

8th Lausanne International Researcher's Conference

Research that Guides Kingdom Impact

Presentation Title: Religious Belief and Practice in Urban Latin America: Key Findings from Buenos Aires, Mexico City, São Paulo and Lima

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Project Overview

This presentation is an overview of the findings from a 2017 Religious Belief and Practice study done in the cities of Buenos Aires, Mexico City, São Paulo and Lima. Residents of these cities were surveyed to better understand how they live their religion. The survey instrument was developed in conjunction with local evangelical partners and then field data was collected by well-known research firms in each of the cities. The goal of the survey was to find information that would influence the strategy and the day-to-day practice of our missionary teams in these cities.

Data

All project data can be found at the following internet site: <https://grd.imb.org/amp/>
During the presentation I will give a brief demonstration showing how to access the complete data set.

The data is arranged into the following categories:

1. **Religious Belief.** The study collected data on numerous religious beliefs such as life after death, the Bible, and salvation.
2. **Identification and Perceptions.** Into which religious group did people self-identify? This section of the survey asked which religious group people identified with and their perceptions of other religious groups. The survey allowed for the large religious groups such as Catholics and Evangelicals as well as smaller and lesser-known religious groups. The survey also allowed for Agnosticism and Atheism.
3. **Attendance of Religious Events.** What is the frequency with which people attend religious services or other events?
4. **Familiarity with the message of Jesus.** Have residents explored the message of Jesus at some time in the past? Were they interested in doing so now? Has anyone ever shared with them about Jesus?
5. **Receptivity.** Should people talk about religion at work? Would you go to a religious service if invited by a friend? By a family member? If you were to have a religious discussion, where would you be most comfortable having that discussion?
6. **Values.** What do you value most? Guilt, shame, or fear—what do you feel most? Who do you turn to for advice?

7. **Religious Practice.** To whom do you pray? Who do you turn to when a family member is sick?

There are three reports for each city: an overview of each city as a whole in the categories listed above, the data filtered by age, gender, and economic demographics for each city, and the data filtered to specific geographic regions in each city. This allows us to compare a specific demographic or geographic information with the city average. For example, how do youth answer a specific question compared to the city average or how do men feel about a specific issue compared to women.

