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The Vital Role of the Laity in Revitalization: A Case Study of Misión Cristiana Elim

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Abstract

Immigration from Latin America to the U.S. is often seen as the movement of individuals across borders, but it often impacts communities as well, including religious organizations. Because of the cell-group focus of *Misión Cristiana Elim* in El Salvador and the large number of Salvadoran immigrants, it is not surprising that this movement is also growing rapidly as immigrants move into new areas. This case illustrates how one Hispanic church movement is growing transnationally through immigration.

Key Words: El Salvador, Misión Cristiana Elim, Pentecostalism, immigration, transnationalism, diaspora

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Mario Vega is the senior pastor of *Misión Cristiana Elim* in San Salvador, El Salvador, a church with over 100,000 people involved in a cell group ministry, which has become an international movement. He is also the author of numerous books and has spoken worldwide on this cell-group ministry.

Introduction

In January of 2003, a Salvadoran immigrant, named Rosa Campos, gathered a group of seven people in her home in Toronto to worship together. After one month, there were so many people coming, the group had to move to a basement to continue meeting. After three months, they rented an auditorium to hold 250 people. Today they rent a bigger space to hold about 1,000 people. This group is based on a cell model and currently has 35 cells with six supervisors, and people attend from countries as diverse as Honduras, Uruguay, Chile, Peru, Argentina, Mexico, Cuba, Nicaragua, Ecuador, the Dominican Republic, and even Romania, Barbados, and Trinidad and Tobago. While the majority remains Salvadoran, this church is now reaching out to a larger immigrant community.¹

This situation is not an isolated case, and the importance of immigration and its ties with revitalization should not be lightly ignored.² While El Salvador might be easily dismissed as the smallest nation in Latin America, except for the Caribbean island nations, it has a major presence in terms of immigration. According to the data from the 2010 U.S. Census, Salvadorans are the fourth largest Hispanic group in the U.S. after Mexico (with almost 32 million people), Puerto Rico (with 4.6 million), and Cuba (with 1.7 million).³ While these groups each grew from the 2000 Census (54%, 35%, and 43% respectively), the 1.6 million Salvadorans in the U.S represented a growth of 151% from 2000. If they continue at this rate of growth, Salvadorans will surpass Cubans to become the third largest Hispanic group in the U.S. by 2020, and they will be coming close to the number of Puerto Ricans. With this rise in immigrants, a similar growth in their churches is to be expected, and *Misión Cristiana Elim* is without a doubt, the largest indigenous Pentecostal movement in El Salvador.

History of *Misión Cristiana Elim*

While both Protestantism and Pentecostalism entered El Salvador at about the same time in the early twentieth century, both faced opposition and grew slowly in the heavily Roman Catholic dominated culture of Central America. The civil war of the 1970's and 1980's left a spiritual vacuum as foreign missionaries left the country and the Roman Catholic Church faced its own leadership crisis with the assassination of Archbishop Romero. This spiritual vacuum would be filled by the attraction of Pentecostalism, and it was in this period that *Misión Cristiana Elim* was born. *Elim* was a movement founded in Guatemala by Dr. Othoniel Ríos Paredes, who sent Sergio Sólorzano to start the movement in El Salvador with nine people in May 1977.⁴ *Elim* in El Salvador split from the Guatemalan group over doctrinal issues in 1983, but continued a slow, steady growth. Comiskey notes that the church not

only grew at an amazing pace during the civil war, but spread outside of El Salvador as refugees left the country.⁵

In 1985, *Misión Cristiana Elim* encountered the cell church growth ideas of David Yonggi Cho of the Yoido Full Gospel Church in Korea.⁶ The following year, under founding pastor Sergio Sólorzano the twenty-five churches of the organization decided to close and the pastors become zone pastors of one united cell system. By adapting the cell growth system to the Salvadoran context, *Elim* began an explosive level of growth, so by 1988, attendance at their cell meetings numbered 20,000.

In 1995 *Elim* faced a major leadership crisis. Due to financial and sexual indiscretions by Pastor Sólorzano, the church leadership attempted to discipline their pastor and founder, but in 1997 he left the church. Mario Vega, a zone pastor from El Salvador's second largest city, was picked to lead *Elim*. Under the leadership of Mario Vega and his commitment to the cell growth model, the church began to grow rapidly. *Elim* began to try and bring all of its cell groups together for a rally once a year. Comiskey notes,

On November 8, 1998, Elim filled two stadiums simultaneously; on November 14, 1999, they filled three stadiums; and in November 2000, the church filled five stadiums with some 120,000 people attending events. In November 2002, Elim Church gathered more than 150,000 people spread over eight football fields.⁷

While much depends on how you calculate membership, this rapid growth led some to suggest that *Elim* might even be the second largest church in the world after Yoido Full Gospel Church.

