

# El Salvador Is Fertile Ground for Protestant Sects

By MARLISE SIMONS

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SAN SALVADOR — Only a decade ago revivalist preachers were viewed with hostility in deeply Roman Catholic El Salvador, at times even treated as alien sorcerers — stoned, tied up in village squares and run out of town.

But from its almost-clandestine beginnings, the Protestant evangelical movement has now won influence and respectability, with senior military officers, businessmen, teachers and students among its followers. Revivalist preachers now far outnumber the Catholic clergy and say they have converted one of every five adults from Catholicism.

The movement has also become closely identified with the battle against the country's Marxist-led guerrillas. While its leaders in the past invoked purely spiritual reasons for their mission, now some say openly that their "crusade" is part of the fight against Soviet encroachment in Latin America.

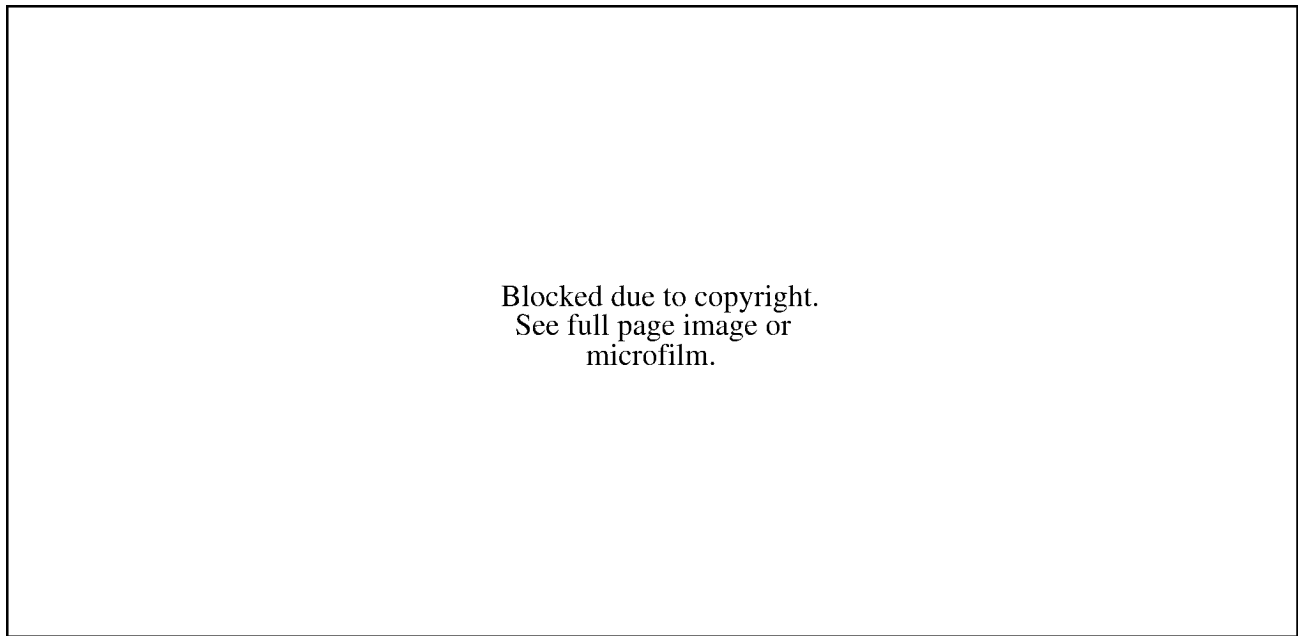
The dramatic growth of the sects here and elsewhere in Latin America is a result of an intense multimillion-dollar evangelical campaign by American-based churches and religious agencies. Their impact and anti-Communist focus appear especially strong in war-torn El Salvador. Preachers often refer to the leftist insurgents in theological terms, calling them "sinners," "forces of darkness" and "allies of Satan."

Because most of the sects here still receive considerable financing and guidance from their North American headquarters, their activities have further tightened the links between the United States and this small nation, which already depends overwhelmingly on American military and economic aid. American money has helped set up new temples, schools, clinics and radio stations.

Moreover, the movement's growth has widened the arena in which political conflicts are fought out under religious banners. The age-old mix of religion and politics in this region had centered largely on Catholic factions and disputing leftist, liberal and conservative views.

