

THE CHARISMATIC RENEWAL MOVEMENT IN COSTA RICA

By Clifton L. Holland, Director of PROLADES

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The origin and development of the **Charismatic Renewal Movement (CRM)** movement in Costa Rica during the period 1969-1979 had a strong impact on many Protestants and Catholics, although it also generated a great deal of controversy. Opponents, both Protestants and Catholics, denounced it as the “pentecostalization” of the Christian Church, whereas supporters praised it for bringing needed spiritual and liturgical renewal to traditional ecclesiastical structures and Christian communities.

The visits by Evangelical charismatics from Argentina (Juan Carlos Ortiz and Alberto Mottesi) to Costa Rica during 1969-1971 as well as several Catholic charismatic leaders (Father Francis MacNutt, Nurse Barbara Shlemon and Father Frank Corbett) during 1970-1973 gave birth to an ecumenical charismatic movement that removed some of the previous barriers to fellowship that existed between Catholics and Protestants; most of the latter prefer to be called Evangelicals.

After hearing about the “Argentine Renewal Movement” that began among the Plymouth Brethren in Buenos Aires in 1968 and quickly spread to other evangelical denominations, several evangelical leaders¹ in Costa Rica agreed to invite Juan Carlos Ortiz to visit San José and share what was happening in Argentina at a “Seminar on Evangelization,” held in September 1969, which was well attended by an ample cross-section of evangelical leaders from many denominations who were electrified by his message, according to the testimony of missionary Bill Cook.²

This historic event was co-sponsored by the Costa Rican Evangelical Alliance, the Department of Evangelism-in-Depth of the Latin America Mission (LAM), the Latin American Biblical Seminary (affiliated with the LAM), the Assemblies of God Bible Institute, the Foursquare Bible Institute and the Pentecostal Holiness Bible Institute. Also participating in the event were pastors from the Costa Rican Bible Church Association (AIBC, affiliated with the LAM), the Assemblies of God, the Pentecostal Holiness Church, the Association of Central American Churches (affiliated with the Central American Mission), the Baptist Convention (associated with the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board), the Foursquare Gospel Church, the Evangelical Methodist Church, and several smaller denominations. The participants included leaders from non-Pentecostal as well as Pentecostal churches and institutions, and some of them accepted the CRM as God-given while others rejected it as heresy.

Many of the early CRM activities were associated with the Bible Temple (“Templo Bíblico”) in downtown San José (affiliated with the AIBC), which was one of the largest evangelical congregations in the country in 1970.³ After Ortiz shared his testimony regarding the Argentine Renewal movement with the congregation of the Bible Temple, this historic non-Pentecostal church (founded in 1929) became a catalyst for the CRM in Costa Rica, which spread during the next few years to most of the AIBC churches in the Central Valley as well as among churches of the Baptist Convention, the Evangelical Methodist Church, the Association of Central American Churches and many Pentecostal denominations.

¹ The leader of this group was the Rev. Jonás González, General Secretary of the Department of Evangelism-in-Depth of the Latin America Mission, who took the initiative of corresponding with the Rev. Juan Carlos Ortiz in Buenos Aires during May and July of 1969.

² Guillermo Cook Bewick, “Análisis Socio-Teológico del Movimiento de Renovación Carismática con referente especial al Caso Costarricense,” (San José: Publicaciones INDEF, 1973), pp. 56-57.

³ See Pedro Wagner’s comments about this (1973:190-193) in *¡Cuidado! Ahí Vienen los Pentecostales*.

An additional catalyst for the spread of the CRM in Costa Rica was evangelical radio station TIFC, known as “Faro del Caribe,” owned and operated by the LAM, which broadcast the recorded messages that Ortiz delivered at the “Seminar on Evangelization” and at the Bible Temple in 1969. This was followed by recorded messages delivered in San José by the Rev. Gerardo de Ávila (a Cuban Pentecostal pastor from New York City) in 1970, the Rev. Alberto Mottesi (a Baptist pastor from Buenos Aires) in 1971, and Father Francis MacNutt (a Dominican priest from the USA) in 1971-1972, as well as Víctor Landero (an evangelical pastor from Colombia with the LAM-affiliated Association of Bible Churches of the Caribbean) in 1972.

