

Pentecostal Human Rights Activists? Religious Motives in Gang “Rescue” Programs in Central America

Abstract

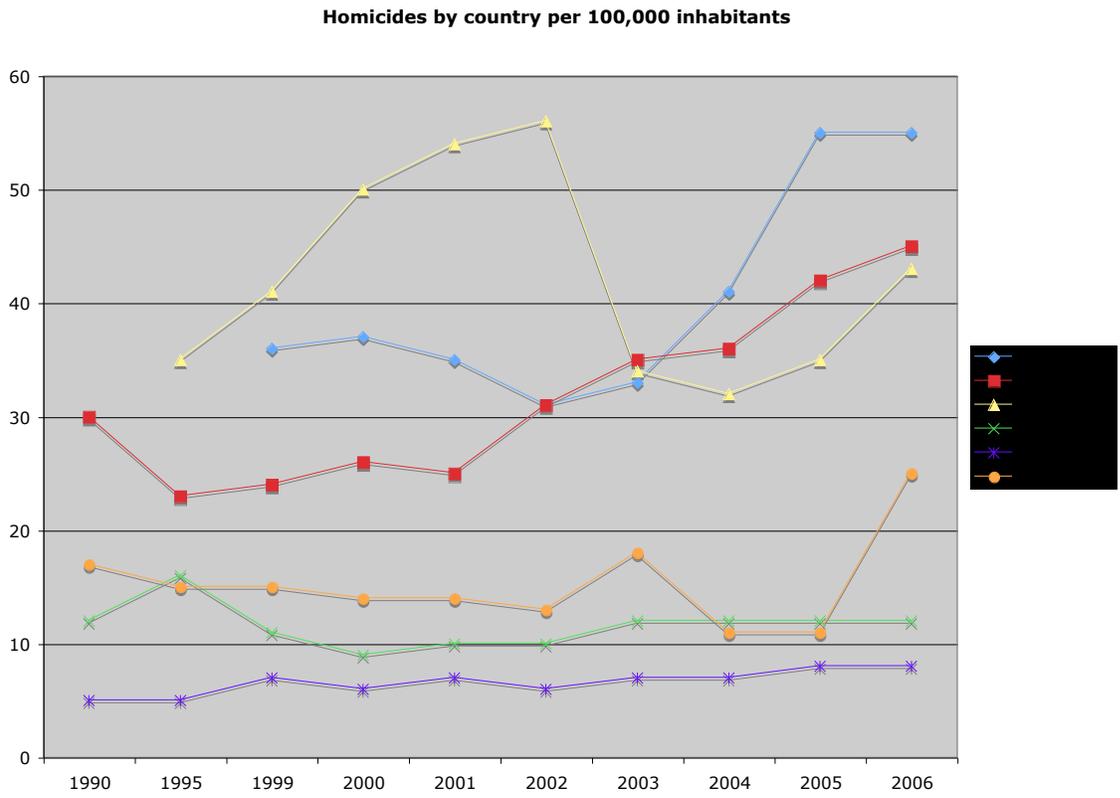
In the northern Central American countries of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, a wave of street violence has replaced the civil wars and political violence of the 1980s and early 1990s. In addition to drug cartels and organized crime, key actors in the growing street violence include thousands of members of the transnational youth gangs such as *la Mara Salvatrucha* and *la Mara Dieciocho*. Studies have found that in many popular barrios where gang membership is high, Pentecostal religion represents a well-advertised “refuge” from the gang (Castro and Carranza 2005; Gomez and Vasquez 2001; Wolseth 2008). Recent research by the author shows that Pentecostal congregations in Northern Central America have engaged in a great deal of ministry aimed at “rescuing” gang members from the gang and from the consequences of increasingly popular “social cleansing” campaigns on the part of police and vigilante groups. I argue here that such work constitutes one form of human rights work and I discuss some of the factors that propel Pentecostals into such often-risky work.

