

World Inquiry Argentina: The Wind of the Spirit Blows in the Midst of a Secular Storm

By: Rino Bello and Hugo Baravalle

Organized by: ACIERA: Christian Alliance of Evangelical Churches in the Argentine Republic

The World Inquiry was conducted in the cities of Buenos Aires and Rosario by Luis Bush in January 2002 and then facilitated at the Encounter for Pastors for the Evangelization of the Nation (ENPEN) which took place in the city of Mar del Plata April 9 to 12. For two and a half hours Bush, Rino Bello and Jorge Ibarbalz facilitated the World Inquiry among more than 1500 Christian leaders registered for ENPEN who represented the entire country, including the cities, towns and rural areas.

The World Inquiry was very positive, and the analysis of the information revealed the challenges the church needs to meet in the power of the Holy Spirit for the evangelization of the nation. The World Inquiry was a valuable instrument for ENPEN where the participants gathered precisely to study the strategies and methodologies for evangelization which the Inquiry helped to clarify.

As a result of the Inquiry in Mar del Plata, various representative leaders from the provinces and cities of Argentina are planning to conduct the survey in their own cities and provinces with whom we are in close contact to assist with the follow-up.

We have no doubt, that in this moment of national crisis in this afflicted nation, God is moving His people in the “supreme task of the church: the evangelization of the world.”

I. Argentina’s Background in Brief

The deep-rooted effects of the Spanish colonization extend to our present time, and after Argentina’s independence in 1810 the Spanish and Italian influx has been even greater.

In the wake of World Wars, I and II many European immigrants arrived in the country -in addition to Spaniards and Italians, there came peasants from Russia, Poland, Germany and other Eastern European countries. Because of this blending of races, Argentina became a predominantly European country, both ethnically and culturally.

Until the 1940s, Argentina’s stability, economy, educational level, and social welfare conditions positioned the country amongst the world’s first seven. A progressive decay settled in and the social and economic conditions in the country, deteriorated in a downhill trend that reaches up to our present time, when worldwide statistics rank Argentina amongst the under developed countries, in spite of other statistics that still rank the country in certain favorable positions (e.g. the United Nations Economic Development Administration, UNEDA, Human Development Index). {Índice de Desarrollo Humano del PNUD – Programa de Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo}

The last 30 years have seen a sharp decline, no matter if governments were military or democratic. The country’s experience throughout the last 11 years has been this deep and inevitable crisis for which no one seems to find a way out.

Christian sociologist Hilario Wynarczyk puts it this way: “In reality it appears that deregulation, the term used by the theorists of neo liberalism for the elimination of any kind of state controls or regulations upon the market for ideally attaining the much-desired free market conditions, has escaped the boundaries of its economic and political application to introduce itself in all social areas.

In Argentina, not only the market but also the opposition, the political parties, the [Roman] Catholic Church and the unions have been steered and regulated by certain actors. Now, the failure of economic deregulation and the reappearance of state controls have also caused the fall of other controls and the paradoxical increase of social deregulation. The hegemonic actors are losing control as new actors and forms of expression enter the stage.

The “cacerolazos” [“pan beatings”] that have characterized popular discontent amongst Argentineans have given way to a new style of protesting, at a time in which a transition is occurring, from a merciless capitalism to a nationalism that has no idea as to where or what it is heading for. The truth is that the number of poor, jobless and hungered is appallingly on the increase while a host of rich actors do not know how or where to spend their wealth as they make all possible efforts to get their money out of the country.

What could we say regarding the thousands (or millions perhaps) of people, especially youths and professionals, who have decided to leave this country and paradoxically return to the lands of their forefathers?

Undoubtedly, the tunnel is dark and there are those who say they can see a feeble light in the distance - some say it is the exit; others say it is the train coming in the opposite direction...

II. The Evangelical Church in Argentina

The evangelical presence dates back to the colporteurs and the courageous independent missionaries that gave their lives for the sake of the Gospel more than 150 years ago. There were many of them, and it would be unfair to name some and not others.

