



Henri Nouwen, reflecting on his extensive travel and ministry in Latin America wrote, "It is my conviction that the spiritual destiny of the people of North America is intimately connected with the spiritual destiny of the people in Latin America."

"I am increasingly struck by the thought that what is happening in the Christian communities of Latin America is part of God's way of calling us in the North to conversion. I even feel that knowing God in North America can no longer be separated from the way God is making himself known in Latin America," wrote Nouwen.

Although he penned those words more than 20 years ago, they ring truer than ever today. For the epidemic of incredibly violent, highly organized transnational gangs are linking Central and North America unlike anything he could've ever imagined.

THE PROBLEM WE FACE

I'm a youth worker in Guatemala. In this country of 12.5 million people, there are an estimated 170,000 active gang members. By far the two most notable are Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Mara 18 (M-18). The word *mara* comes from a Central American slang term referring to nasty, swarming army ants.

MS-13 and M-18 are not your ordinary gangs. Experts have dubbed them "third generation gangs," because they've grown and evolved into multinational units with extremely sophisticated criminal operations. MS-13 and M-18 operate very effectively across international borders. They engage in transnational crime, and their activities disrupt national and international systems.

BORN IN THE U.S.A.

Bruce Springsteen never had transnational street gangs in mind when he penned his famous song, but that's exactly how the two largest and most violent gangs terrorizing Central America found their genesis. The M-18 gang began among Mexican migrants in Los Angeles during the early 1970s after other Hispanic gangs blocked them from joining. It grew rapidly by accepting Central American illegal immigrants that no other gang seemed to want. M-18 was the first Hispanic gang known to recruit outside of its immediate geographical context, often enlisting young teens in their illegal activities.

The MS-13 was formed in the 1980s in the same neighborhood as M-18, but among new Salvadoran migrants. At that time nearly a million people fled El Salvador as a result of a 12-year civil war. At least half of the million are believed to have illegally entered the U.S. Some had been recruits of guerrilla forces from poor neighborhoods in San Salvador and had good working knowledge of firearms, combat strategies, and explosives. Members maintain close ties to factions in Central America, making it a truly international gang.

A June 18, 2005, *World Magazine* cover story, "Coming to a Neighborhood Near You: MS-13, The Nation's Fastest-Growing Crime Threat," reported that "Federal law enforcement officials place the elusive gangs membership at 10,000 nationwide—making it the single largest urban threat no

one seems to know about." The article also notes, "the gang's growing size and streaks of brutality has law enforcers from the United States to Central America grasping for solutions." According to the article, MS-13 has spread to 31 U.S. states.

SIGNS OF HOPE, STORIES OF GRACE

I visited a youth pastor in our training network named Edwin who serves and lives in a gang-saturated community on the outskirts of Guatemala City. As we rode through his streets, he confirmed what the media had been saying—entire neighborhoods were under the controlling death grip of MS-13 and M-18 gang members.

Edwin showed me several new houses under construction that were completely funded by "protection taxes" that businesses and local residents were forced to pay monthly MS-13. "The gang members come by once a month, early in the morning, to collect their fees for 'ensuring' the business or home will not be robbed," Edwin said. When I inquired as to how many of the businesses in this immediate community were required to pay this tax, he replied emphatically: "Todos."

Then we pulled up to Edwin's church where a young man was carefully sweeping the front steps. As we exited the car and approached him, he looked up and covered his neck and arms, which were covered with telltale MS-13 tattoos.

"This is Jaime [not his real name]," Edwin said. "He was one of the key national leaders of the Salvatruchas but has recently given his life to Christ. Would you like to interview him?" The answer, of course, was a resounding yes.

Eight months earlier a young lady from the church's youth group invited Jaime to a weekend retreat. Jaime, anxious for a chance to "get to know her better," accepted—and promptly moved up his plans for a Friday-night attack on a rival gang member to

Thursday evening so he could be free for the weekend. At the retreat Jaime gave his life to Christ, and he had been steadily growing in his spiritual life ever since.

What warmed my heart most about our interview was a “gang prayer map” Jaime was using as a daily-prayer tool. I asked if I could see it. He disappeared through a door after opening a padlock. “He has to hide the map,” Edwin told me, “because if any of the gang members saw it, they would likely kill him.” Jaime came back with two poster boards containing hand-drawn maps—one of Guatemala and another of Central America. On the maps were names of Salvatrucha factions (“clicas”) with the street nicknames of their respective leaders. Jaime looked at me intensely and said, “I pray for each of these clicas every day and for every one of the key leaders that control them, that they might come to know Christ as I have.” On the top of the poster board were written in big bold letters, “Pandillas Para Cristo” (i.e., Gang Members for Christ).

I finally got around to asking whether or not Jaime feared for his life since leaving the MS-13. As if expecting the question sooner or later, he simply smiled nonchalantly and said, “The first verse of the Bible I memorized when I became a Christian I memorized when I became a Christian was ‘to live is Christ and to die is gain.’ That

pretty much tells me that I have nothing to worry about.”

