

DeLonn Rance, “The Church in Latin America...”

THE CHURCH IN LATIN AMERICA: COMING TOGETHER IN MISSION
DeLonn Rance

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Growing up Pentecostal in rural North Dakota meant ostracism by more “respectable” Christian traditions. “Holy roller” was not a term of endearment at my school. My mother “got saved” out of the Lutheran tradition and prayed daily for the salvation of her Lutheran family. As a teenaged Assemblies of God missionary kid in the country of Guatemala in the early ‘70s, persecution was just as likely to come from members of the Central American Mission¹ as it was from the local parish priest. However, with the emergence of the Charismatic movement things began to change. My Pentecostal family was the first to be invited to an interdenominational missionary retreat in Guatemala.²

As a new Assemblies of God missionary in El Salvador in 1984, I was surprised when national executives instructed their bookstore to remove any titles authored by Rene Padilla, Orlando Costas, or Samuel Escobar—identified as ecumenists and liberationists who “should not be read because they are dangerous.” The debate on the General Conference floor on cooperation with other denominations was heated. Some argued that membership in an interdenominational organization allowed the Pentecostal and evangelical churches to speak with “one voice” before the government, the “subversives,” and society. Others argued that the Church was not about power in society, but about power of the Spirit for salvation. Any organizational involvement with other denominations was dangerous in terms of doctrinal purity; moreover, the

¹Founded by C.I. Scofield

²The invitation emerged out of the relationships my father developed with missionaries of other denominations as a member of the school board of the Inter-American School in Quezaltenango, Guatemala.

DeLonn Rance, “The Church in Latin America...”

organization could be used by the powers of state to control and persecute the Church. The Sandinista government’s involvement with the evangelical alliance of Nicaragua, the persecution of the church in Cuba and the Soviet Union, and the connections of the World Council of Churches (WCC) to liberationist agendas were contemporary realities that fueled the passions.

The prevailing motion stated that there would be no official Assemblies of God involvement in any ecumenical organizations, but that individual members and pastors could cooperate with other churches on a local and personal level and even serve on interdenominational committees as long as there was no structural link to the Assemblies of God of El Salvador. A notable “exception” was involvement in evangelistic activities (e.g. city-wide or nation-wide crusades). These inter-tradition relationships usually only lasted as long as the event with participants retreating to their own ecclesial communities after the occasionally contentious dividing up of the salvation “cards.” However, as missions awareness and commitment grew, so did cooperation.

Certainly the church in Latin America, particularly of the Pentecostal traditions, has struggled with ecclesial divisions; this paper, however, presents indicators that the church in Latin America is coming together as the missionary people of God. Noting historical resonance with the motives of Edinburgh I and similar movements, this paper identifies contemporary challenges to ecclesial unity and shows how the contemporary Church is drawn together in unprecedented ways as churches join in a common mission to reach the world with the gospel.

A Historical Resonance with the Motives of Edinburgh I

The emerging missions movement in Latin America resonates with the motives of the 1910 World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh I and is indebted to and motivated by both the Lausanne Movement and the 1980 World Consultation on Frontier Missions, Edinburgh II.

DeLonn Rance, “The Church in Latin America...”

Though delegates from Latin America were excluded from Edinburgh because they were considered reached,³ nonetheless, the Latin American missions movement today, like the participants of Edinburgh I and II, recognizes that they are at a key moment in missions history, that many people remain untouched by the gospel, that missions leaders must come together to strategize for effectiveness in missions, that the entire Church needs to mobilize to the task, and that prayer creates the possibility that the promise to reach all people with the gospel will be fulfilled.

Key Moment in Missions History

Those who gathered at Edinburgh perceived the “momentous character of the present hour.”⁴ World events and activities in the Church were “movements which are placing all at once before the Church a new world to be won for Christ.”⁵ The COMIBAM (COgreso Misionero Ibero AMericano - Ibero-American Missions Congress) missions movement in Latin America parallels that of Edinburgh, tracing its history to a follow up meeting to Edinburgh in Panama City, Panama in 1916.⁶ The first COMIBAM congress in 1987, characterized as historic, catalyzed the transition from Latin America as a mission field to a missionary force.⁷ Under the heading of “the Urgency of the Hour” and through the lens of Pentecostal eschatology,

³Scott A. Moreau, Gary R. Corwin, and Gary B. McGee, eds. *Introducing World Missions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 143.

⁴W. H.T. Gairdner, *Edinburgh 1910: An Account and Interpretation of the World Missionary Conference* (Edinburgh, U.K.: Oliphant, Anderson and Ferrier, 1910), 277.

⁵Ibid.

⁶David D. Ruiz M., “COMIBAM as a Process Leading to a Congress,” http://comibam.org/docs/COMIBAM_process.pdf (accessed July 28, 2009), 1.

⁷Ibid., 3.

DeLonn Rance, “The Church in Latin America...”

