Immigration and Mission: The Spanish Story

By Cristian Dumitrescu

Alberto Guaita and Pedro Villá Sangüesa are the former President and Secretary of the Seventh-day Adventist Spanish Union. The opinions expressed in this interview took place between August and December 2006 when they were still in office.

Cristian Dumitrescu: Since the 1990s the Adventist church in Spain has faced a great influx of Romanian immigrants. What are the factors that influenced this development?

Alberto Guaita: First of all, 10 years ago nobody could envision what we see today; second, the Spanish Union has become a Union of Churches from a Union of Conferences. Many people immigrated to Spain starting about 15 years ago, but the majority of Romanian Adventists came since 1998. I estimate that more than 40 percent of the membership of the Spanish Union is Romanian. In every church there are Romanian immigrants, even in Spanish churches.

Pedro Villá Sangüesa: After the political change in their country, Romanians used the opportunity to go out to other countries, among which was Spain. Forty years ago, Spanish people immigrated to other countries during the Franco regime. Because they know from experience what it means to be an immigrant, they welcomed immigrants better than any other European country. Romanians also learn Spanish quite rapidly, in about 3 months, because both languages have Latin roots. The Spanish Adventist Church has been very hospitable towards Romanians. Those who have come initially called their family and friends to come over. Another important factor is the evaluation conducted by the European Union (EU) on Spain’s population (40 million) and the recommendation that it should increase to 50 million people for economic and industrial purposes and also for cooperation in the EU. As a result, the government allowed and even facilitated immigration to Spain. From 1990 to 1998 about 800 Romanian Adventists came to Spain, and one church was organized; but starting with 1998 more than 7,000 church...
members came and 18 Romanian churches were organized, 13 in Madrid only. We have other immigrants from Moldova, Ukraine, and about 1,500 from South America. The situation that the Spanish church faces right now is very challenging because the membership just doubled and there are others who attend churches but who have not yet transferred their membership, so in reality the membership has almost tripled. That forced the Spanish Union to look for and buy different facilities, build new churches, or rent facilities because of a lack of meeting space. In 1998 we had 73 churches but today we have 124. This new situation created tensions with the Spanish members. The atmosphere changes when new people come in with new ideas.

**CD:** What was the influence of the Romanian immigration on the Spanish churches?

**AG:** The first impact: before the immigration there were many empty seats in our churches. Now the churches are overflowing. The second major impact: immigrants have revived the missionary work in the Spanish Union. In the beginning everything was positive. That lasted until the immigrants outnumbered the Spanish members. Conflicts and tensions ensued. Although all speak Latin-based languages, the cultural differences are notable. The Romanian mentality is the same Spanish people had 30-40 years ago. They have a conservative mentality in principles and also in details. Spain has experienced dictatorship like Romania, but the difficult situation ended earlier here. There was also a different emphasis between a Christian catholic dictatorship in Spain, and the atheist dictatorship in Romania. As a result, the Romanian immigrants emphasize certain aspects of doctrine and life, while the Spanish members have a different view on the same issues, even though there are no doctrinal differences. The main positive factor was the arrival of Romanian pastors. Presently there are 18 Romanian pastors. They have helped a lot in the immigrant churches, but there is always the risk of immigrant Adventists isolating themselves from the Spanish society.

**CD:** Is there a difference between the Spanish members’ reaction at the beginning, when Romanian immigrants started to come, and their feelings today, after the arrival of so many?

**PVS:** Because many Spanish members were immigrants, too, they understood the situation and met them with kindness, hospitality, and good will. Because of such a great sudden influx, the local pastors did not have enough time to attend to the needs of local Spanish members like before. Pastors were involved in helping the immigrants find a
place to stay, jobs, and caring for other problems that immigrants have, and that occupied most of their time. The negative reaction is mostly seen when Spanish members come to church and don’t find a seat like they used to in the past. Unfortunately, little by little these members disappear. The solution was to form Romanian churches, but even those are always full, there is not enough room for Romanians either. Our concern was to find places where they could gather. The problem was also created by the fact that most immigrants were concentrated in Madrid, Zaragoza, Castellon, and along the Mediterranean Coast.

**AG:** There are different opinions among Romanians and Spanish members, and one can also find radical reactions. Although Spain is one country there are 17 autonomous regions speaking four different languages. And, obviously, there are differences among them. If the number of immigrants in a particular church is lower than the number of locals there is no problem. But the majority always leads and imposes their will on how things should be done. When Spanish members are outnumbered they want to preserve the old ways of doing things, and suggest that immigrants form a new church where they can decide how to do things. At the same time, Romanians tend to preserve their culture, language, and traditions, even in the church. But there are also Romanians who have integrated successfully in Spanish churches. A generation from now, things will be easier. Among young people the differences are almost non-existent, they are better integrated.

