

Argentina's Awesome Revivals

Lessons in Evangelism and Spiritual Warfare from South America

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Editor's Note: Pastor Chris Simpson went with Dr. Wagner and others twice in 1991 and 1992 to observe the Argentina Revival firsthand. It is now believed by many that the Pensacola Revival of 1995-2000 probably stemmed from this event in Argentina in the 1990's. It is of note that Evangelist Steve Hill was present in Argentina during this period before visiting the Brownsville AG Church in Pensacola on Father's Day of 1995. This article was compiled in late 1992.

ARGENTINA

One of the most successful models of urban evangelism that I have recently been in contact with is taking place in Argentina. Throughout the history of Protestant missions to Latin America, Argentina has been one of the more resistant nations. With the exception of the Tommy Hicks crusade and its aftermath in the early 1950s, the evangelical movement in Argentina has been pretty lackadaisical.

But this changed dramatically with the Falkland Islands war in 1982 when Argentina tried unsuccessfully to occupy the Malvinas Islands, as they call them. The British victory caused a radical change in Argentine social psychology. National pride, for which Argentines were internationally notorious, was severely damaged. The church had failed them, the military had failed them, Peronism had failed them - they were ready to try something new.

The fact of the matter is that well before 1982 the basis for Argentine pride had severely eroded. Once the world's tenth strongest economic power and boasting a standard of life higher than that of southern Europe. Argentina was the jewel of South America, peaking during the reign of Juan Domingo Peron and his followers through the 1950s and 1960s.

As his influence waned in the early 1970s, Peron linked up with a powerful occult practitioner, Jose Lopez Rega, known popularly as "el brujo" (the warlock). Lopez Rega served under Peron as social welfare minister, and after Peron's death in 1974 became the chief advisor to his wife, Isabel Peron, during her two years as president. He erected a public monument to witchcraft (since dismantled), and is said by many to have publicly cursed the nation when he lost power with the military coup of 1976.

Spiritism, principally from Brazil, began to flood the nation. Under the military rulers 8,000 political suspects "disappeared" forever, the bodies of many recently being uncovered in mass graves. Once the tenth strongest economic power, Argentina now finds itself tenth from the bottom by some measurements. Little wonder the nation is ripe for the gospel message. True, in such a spiritual vacuum, any change is seen by many as a change for the better. The power of witchcraft continues to escalate. False cults such as Mormonism are experiencing rapid growth. A huge ornate Mormon temple dominates the highway leading from the Ezeiza airport to Buenos Aires. But with all this, the power of God is being manifested in extraordinary ways.

Hector Gimenez

The largest church in downtown Buenos Aires is pastored by Hector Gimenez, 33, an ex-drug addict and gunfighter. He started the church in 1983 and now leads a congregation of some 70,000. The official name of the church is The Miracles of Jesus Renewed Christian Church, but it more popularly carries the name of Gimenez's radio broadcast, "Waves of Love and Peace." Their church home is a 2,500 seat theater in which they hold eight services daily, seven days of the week. Gimenez himself preaches five services per day, a total of 35 different sermons per week. A study by a Polish sociologist estimates the attendance at 14,000 daily. I had the privilege of preaching to a packed house at the 8:00 p.m. service on a Tuesday night in April 1990, and saw more than a dozen profess salvation and fifty profess miraculous healing,

numbers totally disproportionate to the usual results of my speaking. When we left just before 10:30 p.m., a new crowd had totally jammed the space between the theater door and the street, waiting to get in for the next service!

Gimenez told me that a couple of weeks previously on Easter Sunday, they had rented the largest enclosed auditorium in the city, Luna Park, which seats 15,000. They needed three services to accommodate the 35,000 worshipers, and they baptized 3,200 by immersion in portable pools. Whether they set an intentional goal to exceed the number baptized in Jerusalem on Pentecost Gimenez did not say.

Spiritual Warfare

What is the secret behind such effective ministry among the urban masses? The answers to such a question must not be oversimplified. All church growth is a complex interweaving of sets of contextual factors, institutional factors and spiritual factors. Much of what is happening in Argentina can be explained by well-known contextual and institutional church growth principles. I do not believe, however, that they can adequately account for the sheer magnitude of the phenomena I am describing. My personal conclusion is that spiritual factors, particularly power evangelism and spiritual warfare, are paramount.

