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# El Salvador

## A Missiological Analysis of its Current Reality and Opportunities

by Jean-Luc Krieg





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**Insightful thought leadership on urban poverty, migration, and mission in Latin America and among Latino Immigrants**

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# El Salvador: A Nation Marked by Violence and Repression

## A History of Violence

The pervasive absence of peace in El Salvador over many years starkly reflects its tumultuous history. For almost a decade before the state of emergency was declared in March of 2022 the nation became known as one of the world's most violent places. Its history of conflict dates back to the early 16th century with the arrival of Spanish conquistadors, who either subdued or wiped out the indigenous tribes. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, El Salvador endured numerous battles for independence and lived under the oppressive control of a wealthy elite, notably the 14 influential coffee plantation families who held sway over its economy and politics. The rigid governance of military dictatorships, particularly during General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez's regime (1931-1944), deeply ingrained violence in the fabric of Salvadoran society. This period was characterized by widespread massacres, genocides, and the systematic extermination of indigenous communities.

Despite the passionate pleas and tireless efforts of Monsignor Oscar Romero in the late 1970s, the ruling elites turned a deaf ear to persistent complaints about agrarian reform and the economic disparities facing the people. Tragically, their response to Romero's prophetic voice was to silence and martyr him, igniting the flames of a devastating civil war that ravaged El Salvador from 1980 to 1992. The consequences were heartbreaking, with tens of thousands of lives lost, massive displacements, and an increase in both legal and undocumented migration to the United States. It was amid this displacement and desperate struggle for survival in the overcrowded inner cities of Los Angeles that two of the most notorious and violent gangs, Mara Salvatrucha 18 (MS-18) and Calle 18 Gang, emerged, formed by youths who had grown up in a culture marked by violence.

## The Rise of the Gangs

During the 1990s, a large number of young Salvadorans were deported from the United States to their homeland, where they struggled to reintegrate due to a lack of professional skills and development opportunities. Instead of finding productive alternatives, many of these youths turned to gang affiliation, triggering two to three decades of escalating violence as these groups gained increasing power and influence. Particularly, the two most notorious gangs, Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18, evolved into pervasive threats to national security and stability. Controlling specific territories and engaging in criminal activities such as drug trafficking, extortion, and murder, these gangs instilled fear and violence across Salvadoran communities. Their detrimental impact permeated all facets of society, undermining the economy, education system, and overall quality of life.

Despite the growing gang problem, public policies aimed at addressing the underlying causes of violence and insecurity proved ineffective. Government responses primarily focused on harsh measures and repression, without tackling the deep-rooted issues of marginalization, inequality, and poverty that contributed to the rise of gangs. The lack of investment in social programs, quality education, dignified employment, and development opportunities left many young people vulnerable and without hope, fueling gang recruitment and expansion. As a result, El Salvador became one of the most violent countries in the world, suffering more murders per capita than any other country in the Western Hemisphere, with most of the violence linked to gangs. Although homicide rates began to decline after 2015, Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18 continued to dominate impoverished neighborhoods, including the central area of San Salvador.<sup>1</sup>

## State of Emergency

In early 2022, the government of Nayib Bukele implemented new measures to tackle gang-related issues, primarily by declaring a state of emergency and enacting laws that resulted in the mass incarceration of over 81,000 gang members. This action made El Salvador the country with the highest incarceration rate globally, with 2% of its population behind bars. Although these measures under the State of Emergency have kept El Salvador off the list of the world's most violent countries, significantly reducing all violence indicators and bringing positive changes to impoverished Salvadoran communities previously under the brutal control of gangs, the underlying causes that led to gang activity remain unaddressed.

