THE ROLE OF AMERICAN EVANGELIST TOMMY HICKS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF ARGENTINE PENTECOSTALISM

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Introduction

The history of the Pentecostal movement in Latin America is shaped by local events as well as the influence of North American missionaries and evangelists (see Martin 1990; Stoll 1991; Westmeier 1999; Smith 2010). For example, David Bundy writes that the earliest Pentecostal missionaries to Argentina were Berger Johnson from Norway and Alice Wood, a Canadian Methodist Holiness missionary, both of whom arrived in early 1909 (2002, 23). In the same year, Italian Pentecostal missionaries, Luis Francesconi, Giacomo Lombardi and Lucia Menna, arrived in Argentina and opened the Iglesia Asambles Cristiana. In contrast, Jose Saracco believes that Louis Francesconi was the first Pentecostal missionary to arrive in Buenos Aires on October 9, 1909 and that Alice Wood arrived on January 15, 1910, at the port of Buenos Aires, and was met by two independent missionaries (1989, 12, 55–56; cf. Hiatt 1987, 6). Alice Wood’s personal diary confirms she did in fact arrive on January 15, 1910 and was met by “Brother Stewart” who took her to “Brother Welch” who had been waiting all day to meet with her.1 Alice Wood’s significance for Argentine Pentecostalism is that she is regarded as one of the first recorded missionaries to establish “a permanent Pentecostal witness” in Buenos Aires (1989, 55).

However, the first Pentecostal missionaries arrived before 1909. Thomas B. O’Reilly, an Irish Catholic man who claimed to have had a powerful conversion experience, healing, and deliverance from alcohol (1910, 7), went on to work with Christian and Missionary Alliance churches and Pentecostal churches. O’Reilly preached at the Azusa Street Mission eleven nights before eventually heading to South America (17). In a letter dated October 3, 1908, O’Reilly gives several reports of the Spirit’s work in Buenos Aires (1909a, 11) and implies that this is not his first trip to South America. He follows this up again in April, 1909, in The Bridegroom’s

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1 Alice Wood’s diary is arranged by date, not page number. Therefore, I reference her quotes by date.
*Messenger* with additional testimonies which use very early Pentecostal language, including phrases such as “the fire” and “baptized in the Holy Ghost” (1909b, 4). O’Reilly was not the only person contending for Pentecostalism in Argentina. Earl W. Clark’s report in the March 1, 1910 issue of *The Pentecost* writes about an existing Pentecostal work in Argentina and it appears as though other missionaries, including Christian and Missionary Alliance missionaries, may have planted even earlier seeds for the Pentecostal movement.

While the early Pentecostals from North America attempted to expand into South America with the message of Pentecost, the impact of the movement during the first half of the twentieth century was minimal. Very few people joined the Pentecostals and many congregations struggled (Anderson 2007, 200–201). In 1920, the missionary Lucy Leatherman complained that the largest city in the southern hemisphere, presumably Buenos Aires, had only one Pentecostal mission and that it had been only for Italians. In 1949, a census of the Christians in three of the most successful evangelical denominations in Argentina totaled 574 members (Grams 2006, 32–33). Large churches of the time consisted of seven members. In the early 1950s, a census of the Assemblies of God counted only 174 adherents throughout all of Argentina. Although missionaries, like Alice Wood, had some success in the early decades of the twentieth century, during this period, revival type religion was often scoffed at in a country with so few evangelicals. However, it was not until the middle of the 1950s when significant growth among Pentecostals occurred in Argentina.

Between 1945 and 1955 a period of social and political change occurred in Argentina (see Turner and Miguens 1988; Lewis 2003). Following WWII, Argentina experienced a brief period of economic growth with low unemployment rates and the reduction of national debt. Constitutional changes were made and workers were given more rights. These changes coincided with the presidency of Juan Péron and the movement associated with him known as Peronism. However, in the early 1950s, the economy took a down turn and protestors were met with resistance by the government.

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2 Questions about the origins of Pentecostalism in Argentina are debated. Through some archival research I am beginning to trace the role of several missionaries who played prominent roles although they are not part of the current historical record. This is a project for further research.

3 Missionary R. Edward Miller began praying in early 1949, after a failed mission attempt in the foothills of the Andes Mountains. After many months, a revival came to his small congregation. However, momentum eventually slowed, followed by two difficult years preceding the Tommy Hicks campaigns.