I agree with Larry Lea who says, "The devil's work is to blind the minds of men and women. It is our work to pray that the powers of darkness be pushed back from shrouding people's minds." Powerful intercessory prayer is the chief weapon of spiritual warfare on all levels. For instance, backstage in Hector Gimenez's service I saw three women interceding on their knees on the hardwood floor throughout the entire two-hour service. I was told there are usually more. I doubt that Gimenez would see the spiritual power he enjoys without these intercessors. Larry Lea adds, "Until we do the prayer work necessary to defeat the forces of the enemy holding people in darkness, Satan's blinders will remain."

One of today's most knowledgeable Argentine leaders is Edgardo Silvosio of Harvest Evangelism based in San Jose, California. Silvosio did a workshop at Lausanne II in Manila in 1989 on spiritual warfare in Argentina. There he said, "If there is one dominant element that has emerged in the theology and methodology of evangelism in Argentina, I would say it is spiritual warfare. It is an awareness that the struggle is not against a political or a social system. Nor is it on behalf of those who are captives, but it is rather against the jail keepers, against the rulers, those in authority in the spiritual realm." Silvosio contends that understanding this allows Argentine evangelists to get to the root of the problem instead of dealing merely with symptoms. He suggests that the results seem to validate this approach.

Eduardo Lorenzo

The national director of Harvest Evangelism in Argentina is Eduardo Lorenzo, who also serves as pastor of the Adroque Baptist Church. When I visited Adroque, an upper-middle-class section of Buenos Aires, I saw a thriving church of 600, a new auditorium with seating expandable to 2,000 and a goal of filling it with church members by 1993. This is not a new church. It has been there for over 70 years, but never had more than 100 members until recently. When Lorenzo took the pastorate in 1974 he saw it grow from 70 to 250 in thirteen years through using standard church growth procedures. But in 1987 the current growth surge began and Lorenzo says, "If we do not make 2,000 by 1993, it will be because we are not trying."

What happened in 1987?

Lorenzo explains that it took them several years to get to the root of the problem and to come to understand the spiritual dimensions of their evangelistic challenge. The process began in the early 1980s when Lorenzo cast a demon out of a woman without really understanding what he was doing. His training and background had not prepared him for such a ministry. At that time one of his church members went to the United States, learned about spiritual warfare and reported to the congregation. Lorenzo then sponsored two spiritual warfare seminars in his church, one led by Edward Murphy of Overseas Crusades and the other by John White, the Christian psychiatrist and author from Canada. Soon afterwards, the battle began in earnest. A new woman who professed Christ was soon discovered to be an undercover agent sent by the enemy. Demons manifested in church services. Satan was counterattacking. Lorenzo

says, "Satan was happy if he could keep the little Baptist church on its merry-go-round. He had effectively blinded the minds of the unsaved in Adroque to the gospel. Through the years several other churches had been planted in Adroque, but ours was the only one, which had survived. Now we ourselves were under direct attack."

Through a prolonged process of prayer, ministry and discernment, Lorenzo and his leaders finally identified the chief prince over Adroque. Sensing God's timing, they recruited a team of 35 to 40 church members who would spend Monday through Friday of a certain week in prayer and fasting. Then on the Friday night all 200 members joined together for strategic-level intercession. They took authority over the territorial spirit. At 11:45 p.m. they collectively felt something break in the spiritual realm. The spirit had left. The church began to grow. Until then virtually no one who resided in Adroque itself had ever been converted. Now 40 percent of the church members are from Adroque proper. The year of the victory was 1987.

Carlos Annacondia

After observing the ministry of Carlos Annacondia for several years, I am prepared to offer a hypothesis: Annacondia may well be the most effective citywide interdenominational crusade evangelist of all time. If this turns out to be only approximately true, his approach to winning the masses of the cities to Christ deserves close scrutiny.

Annacondia was the committed Christian owner of a prosperous nuts and bolts factory in Quilmes on the outskirts of Buenos Aires when he was called into evangelistic ministry. It was probably no mere coincidence that the day he launched his first public crusade was the day the British sunk the Argentine battleship General Belgrano in the 1982 Falkland Islands war. He was 37 years old at the time.