The first visit by Father Francis MacNutt occurred in May 1970, accompanied by Methodist charismatic pastors Tommy Tyson and Joe Petree. According to LAM missionary Bob Sabean, the MacNutt team’s contact person at that time was the Rev. John Parker, superintendent of the Pentecostal Holiness Church, who invited a small group of Evangelical leaders to his campground in Santa Ana to hear the testimonies of MacNutt, Tyson and Petree concerning the CRM in the USA during the 1960s.⁴ However, it is not known whether or not MacNutt had direct contact with any Roman Catholic laypeople, priests or nuns during his first visit.

According to Sabean, Father MacNutt was in Costa Rica again in July 1971 and spoke to university students at Camp Roblealto, and he visited Costa Rica again later in the year.⁵ MacNutt’s charismatic message, accompanied by signs and wonders, opened many doors and attracted great interest, and he was invited to speak at the Latin American Bible Seminary and at Templo Bíblico in San José, Costa Rica, in 1971, according to Dr. Wilton Nelson (1983:95-96).⁶

After several members of the board of elders of the Templo Bíblico attended a private gathering of Catholics and Protestants in 1971 to hear the testimonies of Father MacNutt and other members of his team concerning the origin, nature and early development of the **Catholic Charismatic Renewal (CCR)** movement in the USA that began in 1967 at Dusquesne and Notre Dame universities, Father MacNutt was invited to speak at the Templo Bíblico on a Sunday morning. This was the first time in memory that a Catholic priest had spoken from the pulpit of an evangelical church in Costa Rica,⁷ and MacNutt gave a powerful message at Templo Bíblico regarding the person, power and gifts of the Holy Spirit (including “speaking in tongues,” prophecy and healing) that had a great impact on the audience. Beginning in early 1972, the charismatic renewal continued at the Bible Temple under the leadership of the church’s new pastor, Euclides Padilla, a graduate of the Latin American Biblical Seminary.

Following the visit by MacNutt and his team in 1971, a group of university students, Catholics and Evangelicals, who were strongly influenced by MacNutt’s ministry founded the Agape Coffee House ministry in May 1972⁸ in San Pedro, Montes de Oca, near the University of Costa Rica campus. This ecumenical coffee house ministry had a strong impact on scores of university students who became active Charismatics until it was closed sometime in 1974.

An additional influence that encouraged the development of the CCR in Costa Rica was the visit of **Father Francis Corbett**, a Charismatic parish priest from central Illinois, in January-February and July of 1973. In February of that year, Father Corbett participated in an ecumenical youth retreat at Camp Roblealto, where scores of high school and university students were impacted by the CCR movement. Many of them returned to their homes, parishes and campuses having experienced Charismatic renewal.⁹

It was in the days following this retreat at Camp Roblealto that Father Corbett spoke during Mass at Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Barrio México, where those who had attended the camp

⁴ Personal interview with the author conducted on 27 February 2009 in Escazú, Costa Rica.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Wilton M. Nelson, *Historia del Protestantismo en Costa Rica* (San José, Costa Rica: Publicaciones IINDEF, 1983).

⁷ Wilton M. Nelson, *El Protestantismo en Centro América*. Miami, FL: Editorial Caribe, 1982, pp. 95-96.

⁸ Vargas, Carlos Alonso. “Beginning from Roblealto: The Origin and Development of the Charismatic Renewal in Costa Rica.” Typewritten manuscript, dated March 8, 2009.

⁹ Personal interview with Robert Sabean by the author, conducted on 27 February 2009 in Escazú, Costa Rica.

first met the group that eventually became the “official” **Catholic Charismatic Renewal** (CCR) in Costa Rica in 1972, led by a Catholic couple – José Miguel and Silvina Arias – and José Miguel’s sister, Sor Cecilia Arias of the Sisters of Charity. Father Corbett also attended other meetings during those few days, and prayed over people to be baptized in the Holy Spirit.

The Arias family provided key leadership during the early development of the CCR in Costa Rica, which is characterized as being strictly Roman Catholic and involving older people, rather than high school and university students. The Arias’ led group evolved into a massive movement that resulted in a group of Catholics being baptized in the Holy Spirit and exercising the spiritual gifts, but Father MacNutt was not related to this initial group or to this Pentecost event. According to Carlos Alonso Vargas, this difference is very important:¹⁰

While our orientation [the Agape group] was to build relatively small communities in which people had a serious, definite commitment to each other and to the group as such, theirs was to holding big events where hundreds of people participated in a relatively anonymous, massive way with no mutual commitment. This, of course, reflects the two different expressions that the Charismatic Renewal had in different parts of the world: on the one hand, the smaller covenant communities with committed membership, which were often ecumenical; and, on the other, the massive “movement” that insisted on identifying itself as a strictly Catholic, even anti-ecumenical, thing.

