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A table of contents for *Christian Brethren Review* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_christian-brethren-review.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_christian-brethren-review.php)

### **3 SPANISH CHRISTIAN BRETHERN ASSEMBLIES AND THEIR MISSIONARY AWARENESS**

**Terry Wickham**

#### **A Few Facts and Figures**

After twelve years of democratic government, there have been great changes in Spanish society, in spite of the severe economic crisis. Among these we must mention the total religious freedom we now enjoy under the 1977 Constitution. The population of Spain is now nearly 40 millions, of which still 98% are nominal Roman Catholics. The evangelical minority of 55–60,000 represents less than one half of 1%. There is an evangelical testimony in only about 500 of the more than 8,000 towns and cities of over 5,000 population. Paul Thompson, Spain-team field director for Worldteam Mission, says that 'in 16 of Spain's 50 provinces there are less than 100 believers'. At the same time, according to David Frank who works with Greater Europe Mission in Spain, 'some 170 cults are proselytising and are doing quite well'. He goes on to say that 'Spaniards are not necessarily spiritually hungry, but spiritually curious'.

There are between 110 and 120 assemblies of Christian Brethren, mostly small, totalling 8–10,000 members. We are no longer the largest evangelical grouping; this is now the Gypsy Pentecostal church with about 250 churches and more than 12,000 members.

Brethren assemblies are served by about 70 national workers, of whom 55 are on the list of the Evangelization Fund (roughly equivalent to *Echoes*) and 46 foreign missionaries, of whom about 25 are found on the *Echoes* list or those of similar agencies from USA, Canada or New Zealand.

#### **Missionary Interest in Spanish Christian Brethren Assemblies**

Most live assemblies—and, happily, the majority come into that category—are too absorbed in the task of evangelizing their own country, and too limited in resources, to have very much interest in foreign missions. But there are a few honourable exceptions.

1 A group of churches in Barcelona, Madrid and Algeciras, founded by the same evangelist, are very interested in Muslim work and are preparing several married couples for this. The evangelist and his wife (on the EF list mentioned above) spent four months in *Turkey* a few years ago before being expelled by the police.

2 Nurses have gone from one or two assemblies to countries like Equatorial Guinea or Indonesia to help in missionary work, but only for short spells of time.

3 A small number of Spanish young people over the years have gone abroad with Operation Mobilisation teams or on the ships.

The Spanish assemblies, in common with the Independent Evangelical churches and some Baptist churches, support generously disaster or emergency funds set up not only for national emergencies, but also those located overseas. During the last fifteen years much money has been donated for emergencies in Pakistan, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Ethiopia, Mexico, Colombia and El Salvador. In this last case, even though the disaster followed hard on the heels of the previous one, over £9,000 was raised in two months. Many assemblies also support generously agencies like the Leprosy Mission and the United Bible Societies, although this is more likely where the presence of foreign missionaries makes easier the obtaining of information about needs in the world.

International Youth Rallies like SPREE, Mission 80 and Mission '87 have always been well supported by some assemblies. About 400 Spaniards attended Mission '87, and quite a number came from assemblies.

### **What Spanish Evangelical Churches/Assemblies can Contribute to European and World Mission**

Recently, the magazine *Edificación Cristiana*, of which I am the editor, interviewed Baptist pastor José M Martínez, one of Spain's greatest missionary statesmen, and asked him—among many other things—the following question: 'In your opinion, has the moment come when Spanish evangelicals can contribute to the evangelical movement in Europe? To what extent and in what areas can we do so?' He replied: 'I don't think we have much to contribute; in almost every aspect of Christian life and service our European brethren are still ahead of us. But there is one matter in which perhaps we can be useful to them: in ecumenism. The document produced by the World Evangelical Fellowship 'task force', *A Contemporary Evangelical Perspective on Roman Catholicism*, arose from the opposition of the Spanish and Italian Alliances to an attempt by the European Evangelical Alliance to get closer to the Roman Catholic Church (on an official basis). Due to our special knowledge of Catholicism we can help

believers in other countries to see things in the correct perspective and to maintain without qualification their faithfulness to the gospel. Some of our brethren from other countries recognise and are grateful for this.'

### What Does the Future Hold for Spanish Assemblies?

I would like to deal first with some negative tendencies, most of which stem from the rife materialism which has overtaken Spain during the last 25 years, and which the advent of democracy has only aggravated—hedonism, religious indifference, ethical mediocrity, which surfaces in the evangelical churches as a lack of basic Christian sanctity and piety. At the same time traditionalism, structural rigidity, coupled with a shallow evangelism often divorced from an exemplary ethical conduct, are plain to see. Evangelical churches in general—and the Brethren assemblies are no exception—display the worst features of European Christendom, highlighted in the Spanish case because we are a tiny, greatly fragmented microcosm of the European macrocosm. Some feel that religious freedom has arrived too late in the day for us ever to be able to evangelize Spain; others feel that it can be done, but only if the Roman Catholic church undergoes a massive reformation.

With regard to the Christian Brethren scene in relation to all this, we may also note:

- 1 An over-concern with secondary matters, which is leading to a clear rift between more traditional and more 'open' assemblies. The influence of foreign missionaries can reinforce these tendencies.
- 2 The increasing polarization, stemming from 1 above, limits fellowship and therefore seriously inhibits united efforts to reach out with the gospel.
- 3 A few assemblies are losing their identity and forgetting—or deliberately ignoring—their roots. Such usually end up in the charismatic camp, becoming stronger in Spain, or become independent or mission churches.
- 4 In many cases evangelistic and pastoral methods are superficial and outdated, palpably unable to cope with the challenges and problems of Christian life and witness in a secular society, eg divorce and marriage, contemporary ethical problems, etc. (It doesn't help to have as elders only men who are busy businessmen, as they haven't the time or the skill for the specialized pastoral and teaching work required to deal with these matters.)

But some very *positive* things are happening amongst the Brethren and other evangelical churches in Spain:

- 1 In some areas, notably Catalunya, the Basque Country, Madrid and Central Spain and Seville, a considerable evangelistic work is on the increase, especially in the big cities or conurbations. New churches are being planted each year and many souls are coming to Christ. The monthly ¼-hour TV 'slot' granted to the evangelical community, in spite of being shown at a very late hour, draws an

average 5 million audience, and an increasing number of people are writing in for help. We are praying for a better hour for this programme, so as to increase the audience still further.

2 Through the Roman Catholic base communities, of which there are many throughout Spain, streams of charismatic renewal are coming from the study of the Bible. Although the hierarchy has this well under control, as usual, we look to God to do a great work through his Word, according to his promise that his Word will 'not return unto Him void' but will accomplish his purposes. We are expecting him to do great things in Spain.