“Together in Missions,”⁸ a network of Assemblies of God missions agencies and leaders in Latin America, declared,

WHEREAS we live in the last days in a world rife with great challenges, full of many unreached people groups, and God has raised up the Latin American church for such a time as this, **WE MUST**, like Esther, recognize that God has brought us to the Kingdom for this hour (Esther 4:14) and reaffirm our commitment to the great commission.⁹

Unoccupied Fields/Unreached Peoples

One of the principal reasons for gathering at Edinburgh was to “see more clearly what was immediately required for the fulfilling of the charge to ‘disciple all nations.’”¹⁰ A uniqueness of the 1910 Conference was that only delegates sent by missions agencies (i.e., engaged missions practitioners) could participate, and they focused on what it would take to reach the “unoccupied fields”.¹¹

Unfortunately the ecumenical meetings that followed shifted the missional emphasis from the unreached because the delegates were not practitioners sent from missions agencies.¹² Even among evangelicals leading up to the Lausanne Congress the focus called for each country/each national church to evangelize its own people. Ralph Winter notes,

In-country evangelism would suffice, according to this perspective. Both at Lausanne '74 and at the World Council of Churches the idea of expatriate missionaries still being crucial was virtually ignored—despite the fact that Christian communities in many countries are still tiny, embattled minorities, and pockets of unreached peoples abound.¹³

⁸Translated from the Spanish, “Misiones en Conjunto,” a network of the Assemblies of God missions agencies from twenty-two countries of Latin America, the Caribbean and Spain. More information can be accessed at <http://admec.net>.

⁹Together in Missions, “Declaraciones Misiológicas Fundamentales,” [Fundamental Missiological Declarations] <http://admec.net/web2/uploads/media/DeclaracionesFundamentales.pdf> (accessed August 9, 2009), 1.

¹⁰Gairdner, v.

¹¹Ralph D. Winter, *Thy Kingdom Come* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1995), 15-16. Winter observes that this geographic rather than people focus caused the organizers to overlook Latin America as a mission “field.”

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid., 27.

DeLonn Rance, “The Church in Latin America...”

Winter’s contribution to Lausanne was critical in calling the Church to a new understanding of the missionary task in terms of “pockets of unreached peoples [which] cannot be reached by ordinary ‘near neighbor’ evangelism” but require cross-cultural evangelism by missionaries.¹⁴

Edinburgh I did not conceive of majority world missions, but Edinburgh II included “all of the largest non-Western agencies ... The delegates to this conference, on returning to their countries around the world, have been involved in many notable advances of the specific emphasis on *finishing the task* and upon reaching the unreached peoples (as the necessary precursor to the reaching every *person*).¹⁵ Among these delegates were those who shaped the missions movement in Latin America by prioritizing the unreached:

COMIBAM International is a movement that promotes efforts to reach the unreached throughout the world. The central focus of this task is recognizing the areas of the world that the gospel has not yet reached or where it has not yet grown significantly in order to then develop the work among these areas.¹⁶

The “Declarations” of “Together in Missions” highlight this priority by focusing on pioneer missions and the unreached. “**WHEREAS** Paul and the leaders of the New Testament church focused on fields that were unreached, **WE MUST** develop a pioneer spirit in our missionary activities that focuses on the unreached and on innovative ministries.”¹⁷

Missions Leaders Strategically Collaborate for Effectiveness in Missions

According to the International Committee of Edinburgh I, the primary purpose of the “consultative gathering” was “the study of the great missionary problems of the present day by

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid., 40.

¹⁶Carlos Scott and Jesús Londoño, “Where is COMIBAM International Heading? Strategic Focal Points,” COMIBAM, <http://comibam.org/docs/whereiscomibamheading.pdf> (accessed July 28, 2009).

¹⁷Together in Missions, 3.

DeLonn Rance, “The Church in Latin America...”

leaders in the missionary enterprise at home and abroad. . . .¹⁸ Missionary leaders strategically scrutinized “. . . the ways in which we may best utilize the existing forces of missionary enterprise by unifying and consolidating existing agencies, by improving their administration and the training of their agents.”¹⁹

While the modern ecumenical movement traces its beginnings to this Conference, the purpose of the gathering was not unity, but rather that unity was strategic in the fulfillment of missions. The Lausanne Covenant also linked cooperation and evangelism affirming that “the church’s visible unity in truth is God’s purpose. Evangelism also summons us to unity, because our oneness strengthens our witness, just as our disunity undermines our Gospel of reconciliation.”²⁰

For Latin American Pentecostals and evangelicals involved in missions, “in truth” is critical to unity and to affirming the Lausanne Covenant²¹ with its emphasis on “the authority of Scripture, the nature of evangelism, the grounds of Christian responsibility, the costliness and the urgency of world mission, the problems of culture and the reality of spiritual warfare.”²² Cooperation in missions is vital, but “We recognize . . . that organizational unity may take many forms and does not necessarily forward evangelism.”²³

The COMIBAM Congress of 2007 called mission leaders and missionaries together to strategically focus on an evaluation of effectiveness among the unreached, to collaborate on

¹⁸Gairdner, v.

¹⁹Ibid., 278.

²⁰John Stott, *Making Christ Known: Historic Mission Documents from the Lausanne Movement, 1974-1989* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 28.