In addition to the ecumenical Agape group in San Pedro, two other small Charismatic communities were also formed about this time in the San José metro area: the Shekinah group met in Barrio Escalante (mostly Catholics) and another group met in the Hatillo-Desamparados area and was ecumenical in composition. For about six months, all these “communities” met together every Monday in a general gathering for prayer and fellowship that held them together and was supposed to continue to strengthen the Charismatic experience. These meetings were held at the chapel of Colegio St. Francis in Moravia and were open to newcomers, both Catholics and Evangelicals. The Agape group continues to function today in the area of Sabanilla-San Ramón de Tres Ríos, but its name was changed in 1977 to “Comunidad Arbol de Vida” (Tree of Life Community), which is modeled after the ecumenical “World of God Community” in Ann Arbor, Michigan, founded in 1967.¹¹

Other catalysts for the spread of the CRM and CCR in Costa Rica were the establishment of chapters of the **Full Gospel Business Men’s Fellowship** (FGBMF, founded in 1951 by businessman Demos Shakarian in Los Angeles, CA) and **Women’s Aglow Fellowship** (founded in 1967 in Seattle, Washington) in the San José metro area during the early 1970s, which were well-attended by Evangelical and Catholic laymen. In addition to regular weekly luncheon meetings, both of these organizations also sponsored small Bible study groups in private homes for men and women as well as for couples. These small group meetings, directed by lay leaders, became an important part of the development of CRM and CCR movements in Costa Rica, not only in the Central Valley but also in other parts of the country.

The CCR movement in Costa Rica was mainly an effort led by Catholic laymen with the participation of a few Catholic priests and nuns. However, the **CCR** created a great deal of controversy within the Costa Rican Catholic Church, especially among traditional Catholics, because only a bishop or priest is authorized to perform certain liturgies and functions. Eventually the leadership of the CCR was assumed by **Padre Reinaldo Pol Iparaguirre**, who initially welcomed Catholics as well as Evangelicals to CCR activities, which were held in Catholic institutions and private homes. Padre Pol, who was a close assistant to Archbishop Carlos Humberto Rodríguez Quirós (1960-1979), is quoted as follows:

¹⁰ Vargas, Carlos Alonso. “Beginning from Roblealto: The Origin and Development of the Charismatic Renewal in Costa Rica.” Typewritten manuscript, dated March 8, 2009.

¹¹ <http://www.thewordofgodcommunity.org/>

Yo soy casi el primer sacerdote o de los primeros que se interesó [en el movimiento carismático en Costa Rica], que dio un poquito la cara por el movimiento cuando esto comenzaba y parecía una cosita de locos. Hubo un poquito no de persecución, sino de incomprensión, de parte de la jerarquía; persecución no la ha habido jamás, a Dios gracias. La incomprensión se ha dado a muchos niveles, y como yo estuve dentro del movimiento, me fui convirtiendo a los ojos de muchos como "el sacerdote carismático". En muchos casos nos vieron como el sinónimo, cuando no es verdad, sino que yo empecé con ellos, con ellos he marchado y con ellos termino... Yo creo que, con la gracia de Dios, ya la renovación no es sinónimo del Padre Pol, sino que dando cuenta que no es obra mía, que nunca lo fue, ni siquiera en el inicio, yo entré en el carro, me enganché, pero ya la renovación va tomando su independencia de personas para ser una obra de la Iglesia en general...¹²

According to Vargas:¹³

It's important to note that this "official" Catholic renewal was initially a lay group. (In the Catholic Church, religious sisters, and even male members of religious orders who are not priests, are technically laypeople—only those people who are ordained as deacons, priests or bishops belong to the clergy.) Members of the Arias family were the main leaders.