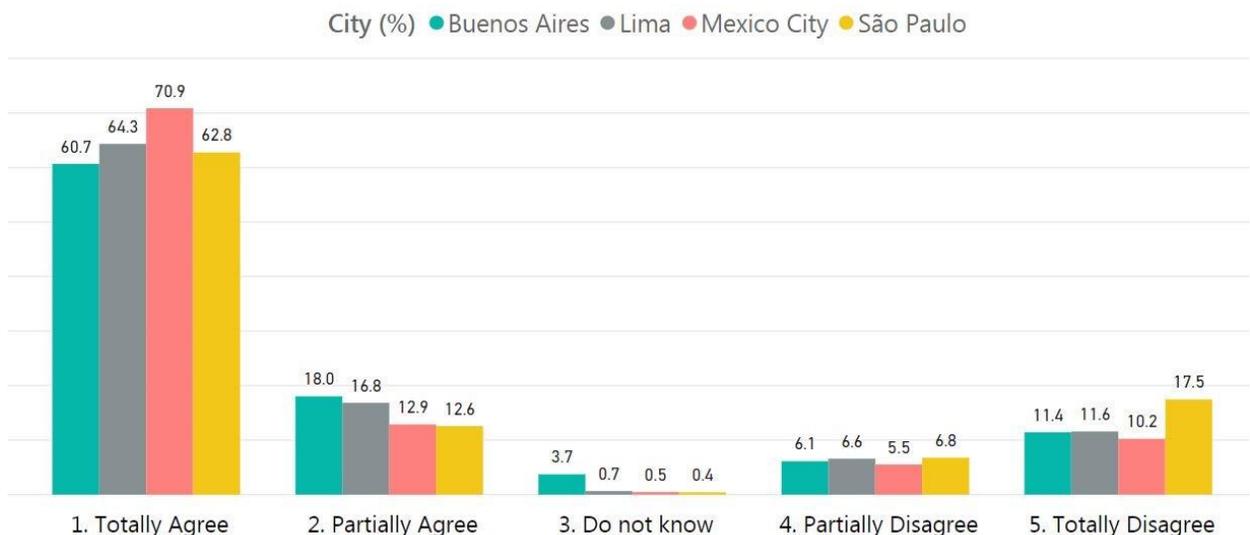
Major Findings

I. The Church in Society

The church in Latin America faces the challenge of being seen as an optional or unnecessary part of religious life. The Evangelical church specifically must deal with a significant negative perception in the general society.

A. The Church is Not Necessary. The majority of respondents indicate a “totally agree” or “partially agree” with the following statement:

Q: I can have a good relationship with God without actively participating in the church.



B. The Label Evangelical is Not Helpful. Respondents are divided over the reputation of Evangelical churches. Many indicate a distrust of Evangelical churches.

Q: Evangelical churches work hard to get money from people.



Q: Evangelical churches are full of hypocrites, people who criticize others for doing the same things they do themselves.



II. A Mixture of Beliefs

When asked about personal beliefs respondents show a mixture of divergent faith systems.

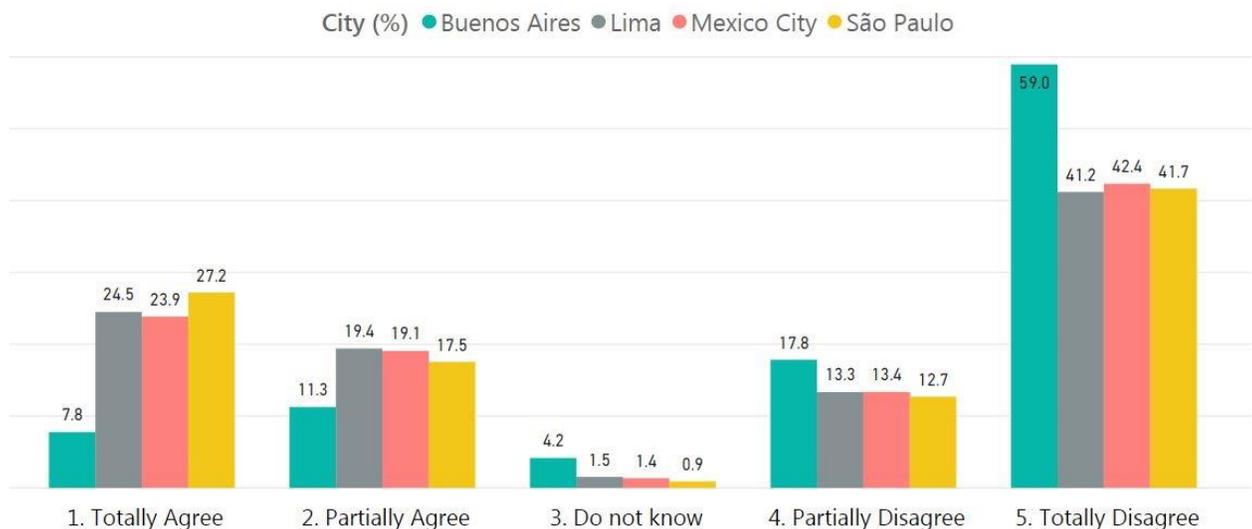
A. On one hand, there is a resounding affirmation of a single, supreme God.

Q: There is only one supreme God.



B. On the other hand, a SIGNIFICANT MINORITY believes in multiple gods and that the God of the Bible is the same as the gods of other religions.

Q: There are many gods that influence the world around me.



Q: The God of the Bible is no different from the gods or spiritual beings of other religions such as Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc.



C. Respondents agree with standard Evangelical statements and at the same time a SIGNIFICANT MINORITY agrees with contradictory statements.