## Ongoing Challenges

According to data from the Salvadoran Foundation for Economic and Social Development (FUSADES), El Salvador continues to face significant socioeconomic challenges: poverty, unemployment, limited investment in education,

and lack of access to basic services such as healthcare and higher education remain major issues.<sup>2</sup> Only 11% of the population has more than 13 years of schooling<sup>3</sup>, and less than 5% of students complete their higher education.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, repressive policies have come at a high cost to democracy, leading to the militarization of society and infringements on human rights and civil liberties. This has perpetuated an indefinite state of emergency, granting Salvadoran security forces the power to imprison citizens based merely on suspicions of gang affiliation or connection, or even for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Thousands of innocents have been incarcerated, and tens of thousands of children of those deprived of liberty have been left unattended, as many families have lost their sole economic support in the crackdown on crime. Additionally, the rise in overcrowded prisons and the intimidation of the free press have already inflicted significant damage on the rule of law.<sup>5</sup>

In the sections that follow, we will detail additional significant challenges that impede the sustainable transformation of the country:

## #1: Lack of Churches Committed to Holistic Transformation

### **Significant Growth of the Evangelical Church**

While El Salvador remains deeply religious with the Catholic Church as the state religion, evangelical Christianity has experienced significant growth over recent decades, overtaking the Catholic population for the first time. A 2020 CID Gallup poll shows that 44% of Salvadorans identify as evangelicals, surpassing the 38% who identify as Roman Catholics.<sup>6</sup> This shift represents a 17% loss of followers for the Catholic Church in just one generation. Although the Catholic Church continues to play an important role, evangelical churches are becoming increasingly influential in Salvadoran society.<sup>7</sup>

The expansion of evangelical Christianity in El Salvador is influenced by various factors, notably the country's turbulent history marked by violence and civil war, which has compelled many to seek hope and stability in faith. The proactive efforts of missionary groups in spreading the gospel and establishing new churches have also been pivotal. Moreover, the growth of the Evangelical Church in El Salvador aligns with a broader regional trend. This trend includes the emergence of movements like Neo-Pentecostalism in the 1970s, which preaches the 'prosperity gospel' — a reinterpretation of the Bible that views earthly wealth as a sign of divine blessing. These teachings have been particularly appealing to the poor and those aspiring for a better life in urban areas.

### **The Church's Inadequate Response to the Nation's Challenges**

Despite the remarkable growth of churches, many of the persistent challenges within the country remain unresolved. The response from evangelical churches in El Salvador has varied and largely proved ineffective in addressing violence and driving social change. While many churches continue to grow in numbers, there is a noticeable lack of practical engagement with their communities, with a predominant focus on spiritual matters alone. Frequently, due to an insufficient understanding of how to effectively address community needs, or because of fear, complacency, or political alignments, these churches have opted for silence or even complicity in the face of socio-political challenges, withdrawing into their religious enclaves and showing hesitance to confront issues directly.

Additionally, certain theological interpretations influenced by premillennialism, brought by American missionaries, have played a role in marginalizing the evangelical church's pursuit of social reform. Concentrated on the anticipation of being raptured from the world before the Antichrist's arrival, the majority of Salvadoran evangelical churches have embraced a preservationist mindset that eagerly awaits rescue from a sinful world rather than actively engaging with it. This emphasis on personal holiness has also deterred many churches from interacting with their communities due to fears of worldly influences. Indeed, for some congregations, the idea of welcoming certain sinners, such as gang members, into the church is viewed as sinful.<sup>8</sup>

This silence and absence in the public sphere not only hinder their moral and transformative impact on society but can also cause churches to become insular and disconnected from daily realities, making their evangelical message less effective.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the limited influence of evangelical Christianity is not just evident in social dynamics but also in politics, due to a significant discrepancy between the proportion of the population identifying as evangelical



and their representation in political offices. Currently, only 6% of congressional representatives are evangelicals, despite more than 40% of the population identifying as such, underscoring the evangelical underrepresentation in politics.<sup>10</sup>

### **An Urgent Call to the Evangelical Church**

The evangelical church's lack of comprehensive engagement is particularly alarming given the current national context. Although the government's repressive policies have reduced violence, they have also left many prisoners' families—children, youth, and particularly women—desperately needing support. Women often bear the brunt, struggling to keep their families together while sliding into extreme poverty. They not only have to provide for themselves but also face the additional burden of covering transportation costs to visit prisons or judicial offices, as well as providing food and personal hygiene items for their incarcerated loved ones.<sup>11</sup> The underlying issues, such as domestic violence, poverty, and the lack of economic and educational opportunities, along with the significant challenges facing Salvadoran youth, are widespread and profound.