Fr. Reynaldo Pol ... joined the group some time later. According to Gaston de Mézerville, who was a good friend of Fr. Pol's, it was he (Gaston) who contacted Fr. Pol when Fr. Corbett first visited Costa Rica, and Fr. Pol was initially reluctant to this new charismatic thing. The Mass at the Barrio México parish church was the first or one of the first times that Fr. Pol participated in a charismatic event, and he stayed with the group mainly in order to provide pastoral guidance on behalf of Archbishop Rodríguez. Of course, Fr. Pol soon became a very enthusiastic Charismatic himself. His involvement and leadership is very well documented elsewhere.

At some point in the mid-80's there was a serious split in the Catholic Charismatic Renewal movement. José Miguel Arias and his group separated themselves from Fr. Pol and remained as a different group that was in some way unrecognized. I don't know what caused this or whether it was eventually healed.

In general, Charismatic Catholics made a significant contribution to church renewal in Costa Rica by opening an opportunity for greater participation by the laity in church activities, including hundreds of home Bible study and prayer groups that were established throughout the country, especially in the San José metro area. This movement deepened the faith and commitment of tens of thousands of Catholics and led to liturgical changes in worship services and to greater spiritual vitality in the daily lives of many Catholic believers.

However, by the mid-to-late 1970s, most Catholic and Protestant Charismatics went their separate ways, mainly due to restrictions placed on "ecumenical cooperation" between the two groups by the Catholic hierarchy on the one hand, and by non-Pentecostal denominational leaders on the other hand.

In 1982, an estimated 25,000 people attended a CCR celebration at the National Stadium in San José, which was reported to be the largest Charismatic gathering in the history of Costa Rica.

¹² Alberto Pozo Córdova, "El Movimiento Carismática en Costa Rica", un ensayo escrito para la Universidad Nacional de Heredia, Costa Rica, 1979, página 35.

¹³ Vargas, Carlos Alonso. "Beginning from Roblealto: The Origin and Development of the Charismatic Renewal in Costa Rica." Typewritten manuscript, dated March 8, 2009.

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For more information about the early development of the CRM and CCR in Costa Rica see the following documents: Guillermo Cook Bewick, *Análisis Socio-teológico del Movimiento de Renovación Carismática con Referencia Especial al Caso Costarricense* (San José, Costa Rica: Publicaciones INDEF, 1973); Alberto Pozo Córdova, "El Movimiento Carismática en Costa Rica" (a term paper presented to the National University of Heredia, Costa Rica, 1979); Liv Karin Erikstad Andersen, "Protestantism in Costa Rica: Pentecostal Growth and Catholic Response," Master's Thesis in History of Religions, Department of Cultural Studies, University of Oslo, Norway (Autumn 2001); and Carlos Alonso Vargas, "Beginning from Roblealto: The Origin and Development of the Charismatic Renewal in Costa Rica," a typewritten manuscript, dated March 8, 2009.

Also, David Stoll has a few paragraphs about the Charismatic Movement in Costa Rica in: *Is Latin America Turning Protestant? The Politics of Evangelical Growth* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990, p. 36):

In Costa Rica, evangelical missionaries told me that charismaticism had become had become a major source of defection [from Catholicism] to their churches. Following a charismatic movement [beginning in 1969], they claimed, the Costa Rican [Catholic] hierarchy had suddenly clamped down at the end of the 1970s. "Whole groups of charismatics suddenly saw the contradiction between mystical experience, Bible reading for themselves, and the [Catholic] hierarchy," the Latin America Mission's Paul Pretiz told me. "They went over to Protestantism en masse. So now the hierarchy always places a popular priest in charge, who is careful to include prayers to the Virgin and reinforce mother church." (Note 32: Stoll's interview with Paul Pretiz in San José, Costa Rica, on July 9, 1985.)

Several features of charismatic renewal attracted evangelical fishers of men. First, renewed Catholics were eager to learn from revivalists and faith healers, who usually turned out to be Protestant. Second, the renewal's position as a sort of halfway house between Catholicism and Protestantism made it a useful stage for certain kinds of converts. Especially for middle- and upper-class Catholics, reluctant to injure their social status by joining a minority religion, a charismatic prayer group offered most of the advantages of turning evangelical without the need to admit it. Third, if and when a priest attempted to rein in Catholic charismatics, the basis had been laid for a speedy exit into an evangelical church. As a result, Catholic charismatics were often said to be defecting to Protestantism wholesale. In any case, some evangelicals were using charismaticism to fill their tents. When Catholic authorities turned polemic, this was one of the reasons. (Note 33: Nelson 1983:334).

