

# Bolivian Aymara Neo-Pentecostal Identity: Historical Background and Case Study Analysis of the Power of God Church<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Indigenous cultures and traditional religions are now players on the world scene. They have brought with them their own particular lifestyle with its primary focus on spiritual life so as to enrich

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1. This article is an adaptation of chapter 3 and the conclusion of Marcelo Vargas, "The Aymara Identity of Neo-Pentecostals in Urban La Paz-Bolivia with Specific Reference to the Power of God Church" (PhD diss., Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, University of Wales, 2010).

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global human experience and bring greater depth to other religions, including Christianity. The Aymara people in Latin America are no exception. In this article, we will combine historical and socio-cultural elements of research to examine historical forces that have shaped Aymara Bolivian identity, particularly in relation to cultural and religious aspects. Both the historic and the socio-cultural aspects must be developed and integrated simultaneously as one reality, for in the indigenous perception of living time, individual life and social life are woven together.

We will then examine Bolivian Aymara Neo-Pentecostal identity and mission, specifically through the Ministerio del Nuevo Pacto Poder de Dios (Ministry of the New Covenant Power of God, PoG) Church in La Paz. The PoG Church is the largest Aymara Neo-Pentecostal church in Bolivia, with 25,000 members in La Paz and 35,000 throughout Bolivia. In La Paz, more than 90% of PoG church members are Aymara. Our research through observation and first-person interviews leads us to conclusions regarding the resilience of indigenous tradition within Neo-Pentecostal expression.

This article is based on four working assumptions that were supported by research. First, the Aymara worldview exerts a permanent and dynamic influence on Bolivian society. Second, Neo-Pentecostal churches are changing the identity and worldview of the urban Aymara living in La Paz, Bolivia. Third, Neo-Pentecostals are syncretizing indigenous beliefs and a Western version of the gospel. Fourth, in the Bolivian context, Neo-Pentecostalism is a gateway to understanding cultural changes and to redefining identity and people's thoughts and actions.

Reports and studies from other parts of the world also show how indigenous peoples are contributing forms and content that broaden and enrich holistic perceptions of life. The trials and tribulations suffered by the Aymara people during the centuries lived under segregationist domination have not been in vain. They are typical of what is currently happening throughout the world. Growing global interdependence has opened the door for segregated human groups to make their contribution, although for many these are still