There is a pressing need for more churches to deeply engage with their communities, actively seeking solutions to the nation's challenges. This commitment requires a shift towards a holistic understanding of God's mission that touches every aspect of life. It also calls for collaboration across denominational lines and partnerships with other organizations and community groups to foster positive change. Crucially, the church must train disciples to become agents of change who not only proclaim but also embody the gospel of the Kingdom of God, serving as catalysts for holistic transformation.<sup>12</sup> Such a shift will enable the church to become a nurturing ground for leaders equipped to address systemic issues like poverty, corruption, outreach to children and youth, and the shaping of social norms, human values, and moral and spiritual guidance.

If evangelical churches embrace this call, they could become powerful agents for change—a beacon of hope and a catalyst for transformation. However, the limited number of churches committed to the *Missio Dei* hinders the fulfillment of this transformative vision.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the evangelical church in El Salvador needs to deepen its engagement with its social context and reclaim its prophetic voice. Such change demands courage, discernment, and a deep sense of mission. Despite substantial challenges, the potential for transformation is vast. By staying true to its calling, the church can shape not only individual lives but also the broader social fabric of Salvadoran society.

## **#2: The Challenges Facing Salvadoran Children and Youth**

### **Neglected Amidst the Pandemic and State of Emergency**

Children and youth in El Salvador are in an increasingly precarious position due to the pandemic and the sustained state of exception. These circumstances have profoundly affected their emotional health, contributing to a rise in various psychological disorders. Today, many Salvadoran adolescents grapple daily with neglect and indifference, struggling with poverty, instability, violence, and persistent traumas and pressures. Recent statistics reveal an alarming increase in various related issues:

- Emotional Health:** Emotional health is becoming an increasingly serious concern in El Salvador. Research conducted in 2022 by the Pro Education Foundation of El Salvador (FUNPRES) reveals that between 35% and 40% of Salvadorans are showing moderate to severe symptoms of depression, anxiety, or emotional stress.<sup>14</sup> Dr. Carina Castro, a specialist in pediatric neuropsychology, has noted a worrying 48% increase in mental health disorders among Salvadoran children and youth since the pandemic began.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, an analysis from the Foundation for Higher Education (FES) shows that 23% of girls in urban areas suffer from significant levels of anxiety and depression.<sup>16</sup> These findings highlight that stress, anxiety, and depression have intensified, fueled by the uncertainty and social isolation caused by the pandemic and the restrictions of the state of emergency.
- Domestic Violence:** The Attorney General's Office in El Salvador has reported a significant rise in domestic violence cases in recent years, with girls and women being disproportionately affected. This increase parallels findings from UN Women in El Salvador, which report a marked surge in violence against women and girls since the onset of the pandemic.<sup>17</sup> The enforced lockdowns and associated stresses have exacerbated this disturbing

trend. Economic vulnerabilities have also intensified, particularly leading to reduced income for women in the informal sector. Recent statistics from the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and its affiliates show a 70% increase in gender-based violence reports since the COVID-19 pandemic began.<sup>18</sup> Effective collaboration between the government and civil society organizations is essential to safeguard the safety and welfare of Salvadoran girls, women, and families.

