

PUERTO RICO

Explosion of new independent Churches on the Island

San Juan, Nov. 8 (ALC). Independent Christian churches or ministries have populated all the corners of the island. Their temples are full of faithful who seek simple answers to their questions and uncertainties, while historic Catholic and Protestant Churches seem distant to people's realities.

"The programs of the Catholic and Protestant churches no longer respond to people's needs, in particular in the countryside and poor barrios in the towns and cities, said historian and religious sociologist Samuel Silva Gotay.

The growth of these religious movements is linked to times of social and economic crisis, but also responds to the search for existential responses, that come from human nature itself, Silva told the daily *El Nuevo Dia*.

Silva Gotay, who investigated the issue with professors Luis Rivera Pagan and Irma Hernandez Torres affirmed that "people come to these churches looking for a response to existential questions and alleviation for the anxiety that has caused this uncertainty."

When a institution emerges that tells you it has the answers, that you are not a leaf that falls in autumn but that you can be immortal and live eternal life, people respond, said Rivera Pagan, [professor at the University of Puerto Rico].

But the attraction also lies in the type of discourse: Simple, understandable and accessible. "Missionary preachers are accustomed to visiting homes, while Catholic priests proclaim their message from the pulpit," said Silva Gotay, author of various books including *Protestantismo y Política en Puerto Rico 1898-1930* and *El pensamiento cristiano revolucionario en América Latina y el Caribe*.

Many of these new churches have also gotten involved in mass communication media like radio, television and Internet to disseminate their message.

Even if they begin in humble tents, in a few years they become empires. The secret? According to Silva Gotay is that they occupy the spaces that traditional Christian Churches have neglected.

Moreover, unlike historic Churches, these independent churches preach the so-called "theology of prosperity" that proclaims economic wealth as a sign of blessings.

These groups generally share a conservative theological vision that leads them to affiliate themselves with the current government ideologies.

"Historic Churches meanwhile, tend to be critical and distant from the State," he said.

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