INTRODUCTION

Violence has plagued the northern Central American countries of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador for more than a generation. In the 1970s, 1980s, and the early 1990s, vicious civil wars wracked Guatemala and El Salvador while Honduras was the site of state-sponsored torture and disappearances propped up by a ubiquitous U.S. military presence. In Guatemala alone over two hundred thousand citizens, most of them non-combatants, were killed in a vast dirty war (RHEMI 1999). Political violence, coupled with stagnant economies and globalization, sent Central Americans, especially Salvadorians, fleeing to the United States by the hundreds of thousands in search of safety and economic opportunity. In the barrios of East Los Angeles many immigrant youths joined local gangs such as the Mexican-American-founded *Mara Dieciocho* and the White Fence. Salvadorian youth formed their own gang in the late 1980s called the *Mara Salvatrucha*. A crackdown by the Los Angeles Police Department on immigrant offenders in the 1990s brought many gang youth back to their home countries where they found a weak formal economy and an emerging drug and weapons market. By the late 1990s, these deported gang

youth had colonized local street gangs, organizing them according to the rules, symbols, and economic logic of the Latino gangs of Los Angeles.

Today, gangs and the fear of gang violence play an enormous role in the everyday lives of millions of Central Americans, even to the extent of shaping national politics and presidential elections. Whereas the political violence of the past is now far less common, street violence has escalated sharply. The homicide rate in each of these countries now hovers around fifty murders annually per 100,000 (OCAVI 2007), at least twice as high as the rate of the other nations in Mesoamerica.



* Source: Observador Centroamericano de Violencia (OCAVI)

To be sure, gang members themselves are not the perpetrators of all or even most violent crime (Barnes 2007) in these countries, but their contribution to violent crime is indisputable (Cruz and Portillo 1998). Furthermore, gang violence has its most direct physical and economic

impact on the marginal communities least equipped to protect themselves from it, leading one priest to conclude that gang violence represents a “war of the poor against the poor about which the government could care less” (FEPAZ 2006). In fact, governments do care about gang violence insofar as gang youth provide the perfect scapegoat for the escalating violence and offer an opportunity to return military units to the streets in “joint patrols” aimed at policing youth in marginal neighborhoods (Loudis, del Castillo, Rajaraman, and Castillo 2006). Widespread anger at gang youth has also manifested itself in the rise of “social-cleansing”—extra-judicial killings of children, adolescents, and young adults associated with the gang (Moser 2002). One poll conducted by a major Guatemalan newspaper found that as many as sixty percent of Guatemalan adults consider social cleansing an appropriate means of dealing with gang violence (Aguilar 2007). Human rights groups such as Human Rights Watch have denounced the rise in homicides of youth, most of which go uninvestigated.

Meanwhile, religion continues to play an enormous role in the social fabric of Central America and Pentecostalism has maintained its rapid pace of growth in each country of this study (Holland 2009). Because street violence looms large in the barrios of northern Central America—and indeed, in thousands of impoverished urban communities in the Global South—we need better research on how Central American Pentecostal believers and Pentecostal congregations are coming to terms with the increasing violence in their own communities. Gangs and gang ministries provide the perfect setting for examining the impact of Pentecostalism on these new forms of violence in the Central American barrio. In fact, a surprising number of Pentecostal¹ congregations have made gang ministry a key feature of their evangelization efforts.