- **Sexual Abuse:** Regrettably, there has been a noticeable rise in child sexual abuse cases recently. The Salvadoran Institute for the Comprehensive Development of Children and Adolescents (ISNA) reported a 25% increase in such cases in 2022.<sup>19</sup> A lack of adequate supervision and protection, along with heightened stress and vulnerability among children and adolescents, has created conditions conducive to such offenses.
- **Child Poverty:** According to UNICEF, 43% of children and adolescents in the country live in poverty, facing significant challenges such as lack of access to quality education, exposure to violence, and limited opportunities for holistic development (UNICEF, 2020). Furthermore, the World Bank warns that educational disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic could lead to a decrease of up to 10% in students' future earnings. Additionally, current cognitive deficits in young children may result in a 25% reduction in their future earnings (World Bank, 2023). It is essential to tackle these issues comprehensively and systematically by providing programs and services that ensure their protection, education, health, and well-being. Creating a safe environment, offering meaningful learning opportunities, and fostering positive leadership models can significantly improve these children's futures and help break the cycle of poverty and marginalization.
- **Lack of Growth Opportunities:** The pandemic isolated many young people and intensified emotional disorders, while the state of emergency has further deepened their anxieties. The fear of interacting with others due to the risk of detention has driven many young people into deeper isolation, especially in impoverished urban communities. Previously, gangs, although negatively, provided a sense of purpose in areas where young people saw no prospects for themselves. Without alternative sources of opportunity and hope, new criminal groups are poised to fill this void. This is particularly concerning given that most young people in marginalized areas still lack access to quality education and extracurricular activities.<sup>20</sup>
- **Children of Gang Members - The Unseen Victims:** Although exact figures are unavailable on how many children of gang members were left unattended when tens of thousands of gang members were imprisoned in El Salvador in 2022, it is vital to recognize the adverse effects of mass incarceration on their lives. These children and families often face stigmatization, discrimination, and economic difficulties. The repercussions on the emotional, social, and educational development of these children and youth are particularly profound. A lack of adequate support and supervision at home can heighten their vulnerability to risky situations, including involvement in criminal activities or becoming victims of violence and abuse. Therefore, it is imperative that authorities, churches, and civil society organizations in El Salvador work together to provide necessary support and resources to the children and youth impacted by the incarceration of their parents or relatives involved in gangs.

These alarming statistics underscore the urgent need for interventions to support the children and youth of El Salvador. Implementing mental health programs, strengthening child protection networks, and promoting education to prevent violence and abuse are crucial steps. Additionally, providing resources and training to church leaders, members of civil organizations, and education professionals is essential to effectively address these issues and create a safer, healthier environment for the nation's young people, offering them places of refuge and healing. Moreover, the absence of spiritual formation in children and youth may lead to weakened emotional resilience and diminished capacity to handle adversities. Thus, spiritual education can play a critical role in enhancing emotional health and providing support in challenging times, with churches serving as pivotal safe spaces that help young individuals stay away from criminal groups and self-destructive behaviors.

## #3: The Future of Gangs

### The Need for Holistic Solutions

Violence and gang issues in El Salvador have been deeply entrenched and complex challenges for decades. These problems cannot be effectively resolved with merely temporary measures such as the repressive policies currently enforced under the state of emergency. While these policies have dramatically reduced violence and made the regime of Bukele one of the most popular governments in Latin America, there will be sequels that will haunt the nation, unless long-term and holistic solutions are implemented. Addressing violence effectively requires a combination of robust security measures and addressing the underlying causes such as poverty, domestic violence, lack of opportunities, and the neglect of children without parental support. In 2023, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights highlighted the need for comprehensive solutions, advocating for a multidimensional approach that encompasses both violence prevention and the social reintegration of youths involved in gangs.<sup>21</sup> To make a significant and lasting impact, it is crucial to implement strategies that tackle the structural causes of violence. This means enacting public policies that enhance social inclusion, ensure quality education, provide access to economic opportunities, develop supportive structures that foster belonging among youth, and strengthen community cohesion.