Every time the epidemic violence swirling around us here in Central America discourages me, I think of Jaime and his prayer map, and I’m encouraged again. I also remember the testimony of three young gang members in another dangerous neighborhood of Guatemala City who became Christians through the outreach of an incredibly creative local church.

During a recent course in youth ministry leadership, we took our students to this church as a site visit. There, during a break in the program, the youth pastor introduced me and a friend of mine to three young men leading cell groups that were heavily involved in M-18.

We, of course, naturally assumed they were “ex-gang members” because of their conversion to Christianity and identifiable leadership roles, so we asked about the consequences they faced after leaving the gang. They gave us quizzical looks. “You have to understand, we have not left our gangs. If we left, we would lose all respect and the ability to share our faith effectively with them. The cell groups we lead are with our fellow gang members. We have decided to stay in the gang so that we can reach it for Christ from the inside. Isn’t that what Jesus

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did when he left heaven to join a gang called humanity to transform it from within?”

Shocked at their profound and scandalous application of the incarnation of Christ, we asked them if the senior pastor of the church and the elders knew that they were still actively part of violent street gangs. With big smiles they exclaimed almost in unison, “Sure they do. We are their appointed missionaries to reach gang members for Jesus.”

STRATEGY OF TRANSFORMATION
Capitalizing on true stories like these—and in order to help ignite a movement of youth leaders in Latin America that will unite to transform their respective nations—a “Strategy of Transformation” has been developed in partnership with three organizations: Leadership Training Ministries/Liderazgo Juvenil, The Center for Transforming Mission, and The Global Youth Ministry Network. This “Estrategia de Transformación” is a 2-1/2-year series of five courses that last three days each, monthly follow-up sessions in strategic cohort groups for theological reflection, youth ministry networking, a national consultation on high-risk youth, and site visits to successful models of incarnational outreach to high-risk youth populations.

Whereas many churches and ministries believe that where high-risk youth is concerned, the objective is to get kids “off of the street,” the Strategy of Transformation’s vision is that churches will actually “redeem” the streets on which high-risk youth “play.” This strategy is currently operating in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala with strong interest from six other countries to launch the initiative in the next year or two.

NO HYPOCRISY ALLOWED

Last month, during an interview with two recently converted MS-13 members at a San

Salvador church with an active outreach to gang members, I heard a refrain that has been repeated by nearly every active and ex-gang member we’ve interviewed in Central America.

As always we asked what their impressions were of Christianity prior to their conversions, and they affirmed that they—as well as the vast majority of other MS-13 members they know—have had a great deal of respect for Christianity but no tolerance for hypocrisy. They affirmed another common refrain: An “authentic conversion to Christianity” is often the only acceptable way, other than death, to safely leave a gang.

So for the most part gang members who experience authentic conversions to Christianity are allowed to leave the gang with few negative consequences, but there is a strong emphasis here on authentic. If an ex-gang member is attending a church service on a Sunday but is discovered living a life the rest of the week that’s incongruous with such a commitment, serious consequences are likely. It’s not uncommon to open up the local paper and see a picture of a corpse (covered by a blanket) of a supposed ex-gang member who had claimed, but not lived up to, an “authentic conversion” to Christianity.

A CHANCE FOR THE CHURCH

What an incredible opportunity for the church to prophetically step into the whirlwind of violence that’s baffling and frustrating government officials, law enforcement officers, and secular organizational leaders.


But the time to act is now. What has often struck me most in the conversations I have had with these young men is their use of the word *todavía* when describing the respect that gang members have for Christianity (*todavía* means “yet, still”). And when used by gang members in this

context it implies that while there is currently still a high level of respect for Christianity by Central American gang members, they fear it might be short-lived if the church doesn’t step up and take advantage of opportunities that have yet to be taken.

And because these gangs are running rampant in the United States as well as Central America, the church in the U.S. should be equally as concerned. Could it be that young people in these gangs, for better or worse, are leading to a North American-Central American linkage of spiritual destinies? When one considers stories like these, it certainly seems very plausible.

In my interview with Jaime I asked what his biggest fear was for the future of the gang scene in Guatemala, and he immediately shared his fear of the “new recruits” being enlisted into the ranks. “They’re going after young kids at the ages of 12 and 13 who’re proving more prone to a level of violence than I ever would have dreamed of,” he explained. “The church has got to get out of its pews and beat the gangs to these young kids. If they don’t I’m terrified of what Central America will be like in another 10 to 15 years.”

With God’s work in young men like Jamie, the three “missionaries” from Iglesia Nueva Jerusalem, and effective outreach like I saw in San Salvador, I, too, am anxious to see what Central America will be like in 10 to 15 years.

But for me, it’s not terror that grips my heart; it’s an excited anticipation of seeing a great God at work. 

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