¹ I use the terms Pentecostal and evangelical more-or-less interchangeably. It is well-documented that the majority of Central American Protestants are evangelical in theology and practice Pentecostal or charismatic forms of faith. For example, in Guatemala more than four fifths of the evangelical population self-identify as Pentecostal or charismatic. Pew. 2006. "Spirit and Power: A 10-Country Survey of Pentecostals." The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, Washington

Such congregations are plentiful in the marginal barrios where the gangs have a significant presence. In fact, a Honduran study of social-contextual variables related to gang presence found a positive statistical correlation between the number of evangelical churches in a Honduran barrio and the reports by residents of high gang presence (Cruz 2004). Just as important, Central American Pentecostals are highly evangelistic, viewing all non-members—especially gang members—as potential converts. But aside from my dissertation research (Brenneman 2009), only two studies have studied Pentecostal gang outreach in any detail. Gomez and Vasquez (Gomez and Vasquez 2001) found evidence of exit via conversion among Salvadorian gang members in San Salvador and in Washington D.C. and Jon Wolseth found that Pentecostal pastors in a Honduran barrio actively promoted their churches as places of “refuge” from the gang and the violence of the street (Wolseth 2008).²

Prior research related to religion and violence in Central America has tended to focus on macro-level political structures and political leaders at the national level (Freston 2001; Garrard-Burnett 1998; Steigenga 2001; Stoll 1991; Stoll 1993). Most studies on religion treat violence only tangentially or address only violence of a political nature (Berryman 2004). This focus is understandable given the enormous political violence enveloping the region in the 1980s and early 1990s. But the literature on Central American religion has all but ignored the topic of Pentecostal approaches to local violence that is not state-sponsored or ideological in nature.

David Smilde’s most recent research on Pentecostalism in Venezuela offers evidence that Pentecostals possess unique cultural skills for avoiding violent interpersonal conflict (Smilde 2009). My dissertation research among ex-gang members uncovered similar evidence of evangelical-Pentecostal strategies for avoiding and even, in some cases, de-escalating gang-

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² I am also aware of one dissertation currently underway comparing Catholic and Pentecostal gang ministries in Southern California.

related violence. In general, these strategies are not the work of what Miller and Yamamori call “progressive Pentecostals” (Miller and Yamamori 2007) nor do they spring from the members of a new class of “enlightened” or well-educated Pentecostals in mega-churches. Rather, they appear to flow from a literal reading of the gospels as interpreted by pastors and lay leaders in small Pentecostal congregations at the barrio level. As one Honduran Pentecostal evangelist stated at a Revival Meeting aimed at gang members on the outskirts of San Pedro Sula, Honduras, “When a human being comes to Christ he doesn’t need his weapons anymore. . . The Bible says you have to bless those that curse you.”

METHODS

During 2007 and 2008 I made multiple trips to each of the three countries in the “northern triangle” of Central America where transnational gangs are popular: Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador. In each country I interviewed as many former members of gangs as I could find and who were willing to be interviewed. In addition to conducting sixty-three semi-structured interviews with former gang members (fifty-nine men and four women) I interviewed dozens of professionals, clergy, and lay people who work with gang members and former gang members assisting them in the transition to safe and productive lifestyles after leaving the gang. I also took field notes during trips to prisons, in “red zone” neighborhoods, and at a tattoo-removal clinic. More than three quarters of the former gang members I interviewed reported converting to evangelical faith, usually in a Pentecostal church.

FINDINGS

A detailed review of my findings is impossible in a paper of this size. However, before launching into a discussion of the motives for gang ministry, a few points of interest are worth mentioning. My study revealed that evangelical-Pentecostal religion, especially that of the small,

often legalistic barrio church, provides several unique advantages to gang members intent on leaving the gang and fearful of the violent repercussions for doing so. Notably, I found that although the transnational gangs espouse lifetime membership through the slogan *¡Hasta la morgue!* (“All the way to the morgue!”)—and indeed, many gang members have reportedly killed former mates for leaving—most gang deserters reported that their leaders made special allowance for gang members who convert to evangelical-Pentecostal religion *and who demonstrate that they are sincere*. In fact, the strict morality and frequent services of Pentecostal religion provide the gang with a convenient litmus test for judging the authenticity of gang conversions (Brenneman 2009; Wolseth 2008). Furthermore, I found that some ex-gang members were attracted to Pentecostalism due to its highly emotional services and to the particular experience of expressing remorse and experiencing catharsis in the midst of a social group that encourages emotional displays of vulnerability, even among men. Since many gang members are known in their communities to have participated in significant acts of violence, these “public” conversions resemble what Braithwaite has called “reintegrative shaming”—a powerful process of reincorporating criminal offenders through public acknowledgement of remorse (Braithwaite 1989).³ Of interest in this paper, however, is the matter of why so many Central American Pentecostal pastors and lay leaders have chosen to engage in ministry aimed at bringing gang members and former gang members into the church. Although it would *not* be true to contend that all Pentecostals actively support efforts to seek out and convert gang members and bring them into the church, nevertheless in all three countries, I encountered numerous gang “restoration” ministries among Pentecostals. Whereas Roman Catholic parishes and priests

