

God vs. gang? For some in El Salvador, rehab happens at church

More than 400 ex-members say that Protestant groups have helped them leave the gangs.

by [Milli Legrain](#) in the [October 25, 2017](#) issue

(The Christian Science Monitor) Wilfredo sits on a plastic chair inside Eben Ezer Church in a gang-controlled neighborhood of El Salvador's capital. It's not hard to see why he's a leader at the church: he is charismatic, bilingual, and polished in his button-down shirt despite the sweltering heat.

Beneath his Adam's apple, two numbers are visible: a one and an eight, for Barrio 18—one of El Salvador's two main gangs, which have helped make the country one of the world's most violent. The shirt hides many more tattoos, signs of the different kind of leader Wilfredo once was, running Barrio 18's international communications from Honduras to El Salvador and across Mexico and the United States.

"I got to know Christ in jail," said Wilfredo, whose last name has been omitted for privacy. Every Tuesday at Eben Ezer, he brings together former gang members who also have left gang life after becoming Christians in prison.

More than 400 ex-members say that Protestant groups have helped them leave the gangs. In El Salvador as many as 60,000 gang members control large parts of the country, which has a population of 6.4 million. But some churches' experiences suggest that addressing the basic needs that many young people hope to find in gang life—acceptance, belonging, stability—can be key to getting them out.

Wilfredo's family brought him to the United States at age ten, and eventually, like many Salvadoran immigrants, he joined the Barrio 18 gang in its birthplace: Los Angeles.

"I was a kid who just wanted to fit in," Wilfredo said, remembering his teenage years in the late 1990s. "It was popular in those days to be part of a gang. I needed to

belong to a gang to be accepted.”

After 20 years in the United States, Wilfredo was deported alone back to El Salvador, where he was arrested for armed robbery. He completed a ten-year sentence in January.

But if stories like Wilfredo’s show that rehabilitation can work, experts say, they also illustrate the challenges ahead, including a lack of institutional support for groups trying to engage with gang members. Rehabilitation groups are often accused of being “gang sympathizers,” said Jeanne Ridders, a human rights activist who has worked with gangs in prisons through nongovernmental organizations.

President Salvador Sánchez Cerén has opted for an approach known as *mano dura*, or “iron fist,” calling in armed forces to deal with gang violence. According to human rights groups and journalists, death squads are carrying out extrajudicial killings.

“People think that problems and social conflicts are going to be resolved with laws: the stricter the law, the more likely it is to be successful,” said Nelson Flores, a former security expert at FESPAD, one of the country’s leading human rights groups. “But actually it’s the opposite.”

José Miguel Cruz, a professor at Florida International University who has been researching gangs in El Salvador for 20 years, conducted a study recently with funding from the State Department. It found that more than 58 percent of former and active gang members believe that the church would be the best institution to lead rehabilitation programs.

Protestant churches “are perhaps the only way in which gang members can retire or walk away from gangs without leaving the country,” he said. “There is no other consistent rehabilitation effort in El Salvador right now.”

At Eben Ezer many Barrio 18 members speak about previous attempts at leaving the gangs. They point to the church as the institution that helped them change. Key to some church groups’ success, they suggest, is their understanding that gangs can fill emotional and social needs—factors that make gang life appealing to teenagers in the first place.

“These young men need an identity,” said Luis Gonzalez, a pastor who has worked with gang members in the notorious San Francisco Gotera prison for several years.

“They can find that within the gang or the church.”

Former Barrio 18 members often say, “I used to be a gang member, but now I’m a Christian.” Churches provide “a new identity, which is fundamental,” said Cruz. “The church identity replaces the gang identity completely.”

Many youths enter the gang as teens, growing up in poverty-stricken neighborhoods of the capital after the civil war ended in 1992.

“My parents used to fight a lot,” said Jorge, whose last name has been omitted for privacy. “Maybe that’s why I decided to join the gang and get away from them.”

He entered the gang 20 years ago, when he was 16.

“Perhaps I got more support from them than from my own family,” he said. “But then you realize that it was all a lie. I spent ten years in jail, and I didn’t get any support. Only my wife helped me then.”

A personal approach helps gain gang members’ trust, Cruz said.

The message the churches impart is “God loves you, he will save you, you can change,” Cruz said. “That is very appealing to gang members with strong feelings of guilt for everything they have done.”

But there are also material needs that drive young Salvadorans toward gang activity. Employment prospects for youth are meager. One local factory offers job placements to select former gang members, many of whom come through the church. At League Collegiate Outfitters in Ciudad Arce, former members of rival gangs MS-13 and Barrio 18 work side-by-side making college T-shirts.

But this model is not widespread. Many Salvadorans resent those who give opportunities to former criminals.

“They don’t believe we can change,” said Wilfredo, who believes he was turned down for a job at a call center because of his criminal record.

At Eben Ezer, mattresses are stacked in a small room at the back of the church for the handful of former gang members who live here at any given time.

“We found this church, Eben Ezer, and men like Pastor Nelson Moz who opened these doors to shelter and protect us,” Wilfredo said with a smile.

Moz's activities have cost him: police have raided the church during worship three times this year. Officers put men on their knees and checked their IDs.

"I end up feeling like what I'm doing is subversive," Moz said. The police "have warned me, 'You cannot be protecting people in this way: you're committing an offense.' . . . We make sure we don't have anyone here being sought by the authorities. If they have served their time, they bring a notice that says so."

In 2012 Obama designated the MS-13 a Transnational Criminal Organization, and in 2015 the Supreme Court of El Salvador labeled gangs as terrorist organizations. Many people working with gang members say they fear being arrested.

Moz has talked with government representatives at public events, but he hasn't heard back.

"We want them to acknowledge what we are doing," he said. "We don't want this to be seen as something hidden or clandestine. It is part of our ministry to help those in need."

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