

The Hispanic Protestant Church in the USA, 1990

By Andrew L. Toth*
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The percentage of Evangelical Christians in the Hispanic population is about as easily nailed down as the statistics on the Hispanic population itself. No definitive studies have yet been done. Various polls show steady Hispanic Protestant church growth in the last three decades. In 1972, Gallup reported about 16% of the Hispanic population as Protestant. In 1986, the figure was 18% (Gallup and Castelli 1987:140). Tom Smith of the National Opinion Research Center reported that 23% of the Hispanic population was Protestant in 1989 (Smith & Chandler 1989: F-18).

Another view of Protestant growth can be seen from a Roman Catholic perspective. According to Louis Velásquez of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, 70% of the 3.4 million Hispanics in their three-county area were Catholic (Smith & Chandler 1989: F-18). In the early 1970's they claimed 85%. By eliminating atheists and cults from the Catholic numbers, one can arrive at a figure close to the polls cited above. But by the Archdiocese of Los Angeles own admission, only about 20% of professing Catholics attend Mass regularly. The Protestants say the rest are unchurched and need to be evangelized; the Catholics claim that these people are their responsibility.

One area where the growth of Hispanics Protestant churches can be documented is in Southern California. In 1970, Clifton Holland listed 225 Hispanic Protestant churches and departments in the greater Los Angeles area (Holland 1974:440). It is estimated that this represented about 70% of the total number of Hispanic churches in Southern California at that time, or a total of about 320 churches. In 1986, AHET's *Directory of Hispanic Protestant Churches in Southern California* documented 1,022 Hispanic churches and missions in eight southern counties (AHET 1986). A current study not yet released has preliminary estimates of 1,450 Hispanic Protestant churches in Southern California (IDEA 1991), and the pace of church planting efforts by the larger denominations is still accelerating as more culturally relevant strategies for growth are implemented.

What does this tell us? For the last three decades the Hispanic Protestant Church has seen a steady 10% annual growth rate in Southern California. The national opinion polls indicate an 11.25% annual growth rate for the Hispanic Protestant population for the same period, which accurately reflects the growth in numbers of Protestant churches in Southern California. Based upon a total Hispanic population of 24.7 million in 1990, and using the more conservative 10% growth figure documented for Southern California, we should have about 5.4 million Hispanic Protestants in the USA. This is 22% of the Hispanic population and well within the range given by Catholic sources.

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Sources

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2. Smith, Tom W. "America's Religious Mosaic in *American Demographics*, June 1984: Vol. 6, No. 6, p.18.
3. Smith & Chandler. *Los Angeles Times*, Saturday, December 2, 1989; F-18.
4. Holland, Clifton L. *The Religious Dimension in Hispanic Los Angeles: A Protestant Case Study*. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1974, p. 499.
5. AHET. *Directory of Hispanic Protestant Churches in Southern California*. Pasadena, CA: AHET and In-Depth Evangelism Associates, 1986.
6. IDEA (In-Depth Evangelism Associates). Church Growth Studies Program. *Southern California Hispanic Protestant Church Directory Up-Date*. Pasadena, CA; IDEA, 1991.