

# **A Research in Progress Report on Protestant Mega-churches in Panama**

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## **On-site visits to mega-churches in Panama City on October 21 & 28, 2012**

### **Overview**

I arrived in Panama City from San Jose, Costa Rica, on Saturday, October 20, and was met at the airport by my friend Robert Bruneau (Director of Christian Camping International) who took me to the Toscanainn Hotel in Barrio Cangrejo in Panama City, where I would spend the next week and return to Costa Rica on Monday, October 29.

Robert had made arrangements to provide me with transportation during my visit with a Baptist layman, Mr. Javier de la Gracia, who knew the city well and this saved me a great deal of time in getting around to visit as many Evangelical mega-churches as possible on the two Sundays, as well as to arrive on time for my various appointments at the Panamanian Bible Society, with denominational officials and with other Evangelical leaders with whom I had made previous arrangements.

The purpose of my visits to these churches was to verify their existence as mega-churches and to provide some basic information about them for future reference.

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## **Casa de Oración Cristiana - Christian House of Prayer**

(General Council of the Assemblies of God)

Principal Pastors Hermes and Inés Espino

Avenida Santa Elena, Urbanización Los Yoses, Panama City

Three Sunday worship services with a seating capacity of 950;  
total average attendance of about 2,500.

I began my first visits to mega-churches in Panama City on October 21. We arrived at Casa de Oración Cristiana - Christian House of Prayer in time to attend the 8:00 am worship service, and we remained there until 8:45 am. The attendees were slow to arrive, but by 8:30 am the auditorium was almost full. I took several photos during the service to document the attendance and to show the interior and exterior of the building. There was a small parking lot at the front of the sanctuary and a large one at the back of the building.



Before the worship service, I was introduced to the Principal Pastor, Hermes Espino, who was very open and supportive about my visit, and he agreed to assist me in any way possible. The church has 13 associate pastors, including five couples.

First Service: 8:00 am. - 10:00 am.  
Second Service: 10:30 am. - 12:30 pm.  
Third Service: 1:00 pm. - 2:30 pm.



The church had its beginning in the Catholic Charismatic Movement in 1973. The meetings were held in a high school gymnasium in Panama City.

The movement caused such an impact on the lives of people, who in turn, brought family and friends, and the Lord Jesus Christ manifested himself powerfully with miracles and transformation in those gathered there who received him as Lord and Savior. In 1975, part of the group that attended these meetings decided to meet in a house located in San Francisco, where they began the Interdenominational Charismatic Prayer Group.



On September 16, 1977, *Casa de Oración Cristiana* became a Church, under the General Council of the Assemblies of God of Panama, with the main objective of positively affecting Panamanian society with a message of hope. As the group grew, the need arose to look for a larger place, and that was when it moved to Calle 44, Bella Vista. The name Christian House of Prayer was chosen by the group, based on Isaiah 56:7, "... a house of prayer for all peoples." In the search for a more suitable place, the church used different movie theaters and parks of the city. It was a time of great youth activity.

In 1980, the leaders heard a prophetic voice about the work that this church would do in the following years: "A church that would prepare ministers and leaders to be of benefit to the Panamanian nation." Through these years, pastors, ministers and workers have come to found and strengthen churches in the Republic of Panama and beyond these borders. In 1986, the church moved to its new home on Avenida Santa Elena, where it has remained until now.





During our visit to this church, there was spirited singing during first part of the worship service led by a worship team of four musicians and six singers who were led by one of the associated pastors. The auditorium had comfortable seating on padded metal chairs (rose colored).

Most of those in attendance seemed to be well-dressed middle-class people who arrived at the church in their own vehicles. Many of the worshippers stood and sang, waved their arms in the air, and prayed (some in tongues) during the first 30 minutes of the worship service, which was video tapped. Then there was a time for the reading of passages from the Bible, followed by a multi-media presentation in English. There were two large viewing screens at both sides of the platform (see photo below). At about 8:30, there were about 500 people in attendance. About 50 percent of those in attendance were men and women.