**CD:** Do you encourage ethnic churches as a solution at this moment?

**AG:** We do not encourage or recommend either ethnic churches nor integration. We let people integrate whenever and wherever they want. At the Union level we support both approaches equally. The main problem is worship space, which is very expensive to build or rent. This is a huge effort for the whole Spanish Union.

**CD:** Is there any help from the government to encourage better integration of immigrants?

**AG:** Yes, sometimes the government gets involved. Timon College, in Madrid, was built with a subsidy from the government based on the fact that many immigrant children study there. In fact, the percentage of non-Spanish children studying in a private college is the highest in Adventist colleges like Zaragoza, Barcelona, Sagunto, and Timon. It varies from 50-75 percent. The government usually sponsors the teachers’ salaries, insurance, and some other costs of operating the schools. Because of this, stu-
dents do not have to pay tuition and fees, only the cost of books, transportation, and lunch. We have requested and received land from the government, on which we built a large church where two Romanian congregations meet, near Timon college, and also a couple of apartments. The land is worth 13-14 million euros while the Spanish Union paid about 5 million euros. Local administrations and city halls cooperate very well with ADRA in providing help for immigrants.

**CD:** Those who study the phenomenon indicate that the first generation of immigrants is the most active in missionary work, although they have primarily come for economic reasons. Does religious conservatism play any role in the missionary zeal?

**AG:** A conservative Christian is a person who has principles, profound convictions, but has problems with the details. The church works best with people who have strong convictions for themselves but manifest a liberal attitude towards others. It is not easy to preserve the balance between the two. Young people particularly face a very complex situation. Romanians are conservative especially when they arrive. But they change quickly, and the change process is faster than for Spanish people.

**CD:** Some people say that strict church discipline is one of the strengths of immigrant churches, and that is one of the reasons they grow because they attract people who like rules. How do you perceive this?
AG: Censorship and disfellowshipping are practiced in the Spanish church, too, but sometimes for reasons slightly different. When immigrants first arrive in Spain they start looking for a job and earning money. The materialism and secular philosophy spreads rapidly. There is an emphasis on individual freedoms and it becomes more and more difficult for the church to apply church discipline. New immigrants, used to the way discipline was administered back home, try to apply it here in the same way, and frequently they are seen as policing the church. Their intentions are good, to preserve the church, to keep it pure and as a model for society. The church is better than society, but is far from what it should be. And this is valid everywhere, not only in Spain. It is difficult to talk about individual sins in public in the way it was done both in Romania and Spain in the past. We have to be more careful about public accusations. The pastors have a harder and harder time applying church discipline.

PVS: This is to be understood as something immigrants have inherited from their culture and previous generations, and it is their way to live their faith. In Spain, nowadays, it is not possible to tell people to do something they are not convinced about. Therefore, even in the church, you live your faith respecting others and not imposing your ways on them. It would be interesting to know how Jesus would act in the church: in a flexible, accepting way, or imposing rules. When immigrants arrive in Spain, most like to keep their customs and ways of faith, just as they lived back in Romania. They have a strong missionary vision, and keep bringing Romanian and Spanish people into the churches. They organize evangelistic meetings for immigrants who have just arrived and introduce them to the church.

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CD: What about their mission target, do immigrants evangelize only Romanians, or do they reach Spanish people, too?

AG: They evangelize among both their fellow Romanian and Spanish people. They still organize public evangelistic meetings where they invite their friends, colleagues, and acquaintances. Usually they invite Romanian pastors or evangelists as speakers. They also distribute books and magazines, including Spirit of Prophecy books. Their Bible School by correspondence, “Sola Scriptura” is flourishing. There are also plans for a radio station, but for the moment there are only 13 internet-based radio programs found at www.radioaventista.com in Sagunto, at the multimedia production center. Most are in Spanish, but there are also Romanian programs in Alcoy, Alicante, and Castellon. Unfortunately, none of these programs and stations has a governmental license to go on air.

PVS: Romanians start evangelizing people from their own culture. But people who work in Spanish houses, like the ladies, do amazing work with Spanish people: they invite them to come to church; they distribute Spanish literature at train stations and other public places. In the Romanian churches they organize evangelistic events where they each invite a Spanish neighbor or work colleague and bring them to the meetings. They do this one Sabbath every other month.