Although there is a great deal of truth in what Stoll says above, Carlos Alonso Vargas has a different slant on things regarding the ecumenical climate during the 1970s in Costa Rica:¹⁴

An important item to bear in mind concerning the spiritual context of those years is that ecumenism was somehow in vogue in Costa Rica during the 70's. On the one hand, the Catholic Church was experiencing renewal in all aspects of its life as a result of Vatican Council II (1962-1965). This renewal could be seen in the liturgy, the renewed interest in and use of Scripture, the involvement of the laity in church affairs and the emergence of lay-led movements, a new concern for the relationship between the Church and the general society with a special interest for the poor, and, not least of all, ecumenical openness. Alongside with the renewal came different kinds of crises that were beginning to manifest themselves—e.g. priests who started abandoning the ministry, excesses in liturgical experimenting, and the rise of Liberation Theology.

On the side of the Evangelicals—mainly those who had been present in the Costa Rican society for several decades, such as the different LAM ministries, the Methodists, the Baptists, etc.—there came

¹⁴ Vargas, Carlos Alonso. "Beginning from Roblealto: The Origin and Development of the Charismatic Renewal in Costa Rica." Typewritten manuscript, dated March 8, 2009.

a realization that they could now relate to Catholics as brothers and sisters and not be rejected or even persecuted by them as had been the case in the past.

The dominant figure in the Catholic hierarchy at that time was the Archbishop of San José, Carlos Humberto Rodríguez-Quirós, a would-be Carthusian monk who had to leave his monastery in France in obedience to his appointment as Archbishop by Pope John XXIII. Archbishop Rodríguez was deeply spiritual and pious, and also very conservative. Perhaps his personality and mentality wouldn't have made him very favorable to ecumenism and other forms of church renewal. But conversely, his withdrawn mood and the fact that he remained distant from the day-to-day life of the ordinary faithful set a very peculiar scene where many things (good and bad) could take place without his intervention. He would of course correct things that were obviously wrong if they came to his attention, but other than that his distance allowed a laissez-faire atmosphere in different areas.

It was in this context that what I call “the Prague Spring of ecumenism” flourished in Costa Rica for several years. Different ecumenical events were held such as prayer services, lectures and round-table discussions. Various groups that identified themselves as ecumenical were well regarded. And, when the Charismatic Renewal began to manifest itself in both Evangelical and Catholic circles, it was only natural that Charismatics of both confessions would do some things together.

Things began to change when various Pentecostal pastors, usually [North] Americans who had just arrived in Costa Rica, came with their theological background that Catholics are not Christians. So they would invite Catholics to their groups, and eventually persuade them that if they had actually come to know the Lord they had to leave the Catholic Church. Sometimes these Charismatic groups would be described as “ecumenical” or “open to Catholics”—but that was just bait. Many Catholic Charismatics began to turn Protestant. In my view, the Catholic charge against Protestants for proselytism was sadly true.

Catholic Charismatics began to react against this in several ways, most notably by emphasizing certain traditional Catholic practices in their groups. A lot of the focus on Mary that emerged at that time (after having decreased as a result of Vatican II) was merely defensive—just to make clear that they were Catholics.

It was also at that time (the late 70's) that Catholic bishops, not just in Costa Rica but in all of Latin America, began reacting against “Protestant proselytism” and labeling all Protestants as “fundamentalist sects” (the word “sects” in Spanish having a very negative ring, similar to “cults”). They also resumed a strong emphasis on different practices of popular piety that had fallen into relative disuse after Vatican II, such as rosaries, pilgrimages, novenas, etc. All this Catholic reaction was favored by the style of the new Pope, John Paul II (elected in 1978), who, contrary to Paul VI, was very favorable to traditional piety and to promoting Marian devotion. While John Paul II was in fact a great promoter of ecumenism and of the achievements of Vatican II, his more traditional spiritual style was taken advantage of as an endorsement of the strong anti-ecumenical mood that asserted its dominion in most of the Catholic Church in Latin America.