The church has two 60-passenger buses that provide transportation for people for each of the three Sunday worship services. Cell groups meet in homes during the week led by trained leaders for Bible study, prayer, discipleship and fellow-ship.

We left this church about 9:30 am to go to our next mega-church visit.

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## **Comunidad Apostólica Hosanna - Hosanna Apostolic Community**

(General Council of the Assemblies of God)

Pastor Apostle Edwin Alvarez

**Hosanna Vision TV**

Corner of Via España and Calle Martin Sosa, Barrio La Cresta, Panama City

Three Sunday worship services with a seating capacity of about 5,300;

total average Sunday worship attendance of about 14,500.



We visited this church from 10:00 to 11:30 am on Sunday, October 31. The church building is a large, impressive structure with a small parking lot at the front and a large parking lot at the rear of the building. The sanctuary has a seating capacity of about 5,300 people, which is nearly full for each of the three Sunday services: 8:30 - 10:00 am, 11:00 am - 12:30 pm, and 2:30 - 4:30 pm. Sunday School is held in the sanctuary in small groups from 10:15 - 10:45 am. The leaders of these Sunday School classes receive special training.



In addition to the main floor of the auditorium, there is a very large balcony that wraps around the interior of the building facing the platform. Throughout the auditorium seating is provide on padded metal chairs. There were four large viewing screens mounted at the front and sides of the auditorium.







During the week on Tuesday and Thursday evenings, cell groups meet in private homes through the city for prayer, fellowship, discipleship and evangelistic outreach. According to one of the associated pastors, there are about 500 cell groups that meet regularly, led by trained leaders. The congregation is multi-racial, which is a reflection of the larger Panamanian society.

The large sanctuary is situated on a major city street, which is connected to another large building on the other side of the street via a pedestrian bridge, where the church's TV studio and offices are located. Adjacent to the main sanctuary is an educational building that houses Hosanna Christian University, which offers accredited classes at night during the week and on Saturdays on a variety of subjects in several academic programs. The rector of the university is from Ecuador and has an accredited Ph.D. from a university in his home country. It is interesting to note that the rector is from the Christian & Missionary Alliance of Ecuador, and he was recruited by the pastors of Hosanna Church to provide leadership and academic credibility for the university.

The large parking lot at the rear of the sanctuary is filled for every Sunday worship service, but there is a major problem with vehicles leaving and entering the parking lot between services, with long lines of vehicles forming at the entrances to the parking lot while waiting for those who are leaving to exit so that they can enter. This means that some of the worshippers are late entering the sanctuary because of the parking lot problem.

Below is a link to a video of part of the worship service: [Panama/P1010084.MOV](#)



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## **Ministerio Iglesia Ejército de Dios - Army of God Church**

(Independent Pentecostal)

Apostle Carlos Morales y Pastor Saúl Espinosa

Calle 9, Colonia Río Abajo, Panama City

Two Sunday worship services with a seating capacity of about 1,000;  
total average attendance of about 2,000.



We arrived at this church about 12:00 noon and discovered that the second Sunday worship service was just beginning (12:00 - 2:00 pm). This is an independent Pentecostal church that is known for its teaching on "spiritual warfare" and "casting out of demons" (exorcisms).



The church has a very small parking lot across the street from the main entrance to the sanctuary, so we assumed that most people walked to church, came by city bus or taxi, or were dropped off by family members.

Because we arrived at the beginning of the second service, we were able to talk with several church officials and explain our reasons for visiting their church. They invited us to come and be seated at the front of the auditorium, which seats about 1,000 people but many people were left standing in the aisles or at the rear of the sanctuary. We were able to come up on the platform and take some photos during the service (see below).



The congregation sang very enthusiastically during the service, along with outspoken prayers with some weeping and joyful praise to God. There were several musicians and a small worship team who lead the service, along with a group of six women who danced and sang at the front of the auditorium for about 15 minutes before the preaching began.

There was a guest speaking so we were unable to meet and hear Apostle Carlos Morales (who was absent from the service) preach. During our time in this service, we did not witness any exorcisms but we did not stay until the end because we had other churches to visit. The church officials that we met were very friendly and invited us to come back again to meet the pastors.