### The Relationship between Gangs and Evangelical Churches

Interestingly, prior to the enforcement of the state of exception, there existed a complex yet significant relationship between gangs and evangelical churches in El Salvador.<sup>22</sup> These two entities were among the most prevalent community organizations within impoverished neighborhoods. Research conducted from 2014 to 2018 highlighted a wide array of interactions between evangelicals and gang members.<sup>23</sup> Notably, evangelical churches were seen as potential pathways out of gang life for members, even by multinational agencies like USAID and UNDP. The study revealed that 68.6% of active gang members wanted to leave their gangs, and 51.2% believed that joining a church or committing to God was essential for exiting gang life. Furthermore, gang leaders often monitored individuals who left to join churches, verifying the sincerity of their conversions and their adherence to faith practices. The data indicated that social reintegration was more achievable for gang members who became involved with evangelical churches.<sup>24</sup> This suggests that evangelical churches, despite facing social and governmental hurdles, may play a crucial role in the rehabilitation and reintegration of gang members into society.

However, integrating gang members into churches and their communities has not been without challenges. Existing church members and neighbors often resist accommodating former gang members.<sup>25</sup> For many evangelicals, avoiding interaction with gang members has become commonplace, consistently shunning any form of engagement. Consequently, the transition from gang life to acceptance within the church and broader society was and is often fraught with uncertainty and difficulties. Furthermore, the lack of employment opportunities, vocational training, and limited educational resources compound the precarious future faced by these former gang members.

### What Will Happen to those Incarcerated?

Although the current regime has halted most evangelical efforts to reintegrate former gang members into society, the government will need to develop long-term solutions for the nearly 100,000 individuals currently incarcerated. Merely constructing the largest prison in the Americas, the *Terrorism Confinement Center*, which opened in February 2023 with a capacity for 40,000 inmates, does not resolve the issue. Despite the security minister's claim that gang members "will never return to their communities... not even in 45 years," such a stance is unsustainable. Most of these individuals are charged with "illicit association," a broad category that allows authorities to hold them, including minors, incommunicado.<sup>26</sup> The specifics of when or how they will stand trial remain unclear. However, the government acknowledges that it cannot merely continue to fill prisons and keep people locked up indefinitely. The experience in many Latin American countries, including El Salvador, has shown that overly harsh (*mano dura*) policies can often backfire and have unintended negative consequences long-term.<sup>27</sup> Eventually, the government will have to address whether it will rehabilitate and reintegrate those who are eventually released and, crucially, what steps it will take to prevent the rise of a new generation of violent street gangs. There is hope that post-2024 elections, the government will begin to offer long-term solutions that include rehabilitation and community engagement<sup>28</sup> since punitive measures alone are insufficient to curb gang violence.<sup>29</sup>

### **A Great Opportunity**

Given the current spiritual revival in prisons, where over 40% of inmates have expressed a desire to lead a life dedicated to God, according to Luis Alonso González Cruz, Director of the Post-Penitentiary Coordination Center<sup>30</sup>, there is an opportunity for churches to welcome released prisoners in the next two to three years. Will the church seize this chance to offer forgiveness and become an ambassador of reconciliation, as the Bible mandates (2 Cor. 5:17-21)? Will society allow former gang members to rebuild their lives, or will they continue to be viewed as perpetual enemies deserving retribution? If the response is affirmative, the church must prepare to utilize its strengths and create effective models for reintegrating former inmates into society through comprehensive social reintegration programs.

## **#4: Urban Poverty**

### **The Challenge of Urban Poverty in El Salvador**

El Salvador, one of the most urbanized countries in the Americas, is grappling with significant urban poverty. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) reports that more than two million Salvadorans, roughly one-third of the population, reside in precarious urban settlements. The contrast in urban poverty in El Salvador is striking. Even though these areas are close to centers of political-economic power and media hubs, urban exclusion is largely hidden, contrasting sharply with nearby modern shopping centers and exclusive residential districts. The situation is particularly dire in the eastern and western regions of the country, where 60% of the population lives in difficult conditions. Here, many earn incomes too low to meet basic needs and lack access to essential sanitary services, a reality that persists even in the metropolitan area of greater San Salvador.<sup>31</sup>