CD: From what I have seen, Romanian churches do not have official translation services. They sing in Romanian, they preach in Romanian, everything seems to be in Romanian. What do they do with Spanish visitors? Is there any attempt to adapt the message to Spanish people?

PVS: Your observation is correct. But when Spanish people come to Romanian churches there is always someone to translate for them. The immigrant churches should establish and consolidate their churches first, among their own, and only then look for ways to preach the gospel to Spanish people. There are always groups of young Romanians who, during the week or even the weekend, deliver Spanish literature, and talk to Spanish people and invite them to come to church. Immigrants have helped revive the missionary spirit in our churches, because members become comfortable with the way things are, and do internal activities but not evangelism. Immigrants have helped a lot to wake-up Spanish members for evangelism. The main element brought over from Eastern Europe and South America is public evangelism. Here it doesn’t work, so the best way remains personal evangelism, through personal relationships. Immigrants have yet to discover this and adapt to the situation.
CD: I have read some EUD statistics in which the Spanish Union reported 8 to 10 percent growth. But if you look at those reports in detail it seems that immigrant churches have a solid growth rate while Spanish churches grow mostly through immigrants, too. Are there any theological differences, preaching styles, or ways they live their faith, to attribute this growth to?

PVS: I don’t think there is any difference, but immigrant members evangelize those who have just arrived, and people are more open towards those who want to help and support them in their new situation, and that makes the difference. Later, after they settle down and live a few years in Spain, it is more difficult to evangelize them. Comparing with other West European countries, Spain has more mission projects than any other country in EUD. And that includes not only projects designed by immigrants but also by Spanish members. And we thank God for this.

AG: During the last 8-9 years the membership of the Spanish Union doubled. Romanians, South Americans, Inter Americans, Africans, Filipinos, and also Spanish people were baptized. At this moment there is no 100 percent Spanish church. About 40 percent of the Spanish Union membership is Romanian, but if you add those who have not transferred their membership they add up to 50 percent. The same situation is seen in the number of baptisms. It is difficult to differentiate between Bolivians, Argentinians, and Catalunyans in the Adventist church.

CD: You mentioned that half of those attending have not transferred their membership to Spain. Do you take them into consideration when you plan to make more worship places available?

PVS: We include those in our plans, too. One out of three persons who comes to church is not yet established and usu-
ally does not financially support the church, but we need to find worship places that accommodate all. The immigrants are very faithful in paying tithe, but they do not give much through offerings and that is what pays for the administrative costs of worship places or the expenses of the churches.

**CD**: Have you noticed any cultural differences that cause conflict with the local culture? Any generational tensions?

**PVS**: The cultural differences are evident in the way people live their faith, especially the everyday rules they are used to. We realize that the Eastern European way of living the faith is the same as in Spain about 40 years ago: the way people dress, the relationships between people, or the education of the children. Among those who have lived here for seven or eight years the integration is quite good, and their lifestyle is quite similar to that of Spanish people. Many immigrants are young parents, and they worry what is going to happen to their children because of the new circumstances. They are concerned that their children will leave the church. The youth want to have their opinion regarding their stay in the church or leaving it. That usually leads to a confrontation with their parents regarding the rule that children have to attend the church the parents are attending. The young people who have decided on their own to stay in the church are stronger, hopeful, and also helpful for the church. The others, who remain in the church because they are ordered to do so by their parents, will leave sooner or later.

**CD**: How do you envision the new generation of Romanians will integrate into Spanish culture? Although they speak Spanish, they are not 100 percent culturally accustomed. They bring their worldview and culture. Do you see a decrease of their missionary efforts after they integrate?

**AG**: For those children who attend either a state or an Adventist school integration should be natural. Usually, after three months it is difficult to differentiate between Spanish and Romanian children. Generally, after they integrate there is a decrease in their missionary spirit, like everywhere else in Western Europe: Germany, France, Italy, and so on. Materialism is very rampant and their interest for mission is replaced by a desire to buy and have things. This is one of the topics we address every time we meet with the new immigrants, but it is a tough battle.

**PVS**: In my opinion the integration of young people in the church is positive, and it is easier for an Eastern European to integrate in Spain than for a South American. This is going to look like the North American situation where you have a pluralism of ideas and lifestyles that enriches
the church. It will not be a total integration, but a unity in faith.

**CD**: You mentioned that Romanian Adventists live their faith like Spanish members 40 years ago. If they will not integrate completely in the Spanish church, would that push the Spanish church backwards and have a negative impact on the church and its image in society?