³ Of course the resemblance only holds up to a point. While a few congregations and ministries put ex-gang members to work in community service projects, most seek only religious and pietistic evidence of change, and none create full-scale reparations processes agreed-upon by the community at large.

tended to be involved in gang “prevention”—that is, social youth ministries broadly construed but not aimed at current gang members—Pentecostals in every city were actively engaging in gang “restoration” ministries involving personal interaction with some of the most marginal and “dangerous” members of their communities. In many cases, this work involved taking personal risks. In all cases, the ministries required resources of time and money. Spending either of these on what most Central Americans consider to be the “*lumpen*” of society requires both a personal/communal commitment and a belief in the efficacy of one’s program or approach. The Pentecostals I interviewed possessed both in abundance.

Most gang ministries do not have the resources or personnel to orchestrate a half-way home. They rely on heavy contributions of time and energy from pastors and volunteers in order to evangelize gang members, keep tabs on new converts leaving the gang, assist them in the job hunt and provide occasional subsistence aid for the new convert and his or her family. In short, the notion of restoration “mixes” spiritual and social aspects of gang ministry in a way not unlike Pastor Luis described the gang as a “spiritual problem.” When I asked Pastor Jose of Youth Restoration to describe what he meant by the term, he explained it this way.

For us restoration means precisely that: restoring [one’s] worth. When we speak of youth restoration (*restauraciòn juvenil*) our idea is that the name should produce in us as much as [the reforming gang members] the concept that you can be someone of worth again. You can once again be someone—how could we say it? It’s [about] your self-concept, and others’ concept toward you. We believe that the work that this title communicates has to do with returning to the person their quality of life. The quality of life in all senses beginning with the spiritual but then continuing to include giving back their emotional quality [of life] and their material quality. So in this sense we use the word restoration

because we believe it's the most complete, right? It's the one that best sums up what we're trying to do for them.

DISCUSSION AND A STORY

Few of the evangelical-Pentecostals I interviewed used the term “human rights.” In fact, I suspect most of these individuals would have been uncomfortable with the term due to its “secular” connotations. And yet, gang ministry, especially ministries which aim to bring deeply stigmatized youth back into the fabric of social society is *human rights work*. Many gang members and ex-gang members struggle with substance abuse, fear the “morgue rule,” and are under the constant threat of the “boomerang effect” of barrio violence. Bringing gang members or recent deserters into one’s church or ministry brings both challenges and hazards, and nowhere were such threats more boldly—some would say naively—confronted than in the home of Maria de la Luz Hernandez. Maria de la Luz, whose name means “Mary of Light” lives with her husband and their six children in a one-story cinder-block home on the dusty outskirts of La Ceiba, Honduras. In 2002, accompanied by a handful of members from her own Pentecostal congregation and a few other local churches, Luz began a ministry to gang members in the northern coastal city of La Ceiba, Honduras. The program, loosely known as “United in Christ” began simply as a visitation ministry aimed at evangelizing gang members on the streets and in the local prison and at helping them to leave the gang and overcome the challenges to living a crime- and drug-free life. But when the crackdown of the Maduro administration went into effect, many local gang members found themselves on the run and forced into hiding in the nearby mountains. When a fifteen-year-old gang member approached her asking for a place to stay, Luz invited him to come and stay in her home with her family. Shortly thereafter, Luz invited Camilo, the former M-18 leader to join her household as well. Camilo had just finished a