In July of 2009, Pastor Mario Vega was asked to give the prayer at the inauguration of President Mauricio Funes.⁸ This was only the second time a Protestant was given this honor, and it was the first time a Pentecostal leader was given such prominence in Salvadoran politics. Pastor Vega continues to maintain connections with Cho's Full Gospel Church and through a network of cell growth leaders in the Joel Comiskey Group⁹, where Pastor Vega blogs on a weekly basis.

Organization of *Elim*

The structure of *Elim* is a highly organized cell structure. In an interview, Manuel Vásquez,¹⁰ an *Elim* pastor, related that there are only fourteen "churches" in *Elim*, one for each capital city of the fourteen departments of El Salvador, with San Salvador and Mario Vega being the main "church" and the others being districts. The districts are divided into zones, and under each zone pastor are a number of supervisors, who meet with individual cell leaders. Pastor Vásquez related that as district pastor, he oversees about

550 cells with about 15 people in each cell. Communication occurs through weekly meetings at most levels, but *Elim* also was an early proponent of radio and television mass media and has also spread on the internet.¹¹ With their organization and radio network, *Elim* was able to organize its people within 24 hours of a massive earthquake in 2001 to arrange services and emergency assistance even before government aid began.¹² Pastor Mario Vega¹³ has explained that every new convert to *Elim* begins a 26 week discipleship program which begins with theological training and spiritual formation, but quickly moves into leadership training as well. Every *Elim* member is a potential cell leader.

Due to its focus on the cell growth model, which empowers lay leadership, its strong spiritual foundation, and the tremendous movement of Salvadoran people out of the country as immigrants and refugees, *Elim* has unconsciously become a transnational immigrant church. Immigrants with a background in *Elim* can form their own cell groups anywhere they go, and as they get bigger they can self-replicate. Without any organized mission plan, *Elim* has now planted daughter churches in the United States, Central America, and even Europe.¹⁴ These daughter churches are organized along the same pattern as *Elim* in El Salvador, but they still look to Mario Vega and the mother church for theological leadership.

***Elim's* Theology and Training of the Laity**

Misión Cristiana Elim does not do its cell work as if it were an innovative idea, but from a conviction that it is about returning to the model of the New Testament church. Within that model, individual Christians had a much more active life than is currently understood. During the Reformation, Luther developed this idea from scripture, which is now referred to as “the priesthood of all believers.”¹⁵

The basic idea for *Elim* is that the functions of evangelization and education are not just the privilege of a few professionals dedicated to those functions but the work of all Christians. This is supported by Romans 15:14, “I myself am convinced, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with knowledge and competent to instruct one another.” (NIV). The role of ministers is to train believers to do the work of the ministry. As Ephesians 4:11-12 notes, “So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.” Consequently, ministers are called not to monopolize the function of teaching the saints, but to make a minister out of each of those saints. Every Christian should perform his/her teaching functions in a small group, in their homes.

The New Testament has 32 verses that refer to the mutual edification that Christians should practice. It is said that Christians should love one another, exhort, teach, bear, forgive, serve, edify and host one another. It is also said that Christians should pray for one another, confess their faults to one another and bear the burdens of one another. The scenario presented in the New Testament is of an active church, very involved in the work of the ministry. Very different from the idea of a passive congregation where all “religious” functions are left to the pastor.

The core values of a cell or house meeting are: evangelization, fellowship and edification. These are the necessary components in every cell and must coexist in a balanced way. The primary purpose of cell work is not to seek the edification of a mega church; the most important purpose is to open up space so that each Christian can live the values of the universal priesthood of all believers. This also allows for the practice of effective principles for evangelization and mutual edification to occur.

In some cases, with God’s plans, because of the gifts given to each minister, and because of the environment, a cell can help give rise to the formation of a mega church. But if such a thing does not happen, what matters most is the experience of living the values and principles of the model. There are mega churches that are not cell churches and there are many churches that are cell churches but not mega churches. One thing does not necessarily imply the other.

What is implied in the cell work is that every believer is seen as a potential minister of the Gospel. And for that purpose, a training course for new cell leaders has been designed by *Elim* that is offered to each convert the week after his/her conversion, at the latest. This course lasts for 6 months and consists of 26 lessons that are imparted once a week. When a person believes in Jesus he/she is invited to start the training course. Of course, this person does not know the purpose of the course and he/she is not asked if they want to be a leader or not. *Misión Cristiana Elim* believes that as a new Christian he/she must practice their universal priesthood. In this way, each new convert sees the cell work as something natural to his or her new Christian life. Apart from that, he/she is involved with a cell from the very beginning. So, for the new convert, his/her new faith involves both the small gathering in the houses and the large gathering in the church building.