When I use the term "effective evangelism" I follow the lead of Donald McGavran and the Church Growth Movement in arguing that biblical evangelism involves bringing unbelievers to a simultaneous commitment to Christ and also to the body of Christ. Making disciples involves bringing men and women to faith in Jesus and into responsible membership in a local church. Carlos Annacondia is highly successful in seeing this happen. On a recent visit to Argentina I worked with pastors of four cities. Without any leading questions on my part, in each of the four cities I heard Christian leaders in a matter-of-fact way refer to recent trends in their cities as "before Annacondia" and "after Annacondia". In more than 20 years of studying urban crusade evangelism I have never heard such consistent testimonials of one evangelist across the board. Single instances of effective evangelistic crusades such as Tommy Hicks in Buenos Aires and Stanley Mooneyham in Phnom Penh have been recorded. But Annacondia's ministry seems to be unique.

Several pastors showed me new sanctuaries they had constructed to contain the growth after Annacondia's crusade in their city. One showed me a basketball stadium they had been leasing for six years. Another church now holds 17 services a week in five rented theaters. Another pastor reports "a notable change of attitude among the people of our city as a result of Annacondia's ministry."

What Is Different?

What is Carlos Annacondia doing that other urban evangelists do not usually do? Annacondia has a great deal in common with traditional crusade evangelists. He preaches a simple gospel message, gives an invitation for people to come forward and receive Christ as their Lord and Savior, uses trained counselors to lead them to Christ and give them literature, takes their name and address and invites them to attend a local church.

Like Billy Graham and Luis Palau, Annacondia secures a broad base of interdenominational support from pastors and other Christian leaders in the target area. Like Dwight Moody and Billy Sunday he has had no formal academic theological training. Like Reinhard Bonnke and T. L. Osborne he features miracles, healings and deliverance from evil spirits in his meetings. He is not the only one who preaches in the open air, conducts three-hour services, or has on-the-spot intercessors praying for the ministry.

If I am not mistaken, the major difference is Carlos Annacondia's intentional, premeditated, high-energy approach to spiritual warfare.

A permanent fixture of Annacondia's crusades is what has to be one of the most sophisticated and massive deliverance ministries anywhere. Under the direction of Pablo Botari, a wise, mature and gifted servant of God, literally hundreds of individuals are delivered from demons each of the 30 to 50 consecutive nights of a crusade. The 150-foot deliverance tent, erected behind the speaker's platform, is in operation from 8:00 p.m. to 4:00 a.m. each night. Scores of teams whom Botari has trained do the actual hands-on ministry.

I have never observed a crusade evangelist who is as publicly aggressive in confronting evil spirits as Annacondia. With a high- volume, high-energy, prolonged challenge he actually taunts the spirits until they manifest in one way or another. To the uninitiated the scenario might appear to be total confusion. But to the skilled, experienced members of Annacondia's 31 crusade ministry teams, it is just another evening of power encounters in which the power of Jesus Christ over demonic forces is being displayed for all to see. Many miraculous healings occur, souls are saved, and so great is the spiritual power that unsuspecting pedestrians passing by the crusade meeting have been known to fall down under the power of the Holy Spirit.

Pablo Prokopchuk

A typical Annacondia crusade will have a radical influence on the philosophy of ministry of many cooperating local churches. A case in point is Pastor Pablo Prokopchuk of the Los Olivos Baptist Church in the city of La Plata. He told me that his church had been plateaued at 30 members for years before Annacondia came. After Annacondia left, his church persuaded him to hold a local church evangelistic crusade. "I don't have the gift of evangelist," he protested. The lay leaders responded, "You preach and we will pray that God gives you the gift of evangelist!"

They held their first service, gave the invitation, and no one responded. Then Prokopchuk felt an inner voice saying, "Try it the way Annacondia does it!" Although it was not part of his Baptist tradition, he began challenging the spirits and praying against them. He gave the invitation again, and 15 to 20 people actually ran up front to receive Christ. He now has 900 in his central church with 2,100 others attending satellite congregations around the city, and his goal is a total of 20,000 members by the year 2000. He has been "doing it like Annacondia" ever since with obvious results.