prison term and was running for his life. The ex-gang member recalled when Luz approached him after a worship service in the prison chapel shortly before he was to be released and told him, “God has made me a mother to you.” Since he himself had learned of his orphan status as a young teen, Camilo felt deeply moved by her pronouncement. After his release, Camilo spent several months in the Hernandez home, and soon word began to spread among those most desperate to find a way out of the gang, that safety and a modicum of stability was available at the home of “Hermana Luz” (Sister Luz). Eventually, Luz and her husband came to provide a kind of halfway house for gang members trying to escape the gang. A total of fourteen recovering gang members have found refuge in the Hernandez home. At one point eight young men lived and ate in the Hernandez home at a time sharing two bedrooms and a guest bathroom while Luz, her husband and their six children (including four young daughters) shared a bathroom and two bedrooms.

When I asked Luz to explain how and why she had allowed her home to become a half-way home for recovering gang members, she answered matter-of-factly, “Well, it wasn’t something that I had been planning for. All at once when I was about twenty-four, a relative of mine fell into a gang and that’s when we started to live the pain of the youth and the families.” Thus, on the one hand, the decision of Luz and her husband to place their household at risk by taking in gang members during the “hunt-down” was motivated by a simple, humanistic empathy. “No one was doing anything for them and we realized that they were dying. . . . We never made an open decision like, ‘Let’s bring home a youth!’ because we didn’t know how. It’s just that along the way a case came up . . . where we couldn’t really see another option than to bring them into our home.” Indeed, one could think of plenty of “options” other than bringing into one’s home not one but several gang members at a time, especially in a home with four

young daughters! But Luz seemed uniquely prone to viewing gang youth as though they were members of her own family—as if they were her children.

And yet Luz’s motivation goes beyond maternal compassion to include religious conviction. She spoke of feeling motivated by the spiritual rewards of helping converted ex-gang members find eternal salvation whatever the outcome of their immediate future.

Early on when so many youth were getting killed, there was a moment when every week one or two of our [ex-gang member converts] would be killed after getting out of prison. I got to the point where I said, “I don’t want to do this anymore because I don’t want to see them get killed.” But when I said that I remembered that God is interested in what happens with our soul and where our soul goes. And so I realized that they had Jesus inside of their hearts so it didn’t matter if they died because that soul was not lost—although I still cried every time they died—but I realized that that youth was going up there to rest with Jesus. That was the most important thing.

Nevertheless, such “purely” spiritual rewards as the confidence that saving souls would lead to the eternal rest of slain gang members clearly took a back seat to the motivation of seeing individual gang members “transformed” through after staying in her home. She spoke proudly and by name of former gang members who had found a stable life with a job and a marriage following their time in her home. Most stop by to visit or call her from as far away as California. Although Luz and her husband made the decision in 2006 to temporarily discontinue their hosting of gang members in their home for a time, they remain active in gang and prison ministry and had hosted another youth in early 2007. She stated, “I get passionate, passionate when I am with these youth—those that have left the gang or those that are still active or in prison. That’s where I feel really capable.” From her own account then, Luz appears motivated by a “mixture”

of religious, social, and personal motivations. This “mixing” of motives was quite common among the evangelical gang ministry leaders I interviewed.