**PVS**: The culture that the Romanians bring here can have both a negative and a positive impact. This is also part of the Spanish Adventist heritage. People have become more individualistic here, and they ask themselves questions about their beliefs and church membership, so it will not be good to bring back the rules. But if that happens, it will not lead away from faith either. The positive impact is the missionary spirit, and also the blending of attitudes in the church. It is very significant. The negative impact will be imposing the faith on family members and on others in the church. The Spanish church members live their faith in the way they believe is the best in this culture.

**CD**: How do you see the Spanish church in the future, if the immigrants keep coming? Is it possible to see a Spanish Adventist church where the Spanish people are a minority?

**PVS**: The impact will not be so serious because you have those immigrants already established in this country who will help the newcomers. Only God knows what will happen. The Spanish church has another very big challenge: to reclaim all those members that have disappeared during the years due to the inability of the pastors to care for them, and to encourage Spanish members to plan evangelistic projects. Integration would have to be cultural but also encourage unity and identity with the Spanish church. Spain is Spain, not another country of immigrants. Besides immigrants from Romania, there are others from Colombia, Venezuela, Peru, or other countries. It is possible that Romanian immigration will slow down but increase from other countries because the development of the economy of Spain is very high. The immigrant church members will feel accepted among Spanish church members, and they will receive attention, support, and love, but the identity of the Spanish church will not be lost.

**AG**: Predictions made in the past have not been useful (laughs). Nine years ago, when I first started to work as the Union president, I asked the Division to set up a committee to study the phenomenon. Ironically, the Division frequently asks us how we cope with different situations. God helped us at every step, starting with finding empty buildings that belonged to other churches, and renting them. In
the beginning we also used cinema halls, because other churches were not used to renting their buildings. This will remain a problem in the future. We also hope the membership transfer letters will no longer be a problem. We will definitely need more Romanian pastors; probably we will select from those who study at Sagunto. They are experienced in working with Romanians, and the Spanish Union is also better prepared to help, based on previous experiences.

CD: What is the ratio of Romanian pastors to Romanian members?

AG: We had a very good relationship with the previous president, and we continue to have good communication with the present one. The Romanian leaders usually recommend pastors for the new Romanian churches in Spain.

PVS: A third of the pastors employed by the Spanish Union are from other countries, but they are encouraged to develop relationships with the Spanish Union and their Spanish counterparts, not with their Unions back home. We do not encourage supervision from other groups. There should be unity in diversity within the Spanish administrative framework.

CD: Do you envision some of the Romanian pastors becoming part of the administrative structure in the future?

PVS: That should be a natural process, and that takes time. We have already included one pastor and one lay person on the Union committee. But there are also South American pastors represented. It should be a process of maturity, not done under political pressure.
AG: The Spanish Union is not a Union of Conferences but a Union of Churches. In 2002, during the elective session, one Romanian pastor and one lay member became part of the 19 member committee at large. I believe that at the next session the process will continue. But this will be decided by the constituency. I do not think this will be based on the number of ethnic members or ethnic representation; there are no such models at the Division or General Conference levels. The only change in structure should be geographical, by establishing conferences. However, the General Conference is interested in Unions of Churches, and their people employed at several conferences. There are five Unions of Churches in Europe. There is also the precedent of creating two Unions in Germany, but it is very difficult to reverse the process now. But there are other Unions who are considering the Union of Churches as a future model.

CD: Is a Union of churches more missionary efficient?

AG: First, there are more funds available for mission that otherwise would be used to pay the administrators. Second, there is a closer relationship between the administrators and the church, the administrators are more in touch with the local churches and members, visiting them every Sabbath. In the traditional role, the Union Conference is just a link between the local conferences and the General Conference. But there is no perfect model. In some countries the Union of Churches is a solution, but in Unions with 70,000 members and six conferences, like Romania, it is more difficult to implement such a model. We have to reach 20,000-25,000 members in Spain before we could consider the Union Conference model. Today we have about

The Union of Churches has been an exception in the past, but has become a model for the future.
13,000 members on the records, but about 16,000 people attend our churches.

**CD:** Romania is now part of the European Union. How will this impact immigration in the future?

**AG:** I do not think there will be a big difference. There is still a restriction of two years imposed on the free circulation of people. According to a survey done by the Spanish government, 70% of the immigrants in the country have already decided to stay. We do not expect big changes.

**CD:** Thank you very much for sharing this information with JAMS readers.