A Research in Progress Report on Protestant Mega-churches in Honduras

By Clifton L. Holland (General Editor)
Last updated on 9 October 2012

Introduction

I arrived in San Pedro Sula on Saturday afternoon, June 2, on a TACA Airlines flight from San José, Costa Rica, after a brief stopover and change of planes at the international airport in El Salvador. The Rev. Jorge Machado, Executive Secretary of the Honduran Evangelical Alliance, had made arrangements for me to be picked at the airport and taken to my hotel near the center of San Pedro Sula, the nation’s largest urban area and its chief industrial and financial center located on the lowlands of the northern Caribbean coast. Brother Jorge had also made arrangements with local church leaders to provide me with a guide and local transportation in the person of Mr. José Carlos Aguilar, a very friendly and likeable young man, who was a staff member of a para-church ministry. Thanks to his assistance, I was able to visit three mega-churches on Sunday, June 3, to meet with four members of the San Pedro Pastors’ Fellowship on Monday morning, and to get back to the airport in time for my afternoon flight to Tegucigalpa, the nation’s capital.

After a week of meetings with Evangelical church leaders in Tegucigalpa, the following Sunday (June 10) I visited three additional mega-churches in the Tegucigalpa metro area with the help of Mr. Nelson Hernández, who provided me with local transportation all week thanks to arrangements made by the Rev. Jorge Machado. After enjoying Sunday lunch together at a local Italian restaurant with Jorge and his wife, the Machados took me to the international airport in time for my next flight to San Salvador, El Salvador. Below is my personal account of visits to mega-churches in both cities.

Part I: On-site visits to mega-churches in San Pedro Sula on 03/06/2012
by Dr. Clifton L. Holland and José Carlos Aguilar

(1) Ebenezer Church of Christ - Iglesia de Cristo Ebenezer Honduras
(affiliated with Ebenezer Ministries of Guatemala)
Location: 500 meters before entrance to Colonia Campisa,
2nd Anillo de Circunvalación (highway to Ciudad Cortés)
San Pedro Sula

Pastors: Apostle Germán Ponce & his wife Ninoska de Ponce
Telephones: (504) 3259-2428 - 3392-0522
E-mail: iglesia@ebenezer.hn
Internet: http://www.ebenezer.hn/

PROLADES Classification: New Apostolic Reformation Pentecostal Family of Churches

Sunday Services: Congregational Worship 9.00 AM-12:00 noon;
Evangelistic Service 4:00-6:00 PM.
The main church facility (see diagram below) is a very large domed building (built in 2011), which is surrounded by a paved parking lot for 800-1,000 cars and micro-buses at the front of the main entrance to the auditorium, with special parking areas for motorcycles and buses on one side. A cadre of volunteer parking lot attendants assisted motorists in finding a convenient place to park their vehicles. Most of those who attend come to church activities in their own vehicles, but church officials rent an average of 10-12 buses on Sunday morning to provide transportation for approximately 600 to 700 people (about 60 people per bus). The church property is located on the outskirts of San Pedro Sula where there are few options for public transportation and there are no nearby housing areas.

As we entered the vestibule of the main auditorium, we were welcomed by “official greeters” (men and women) who were dressed in certain way to indicate their rank and function within the 10 groups of volunteer workers who provide a great variety of services to those who attend on Sunday morning or evening. We arrived at the beginning of the Sunday morning worship service at 9:00 AM to find the main sanctuary, which seats about 6,500 people, only about half full. It was not until 10:00 AM that the auditorium was nearly full of enthusiastic worshippers, most of whom were standing, singing, dancing and waving their arms in the air in tune with the music, which was led by a large worship team of singers and musicians on the main platform. In front of the worship team on the platform and below on the main floor of the auditorium a group of two dozen young people performed multiple choreographed dance routines and waved multi-colored banners during the first hour of the service. The music and singing was very loud and lively, and people of all ages (especially the youth) seemed to be enjoying themselves during this lively Pentecostal-type celebration. The church had an excellent sound system, good stage lighting, and a variety of equipment for multi-media presentations on large viewing screens at the center and on both sides of the main platform. The service was being filmed by a several cameramen for later distribution of recorded programs via the Internet and the church’s radio and television ministry.