Soon after the accession of John Paul II to the papacy, he appointed Bishop Román Arrieta, until then of Tilarán, as Archbishop of San José. Archbishop Arrieta, who as Bishop of Tilarán had attended the Council together with Archbishop Rodríguez, was much younger than his predecessor and more open to various kinds of church renewal. He gave support to the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, but he also made sure that it was strictly Catholic. Although he supported ecumenism in theory, he often spoke against “fundamentalist sects” and discouraged specific expressions of ecumenism in his archdiocese. He only endorsed Comunidad Agape as an ecumenical group, because he knew us and he knew there were several priests that were related to us. The outcome of all this process was the new “ecumenical winter” that prevailed since the 80's and into the 21st century.

Another perspective on the CCR in Costa Rica is provided by R. Andrew Chesnut, who reported the following:¹⁵

With the great exception of the Brazilians, the majority of those episcopacies who have made official pronouncements of ecclesiastical approval of the CCR did so between the late 1970s and mid-1980s, just as panic over the Pentecostal "invasion" was reaching fever pitch. And it is no coincidence that the national episcopacies which extended official recognition during the period in question are those that were facing the most intense competition from Pentecostals for the loyalty of popular religious consumers.

Beginning with the Panamanian bishops in 1975, the episcopacies of Chile, Puerto Rico, Costa Rica, Honduras, and Guatemala extended ecclesiastical recognition to the CCR over the period of a decade. In addition to Brazil, the aforementioned countries have led the region in Pentecostal growth rates.

While all the national episcopacies have embraced the CCR as a strategy to compete with surging Pentecostalism, nowhere is the link as explicit as in the document drafted by the Costa Rican Bishops' Conference in 1979. The episcopal letter is a two-part document that simultaneously addresses both the CCR and the Pentecostal boom. The first part endorses the Renewal with what are subsequently to become standard caveats, such as caution with charismata and instruction not to de-emphasize the Eucharist. Most importantly, the bishops warn of the danger incorporating elements from "separated churches," or Protestantism (McDonnel Vol. II, 505). The second part, called "Protestant Proselytizing," makes a series of pastoral recommendations "in face of the extraordinary intensification of Protestant recruitment, especially by sects who are fanatic, proselytizing and aggressive toward the Catholic Church" (McDonnel Vol. II, 505). The pastoral recommendations converge perfectly with the mission of the CCR.

Bible courses, more attractive and participatory liturgy, better use of mass media for evangelization efforts and greater catechism are the major pastoral directives. The Costa Rican bishops also naively insist that their "separated brothers cease all aggressive and proselytizing activities" (McDonnel Vol. II, 506).

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Recently, based on further research, I discovered that the actual beginning of the CRM on Costa Rican soil began in early 1966 among Protestant missionaries studying at the inter-denominational Spanish Language Institute in San José. Below is new information that has recently come to my attention.

Veteran LAM missionary Robert Sabeau told me (phone interview on 20 February 2009) that, in early 1966, a new LAM missionary, Robert Smith, and his wife arrived in Costa Rica and attended the Spanish Language Institute at the same time as Bob and his wife Nancy. In March 1966, Robert Smith invited fellow students to meet with him for a discussion about the "charismatic renewal movement" taking place in New England, and a small group of students began to meet with the Smiths weekly on Saturday nights. Included in this group were Bob and Nancy Sabeau, Jack and Mary Anne Voelkel, Tom and Nina Jean Cherry (LAM's Costa Rican Field Administrator), Gerry and Nancy Reed (Evangelical Covenant Church, who later served for many years in Ecuador), among others.

¹⁵ "A Preferential Option for the Spirit: The Catholic Charismatic Renewal in Latin America's New Religious Economy," a paper delivered at the 2000 meeting of the Latin American Studies Association, Hyatt Regency Miami, March 16-18, 2000. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/pss/3177063>

See my e-mail correspondence below with retired LAM missionaries Jack and Mary Anne Voelkel, who spent most of their missionary career in Colombia in a ministry to university students.

From: Clifton L. Holland
Sent: Friday, February 20, 2009
To: Jack Voelkel
Subject: The early days of the charismatic movement in Costa Rica

Dear Jack and Mary Anne:

Bob Sabean told me this morning (phone interview on 20 Feb 2009) that a new LAM missionary, Robert Smith, arrived in Costa Rica in early 1966 and attended the Spanish Language Institute. In March 1966, Smith invited fellow students to meet with him for a discussion about the "charismatic renewal movement" and a group of students began to meet weekly with him. Included in this group were Bob and Nancy Sabean, Jack and Mary Anne Voelkel, and others.

