, New Testaments and other Christian literature house-to-house; to provide a variety of human and social services to needy people in those communities; and to eventually win converts to Christ, baptize them and teach them the fundamentals of the Christian faith, and form new

<sup>28</sup> Holland, Clifton L. (ed.) (2013). *Church Trends in Latin America*. *Supra note* 19, p. 32.

<sup>29</sup> Holland, Clifton L. (ed.) (2013). *Church Trends in Latin America*. *Supra note* 19, p. 33.

congregations of born-again believers. Most of these activities are being done today using national resources without any foreign financial assistance or human resources.

## 12. Interpretation of Latin American church trends

The previous review of the main trends within the Latin American church reveals great strengths but also great weaknesses. One must be careful to make any farfetched generalization, but it could be said that while the growth and vitality of the Latin American church – particularly the evangelical movement – is uncontested, the Latin American church faces serious challenges.

The main challenge of the Latin American church is its overall lack of significance for society – transformational role of the church. Save some important exceptions, the Latin American church is not being relevant to society, and is rarely noticed in public debates or reaching out to solve social problems. This is particularly striking in countries where more than 40% of the population is practicing Christians of various denominations. The church's scope seems to be limited to its own walls, and outreach beyond its walls is particularly difficult.

The Latin American church has a huge potential to impact society, but this potential is largely left untapped. In general, Christians fail to acknowledge and address quality of life issues such as income disparity, health, education or public welfare. Also, church leaders rarely participate in efforts to address community problems or propose viable solutions; participate in community development activities, etc., especially in poverty-level communities and high-risk neighborhoods (lack of compassion, concern and advocacy for the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed, the infirm, victims of gang violence, etc.)

Part of the explanation for this situation is the extreme political polarization and conflicts over the participation of evangelicals in the political arena. The influence of prosperity theology in many Christian communities is another explanatory factor of this lack of participation.

There is yet another factor that explains the lack of social involvement of a great number of churches, which can be identified as “social apathy.” In Latin America, a large number of churches, mainly belonging to Pentecostal denominations, teach a theology with a strong segregation between “spiritual” and “earthly” matters – dualism – which explains an overall lack of interest in social issues and a very limited involvement of these churches in the pursuit of public justice.

Prosperity theology is essentially a materialist interpretation of the gospel which denies suffering as a path to blessing. Prosperity theology is not only a questionable theology; it greatly limits the involvement of Christians in society, community work, diaconal care, the public square and even in missions.

This finding is essential for understanding the lack of support for the Persecuted Church. According to this view social and societal involvement, such as any form of activity related to the containment of persecution, is seen as a loss of time and as useless in a world affected by sin in the anticipation of the new earth and the new heaven. Of course there are exceptions to this

phenomenon and the degree of social apathy may be very variable. Social apathy tends to be stronger in Central America than in South America, where the concept of “integral mission” has more followers. “*Most Pentecostals are not interested in social issues whatsoever, and are not likely to address the issue of organized crime in their congregations*”, says an Ecuadorian pastor<sup>30</sup>.

Also, as spectacular as the growth of the evangelical movement may seem, it has been stagnated in the past two decades, and some converts to evangelical Christianity are now abandoning the church. Decreasing church attendance in both Catholic and Protestant communities is a major trend that should not be neglected. Nominalism among church members (more adherents than actual members) is growing<sup>31</sup>.

It would not be fair to state that the Latin American church has quantity but not quality. However, issues such as the overall insufficient education level of pastors and the lack of access to theological education (in combination with deficient university accreditation) are sources of concern. Theological education has an additional weakness: it focuses mainly on biblical and pastoral aspects, but generally neglects leadership and management aspects, which are critical to administer any ministry. Moreover, most theological programs do not put much emphasis on the understanding of the social, political and cultural trends to which church leaders are expected to respond<sup>32</sup>.

At the same time, the possibilities for Christian education at primary and secondary school levels are increasing. Although most Christian schools are private schools – therefore only accessible to the better-off –, confessional education is legally safeguarded in most Latin American countries. Catholic religion classes are part of most public schools. Mexico, along with Cuba, are noteworthy exceptions, where all public schools are secular.

Another major challenge of the Latin American church is its lack of unity, in combination with the persistence of great theological differences – theological polarization. Though less prominent than in the twentieth century, there are still some major tensions and conflicts within the

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<sup>30</sup> See Petri. *Supra* note 9.

