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World's Largest Congregation: A Cathedral in Chile

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WORLD'S LARGEST CONGREGATION

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December 15, 1974, was a day to be remembered in the history of Latin American Pentecostalism. A crowd estimated at 20,000 persons jammed into the new Jotabeche Pentecostal Methodist Church in Santiago, Chile, for the dedication of their new "Temple-Cathedral." In attendance was the President of Chile, General Augusto Pinochet, and other high government officials. The highlight of the service came when President Pinochet, a Catholic, cut the ribbon which officially opened the cathedral for worship (see photo).

Many thousands who could not enter the church filled the streets for several blocks surrounding the building, located on Santiago's main street. With 80,000 members, it is the largest evangelical church in the world. The fervor and size of the congregation gave testimony to the dynamic growth of Pentecostalism in Chile in recent years. In less than a decade, this congregation has quadrupled in size as has most of the Pentecostal movement in Latin America.

Presiding over the dedication ceremonies was the church's pastor, Javier Vasquez. The dedication sermon was delivered by Bishop Mamerto Mancilla Tapia, head of the Methodist Pentecostal Church of Chile. Diplomats from several Protestant nations were present in addition to representatives of many Pentecostal denominations from several Latin American countries. A large delegation from the United States represented the Pentecostal Holiness Church, which has been affiliated with the Methodist Pentecostal Church of Chile since 1967. Several PHC leaders spoke.

The Jotabeche church will seat 15,000 for regular services, including a chorus and orchestra of 1,000. Because the congregation is so large, members will be permitted to attend "general services" in the mother church only once per month on a rotating basis. Otherwise, the faithful attend one of the more than 100 "annexes" or "classes" which are located throughout the city. These are shepherded by obreros (workers) who serve as assistants to Vasquez.

The middle-aged, well-liked Vasquez, only the second pastor in the sixty-five year history of the church, is quiet and unassuming but is a spellbinder in the pulpit, and his influence extends to the highest levels of government. For many years a leading official of the government-owned Chilean railroad system, Vasquez resigned his job in 1964 to become pastor of the church after the death of its founding pastor, Bishop Manuel Umaña.

Along with most other evangelicals in Chile, Vasquez strongly supports the military junta headed by Pinochet. Two days before the dedication, about 2,500 evangelicals gathered in Santiago to hear Pinochet speak and to declare their support of the government (see following story). The relationship of the Chilean Pentecostals to the government was underscored by Pinochet's appearance at the dedication, the first time a Chilean head of state had ever attended a Protestant service. Other Christian speakers at the dedication ceremonies declared the international press had exaggerated the violence of the 1973 revolution that toppled Allende, and they said the recent condemnation of Chile by the United Nations was unjust.

The Pentecostal movement in Chile began in 1909 when the Chilean Methodist Church experienced a charismatic renewal under the leadership of Pastor Willis C. Hoover of the Valparaíso Methodist Church, who was suggested to Methodists in Chile in 1902 when a holiness revival swept the Chilean Methodist church. After reading of the worldwide spread of Pentecostalism in 1908, especially of the revival in India under Pandita Ramabai, Hoover led special prayer vigils for his church. Several months later, Methodists in Valparaíso and in the denomination's two churches in Santiago began speaking in tongues, shouting, and dancing "in the Spirit." As a result, Hoover was tried and convicted by his superiors on the Methodist mission board on charges of being "irrational" and "anti-methodist." On September 12, 1909, Hoover and thirty-seven Chilean followers formed a separate church in Santiago with a revised name—the Methodist Pentecostal Church. The Jotabeche church (so-named for its street location) was formed at that time—the first Pentecostal congregation in Latin America.

In 1932 a division occurred between the followers of Hoover and Umaña, then pastor of the Jotabeche congregation. Umaña's group retained the Methodist Pentecostal name, and Hoover's group became the Evangelical Pentecostal Church. Since 1932, several more divisions have occurred, principally under such Chilean leaders as Enrique Chavez (the Pentecostal Church of Chile) and Francisco Anabalón (The Apostolic-Pentecostal Church of Chile). These divisions apparently have not impeded growth of the Pentecostal movement; indeed, some observers believe the divisions may have stimulated growth.