Winning the Urban Masses

Among the many things we have learned from our evangelical urbanologists is that the masses of people living in the world class cities today belong to the lower social classes: the poor and oppressed. While it is extremely important not to neglect the upper classes and to encourage ministries such as Eduardo Lorenzo's in Androque, the fact remains that if we do not win the poorer masses to Christ we will not effectively evangelize the cities of the world. The 5,000 to 20,000 who crowd into Annacondia's crusades night after night are lower class. The 14,000 per day who attend Hector Gimenez's services in the Roca Theater are lower class. Omar Cabrera, pastor of the Vision of the Future Church of 90,000, which is Argentina's largest, uses aggressive spiritual warfare in his own style and it filling his meeting places in 40-50 locations with those of the lower class.

What are people like Annacondia, Gimenez and Cabrera doing that others with perhaps an equal desire to reach the urban masses are not doing? Spiritual warfare is part of the answer, but why are power evangelism and spiritual warfare so effective?

THE WILKES SPECTRUM

The most helpful analysis I have yet seem to explain something of what is behind this has come from my friend Peter Wilkes, pastor of the South Hills Community Church of San Jose, California. As I traveled through Argentina with Wilkes recently, I saw him using a set of scientific skills acquired through a Ph.D. in physics, his vocation before being called into full-time ministry. His analysis of the evangelistic

effectiveness of the high-profile Argentine leaders has now been conceptualized in what I am calling (he would be too modest to coin the term) the "Wilkes Spectrum." It amounts to a sliding scale of class preferences for Christian values. One the extremes we find a fascinating and immediately recognizable contrast between personal and Christian preferences of the upper class and lower class. Most individuals, of course, are on neither extreme, buy many will profile toward one side or the other.

THE WILKES SPECTRUM Class Preferences for Christian Values

Personal Preferences	
Intellectual	Intui ti onal
Rati onal	-Emoti onal
Sci enti fi c	-Experi enti al
Deducti ve reasoni ng	-Inducti ve reasoni ng
Li teracy essenti al	Li teracy opti onal
You control li fe	Li fe control s you
Christian Preferences	
Fai th compl ex	Fai th si mple
Conversi on gentle	Conversi on confrontati onal
Hol i ness gradual	-Hol i ness sudden
Bi bli cal cri ti ci sm-	-Bi bli cal li terali sm
Systemati c theol ogy-	-Pragmati c theol ogy
Relati ve ethi cs	-Absol ute ethi cs
Preachi ng based on study	Preachi ng based on prayer
Weak demonol ogy	-Strong demonol ogy

Notice four important observations concerning the application of the Wilkes Spectrum to urban evangelism:

From the point of view of personal and Christian preferences, the middle class in the First World would shade toward the left, but the middle class in the Third World would shade toward the right. This is obviously a function of world view, among other things.

If there is a trend worldwide, it would seem to be a movement toward the right side of the spectrum. Ironically, both the charismatic movement and the New Age Movement are nudging significant numbers of former left-side people toward the right. Scientism may have seen its day.

The masses of the ties of the world, whether Chicago, Calcutta, Cairo or Caracas are found toward the right side of the Wilkes Spectrum. Effective Argentine evangelists such as Annacondia, Gimenez and Cabrera are skillfully contextualizing their message and methodology to communicate with and meet the needs of the lower classes. One of their discoveries, which less successful urban ministers would do well to look into, is the efficacy of power evangelism and spiritual warfare for that particular audience.

I hesitate to mention this, but it is a worrisome fact that most of our theological training institutions in the Western world, and many in the non-Western world, talk a great deal about ministering to the poor and oppressed of the world's urban centers in their social ethics classes, but they have recruited faculty and designed their curricula to train for ministry toward the left side of the Wilkes Spectrum. This may be one of the explanations why a surprising number of the urban metachurch pastors in world class cities are without theological degrees while many with theological credentials are frustrated. I believe that the great days for urban evangelism are yet ahead.

God is helping us understand the nature of the city through our urbanologists. He is providing us with practitioners who are demonstrating that it can be done. He is helping us understand some of the reasons we have not been as effective as we would like to be. My prayer is that we will combine the theoretical with the practical, the technological with the spiritual, in such a way that city after city in our world will be brought to faith and obedience under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.