Here is a link to a video of the worship service: [Panama/P1010079.MOV](#)









## Visits to mega-churches on Sunday, October 28

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### Iglesia Palabras de Vida Eterna - Words of Eternal Life Church

(Independent Pentecostal)

Apostle Ruben Dario Aguirre and his wife Eaelsa

Sector La Candalaria, Frente al Centro Comercial La Doña, Tocumen, Panama City

Three Sunday worship services with a seating capacity of about 2,000;

average total Sunday worship attendance of about 5,500.



We travelled a long way to visit this church, which is located on the main highway to the international airport in Tocumen. We had difficulty finding the church, which is located on a side street, but finally we discovered the sign (above) on the main highway, and then drove to the front of the church on the side street. There was a large parking lot across the street from the main entrance. We arrived at

the church about 10:45 pm in the middle of the second Sunday morning service (10:00-12:00 noon). The auditorium was packed full of people and there was no place for us to sit, so we stood along the side near one of the exits so that we could observe what was happening. The preacher was Apostle Dario Aguirre, who delivered a very spirited message with a "prosperity gospel" focus. We climbed the stairs to the balcony so that I could have a better view of those in attendance, who seemed to be well-dressed and middle-class.











The last photo presented above is a view of the large balcony, which was completely full of people.

The pastor was very well dressed as he preached from a pulpit on the large center stage of the auditorium with a large blue curtain as a back-drop. The people were seated in solid metal, padded chairs in the very attractive auditorium.

The parking lot was too small to hold all the vehicles of people who were attending the service, so the side streets were crowded with parked cars on both sides of the streets. Also, there was a line of taxis waiting near the main exits from the auditorium to provide transportation to those returning home after the service. Also, on the main highway there was a taxi stand with a row of taxis near a bus stop, awaiting passengers. Across the street, there is a large shopping area with dozens of stores: Centro Commercial "La Doña."

There are three Sunday worship services: 7:00 am, 10:00 am and 5:00 pm.

There is a video on the church's website with the pastor narrating the history of his church at: <http://www.palabrasdevidaeterna.org/content.php?id=6>

The church was founded about 35 years ago (ca. 1982), called Templo Ebenezer, in a rural area outside of Panama City. After 12 years in that place, the pastor obtained a property from his mother-in-law, where they are currently located, and they built the first phase of the current building with the support of only about 70 parishioners. Their number of members grew to about 500 soon thereafter, and it continued growing to over 1,000 with the first two years as the size of the building was expanded and finally completed, with the support of about 2,000 church members.

Currently, the total attendance at the mother church is about 8,500 on a given Sunday, as well as thousands of others in several daughter churches. During the week, about 684 cell groups in five networks, with about 7,420 participants, meet in private homes throughout the city in the evening where they are trained in discipleship.

In 2003, as part of the commitment that promotes the welfare of the inhabitants in communities of social risk, this church initiated a social outreach program in the community of Las Garzas, Corregimiento de Pacora. They started a children's feeding program ("comedor infantil") in a needy community that provides food for many children of poor families.



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## Tabernáculo de la Fe - Tabernacle of Faith

(Full Gospel Church of God, Cleveland, TN)

Apostle Manuel A. Ruiz

Colonia Juan Díaz, Panama City

One Sunday worship services at 11:00 am, with a seating capacity of 4,000;  
total average worship attendance of about 3,500.



We arrived at this large four-story church about 11:15 am to find the worship service under-way, with most of the first floor of the auditorium almost completely full. However, the large balcony was empty, but we were allowed to be seated there so that we could observe the worship service.

The musical group leading the service played their music very loud, accompanied by exuberant congregational singing, for about 45 minutes. People were singing and

dancing in the aisles and in the space below the platform. The Caribbean-style of music was very enthusiastic and people were very motivated by participating while standing, singing, praying, speaking in tongues, and praying. Some of the group of dancers appeared to be in a state of ecstasy with their eyes closed and hands raised in the air, while dancing in a semi-circle. The dancers were people from the congregation, mostly women, who were assisted by a special group of women clothed all in white, long dresses; part of their task was to help anyone of the group of dancers who might faint or fall into a trance. Most of the attendees were of Afro-Panamanian heritage. See photos below.