### **The Economic Effects of COVID-19**

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a marked impact on El Salvador's economic situation. The country's economy, heavily dependent on remittances from the United States and an informal sector that provides about 70% of employment, was severely affected. The decline in remittances, coupled with substantial job and income losses, slightly increased poverty levels in 2021.<sup>32</sup> Before the pandemic, El Salvador had seen a consistent decline in poverty levels, decreasing from 40.4% in 2016 to 29.8% in 2022.<sup>33</sup> While this achievement is no doubt praiseworthy, the country still faces very significant challenges, with a poverty rate that remains one of the highest in Latin America.<sup>34</sup> According to the Multiple Purpose Household Survey (MPHS), 8.6% of households were living in extreme poverty, while relative monetary poverty rose to 18.1%.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, a report by FUSADES and USAID in 2022 showed that 40% of the population in San Salvador lives in conditions of vulnerability, 39% felt their economic situation had deteriorated over the previous year, and 46% experienced some level of food insecurity.<sup>36</sup> The lack of access to basic services remains a significant issue. Since 2018, over 60% of families have been impacted by the absence of social security, a problem linked to the informality of employment. This figure increased to 68.3% in 2022.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, access to potable water has not seen any improvement, affecting 21.2% of households in 2022—the highest level since 2018.<sup>38</sup>

### **Combating Poverty in El Salvador**

Poverty in El Salvador is a complex issue that demands a comprehensive and sustained approach. While the government's crackdown on gangs has created a more peaceful public and marketplace environment, the lack of economic opportunities continues to drive the population towards emigration. Without remittances from North America, the levels of extreme and relative poverty would be significantly worse than those currently exacerbated by the pandemic. Consequently, it is critical to focus efforts and resources on alleviating poverty to prevent marginalization and misery from seeking alternative paths such as subversion and crime, as has happened at various times in the nation's history. Addressing both crime and poverty is vital to ensuring a dignified life for all Salvadorans.



# Conclusion: The Need for a Church Committed to its Nation

## **El Salvador Still Faces Significant Challenges**

In conclusion, although most Salvadorans believe their country is heading in the right direction, the situation described in this briefing clearly shows that El Salvador still confronts numerous challenges.<sup>39</sup> The evangelical church has a significant opportunity and an important role to play in addressing these issues and guiding the nation towards God's redemptive purposes. It is hoped that the church will accept this challenge and actively engage in the transformation of the nation.

## **The Call for the Church to Engage in Pursuing Shalom**

To address the ongoing challenges, the evangelical church in El Salvador must embrace its calling to pray and seek the Shalom of their country (Jeremiah 29:7). Denial and inaction are not viable options; the church must address social unrest through living justly, adopting transformative attitudes, taking decisive actions, and engaging in prayers that align with God's will. By diligently praying and working, the Salvadoran evangelical church can potentially restore families, schools, communities, and cities, ultimately transforming the nation through its influential role in fostering healing, reconciliation, and restoration.

Establishing a deliberate Christian presence in the community is a crucial strategy for the church. This can be accomplished by founding and equipping more churches to focus on community engagement, offering comprehensive urban pastoral care that fosters hope, mediates conflicts, and works alongside community leaders to improve well-being. Moreover, implementing values-based programs in public schools that focus on life skills, violence prevention, and abuse, or through children's clubs and local youth groups, provides the church with a significant opportunity to impact Salvadoran society. These initiatives offer young people an alternative framework that counters the appeal of gangs and fosters a sense of belonging. Finally, training to become ambassadors of reconciliation and developing programs to reintegrate ex-convicts into society are additional ways the church can act as a relevant agent of change in a society torn by violence.

In conclusion, with the numerous challenges El Salvador faces, the evangelical church plays a vital role in fostering peace (shalom) and restoring its society. The Church has the choice to seize this pivotal opportunity or overlook it, missing a historic chance to engage in prayer and compassionate action. If the Church effectively responds to this opportunity, it will be able to make a lasting difference.

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