The first week of the training program, the convert receives a teaching entitled: “And now what?” Here he/she is taught about what happened the day of their conversion. They are encouraged to continue in the Christian life assuming their role as a Christian. Thus, successively, the new convert is carried through themes such as the Bible, prayer, baptism in water, etc. After 13 weeks and an equal number of themes of basic Christianity, the

person begins to receive training on cell work. They start with themes such as defining what a cell is, what are the components of a cell, how they multiply, and so on. On the way, the person understands that he/she has been called and is training to become a new leader.

At the end of 26 weeks it is expected for that person to have received the baptism in water and to be ready to receive a cell as the person in charge. Multiplication of leaders is key to produce the multiplication of cells. In fact, the cell work is a leaders' formation strategy. Cells only multiply when a new leader has been formed. You would probably think that a period of six months of training is too short to give a cell to a new believer. But we must not ignore the fact that although the training lasts six months, the new leader will continue to meet each week with his/her zone pastor. In addition, the new leader will have a coach, who is in charge of no more than five cells who will also counsel the new leader once a week, meeting with him or her and his or her cell group.

The training course for leaders is really only an introduction to a lifestyle that is to continue through the rest of our existence. For new believers, this is the Gospel they have known and so they do not conceive of Christianity differently. After 25 years of cell work, generation after generation of Christians have entered into this process to form a culture in which each member is conceived as a person with ministry responsibilities within and outside the church building. A Christian life is not limited to the schedule of weekly church services, but extends throughout every day and night. Neither is it limited to the church building, but it extends into neighborhoods and houses wherever the believer goes.

Revitalization of the Church in Diaspora

We began with the story of Rosa Campos in Toronto, Canada. Today, *Misión Cristiana Elim* has about 50 such groups across the U.S., each growing through cell groups with lay leadership and spreading in a vibrant way throughout Hispanic communities.¹⁶ In the process, they can provide a model for how immigrant transnational churches can be a vital part of the revitalization of the Church.¹⁷

Not all transnational immigrant churches are like *Elim*. Given both the context of Salvadoran immigration and the ecclesiastical structure of cell groups led by empowered laity, *Elim* has the advantage of many potential leaders spread throughout a number of nations. *Elim* has succeeded because of several key internal factors. First, *Elim* uses a cell structure of leadership, which trains all members to be potential leaders. Second, they create a strong network of zones and supervisors, which allow gifted leaders to come from within the church. Third, *Elim* has a theologically strong and passionate leader

to oversee the entire movement. Fourth, *Elim* holds a Pentecostal theology that emphasizes the priesthood of all believers and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which allows people with limited educational opportunities, but who possess natural leadership abilities to succeed. Fifth, the cell church system requires little in the way of financial resources to start and maintain a church.

In addition, *Elim* has had to deal with both positive and negative elements of globalization and transnationalism. On the positive side, the political socio-economic situation has led to massive immigration, and unconsciously this has helped the spread of *Misión Cristiana Elim*. This has led to a growing network of people and churches across many cities and nations. In turn, these groups through the unofficial avenues of remittances help meet the immediate needs of many people in poverty in El Salvador, and some of these resources find their way back to *Elim* in gifts, tithes, and offerings from daughter churches as well as individuals.¹⁸

On the negative side of transnationalism and globalization, *Elim* in El Salvador is faced with growing social problems, for which people often turn to the church for help. Issues, such as the rise in gang violence and family related problems which result from split families and the emotional scars of children who feel abandoned by their parents, are growing.¹⁹ Financial costs rise, as the leadership needs to travel and communicate across national borders. The daughter churches outside of El Salvador will also face different challenges in each of their cultural contexts, and these challenges may not be well understood by the leadership back in El Salvador. Some of these challenges will also occur as more and more non-Salvadorans join this movement and bring concerns and issues, which may be unique to their places of origin.

From the example of *Misión Cristiana Elim*, several crucial elements for the success of immigrant churches can be observed. First, they will need a strong focus on lay leadership and teaching others to be leaders. Second, they will require a flexible structure, which allows the church to move and grow in uncertain situations. If the church is too centralized, local branches of the church might not have the opportunity to adapt to local needs that arise. Third, there will need to be a strong emphasis on theological training of the laity. Fourth, the church will need to have a well organized network that can help potentially isolated groups remain connected to the home church and its leadership as well as with other daughter churches.

