



From the Editor: Celebrating the Hispanic Assemblies of God Centennial

By Darrin J. Rodgers

The Assemblies of God marked one hundred years of ministry in 2014. Another important anniversary will be celebrated August 1-3, 2018, in Houston—the centennial of the 1918 organizational convention of Hispanic Assemblies of God churches and ministers.

The Assemblies of God ministry among Hispanics emerged in the midst of the Mexican Revolution, a decade-long civil war that began in 1910 and changed the North American social landscape. Thousands of displaced people fled the armed conflict and social disruption in Mexico and sought refuge along the borderlands in the United States. These refugees, uprooted from their families and their native land, often lived in squalid conditions. They had an uncertain legal status and, in the eyes of many observers, not much of a future.

While the broader American society often rejected the Mexican refugees, Pentecostals reacted differently. Countless Assemblies of God ministers fanned out, offering food, shelter, and medical assistance to those who were hurting. Anglo missionaries Henry C. Ball, Felix Hale,

John Preston, Dr. Florence Murcutt, Alice Luce, and others joined Hispanic ministers such as Isabel Flores, Antonio Ríos Morin, and Arnulfo López. Together, they ministered among the 300,000 refugees from the Mexican Revolution who lived along the borderlands in Texas.

These Pentecostal pioneers viewed the refugees as a heaven-sent opportunity to share the gospel, which they did in both word and deed. Many Mexican refugees were receptive to the gospel, and Spanish-language Pentecostal congregations started forming in refugee camps and elsewhere.

1918 Convention and Arrests

One hundred years ago, an organizational convention was held for Hispanic Assemblies of God churches and ministers in the United States.

Isabel Flores (a male Mexican-American pastor) and Henry C. Ball (an Anglo missionary) spearheaded the January 1918 convention, which was held in Kingsville, Texas.

At the time, the Pentecostal movement among Hispanics was in its infancy and consisted primarily of scattered, unorganized missions along the U.S.-Mexican border. The convention united Hispanic Pentecostals and laid the foundation for one of the largest and fastest growing segments of the Assemblies of God.

The first superintendent of the newly organized Hispanic work was Ball—probably chosen because as an Anglo he was able to navigate the difficult legal and cultural challenges facing the Mexican refugees.

In one such challenging circumstance, Isabel Flores was arrested in May 1918 and incarcerated in the Jackson County jail in Edna, Texas. The reason for the arrest is unknown. An account published in 1966 in *La Luz Apostolica* simply stated, “It was wartime, and the officer did not speak Spanish and Isabel did not speak English.” Ball came to the aid of Flores and traveled to Edna, where he spoke with the authorities and se-

cured the prisoner's release.¹

Ball's status as a native-born American, however, did not prevent him from also encountering problems. The Assemblies of God, like many other premillennial American evangelicals, took a pacifist position during World War I. Ball's work with Mexican refugees and his church's pacifism caused government officials to view him with suspicion. Ball was arrested in Brownsville, Texas, on suspicion of being a German spy, but he was soon released.²

Development of Hispanic Leaders

Despite legal, political, and economic tensions, Ball maintained his focus on helping the Pentecostal movement among Hispanics to mature and grow. He stressed the importance of developing indigenous leaders who could serve as pastors, evangelists, and missionaries to Hispanics in the United States and across Latin America.³

This vision for indigenous leader-

ship was more fully realized in 1939, when Demetrio Bazan succeeded Ball as the first Hispanic leader of the Latin American District Council of the Assemblies of God.

Hispanics forged their own Assemblies of God identity—developing indigenous leaders, schools, and governance structures—which gave believers a voice in a society where they were often marginalized.

Today, nearly one quarter of Assemblies of God adherents in the United States are Hispanic. In the last ten years, from 2006 to 2016, the number of Hispanic adherents increased from 540,431 (19.1% of all adherents) to 718,785 (22.2% of all adherents). Hispanics accounted for 44% of the growth during that period. The rest of the growth came from whites (11%) and other ethnic minorities (45%).

The vision to bring the gospel to suffering Mexican refugees ultimately helped to transform the American church. Those refugees became the seeds from which a resilient His-

panic Pentecostal movement was birthed. Today, Hispanics and other ethnic minorities are helping to fuel the continuing growth of the Assemblies of God in the United States. ✝

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NOTES

¹“Historia de los Primeros 50 Años de las Asambleas de Dios Latinos,” *La Luz Apostolica* 50:8 (April 1966): 2.

²Ibid.

³Ball promoted an indigenous missions theory as early as 1918, when he wrote that Hispanic AG churches in the U.S. aimed to be self-supporting and to ultimately send missionaries to their countries of origin. H. C. Ball, “A Report of the Spanish Pentecostal Convention,” *Pentecostal Evangel*, December 28, 1918, 7.

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