<sup>31</sup> “A review of the literature on desertion from all religious groups reveals that the greatest loss occurs among the 18-29 year-olds, which is the age bracket when most young people become independent of their parents by going away to college, getting a job, living on their own or with other youth, get married and begin to raise a family, etc. During this stage of independence from their parents and when their lives are filled with new activities of all kinds, these young adults tend to lose interest in religion in general and going to church in particular, regardless of their religious affiliation. Also, this is the stage in life when people begin to question the belief system they inherited from the parents, begin exploring new religious options, or drop out of religious activities altogether;” Holland Clifton L. (ed.) (2013). *Church Trends Revisited: The Vitality of the Church in Latin America*. San José, Costa Rica: PROLADES, p. 28. Retrieved from <http://www.prolades.com/blog-prolades/documents/Church%20Trends%20Revisited-SWOT%20Analysis-CLH-rev-6.pdf>.

<sup>32</sup> Indeed, “[s]ome countries lack accredited programs of theological education at the licentiate and Master’s levels, such as Honduras and Panama, and that few local pastors in most countries have more than an unaccredited Bible institute-level training (high school equivalent). Among senior denominational officials in Central America, many have graduated from Bible institutes and have had some seminary (licentiate-level) and/or university education. Most of the top leadership in evangelical mega-churches in Central America is composed of university graduates with secular degrees but with little formal theological training;” Holland Clifton L. (ed.) (2013). *Church Trends Revisited: The Vitality of the Church in Latin America*. *Supra* note 31, pp. 28-29.

evangelical-Protestant spectrum in Latin America due to the principal controversies that were mentioned earlier: the Pentecostal-non-Pentecostal polarization, Liberation Theology, the Charismatic Renewal movement, the Prosperity Gospel, the G12 Vision & Strategy, and the New Apostolic Reformation (and its emphasis on modern-day apostles & prophets, spiritual warfare, territorial spirits, dominion theology, etc.).<sup>33</sup>

There are theological, organizational and relational differences between the members of each Major Protestant Tradition (and between these Traditions) and Denominational Family (and between these Families). The definition of “Biblical soundness” varies among all of the component groups within the Protestant movement. The main theological and relational differences within the Protestant movement are between those that compose the Mainline Protestant denominations (Liberal) vs. evangelical groups (Conservatives and Moderates); WCC-CLAI-related groups vs. WEA-CONELA-related groups.

There is also a major theological divide between non-Pentecostal and Pentecostal groups and between these denominations and the Adventist Family of Churches, which often restricts interdenominational cooperation and expressions of unity. There remains the difficult problem of expressing unity in the midst of diversity, especially regarding conservative-separatist groups vs. interdenominational cooperation in evangelical alliances and fellowships. Also, in some areas, there is still a strong hostility and opposition from Roman Catholic neighbors.

In addition, Latin America is not immune to power struggles among leaders (conflicts regarding personalities, vision, mission-objectives and methods, theological differences, administration and management issues, finances, ethical issues, worship styles, gender issues, resistance to change vs. revitalization, organizational growth strategies, etc.). The existence of power struggles between missionaries and national leaders (divisions and schisms) greatly weakens the church which may have varying consequences on the church bodies, for example:

- Poor public testimony of members of the local congregation or church officials due to ethical and moral problems, whether within the congregation or in the community;
- Political and social polarization within the congregation on issues of public interest;
- Lack of integral church growth and a growing decline in membership and attendance;
- Growing lack of confidence in leaders among membership due to inadequate preparation of pastors and denominational officials and their poor job performance;
- Abuse of authority and lack of collaborative management;
- Lack of training in crisis management and conflict resolution;
- Lack of vision and planning;
- Resistance to change and modernization;
- Failure to train, inspire and mobilize the membership regarding vision and mission;
- General lack of discipleship among members and adherents;
- Failure to listen and respond to the concerns and address the felt needs of the membership.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Holland, Clifton L. (ed.) (2013). *Church Trends Revisited: The Vitality of the Church in Latin America*. *Supra note 31*, p.9.

<sup>34</sup>Holland, Clifton L. (ed.) (2013). *Church Trends in Latin America*. *Supra note 19*, pp. 5-36.

On a positive note, it must be observed most Latin American churches are self-sufficient and fund all their activities without any foreign financial assistance or human resources. However, one could question the prioritization of these activities. A closer look at church budgets and spending patterns of Protestant denominations, would reveal that the largest amount of the budget is spent internally on internal church activities. Indicators hereof are the prayer agendas and the attribution of church offerings.

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