The historical churches were the first to settle in the country. The influence of Anglicans and Methodists was great in the early stages of the new country. Other denominations came in during the early 1900's. But the evangelical church really started developing in the 1950's, with the Pentecostal groups taking the lead. The 1970's brought about charismatic renewal movements that resulted in major changes - most of them very positive - within the national leadership.

Throughout the last 20 years, the evangelical leadership affirms expressions of unity, evangelism, discipleship, missions, and more recently of social responsibility. We see the rising of national evangelists, large churches, congresses, conferences, Bible seminaries, specific ministries, etc. In the 1980's the country saw a multiplication of evangelistic crusades throughout the nation and in a diversity of approaches - mass evangelism, one-to-one, through radio, TV, etc. Nevertheless, the 1990's were characterized by a slow-down and it seemed that the church had come to a sort of “plateau,” which gave way to less evangelistic activities such as concerts, praise rallies, etc. The 1990's also saw a substantial

development of foreign mission work, prompted by a one-equal-to-one exchange rate for dollars-pesos, which lasted 11 years.

Although there is an evangelical presence in every province in Argentina, the same thing cannot be emphatically stated regarding every town or village in the country. One most certainly will find evangelical churches in the big cities, but there are many small—and not so small—towns that have no evangelical witness established there as of yet.

One of the most controversial issues and one that poses many difficulties for reporting exact figures is that of the number of evangelical Christians in the country. Research carried out by reliable ministries shows that evangelicals make up for a 4 to 6 % within a total population of 37 million.

Others say that the figures should be closer to 8 or 10 %, although this would be the result of including not only church members but also those who could be considered “sympathizers” and those who “at some time - perhaps once only - attended an evangelical church.”

The impression a foreign visitor might get is that Argentina has “mega-churches,” if we take into account that there are church buildings with a seating capacity for 2,000+ and that these same churches feature up to 3 services every Sunday. On the other hand, it is also true that typical local congregations with an average membership of 200 or 300 members or less have lately experienced a decline in their membership and attendance, due to a steady exodus of members who emigrate from the country; and this is a serious problem that makes it difficult to provide honest figures.

It is also necessary to take into account the importance of the charismatic movements, which formerly were almost exclusively related to Pentecostal groups and at present are being experienced in many non-Pentecostal denominations. This Evangelical “ecumenism” has undoubtedly done the church at large a lot of good, while at the same time has fostered concern and even ill feelings amongst the traditional groups.

All this strives to put in a nutshell the fact that during the past 20 years the church in Argentina has experienced a “stir of the Spirit” that may well turn into a “revival.”

Our reflection at this point is: Is it possible to experience a “revival” if the situation in the country is so difficult? The straightforward answer is, YES, IT IS POSSIBLE!

We believe that the church in Argentina is like the woman ready to give birth described in 2 Kings 19:3: They told him: "This is what Hezekiah says: This day is a day of distress and rebuke and disgrace, as when children come to the point of birth and there is no strength to deliver them." This situation of distress, rebuke and disgrace that was described above in I., we need to recognize and identify as ours, with a humble and repentant heart. Accepting reality means that, knowing our weakness, we might design the best strategies to tackle the task in the most effective manner. In short, let us turn the difficulty into an opportunity, and let us dream!

Let us dream about a Church that has received a visitation of the Holy Spirit and is ready to give birth to a Revival. Today we face a difficult transition point. On one hand, there is toil and pain because the “children come to the point of birth and there is no strength to deliver them,” and on the other we have the “children [that have] come to the point of birth.” We should like to identify these “children” as the revival that God wants to pour out over Argentina in a way that we have never experienced before, and

our present birth pains are a natural part of this process of giving birth. The Argentine church is “pregnant” with God’s stir made manifest in these last 20 years, but the children that are coming is something much greater, it is REVIVAL!