At about 11:00 AM, at the beginning of the second hour of worship, those leading the service began speaking more softly into the microphones as the singers and musicians sang and played quietly in the background. There was a series of scripture readings, personal testimonies, announcements about current and future events in the life of the church, and the offering. We departed the service at about 10:30 AM so that we could interview several of church officials in a quiet location outside the main auditorium before leaving for our next visit to another mega-church. We were informed that the third hour of the morning worship service is devoted mainly to special music presentations, the sermon (45-50 minutes), and the altar-call.

It was obvious to me that most of those in attendance were middle and upper-middle class people, with large numbers of young people and children present during the first hour of the service. Shortly after 10:00 AM, most of the young people and children left the main auditorium to attend Sunday School classes in adjacent buildings. There was a separate building used for the Youth Ministry among high school and college students. During the worship service most of the adults present (men and women) were dressed casually, except for the church staff members and volunteer workers who were dressed more formally. The seating in the main auditorium was very comfortable in padded, brown individual chairs. There were a few empty seats at the back of the auditorium, but most of the sanctuary was quite full, with over 6,000 people in attendance.

The senior pastor and his wife, Apostle German Ponce and Ninoska de Ponce, are from Guatemala; they were sent out to plant a new church in Honduras in 1994 by Apostle Sergio Enríquez, the founder and senior pastor of Ebenezer Church of Christ of Guatemala City, an independent Pentecostal denomination (New Apostolic Reformation Family of Churches).
(2) Harvest International Ministry - Ministerio Internacional La Cosecha
(affiliated with the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel)
Location: Auditorium of Ministerio La Cosecha, San Pedro Sula

Senior Pastor: Apostle Misael Argeñal Rodríguez
Telephones: (504) 559-8327 / 8337; FAX: (504) 559-8289
E-mail:
Internet: http://www.ministeriolacosecha.org/

PROLADES Classification: Finished Work of Christ Pentecostal Family of Churches

Sunday Services: Devotional service 8:00-10:00 AM:
Morning worship service 10:00 AM -12:00 Noon;
Main Worship Service 5:00-7:00 PM

The senior pastor is an ordained minister of the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel with headquarters in Los Angeles, California. Pastor Rodríguez is an active member of the Association of Evangelical Pastors and Ministers in San Pedro Sula. He is President of the MILCO Communications Corporation, formed by a network of eight radio stations, located in the main cities of the country, and Television Channel 39. He and his associates have created a variety of ministries through the Foundation Honduras for Christ, which owns and operates a technical training school, a medical clinic, an orphanage, a primary and secondary school (with athletic fields and courts), and the Christian University of Honduras, all of which are located on the large church campus in the suburbs of San Pedro Sula.

The main auditorium of Harvest International Ministries is still under construction, but when completed it will seat an estimated 20,000 people. Currently, it can only seat about 10,000 people, most of whom are transported to the main Sunday worship service (5:00-7:00 PM) in a fleet of 100 to 150 rented buses (hold an estimated 60 passengers each). A smaller number of buses are used to bring people to the two Sunday morning services listed above, which have an average attendance of 1,500 to 2,000 from 8:00-10:00 AM and 2,000-2,500 from 10:00 AM to 12:00 noon, according to church officials that I interviewed.

Most of the attendees arrive by bus and not in their private vehicles. There is a large, unpaved parking lot but there were only about 100 cars in the parking area when we visited this church between 10:30 AM and 12:00 noon. We estimated the attendance at about 2,000 people, who were seated in white, unpadded folding chairs in the front of the main platform. There was a small group of worship leaders on the platform who led the congregational singing with the help of a few instrumentalists.

This ministry was begun by pastor Rodríguez and his family in 1996 in a large tent in a vacant lot in San Pedro Sula, and it has grown mainly through an expanding network of “family groups” that meet weekly in neighborhoods throughout the San Pedro Sula metro area. Currently, there are an estimated 1,500 “family groups” of 20-40 people each that meet weekly led by lay leaders who are trained and supervised by church elders; the elders are trained and supervised by members of the pastoral team (“cuerpo de ancianos”) led by Apostle Rodríguez.