Below are links to videos of part of the worship service:

[Panama/P1010101.MOV](#) and [Panama/P1010106.MOV](#)

Some of the women dancers shook their heads up and down or sideways, sometimes very rapidly, while waving their arms in the air. This was the only church in Panama City where we observed this practice.

This church was described to us by other Evangelical leaders as a place where "divine healing" and "casting out of demons" was a regular occurrence during worship services. It has the second-largest congregation in Panama City, after the Hosanna Apostolic Community (Assemblies of God).

Those in attendance seemed to be a mixture of middle and lower-class people because of the way they dressed, and were mainly middle-aged people.

There was a small parking lot at one side of the auditorium, but we noticed a long line of parked buses on a side-street that were waiting to take parishioners back home after the service, as well as to bring folks to the services from the respective neighborhoods. Some of the attendees used city buses or taxis for transportation. The church is located on a major highway in a commercial area.





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**Centro Cristiano Betania / Bethany Christian Center**

(Foursquare Gospel Church)

Pastor Dr. Ilya Carrera

Domo de la Universidad de Panamá en Curundú.

(Campus Harmodio Arias Madrid), Panama City

Two Sunday worship services with a seating capacity of about 1,500;  
total average Sunday attendance of about 2,500.



First Sunday worship service: 8:30 - 10:00 a.m.  
Academy of Spiritual formation: 10:00 - 10:45 a.m.

Secondo Sunday service: 11:00 a.m. - 12:30 p.m.

Wednesday: Alpha groups in different locations, 7:00 - 9:00 p.m.

Friday service: 7:00 - 9:00 p.m.

Saturday service: 4:00 - 6:00 p.m.

The Administrative offices are located at:

Calle 68 #992, Panama City, Panama

The Pastor's personal website: <http://www.ilyacarrera.com/>



We arrived at this church about 12:00 noon to find the auditorium about half full of well-dressed, middle and upper-middle class people. This rented auditorium is known as the "Domo de la Universidad de Panamá" in Curundú, which is located near the former Albrook Air Force Base in the old Canal Zone. Most of the people arrived in their own vehicles, also some came by city bus or taxi.



The worship services are streamed live on YouTube, and audio recordings are also available; some of these recordings are broadcast via an 96.1 FM radio:

<https://www.youtube.com/c/507ccbetania/live>

Here is a link to a video I made of the worship service: [Panama/P1010097.MOV](#)



Dr. Ilya Carrera is an architect by profession and the author of several popular books on the Christian Life. She received a master's degree in Christian counseling from DOXA University and a doctorate in theology and pastoral ministries from Latin University of Theology. She currently pastors the Centro Cristiano Betania, which has an attendance of about 2,500 members.

The Church was special ministries for people of all ages, including a Sacred Dance group that participates in worship services and other special events.





This photo, copied from the church's website, shows the auditorium nearly filled with people.



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## **Calle Q Foursquare Gospel Church**

Pastors: Pablo and Tella Flórez

Address: Calle Q, Barrio Calidonia, Panama City

Website: <http://iccqpanama.com/pa/>



We visited this historic Foursquare Gospel Church to find out if it was a “mega-church” to discover that, although famous as one of the largest older Evan-gelical churches in Panama City, the size of its congregation is less than 2,000 members, with only about 900-1,000 people present in its Sunday morning worship service. It was the first Foursquare Gospel Church established in Panama City, founded on 1 October 1936. Note: in the photo above, the street parade by Catholic parishioners is unrelated to the Foursquare church in the background.

The "Q" Street Foursquare Church was founded around 1936. An old house was purchased for eventual meetings of the Methodist Church. The initiative was of the missionary brothers Arthur F. Edwards and his wife Edita.