Respondents agree with the following statements that indicate Evangelical belief:

1. The Bible is the highest authority for what I believe.
2. Jesus Christ died and came back to life.
3. Jesus Christ is God.

Respondents are divided over additional questions related to Jesus:

1. Jesus Christ's death on a cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of my sin.
2. Only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God's free gift of eternal salvation.

Respondents agree with the following statements that contradict Evangelical belief:

1. God is not involved in the world today. (Significant Minority agree.)
2. To receive material blessings from God, I have to do something for God. (Majority agree.)
3. One has to be baptized in the Catholic Church to go to heaven. (Significant Minority agree.)
4. My beliefs include the best elements of several religions. (Significant Minority agree.)

III. Opportunity for the Church

The majority of the population knows an evangelical. Evangelicals are not isolated in society and they are known as Evangelicals.

Q: Do you personally know someone who is an evangelical?

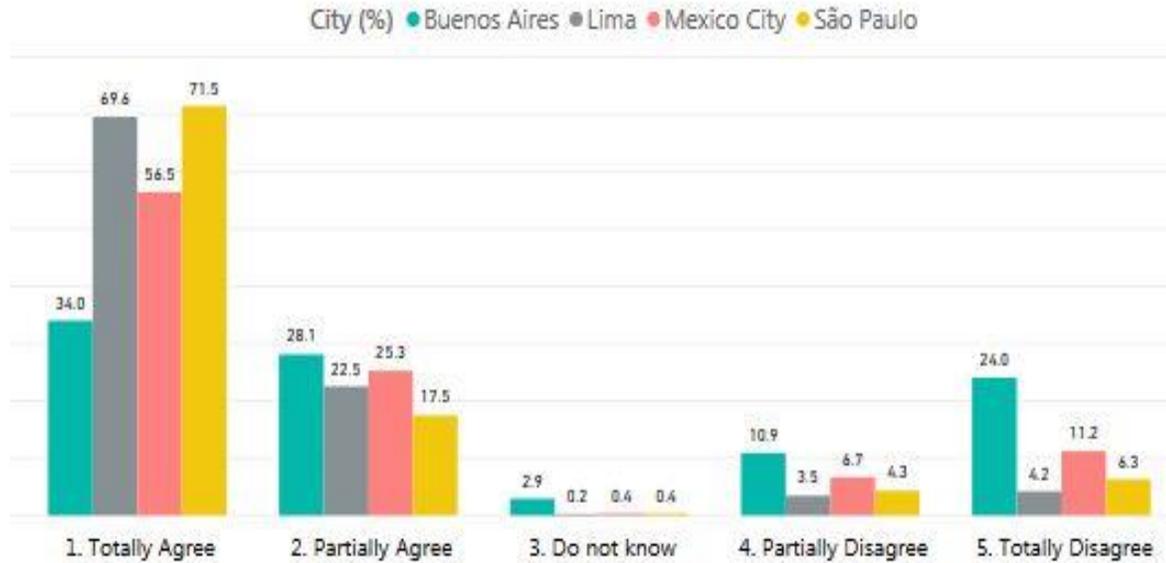


The majority of respondents in three cities affirm an openness to Evangelical Christianity. Respondents in Lima, Mexico City, and São Paulo affirm the following statements.

1. If a friend of mine who regularly attends an evangelical church invites me to attend a church service with them, I would be willing to do so.
2. I would be willing to study the Bible if invited by a friend or co-worker.
3. I would be willing to study the Bible if invited by a family member. (Stronger majority than #2.)

In Buenos Aires, a Significant Minority affirmed the above statements but the affirmation rate was much lower compared to the other three cities. Respondents in Buenos Aires did join the other three cities in having a majority affirm the following statement:

Q: If someone who follows Jesus Christ wanted to tell me about their belief, I would be willing to listen.