Now, like the new Catholic theologians on the left, the revivalist newcomers of the right use the Gospel as a vehicle to promote their political views.

Although several branches of Protestantism have been growing steadily



Worshippers attending weekday service at an evangelical church in San Salvador. According to an interdenominational agency, the number of Protestants baptized in El Salvador grew to 250,000 in 1985 from 70,000 in 1975.

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here since the 1930's, ambitious plans by fundamentalists to intensify their work in Central America are relatively new. According to missionaries, several large denominations decided to step up their activities within the past 10 years.

"The Catholic left and the Marxists were looking like the only people with a new message, the people with the appeal and the vitality," said an evangelical development expert here. "Many of us knew that was wrong, that had to change."

### Baptisms Up Sharply

Since then, missionaries supported by North American recruiting techniques and funds have helped establish new churches, training centers, bookstores and the region's first evangelical university, which opened in San Salvador in 1981.

According to Campus Crusade for Christ, an interdenominational agency, the number of Protestants baptized in El Salvador, which has a population of 4.6 million, jumped from 70,000 in 1975 to 250,000 in 1985. It says the movement has more than half a million followers and 2,465 large and small places of worship.

On recent visits to Sunday services in poor and well-to-do parts of San Salvador, church halls were full, despite rain squalls. At the Gamaliel Tabernacle, a new Baptist church set among well-appointed homes, the proceedings were unusually orderly for a culture that normally thrives on improvisation. Attendants in dark blue uniforms firmly directed worshippers where to sit or move. Outside, a church bookstall offered translations of American authors giving testimony or advice on self-improvement or how to make money.

There is no single theology or mission strategy in a movement as fractured as this, which involves large denominations and many small, independent offshoots. Evangelical leaders in the past have been circumspect about discussing their financing or organization with outsiders. But apparently emboldened by the broad conservative mood in the United States and their growing acceptance here, leaders have become more willing to talk about their strategy.

### Religious and Ideological

The California-based Campus Crusade for Christ, an agency specializing in recruiting and training, channels

converts to churches of the Pentecostal movement, which makes up three-fourths of the Protestants here. Its leaders say they regard their mission as both religious and ideological.

"Our main objective is to influence the university," said Manuel Martínez, an executive at the Campus Crusade for Christ. "All mass movements and revolutions begin there. The conflict we have in El Salvador today began in the universities."

But in 1980, one of El Salvador's more turbulent years, Campus Crusade mounted a nationwide drive called "The Spiritual Battle for El Salvador." As a pivot, it used an American-made film called "Jesus," which, according to the drive's organizers, has been shown in more than 100 towns and villages to 250,000 people.

Adonai Leiva, the national director for Campus Crusade, said that after a film show or a street rally people who "react most positively to our message" are visited by "Christian brothers or Campus Crusade coordinators".

"In our methods and strategy we emphasize the personal contact," Mr. Leiva said. "We usually follow a person through visits and contacts for three months, like a soccer player follows the ball. Then, if the person still resists, we incorporate him into a cell, a small group that often meets for prayer and discussion. Of course not everyone lets you go all the way."

### 'We Were Called by God'

Mr. Leiva conceded that the agency's tactics were not dissimilar to those used by its opponents on the left.

"The Marxists infiltrate the universities," he said. "So do we. Marxism is the first thing humanities students hear. It's planned that way. Therefore we try and get to them first. So we start work in high schools and prep schools."

The Marxists, Mr. Leiva continued, "also use the most effective methods, the personal approach, the small groups."

"They learned that from the Bible," he said. "But we were called by God."

Increasingly, preachers appear in remote refugee camps and villages where the short-handed Catholic clergy do not reach. In 1985, in a move apparently initiated by Washington, the local office of the United States Agency for International Development signed its first cooperation agreement here with a Protestant group to distribute food to refugees.

There are also signs that the Protestants are receiving encouragement from the armed forces. "We now preach in the barracks and the jails," said Edgardo Montano, a preacher with the Assemblies of God. "Before, only the priests could go there."

In Chalatenango Province recently, soldiers first helped out on a Protestant housing project, then the zone commander himself attended the inauguration. Asked whether this might identify the project with the army and leave it a target of the guerrillas operating nearby, the project director, the Rev. Edward Ward, said: "The army has had a murderous image for so long. It also deserves some good publicity."