Since its inception, our congregation has been characterized by maintaining an attitude of dedication to the Lord and service to those around him. Among his pastors we can mention the brothers Lelando and Barbara Edwards (sons of the missionaries and founders of our church), pastors Binton Johnson, Edgar Coombs, Jose Silva, Eduardo Zarate, and the reverends Pablo and Tella Flórez today.

The "Q" Street Foursquare Church executes a series of projects oriented to the evangelistic and missionary work in the Republic of Panama. Some of these projects have been extended to other regions of the country, such as mission and health tours in the provinces of Darién (bordering the Republic of Colombia), Coclé, indigenous comarcas, as well as social assistance activities and ministerial support. to pastors and leaders.

An entire mission is fulfilling the mandate of our Lord: "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature", carrying a message of salvation and healing, because "Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday and today and for centuries" (Hebrews 13: 8)

After having developed his pastoral ministry in the neighboring Republic of Colombia for about 20 years, the Reverend Pablo and Tella Flórez, received the Lord's call to serve him in the Republic of Panama since the year 1980 in the Foursquare Church of Calle "Q", where they have developed a ministry focused on the formation and training of leaders.

Source: <http://iccqpanama.com/pa/nuestra-historia/>



For many years this building housed the administrative offices of the Foursquare Gospel Church in Panama, as well as the auditorium and pastor's office of the Calle



Q Foursquare Church. The surrounding neighborhood is now quite run-down, surrounded by apartment buildings for lower-income people. However, the church owns a large lot next door to the current facility where it hopes to build a new, larger worship and educational center.



Above is an historical photo of this church during its formative years, as one of the largest congregations in Panama City. Below is an artist's drawing of the new Calle Q Foursquare church building for which funding is being sought.



Below are several photos that were taken during our visit to this church.











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## **Iglesia de Cristo Horem Panama - Ministerios Ebenezer**

Pastors Apostle Timoteo and Ana Cabrera

Villa de las Fuentes #2, Tumba Muerta, Panama City

Website: <http://iglesiadecristohorem.blogspot.com/>

Main Sunday worship service: 10:00 a.m.

Total Sunday attendance and membership unknown.

We were unable to visit this church due to lack of time.

This church was founded in 2004 and is affiliated with Iglesia de Cristo Ebenezer in Guatemala City, Guatemala, led by Apostle Sergio Enríquez, who was a disciple of Pastor Otoniel Ríos Paredes, founder of Elim Christian Mission in Guatemala City in the 1960s, later known as Iglesia MIEL (Misión Evangélica Elim).

This denomination is now classified as part of the New Apostolic Reformation Family of Churches.

Large churches in the city of Colón, Panama, on the Atlantic coast.

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**Ministerio Brazos Abiertos - Open Arms Ministry**

(Foursquare Gospel Church)

Pastor Iván Gómez

Centro Comercial Cuatro Altos, Colón

(Did not visit due to labor strike; average Sunday attendance unknown.)





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## Calvary Temple Christian Center / Centro Cristiano Templo Calvario

(Assemblies of God)

Calle 7 y Avenida Central, Colón

(Did not visit due to labor strike; average Sunday attendance unknown.)

Reverend Dr. RICARDO L. ALLEYNE W., is the Senior Pastor of the CALVARY TEMPLE Christian Center of the Assemblies of God, founded by missionary Paul Palser in 1968. Alleyne has been the pastor there since March 1987, along with his wife, pastor Marva. Both studied at the Bible Institute of the Assemblies of God.

The Templo Calvario has a 1000+ membership. Under the leadership of Rev. Alleyne and his wife they have founded several outreach ministries that impact Colon city, such as: The Good Shepherd Academic Center, The Noah's Ark Day Care Center, Templo Calvario's Interdenominational Ministerial School, Soup Kitchens, Shaboc Restaurant, Shaboc Rehabilitation and Resocialization Center: Estereo Abalanza, Mercy House, Golden Hands Ministry, Youth and Children's Ministries, Toy Bank and the School Implemented Bank.

Apostle Alleyne and his wife have worked extensively with the street youth gangs in the city of Colon and have gained their deep respect. They also direct a tough jail ministry (men, women and youths).

Source: <http://www.pajacam.org/?p=141>