Bob Smith was from New England, where the Charismatic Renewal began during the early 1960s:

...The movement soon entered the universities. **This began in New England.** In October of 1962, the glossolalia phenomenon broke out at **Yale University**, among members of the Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship. Included in this neo-Pentecostal revival were Episcopalians, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Methodists, and even one Roman Catholic. Five were members of Phi Beta Kappa, and some were religious leaders on campus (they were soon called "GLOSSO YALIES"). Thereafter, the movement spread to Dartmouth College, Stanford University, and Princeton Theological Seminary.

SOURCE: <http://www.rapidnet.com/~jbeard/bdm/Psychology/char/abrief.htm>

QUESTION: What do you remember about what happened in 1966 at the SLI regarding the situation with Bob Smith and the meetings that you and others attended in reference to the Charismatic movement in the USA?

Any help that you can give me in this regard will be greatly appreciated!

Blessings, Cliff

From: Jack Voelkel
Date: Sunday, February 22, 2009
To: Clifton L. Holland
Subject: The early days of the charismatic movement in Costa Rica

Hi, Cliff. Nice to hear from you.

I don't have much to add to what Bob Sabean shared with you. But this is what I remember. Mary Anne may add a word or two, as well.

Bob Smith and his wife were studying with us in the Spanish Language School. The Smiths were accepted candidates of the LAM, as were we.

Bob was asked to speak in the Language School Chapel one day and his theme was "The Greening of New England." In his talk he spoke of the experience many were having with the Holy Spirit. Following his message, many of us wanted to hear more. Mary Anne had had received a charismatic gift years before, privately. Bob's message resonated with her experience [better for her to be more precise here, if she so desires].

Then, as Bob Sabeau remembers, Bob Smith invited those of us who were interested to join together once a week, which became known as "The Saturday Night Prayer Meeting." It was at these meetings that many of us saw charismatic gifts utilized for the first time, and many of us came into a new experience with the Holy Spirit.

This Prayer Meeting, though at first regarded with suspicion by the LAM leaders at that time, including the field director, Tom Cherry, continued on for years. At one time [LAM missionary] John Huffman [and his wife Lea were participants]. Interestingly enough, Tom Cherry himself through other influences came into the charismatic fold and [eventually] became a pastor of a charismatic church in the U.S. [in Arcadia, California].

The experience of the "Saturday Night Prayer Meeting" brought deep spiritual refreshment to many of us who attended, and gave us a special sense of bonding with each other. It prepared Mary Anne and me to face some dimensions of spiritual warfare we encountered later on in Colombia

I trust this will be helpful, Jack

From: Mary Anne Voelkel
To: CLIFTON HOLLAND
Date: Monday, February 23, 2009
Subject: The early days of the charismatic movement in Costa Rica

Dear Cliff:

It has been interesting to revisit these days with you via e-mail. As I have gotten to know folks in Colombia, the US and England, I realize what a world-wide move of the Spirit it was.

In 1956/57 I was studying at Wheaton's nursing college just outside Chicago. On the night of my baptism in water (**I was attending Moody Church and Dr Alan Redpath was the Pastor**), I was worshipping and said to the Lord that I lacked words with which to praise Him adequately. I received a clear message in my mind that at first I didn't understand:

He said: "That's what the gift of tongues is for."

I was confused. I had never really heard anyone speak of the gift of tongues and I thought a bit and remembered the Book of Acts. So I asked Him: "How do you do that?"

I did not receive a verbal answer but I felt as though I were under a waterfall of His presence and thought: "Well speaking in tongues must involve speaking, so a bit hesitantly I began to praise Him in a language I did not understand." When I told my pastor that evening just before my water baptism, he urged me not to tell anyone about my experience and I obeyed him---I didn't even tell Jack, my fiancée. I gathered it was something one wasn't supposed to do or talk about, so I never used the gift again.

By 1964/65 we had married, founded a church in Quebec, had been accepted by the LAM and were in Toronto preparing to go to language school in Costa Rica. That year I felt God calling me to give Him our children's nap time. I began to read Tozer's book, *The Pursuit of God* and seek the Lord each afternoon.

One day as I was praising Him, our came that language I had used in my college years. I praised him like that from time to time and then one day it came as a "word from God" in English. I apologized to the Lord for putting words in His mouth. It happened like that several times and then **one day a friend invited me to a charismatic church in Toronto** and I heard tongues and interpretation for the first time and the Lord gently spoke to my heart and said "Those are the gifts you have."