This information was provided to me by the Rev. Mario Fonseca, one of the assistant pastors, who informed me that Harvest International Ministries has 56 affiliated churches in Honduras and functions as a separate jurisdiction of the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel,
independent of the national superintendent. Members of all of these affiliated churches meet annually in a mass crusade in the SPS’ Olympic Stadium, which seats 33,000.
Pastor Marco Argeñal and his wife María Consuelo founded this church in 1978 in Barrio Medina Concepción, San Pedro Sula, as a house church with seven people. It was not until 1982 that they were able to purchase a lot, next to their present location, and construct their first church building, which housed a congregation of about 400 people. As the congregation grew, they decided to expand and build a new church that seated 1,500 on the adjacent property, which was begun in 1988 and completed in 1992. Between 1992 and 2007, the ministry grew nationally with the establishment of daughter churches and a network of cell groups and discipleship groups.

During the same period, the founding pastors established Shalom Bilingual Academy (primary and secondary school), JMA School of Music, Shalom Bible Institute, Jerusalem Campground, and a Consumer Cooperative. These activities required the construction of an adjacent three-story educational building with 25 classrooms (see photos below). In 2007, the church officials purchased another property adjacent to their previous facilities and constructed a new auditorium that seats 2,500 people.

My assistant José Carlos and I attended the evening service of this church between 5:00 and 7:00 PM, where we found the auditorium filled to capacity. According to church officials, the same was true at the morning worship service, but many of those in attendance in the morning also were present in the evening. Therefore, we could only estimate the total Sunday attendance at about 2,500-3,000 people.

During part of the evening evangelistic service, between 6:00 & 7:00 PM, there is a separate Youth Service for high school and college students in a smaller assembly room, adjacent to the main sanctuary, led by the youth pastor and several assistants. The tone of that meeting (different songs and music that appealed to the youth) was quite different from the one being held in the sanctuary where the attendees were mainly adults and younger children. We discovered that the Rev. Marco Otoniel Argeñal, the son of pastor Marco and María Argeñal, is the Youth Pastor.

This mother church has founded six daughter churches in different parts of Honduras, all of which are described as independent neo-pentecostal in orientation and doctrine.
Part II: On-site visits to megachurches in Tegucigalpa on 10/06/2012
by Dr. Clifton L. Holland and Nelson Hernández

(1) Foursquare Gospel Center – Centro Evangélistico Cuadrangular
(affiliated with the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel)
Location: 5ta Avenida, entre calles 12 y 13, Barrio Concepción, Comayaguela

Senior Pastor: the Rev. Oswaldo Canales
Telephones: (504) 2220-1840; 2220-1841; 2220-1842; 2237-5737
E-mail: Oswaldo.canales@yahoo.es – contacto@cuadrangular.org
Internet: http://www.cuadrangular.org/

PROLADES Classification: Finished Work of Christ Pentecostal Family of Churches

Sunday Services: First worship service 8:00-9:30 AM:
Second worship service 9:45 -11:15 AM;
Third worship service 11:30 AM – 1:00 PM

We arrived at this church in downtown Comayaguela (adjacent to Tegucigalpa) about 7:45 AM shortly before the beginning of the first Sunday morning worship service, where we were greeted by the senior pastor, the Rev. Oswaldo Canales, whom I had met many years ago during a previous visit to Honduras (1980s). He invited us to join him in his office on the second floor of the church’s educational building, adjacent the sanctuary, where we conversed for about 20 minutes before heading downstairs to participate in the worship service. Nelson and I positioned ourselves at the rear of the auditorium, just below the stairs to the balcony section, so that we could observe the proceedings and take a few photos. The head usher reported that the auditorium has seating for only about 700 people, with an accumulate attendance in the three morning services of about 2,100 people.

I first visited this “mother church” of the Foursquare Gospel in the late-1970s, when I was involved in my first national church growth study of Honduras at the invitation of a group of prominent church leaders who co-sponsored the national study. The Rev. Dean Truitt, the missionary pastor of this central church at that time, assisted us in our fieldwork. The first Foursquare missionaries arrived in Honduras in 1952 and founded their first church at this location in 1955. Currently, there are 125 organized Foursquare Gospel churches in Honduras that are under the District Superintendent, in addition to those churches that are affiliated with Harvest International Ministries in San Pedro Sula (see previous mention of this mega-church) and supervised by General Pastor Misael Argeñal Rodríguez.