Our dream today is to feel pregnant with this vision of revival. For this, we need to strengthen our commitment to:

- The Lord Jesus Christ
- The Church, Christ’s body, living out a respectful unity
- Evangelization and discipleship
- Church planting
- Home and foreign missions
- Care programs
- Theological education for ministers
- Penetrating all areas of society, including the political arena

It is possible that at some point in the next 20 years a report be written regarding this time, which will reflect a nation that has emerged from its crisis, with the birds that had to emigrate coming back to their homes here, with Christians serving in key public leadership positions, and more. The church making up for a real 25 to 30 % of the population; missionaries in the most distant locations in the world; evangelists going throughout the nations of the world with the good news. The name that is above all names, JESUS CHRIST, exalted.

All this will come to pass if we are capable of standing our present pain, and if under the power of the Holy Spirit we “push” to deliver the children.

We have described the reality of the secular Argentina, the Church, and the dreams and commitments of the pregnant Church. We bless the church and the nation, in the certainty that the children - revival! - will come, because “there is the sound of a heavy rain”:

And Elijah said to Ahab, "Go, eat and drink, for there is the sound of a heavy rain." So, Ahab went off to eat and drink, but Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel, bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees. "Go and look toward the sea," he told his servant. And he went up and looked. "There is nothing there," he said. Seven times Elijah said, "Go back." The seventh time the servant reported, "A cloud as small as a man's hand is rising from the sea." So, Elijah said, "Go and tell Ahab, 'Hitch up your chariot and go down before the rain stops you.'" "Meanwhile, the sky grew black with clouds, the wind rose, a heavy rain came on and Ahab rode off to Jezreel. The power of the LORD came upon Elijah and, tucking his cloak into his belt, he ran ahead of Ahab all the way to Jezreel. (I Kings 18:41-46).

World Inquiry for the Cities of Argentina

The Argentine gathering was a great blessing in the midst of a serious national economic, political and social crisis.

Argentine key facilitator for the Bill Kennedy, said: "We have truly lived a miracle of the Lord having received confirmation of over 1500 participants covering the 23 provinces of Argentina and all the major denominations of the 3 mayor umbrella groups. God is turning this into a Historical time. May we all be conscious and ready to be found obedient in all that He gives us through this time, so special for our nation."

It was called "an encounter of pastors" and was sponsored by CNEC, a new fraternal entity combining the three major Christian Church leadership structures in the country. The event was hosted at the beautiful three-tiered theatre now church in the coastal city of Mar del Plata.

The purpose of this event was to consider the way forward for the evangelization of the country. ENPEN as it became known, provided continuation for the Amsterdam 2000 event led by the Billy Graham Association. As a result of the World Inquires held in January in the city of Buenos Aires and Rosario the national organizing committee included it in the program as they considered it be a useful tool for reflecting together on "where to go from here in the evangelization of Argentina."

The interest in ENPEN exceeded early expectations of the organizers. Actually, not many weeks prior to the event CNEC seriously considered canceling the gathering as there were less than 100 people registered. However, the problem became providing transportation. World Help, an organization based in Virginia led by Vernon Brewer who is partnering with the World Inquiry, came through with funds for ten buses. According to Ruben Proietti, a key leader of CNEC, the timing was such that it opened the gates for others who were waiting to see what would happen.

By the beginning of the first morning of the conference, about 1500 key pastors, denominational, mission, lay and women leaders registered for ENPEN from all of the 23 provinces. From the beginning of our time together there was a powerful sense of the presence of the Lord. On the first morning of the conference, following the devotional, two- and one-half hours were set aside for the World Inquiry in the plenary session. The actual facilitation of the Inquiry was conducted by two of the members of the organizing committee. They encouraged the leaders from the cities to return and organize a world inquiry with Christian leaders in their own city.

The compilation of the results of the focus group meetings by city provided a significant picture by city and for the entire nation of what the servants of the Lord are sensing in their spirits God is saying at this time.