



Mormon conversions surge in Latin America

Guatemala offers glimpse of changing tide in region

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GUATEMALA CITY, Guatemala - Clutching the Book of Mormon and dressed in a white starched shirt and neatly pressed charcoal colored slacks, Willy Guzman walked across the cracked sidewalks of Zona 6 in Guatemala City to the shiny, white church that rises above the modest and mostly shanty flats of the neighborhood.

As it neared 8:00 a.m. Sunday morning, the streets were bustling with men dressed in Western-style suits and women in skirt suits pushing baby strollers, all making their way towards the church.

"Everyone walks to church," Guzman explained, "so as not to make anyone work on this day of worship."

As he approached the Mormon church gates, Guzman was greeted by several church Elders, mostly Americans speaking in heavily accented Spanish. Being the church music director, they inquired about his music selection for the service and what instruments would play accompaniment.

Music is part of the reason he enjoys being a Mormon, but he was quick to add that, "Mormonism is a lifestyle. When you are Mormon you practice your religion everyday, not just on Sundays."

Guzman is a recent convert among a sea of Catholics in Guatemala.

He has been a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for nearly two years now and it was his wife Wendy, 24, and a lifelong Mormon herself, who introduced him to church Elders (referred to as "Elders" because of their ordination to the priesthood office) about four years ago. It is then that Guzman began to take the classes that would lead to his change of faith.

"It is funny actually because at one point, when I was beginning to feel a bit indifferent about going to church it was Willy who would push me to go on Sundays," Wendy Guzman said.

Explosion of growth in Latin America

The Guzmans are among a growing number of Latin Americans who have turned to Mormonism in the last few years. According to the church, there are 12 million members worldwide with 4.5 million members in Latin America alone. In comparison, there were only 700,000 Mormons reported in Latin America in 1980.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was founded in Fayette, New York in 1830 by Joseph Smith. A major chapter of church history involved the westward trek by Brigham Young in 1847 and the expansion of the church to Salt Lake City, Utah. Until recently, membership was primarily concentrated in that state and North America in general. But, today, the majority are based outside the United States.

Dr. Manuel A. Vasquez, Assistant Professor of Religion at the University of Florida, Gainesville, said the Mormon Church -- particularly for many Latin Americans -- has come to symbolize the perfect

balance between the contemporary and the traditional.)

"Mormonism is an American form of Christianity in that it represents all of the American values of self-discipline and self-reliance," said Vasquez, noting there is also a very strong emphasis on traditional family values.

"Strong gender roles still exist within the Mormon church, which is very appealing to many Latin American families in which the father still plays the central role."

For the Guzmans, the emphasis on traditional family values is an appealing characteristic as well as the idea of being part of a modern day, global organization.

"Once we raise our children, as dictated by our faith, we do plan to travel and complete missionary work on behalf of the church -- as a couple, of course," said Wendy Guzman smiling at the prospect of traveling to distant lands.

Young American missionaries

The Guzmans have made long-lasting friendships with church Elders or missionaries they have met who represent not only a connection to the church but serve as a gate to a world beyond Guatemala.

"We end up spending so much time with the missionaries that in most cases you end up becoming really close," said Wendy Guzman. "And they are not all American -- we have met Samoans, Nicaraguans, Puerto Ricans -- I mean from just about everywhere."

Missionaries usually travel in pairs and are dispatched worldwide to teach Mormon doctrine. According to the church, about 75 percent of its missionaries are young men between the ages of 19 and 26 and they serve for 24 months. At the age of 21, women can also join a mission but serve only 18 months. Missionary life is restricted to study, prayer, proselytizing and community work.

Currently, the church has over 337 missions in 165 countries worldwide.

"The Mormons have an excellent missionary outreach," Vasquez said. "They make the effort to learn the language and culture of the people they want to reach and this method of evangelizing really works."

Tides of change

Twenty years ago the Guzmans would have been among a tiny minority as Mormons in Guatemala, a country whose Catholic roots stem to the 18th century when Spanish Conquistadors set out to Christianize most of Latin America.

Guatemala is still largely Catholic with nearly 75 percent of the population, but Evangelical and other Protestant denominations have made headway in the last 25 years.

Mormon missionaries, for their part, arrived in Guatemala in 1947 with only 66 members. By 1984, when the Guatemala City Temple was dedicated, membership had risen to 40,000. And by 1998, membership had quadrupled to 164,000.

"In Latin America these are all churches who have given Catholicism a run for their money," said Vasquez. "And in large part the success of the Mormon Church in this region is because it is almost like a vicarious enjoyment when you go to church -- you escape the drudgery of every day life. It is almost like a catharsis."

Leonor Ayala is an assignment editor on the NBC News Assignment Desk. She recently returned from a trip to Guatemala.

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