When I asked Pastor Oswaldo Canales about causes of Foursquare Gospel growth in Honduras, he mentioned three important factors: (1) the establishment of cell groups (“grupos familiares”) that meet during the week in private homes (his central church has 170 such groups that met on Saturday); (2) a strong program of discipleship for church members; and (3) the consolidation of new believers into the life of the local church. It was obvious to us during our visit to this church that those in attendance were very enthusiastic about their worship experience.
We arrived at this church at about 8:40 AM during the first worship service and remained there until about 9:30 AM. After we asked to speak to a church official, we were greeted by assistant pastor Mario Emel Gonzalez who cheerfully agreed to converse with us about the life of this congregation, which was founded in 1983 and is the largest one in this denomination. The auditorium has a high ceiling with exposed metal support beams; its seating capacity is only about 1,250. According to Mr. Gonzalez, both Sunday morning services are filled to capacity, which means that about 2,500 people attend regularly.

The church has a fairly large parking lot in front of the main sanctuary, with a large two-story educational building at the far end of the lot. Although many attendees arrive at the services in their own vehicles, church officials rent an average of 12 buses each Sunday to provide transportation for those who live in distant communities and lack public transportation. Only a few people who attend live nearby, so the rented buses are an important contribution to the growth of this church, which is located in the outskirts of Tegucigalpa near a major highway, which facilitates access to these church facilities, not only on Sundays but also on Wednesday and Friday nights when attendance averages about 1,000 people at each of these services. One of the reasons for church growth is the functioning of about 500 cell groups that meet weekly in private homes: 100 cell groups for men, 250 cell groups for women, and 150 cell groups for the youth.

Senior Pastor Ana Ruth Diaz, born in Tegucigalpa in 1951, began her pastoral career at age 20 and has become a very well-known leader within her denomination and nationally in Honduras. She pastored five other congregations, both in urban and rural areas, before founding Oasis de Amor in 1983. The church’s website claims that Oasis de Amor has about 6,000 members, which probably includes people who attend the cell groups but may not attend the Sunday services, since the maximum attendance in both of these services is only about 2,500 people. The larger figure may also include children and youth who attend Sunday School classes and youth activities, some of which are held at the same time as the Sunday morning worship services.

The pastoral team also includes, in addition to her co-pastor Justo E. Betancourt, pastors Oscar and Kary Garcia who administer the network of youth cell groups, and pastor Mario Emil Gonzalez who administers the network of men’s cell groups.
Iglesia de Dios de Amor

Miercoles
Escuela de Lideres Mujeres
7:00 - 8:00 pm

Sábado
Culto Jóvenes (2 servicios)
3:00 - 5:00 pm
5:00 - 7:00 pm

Domingo
Cultos Generales (3 servicios)
6:00 - 8:30 am
10:00 - 11:30 am
5:30 - 7:00 pm

Una Iglesia para Bendecir las Naciones
(3) Evangelistic Center of the Assemblies of God -
Centro Evangélico de las Asambleas de Dios
Location: Colonia San Ignacio 5ta Entrada,
frente a Blvd. Fuerzas Armadas, Tegucigalpa

General Pastors Miguel and Jacky Montoya
(Miguel Montoya is president of the Tegucigalpa Pastors Association)
Telephones: (504) 2220-1840; 2220-1841; 2220-1842; 2237-5737

PROLADES Classification: Finished Work of Christ Pentecostal Family of Churches

Sunday Services: first morning worship service 8:00-9:15 AM; second morning worship service 9:45 -11:00 AM; third morning worship service 11:30 AM – 12:15 PM; evening worship service 3:00 - 5:00 PM

Nelson and I arrived at this church at about 9:40 AM near the end of the first Sunday morning worship service, so we witnessed the last few minutes of that service and the beginning of the second service until our departure at about 10:30 AM. The large, split-level auditorium has comfortable padded seats for about 2,600 people. By 10:15 AM seating on the main floor was nearly full and the balcony was about one-third full. According to a church spokesperson, about 1,400 people attend the first Sunday morning service, about 1,700 attend the second service, and about 2,100 attend the third morning service, which gives a combined total attendance of about 5,200 people on Sunday mornings. Most of those who attend the Sunday evening service also attended one of the morning services, so we did not include attendance in the evening service in our calculation for the total Sunday attendance. According to this church’s website, it is the largest congregation of the Assemblies of God in Honduras.