In fact, “separating” religious and social motives is difficult if not impossible when listening to leaders of evangelical gang ministries. As Smith and others have pointed out, religion provides a narrative about how things “ought to be” that can motivate risky or “disruptive” action in a world that does not align with such values (Smith 1996). Evangelical gang ministry leaders tended to borrow frequently from biblical narratives and injunctions when explaining the motivational framework for their ministry. Luis and Nahum, two university students who work in the Salvadoran administration’s pro-youth program, conduct “*proyectos ambulatorios*” (walking projects) walking through “red zone” neighborhoods to seek out gang members and attempt to persuade them to leave the gang. They also visit prisons, organizing games and non-violent recreation for El Salvador’s thousands of imprisoned gang members. On evenings and weekends the two “check-up” on gang members they know who have recently left the gang, hoping that through such visits and by inviting them to church youth rallies, such recent gang leavers will remain motivated to retain their commitments. While traveling to a prison outside San Salvador, Luis and Nahum described to me their motivation using a variety of biblical themes including the story of “the good Samaritan.” “The story shows that Christians must come to the aid of those in need,” he said. He went on to point out that while others walked past the man who had been robbed and left for dead, the good Samaritan came to his aid, took him to a hotel and paid for his stay with his own money. Drawing a parallel between the victim in the story and gang members in general, he added that, “We don’t know what that man had been involved in before the robbery.”

Such biblical themes surfaced in interviews with other evangelicals as well. Pastor Luis,

in his critique of the larger evangelical world which, he feels, has ignored the plight of the gang members, argued,

Really the mission of the church is that—to support those most in need. They used to say to the Lord, “You spend your time with publicans and sinners,” right? The Lord said, “I have come to seek the sick of this earth, those with the greatest needs, not the healthy, because the healthy don’t need anything.” So we have identified with the people. There have been criticisms as well because the same [evangelicals] sometimes say, “They ought to take all of the gang members and kill them!”

In fact the language of taking gang members into account as “the least of these,” that is, as impoverished youth with great needs rather than as hardened criminals deserving punishment, was more common among evangelicals than I had expected. Pentecostal-evangelicals such as Luis and Nahum, Luz, and Pastor Luis viewed their mission largely in light of a biblical command to protect the weak, not merely to convert the damned. Although spiritual salvation was clearly a key component of all evangelical gang ministries, such spiritual concerns were often viewed in the context of a larger humanitarian concern for the well-being and future prospects of gang members.

Not all of the motivations for engaging in evangelical gang ministry were selfless. Whether or not they were willing to admit it, evangelical congregations and pastors could in fact realize certain benefits from gang ministry successes. After all, in the evangelical worldview a congregation in which former gang members are active and have made an obvious and public change in their lifestyle is one that demonstrates the evangelical principle that “God can change anyone.” Thus, when a high profile gang member or leader converts, he is likely to be “showcased” in the congregation in which he has converted and, should he continue to maintain

the evangelical lifestyle for a sufficient period of time, he will be given visible responsibilities in the church such as playing in the band or preaching on occasion. Converted gang members often travel with evangelists to give their testimonies at evangelistic campaigns or at mega-churches. A congregation with one or more converted ex-gang members participating actively is one in which “the spirit” is made visible to those in the local community.

In short, it is difficult to extricate social from religious concerns motivating evangelical gang “rescue” efforts. Within the evangelical worldview, Christians are to act responsibly toward their “neighbor,” especially those neighbors in need. But they are also to seek the salvation of everyone, including and especially youth involved in substance abuse, drug-dealing, and violence. This human rights work, even though it is rarely recognized as such, plays an important role in the barrios of Central America. I suggest here that although Pentecostal-evangelicals generally avoid the term, their theology holds impressive potential for building active networks of work on behalf of youth at risk of social cleansing. In fact, the individualist ideology undergirding Pentecostal-evangelical theology may, in this case, actually provide an important resource for energizing such work. Unfortunately, Pentecostal reticence to community organizing or political activism, documented elsewhere (Garrard-Burnett 1998; Smilde 1998) has severely limited the potential for an organized critique of the repressive, militarization of attempts at gang reduction on the part of police and the government. Future research ought to investigate the possibility for the expansion of the Pentecostal cultural frame to include a sustained critique of social structures and their undermining of the human rights of gang members.

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