Also, a majority of respondents in all four cities stated a desire to know more about God. An *overwhelming majority* in Lima, Mexico City, and São Paulo said they would like to know more about God while *slim majority* in Buenos Aires expressed this desire.

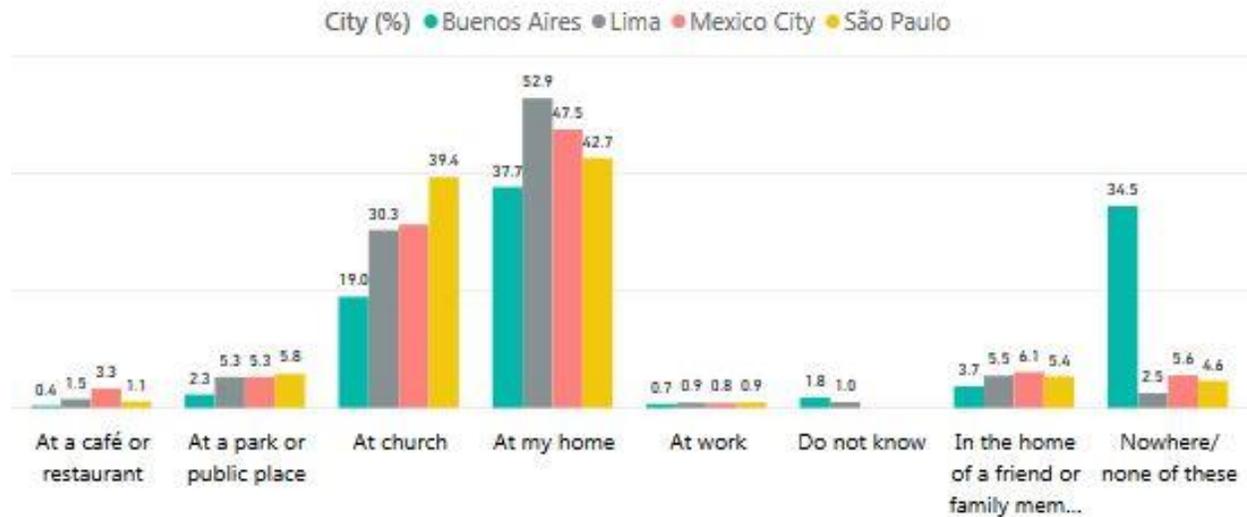
Q: I want to know more about God and his word.



The Gospel Through Home and Family

Home and family are at the core of Latin-American culture. This cultural truism came out in this survey. When asked about the preferred location to study the Bible, the home was preferred over the church.

Q: If you had to read or listen to the Bible and discuss it with a few other people, where would you be willing to do so?



Also, when asked about who they trust for direction on life decisions, the majority of respondents in all four cities indicated their family.

Q: Who do you look to most for counsel on important decisions?



Conclusion

This paper has presented a brief overview of the high points of the data. Please explore <https://grd.imb.org/amp/> to see all the data. In concise form, three major implications for our ministry teams in these four cities are as follows:

1. Faith conversations that lead with the term Evangelical or expect people to be interested in church may both prove to be unproductive.
2. Many common cultural beliefs inhibit the ability to accept the truth from God's Word. Many confuse an understanding of God with a willingness to follow Jesus. This points us to the necessity of discipleship.
3. There is great openness to discussions of faith, learning more about Jesus Christ, and being invited to an Evangelical church. As believers are mobilized and equipped to have conversations about the Good News of Jesus Christ and to take next steps in Bible study with those around them there is great potential for developing new communities of believers across all four of these cities.

Discussion and Feedback

Thank you for taking the time to engage with this data. As a researcher, I value the feedback of other researchers.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Do you agree with the three conclusions above? What else would you add to these three?
2. What other ministry implications do you see?
3. What other major points do you see in the data (found online) that I did not include in this paper?
4. What else would you like to add?

Please feel free to email your thoughts and feedback to me at rbwaldrep@gmail.com