Then we arrived in Costa Rica [1966]. **Bob and Dot Smith** were there as well and we had many conversations about the Holy Spirit. The Smiths and Jack and I and **Gerry and Nancy Reed** (of the Evangelical Covenant denomination) began to meet each week for prayer. We shared our experience with the Holy Spirit and prayed that God would meet us. Then Bob spoke in chapel on "The Greening of New England" and almost 40 people spoke to Bob afterwards and said that they had had similar experiences to his and to mine.

We began the **Saturday Night Prayer Meeting** [1966-1967], which lasted all that year and beyond. (We stayed more than a year in Costa Rica. I was learning about layout from John Rasmusson who was in charge of the *Evangelist* in Costa Rica----so that I could better write the E/D prayer letter called "Postmarked Peru" and later the letter called "Postmarked Colombia."

Most of us fasted before we went to the Saturday Night Prayer Meeting and spent time preparing our hearts for our time together. It was the highlight of the week. We asked God to meet us, to speak to us and to lead our prayer time.

The six of us attended as well as the Hanks, folks from language school and little by little, many people from the LAM. One of the female missionary doctors (whose name I can't remember), **Ruben Lores' wife Donna**, and many, many others.

We began to use our gifts as the Lord led us and people from the mission found refreshment in the Spirit. One night [in 1966] **Ruben Lores** stepped in without our knowing he was there. He was very doubtful about the meeting and to his surprise there was a tongue and interpretation just as he came in that didn't name him by name, but described the situation that he was going through and a difficult decision that he had to make and the words he received comforted him, strengthened him and moved him to the depths.

We often prayed for healing and God in His mercy heard us. **Jack received the gift of prophecy and used it.** Others received other gifts. Most of all, we sought the Lord and prayed. It was my understanding that the Saturday Night Prayer Meeting continued on for years and -- if I am not mistaken, **John Huffman** became its leader. You would know that detail.

We went on to **Peru** with ED [1967] and met with **David James Morse** and his wife. The E/D team was stuck in Peru and some 42 visas were being held up by a Mr. Clopetrofsky in the immigration Department and couldn't get into Colombia so the whole E/D team decided to do a total fast one day (no food and no liquids either---not even water.)

At 6:00 pm Bob Lazear and Charlie Cook, I believe, called from **Colombia** to say that Mr. Clopetrofsky had been fired and that all the visas were granted not only for our whole team but also for the other missionaries trying to get in as well.

In **Colombia** [1968] we worked on ED for a year and then asked to stay on to pioneer a student ministry. We began to evangelize and seek the Lord with our students. We grew in worship and developed the first praise song notebook. We met some American Charismatics and began to have fellowship with them.

May the Lord bless you in your research.

Mary Anne

(NOTE: The bold highlights and additions or clarifications in brackets in the e-mails above were added by the author – CLH.)

In a later e-mail, Jack Voelkel reported that after attending the Spanish Language Institute in Costa Rica during the school term 1965-1966, he and his wife were assigned to work with the LAM's Evangelism-in-Depth Team in Perú during 1967. Then they moved to Colombia to be part of the Evangelism-in-Depth Team there during 1968-1969 and lived in Bogotá.

Later in 1969, the Voelkel's were assigned by the LAM to begin a student ministry in Colombia where they had a very successful missionary career working with students at several major universities located near their "student center" headquarters in Bogotá.

The Voelkel's and other staff members who worked with them in their university student ministry in Colombia for decades were Evangelical and Catholic charismatics who impacted the lives of hundreds of students through their various programs of evangelism, discipleship and spiritual nurture. The Voelkel's student ministry in Colombia had its roots in the incipient charismatic renewal movement that began in Costa Rica during 1966-1967 in the "Saturday Night Prayer Meeting."

If this was true of the Voelkel's, then it was probably true of other missionary couples who participated in the "Saturday Night Prayer Meeting" in Costa Rica during 1966-1967 and experienced charismatic renewal, which may have become an integral part of their ministries in their various countries of service during the following decades.

NOTE: Please send the author any corrections or additions to this text that may shed more light on the origin and development of the Charismatic Renewal Movement in Costa Rica during the 1960s and 1970s.

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(about 6,085 words)