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Pentecostal denominations as the Assemblies of God, the Church of God, and the Church of the Foursquare Gospel have begun missions in Chile but their growth has not matched that of the indigenous Pentecostal groups. In all there are more than 100 Pentecostal denominations in the country. According to recent statistics, more than one million of Chile's 12 million population are Pentecostals. The Methodist Pentecostal Church claims 650,000 members in Chile. It also carries on extensive mission work in Argentina, Bolivia, and Peru.

Leaders point out that the Chilean Pentecostals have achieved their phenomenal growth without any financial support from the outside. The Jota-beche Cathedral worth in excess of $2 million was completely paid for by the dedication day—from members' contributions. Most of the labor was also donated by members of the church.

Also, say the leaders, the dedication service shows that Chile still enjoys full religious freedom under the military junta. Pentecostals continue to preach on the streets and highways as before. In recent months, moreover, charismatic Baptists and Catholics have joined their Pentecostal brethren in street witnessing. VINSON SYNAN

Chile: Church and Caesar

A cold war that developed between church leaders in Chile during Salvador Allende's election campaign in 1970 has been warming up ever since the military coup that ousted him in September, 1973, took place. The latest salvo was fired last month in Santiago at a meeting of 2,500 evangelicals who pledged support of the military government of President Augusto Pinochet. They also denounced Chile's international critics.

Leaders of more than thirty denominations, representing the vast majority of Chile's Protestants (who make up more than 10 per cent of the land's ten million population), signed a declaration and handed it to Pinochet. The declaration expressed shock at the "in-famous" and "unjust" censure of Chile by the United Nations, attributing it to a "political majority controlled by the Marxist powers." It acknowledged the possibility that "some lamentable injustices and abuses of power" had taken place after the coup, but it insisted these violations of rights were "isolated instances" beyond the government's control.

The statements addressed by the Chilean evangelicals to their "fellow citizens and to the world," suggested that Allende and his Marxist colleagues had won the presidency by deception. "Once in power," it asserted, "they brought about chaos and the breakdown of the institutional structures," leaving the country "divested of our most cherished spiritual values" and making the government an illegitimate one. The military intervention, it declared, "was God's power to stop the prayers of all the believers who recognized that Marxism was the expression of Satanic power in its highest degree."

In conclusion, the paper expressed a conviction that "a pure evangelical witness, based on our Lord Jesus Christ, the Source of life, can change the human nature even of those who have been poisoned by Marxist hatred."

Reaction to the declaration in some church circles was expected to be vocal and bitter. Much criticism has been heaped upon Chile's military junta by church leaders all over the world. Most of it centers on the alleged mistreatment of some 6,000 political prisoners. Also mentioned: the CIA's supposed involvement in Allende's overthrow, the suspension of democratic processes, the control of Congress, the press, usurpation of court powers, and the like.

Many missionaries and Chilean churchmen, however, insist the situation is not as bad as outsiders describe it, and they say some of the tough measures are needed in order to root out Communist influence. One of the things that alarmed Chilean churchgoers most, says a Southern Baptist missionary Robert C. Moore, was Allende's introduction of millions of Marxist-oriented textbooks into schools, from kindergartens to universities. Other missionaries and nationals concurred; they say Communists controlled many classrooms.

The Chilean clergy opposed to the junta seem to be in the minority, but they include top leaders, resulting in some notable clashes. During the Allende campaign, the pastors of Santiago quoted Cardinal Raul Silva Henriquez as saying that it would be entirely permissible for a Catholic to vote for a Marxist. More recently, Henriquez issued a statement critical of the junta, and Santiago auxiliary bishop Fernando Aritzeta Ruiz has been active in the defense of Allende's jailed colleagues. But opposition to Allende was led by priest Raul Hashbin, director of a Catholic television station, and the bishop over Chile's armed forces said the coup was "the best thing that ever happened to my country."

A showdown in the 24,500-member Evangelical Lutheran Church occurred in May, when Bishop Helmut Frenz, 41, by a split voice vote, denounced the government's campaign of confidence from the church's fifty-two-member Synod. Frenz, head of the Chile church since 1970, was under pressure to resign by many mem-