Vibrant immigrant churches are springing up in the midst of the cities of Canada, the U.S., and Europe, often in areas where traditional churches are dying. Currently, many of these churches are functioning to help immigrants scattered by economic and political pressures to gather together into a new community, grounded in their cultural roots to deal with an often hostile new culture. Such churches often struggle to find leaders who understand their

home culture as well as the needs of their new environment, but churches like *Misión Cristiana Elim* may have found an effective solution through the empowering of lay leadership. Much more about the revitalizing influence of immigrant churches remains to be uncovered by studying churches like *Misión Cristiana Elim*. Meanwhile, people like Rosa Campos will continue to spread the gospel in house churches throughout the immigrant community in Toronto, Canada, the United States, and many other parts of the world, providing an essential avenue for the potential revitalization of churches in the West.

End Notes

¹ Jesus Elizondo of the Toronto Branch of Elim at 4545 Jane St., Toronto, Ontario, Canada, Personal email, 24 Dec. 2010.

² In March of 1998, David Lopez from Los Angeles was sent to help organize a group in Houston that was forming. Currently this church now has 160 cell leaders and oversees a district spread out over Austin, Dallas, San Antonio, Rosenberg, and even Greeley, Colorado. The pastor estimates that 40% are Salvadoran, 20% U.S. born Hispanics, 15% Mexican, 15% Honduran, 5% Guatemalan, and 5% other assorted nationalities. The churches send money to support pastors in El Salvador and for other collaborative ministries. Once a year the pastor goes to El Salvador to meet with leaders and once a year leaders from El Salvador come to the U.S. to meet with pastors here. David Lopez of Iglesia de Restauracion, Inc., Mision Elim Internacional in Houston, Texas, Personal email, 20 Jan. 2011.

³ Sharon R. Ennis, Merarys Ríos-Vargas, and Nora G. Albert, U.S. Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration, U.S. Census Bureau, May 2011. *The Hispanic Population: 2010*, page 3.

⁴ Joel Comiskey, 2004 *Passion and Persistence*, (Houston, TX: Cell Group Resources, 2004) 30-31.

⁵ Comiskey 2004:33-34.

⁶ Comiskey 2004:35-36.

⁷ Comiskey 2004:41.

⁸ Sara Miller Llana attributes the growing political influence of Pastor Mario Vega and his interest in social justice issues as an important factor in whether Funes would win the presidency in her article "Evangelicals key to El Salvador elections." *Christian Science Monitor*. Posted 3/14/2009. Retrieved at <http://www.csmonitor.com/layout/set/print/content/view/print/243519> on 1/28/2010.

⁹ <http://www.joelcomiskeygroup.com>

¹⁰ Manuel Vasquez, Personal interview, 7 Jan. 2010 in Santa Ana, El Salvador.

¹¹ <http://www.elim.org.sv/>

¹² Mario Vega, "Cell Leadership in the Face of Tragedy," *Cell Group Journal* 2001:10(3), summer. Retrieved online 6/30/2010 at http://www.touchusa.org/Articles/CC_archives/volume10/10_3.html.

¹³ Mario Vega, Personal interview, 11 Jan. 2010 in Santa Ana, El Salvador.

¹⁴ According to their website (<http://www.elim.org.sv/>), *Elim* has churches in Belgium, Canada, Guatemala, Honduras, Italy, and Mexico as well as the United States and El Salvador.

¹⁵ Luther did not specifically use this phrase, but the theological underpinning can be found in his 1520 tract, *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*.

¹⁶ According to their website (<http://www.elim.org.sv/>), *Elim* currently has active churches in: California, Colorado, Connecticut, Georgia, Illinois, Kansas, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Oregon, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia.

¹⁷ N.C. Aizenman points out in an article that *Elim* is not just growing by immigration, but that many immigrants who were non-religious before immigrating are joining immigrant churches like *Elim* in the U.S., “Finding God in Their Adopted Homeland- At Churches Across Area, Central Americans Develop a Devotion They Never Had,” *Washington Post*, Jan. 22, 2006, Section A, page C1.

¹⁸ For more on remittances and their impact, see Luis René Cáceres, and Nolvía N. Saca, What Do Remittances Do? Analyzing the Private Remittance Transmission Mechanism in El Salvador. International Monetary Fund Working paper 250 (2006). Retrieved 5/10/2010 at <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/wp/2006/wp06250.pdf>.

¹⁹ See also Leisy J. Abrego, “Rethinking El Salvador’s Transnational Families,” *NACLA Report on the Americas*, 2009:Nov./Dec. 42(6):28-32 and Donna DeCesare, 2009 “Salvadoran Gangs: Brutal Legacies and a Desperate Hope,” *NACLA Report on the Americas* 2009: Nov./Dec. 42(6):33-37 for more on these topics.

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