The second worship service began with very loud congregational singing, led by a worship team of five vocalists and six musicians on the main platform. Many members of the congregation stood and clapped their hands or raised their arms in worship, and some of them also danced a jig in front of their seats or in the aisles. Later, an offering was taken without any long introduction or appeal for funds, and announcements were made verbally as well as using a multimedia presentation on a large central screen and several smaller ones. First-time visitors were publicly recognized and given a brochure about the church by an usher, while those seated nearby extended a warm greeting, handshake or hug. This was followed by more congregational singing and by special music from the worship team (female vocalist). The auditorium had a good sound system and stage lighting. A cameraman video-recorded parts of the worship service and the pastor’s sermon for use in a later TV broadcast via ENLACE Honduras Channel 57. We observed that there were more women in attendance than men at this worship service, and that most people were well-dressed.

The church was founded in 1994 by Assembly of God missionary Bill Strickland using a large tent in a vacant lot. The congregation grew in size over the next decade and achieved mega-church status about 2005, mainly because of the formation of cell groups among church members during the week in private homes. By 2009 there were about 1,200 cell groups and current there are an estimated 1,300 cell groups meet in the metro area of Tegucigalpa-Comayaguela with a combined attendance of about 8,000 people. The church has a pastoral staff of 12 people and operates a primary and secondary school of the church premises (owns a fleet of 12 buses).
**International Christian Center - Centro Cristiano Internacional (CCI)**

Location: Residencial El Trapiche, Toncontín, Tegucigalpa

General Pastor Alberto Solórzano  
Telephones: (504) 2239-6915; 2239-6925  
E-mail: info@ccihonduras.org  
Internet: [http://www.ccihonduras.org/](http://www.ccihonduras.org/)

PROLADES Classification: New Apostolic Reformation Pentecostal Family of Churches

Sunday worship services:  
- first morning service 9:00-10:30 AM;  
- second morning service 11:00 AM – 12:30 PM;  
- evening service 6:00-7:30 PM.

This church was founded in 1999 and during its first years of existence met at the facilities of the International Christian School on Saturdays and Sundays. Eventually, the congregation purchased a large property and constructed its present facilities at the current location. The main auditorium has seating for an estimated 1,650 people in padded metal chairs. According to a church official, the auditorium is nearly filled to capacity during each of the three Sunday worship services, which means that the total estimated attendance is about 4,500-4,800 people.

We arrived at this location about 10:45 AM as people were leaving the first worship service, so we were able to observe the gradual increase in attendance: at 11:00 AM the auditorium was only about one-quarter full and by 11:25 it was about three-quarters full. The worship team consisted of six vocalists and five instrumentalists on the main platform; I remember that the song leader had a very good singing voice. While the congregation sang a variety of Gospel songs, the words were projected on a large screen at center-stage and two smaller screens of each side of the platform. First-time visitors were publically recognized and handed a brochure about the church’s activities. Announcements were made using a multimedia presentation. This was followed by another multimedia presentation about CCI’s worldwide ministry and its affiliated churches in Latin America and Africa, and then a special offering was taken for the support of its growing missionary work.

The floor of the auditorium was carpeted and there was an excellent sound system. A cameraman filmed the service with a video camera and the service was broadcast live on the church’s TV network. The speaker of the morning was Apostle René Peñalba, who is the founder and president of CCI and bishop of CCI’s Global Missionary Network (founded in 2003), which now includes over 180 local churches in 24 countries in the Americas (10 churches among Hispanics in the USA and affiliated churches in Mexico, Central America, Ecuador, Argentina and Chile), Europe, Africa and Asia; but he is not the pastor of this particular congregation. The Rev. Alberto Solórzano is the General Pastor of CCI Tegucigalpa and also president of the Honduran Evangelical Alliance. Bishop Peñalba is also the president of CCI Communications Group, which consists of CCI Radio, CCI TV, CCI Publications, *La Razón* newspaper, and CCI’s various websites. CCI’s TV studio is located on the second floor of the auditorium.
The Rev. Alberto Solórzano
Dr. Clifton Holland and his assistant Nelson Hernández

Dr. Holland and the Rev. & Mrs. Jorge Machado