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Tuesday, Apr 27, 2004

Breaking news

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Posted on Mon, Apr. 19, 2004

RELIGION

Boy evangelist touches crowd

Alejandro Arias is only 16 and well on his way to building a worldwide congregation

BY SAMUEL P. NITZE
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The boy evangelist Alejandro Arias walks out among the worshipers and touches them -- on their faces, on their foreheads - and one by one they collapse, dropping into the arms of church volunteers hovering nearby.

"They are sensitive to the Spirit," he said, microphone in hand, his voice carrying through Cornerstone Church in central Davie. ``Thank you, Lord Jesus. Thank you, Lord Jesus."

In many respects, the scene is not unusual for a congregation steeped in the Pentecostal or "charismatic" traditions, which emphasize active, emotional worship, the laying on of hands, healings and a belief that Jesus is present.

But what is unusual is the 16-year-old Costa Rican preacher at the center of it all, who returns to preach in Miami-Dade and Broward this week. As he strode back and forth at the church, cutting the air with his free hand, he looked younger than 16, standing maybe five feet tall, his black suit loose on a slight frame. But his presence was not a child's.

He held the diverse Davie congregation rapt for three hours. Worshipers wept, cheered and applauded as his voice moved from barely audible whispers to bellowed refrains.



INSPIRED: Boy evangelist Alejandro Arias directs his healing power to Jody Clawson, center, during a visit to the Cornerstone Church in Davie. CANDACE WEST/HERALD STAFF | [More photos...](#)

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In a whisper: ``I don't know if you feel it, but Jesus is here. I can feel Him."

At top volume: "More revival! More revival!" and ``Only believe! Only believe!"

He spoke in a mix of English and Spanish, with a translator walking at his side.

FAN OF BILLY GRAHAM

An admirer of famed international evangelists Billy Graham and Benny Hinn, Arias said he aims to spread his message of hope, love and salvation across Latin America and the United States, and, eventually, ``to take the Gospel worldwide."

He spoke of opening worship centers for alcoholics and addicts, of reaching out to children, of using television, the radio and the Internet to get his message across.

Arias' parents said their son was different from the start -- closing himself in his room at age 5 or 6 to preach to toy soldiers owned by his younger brother.

"We told ourselves, `He's gone crazy,'" said Damaris Naranjo, his mother. ``We knew nothing of God."

A few years later, he began to preach in parks and on buses, and at 11, with help from a pastor in his home city of Alajuelas, in churches.

"I've seen many, many people come through here -- top ministers in the nation -- and he is unique," said Cornerstone's senior pastor, the Rev. Dominick Avello, who helped arrange for Arias and his parents to visit the United States. ``His desire to be set apart for service to the Lord is very pure."

In a recent interview, Arias said, ``We have a mission to bring evangelism to all the world, and God is giving us great success. We want to bring the presence of God to all the children in all the states."

His mother sat on the floor nearby, playing videos of a younger Arias ministering to large gatherings.

He has preached to crowds of thousands at home and in Colombia, Guatemala and Venezuela, she said.

The broad outlines of his story are not uncommon in Pentecostal or charismatic Christian circles, according to several religious scholars.

"He stands in a well-defined tradition of child evangelists, particularly among Pentecostal groups," said Leo Sandon, professor emeritus in religion and American studies at Florida State University. ``It's almost a textbook case."

Arias' desire to spread revival from his native Costa Rica to the United States and beyond reflects the increasingly transnational character of Pentecostalism and its strength in Latin America, said Manuel Vasquez, an associate professor of religion at the University of Florida.

`SWEET SENSATION'

Kim Ramasir of Miramar was among the worshipers who stopped to buy a tape on her way out. Minutes earlier, she had dropped to the ground as Arias touched her -- filling her with the spirit, she said.

"It was a sweet sensation, the most beautiful thing -- my knees couldn't stand up to it," she said. ``He is a servant anointed by God Almighty."

Partway through the Davie service, he spoke of pending plans to embark on ``crusades of healing and miracles."

Arias welcomed offerings, and velvety sacks were passed around. Arias' mother stood near her son, filming. When the service ended, Arias' father sold cassettes for \$7 and videos of earlier services -- this was his fourth at Cornerstone -- for \$20.

Avello brought Arias to his nondenominational church of 600 members after a sister church in Knoxville invited him there to speak.

"I brought him here on the recommendation of a very seasoned pastor," Avello said. ``The whole congregation enjoyed him and embraced him."

Doubts about some evangelists' motives reached a high point in the late 1980s after financial and ethical lapses of television evangelists like Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Bakker. But they were exceptions, Avello said.

"He is the real deal," Avello said of Arias. ``He is a very honest, very pure, a very innocent young man. His motives are very clear and forthright."

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