²¹They also resonate with the following elements found in Graham’s inaugural address at the Lausanne Congress: “His four personal hopes were that the Congress would (1) ‘frame a biblical declaration on evangelism’, (2) challenge the church ‘to complete the task of world evangelization’, (3) ‘state what the relationship is between evangelism and social responsibility’, and (4) help to develop ‘a new “koinonia” or fellowship among evangelicals of all persuasions . . . throughout the world’.... “the ‘two basic needs’ he saw were (a) that during the Congress there would be ‘a tremendous emphasis on prayer’, and (b) that we would all leave the Congress ‘filled with the power of the Holy Spirit’.” Ibid., xiv.

²²Ibid., xv.

²³Ibid., 28.

DeLonn Rance, “The Church in Latin America...”

plans to be effective in responding to the needs of the field and mission community, and look to the future in prayer and reflection.²⁴ “Together in Missions” affirms the need for cooperation by declaring:

WHEREAS the Church of Christ is one, but with a diversity of members, and cooperation and unity are much discussed in Latin America, **WE MUST** participate in a Biblical unity that gives witness to the world (John 17) but [that] allows freedom that the many members (I Cor. 12:12) be able to respond to the call of our Lord without losing their identity and Pentecostal missionary philosophy.²⁵

The Mobilization of the Entire Church to the Task

The participants of Edinburgh I recognized that strategic collaboration among missions leaders was not sufficient to meet the task. The mobilization of the entire Church was required. As an outcome of the meeting, “Facts rose into prominence which were seen to be of vital importance for the whole Church of Christ.” Namely, the missions mobilization of the Church that it might have “a new and thrilling vision of the work before it.”²⁶

But it has become increasingly clear to us that we need something far greater than can be reached by any economy or reorganisation of the existing forces. We need supremely a deeper sense of responsibility to Almighty God for the great trust which He has committed to us in the evangelisation of the world. That trust is not committed in any peculiar way to our missionaries, or to Societies, or to us as members of this Conference. It is committed to all and each within the Christian family; and it is incumbent on every member of the Church, as are the elementary virtues of the Christian life—faith, hope and love. That which makes a man a Christian makes him also a sharer in this trust. This principle is admitted by us all, but we need to be aroused to carry it out in quite a new degree.²⁷

At Lausanne, the Church was understood as,

...the community of God’s people rather than an institution.... In the church’s mission of sacrificial service evangelism is primary. World evangelization requires the whole church to take the whole Gospel to the whole world. The

²⁴Ruiz, 6.

²⁵Together in Missions, 4-5.

²⁶Gairdner, v.

²⁷Ibid., 278.

DeLonn Rance, “The Church in Latin America...”

church is at the very center of God’s cosmic purpose and is his appointed means of spreading the Gospel.²⁸

Latin America’s COMIBAM considers the mobilization of the Church its strategic focal point,²⁹ inviting “all of our brothers and sisters in Ibero America to get involved with us in the faithful completion of the mission that He has given us.”³⁰ “Together in Missions” seeks to involve every member of the body of Christ in concrete missionary activities including prayer.³¹

Prayer Leads to the Fulfillment of Promise

The Latin American missions movement understands that the missionary endeavor advances as the Church is guided and empowered by the Spirit through prayer. Mott considered prayer and worship as the most important activity of Edinburgh I.³² At Lausanne, Billy Graham emphasized prayer as a basic need of the Congress.³³ In 1980 Patrick Johnstone challenged the delegates to Edinburgh II to prayer.

Prayer is the secret.... Unless we see that the only way we can move ahead is on our knees, we are not going to see those breakthroughs. It is not going to be with wonderful plans or clever ideas of men.... unless [plans and strategies] come from prayer, we are not going to see anything happen.³⁴

“Together in Missions” identifies prayer along with the fire and call of the Spirit, the Pentecostal message, and the Pentecostal strategy of the indigenous church as an essential element of a Pentecostal missiology. Their “Declarations” state,

WHEREAS the Lord himself ordered “Pray that the Lord of the harvest send forth workers to his harvest,” (Matthew 9:38, Luke 10:2) **WE MUST** intercede to the Lord with words and in the Spirit for divine direction in the development of

²⁸Stott, 28.

²⁹Scott and Londoño, 1.

³⁰COMIBAM 87, “Declaration, Results of the Iberoamerican Missionary Congress,” São Paulo, Brazil, November 1987.

³¹Together in Missions, 1.

³²Gairdner, 180.

³³Stott, xiv.

³⁴Patrick Johnstone, “Mission Imperative: Intercession,” in *Seeds of Promise: World Consultation on Frontier Missions, Edinburgh ’80*, ed. Allan Starling, 193-201 (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1980), 195.

DeLonn Rance, “The Church in Latin America...”

missions and for future workers, open doors, missionaries in the field, a growing church, the persecuted church, the sending church, and the growth of the work around the world.³⁵

While the missionary movement of the Church in Latin America resonates with the ecumenical movements of Edinburgh I and II and Lausanne, much like these historical movements, many significant challenges still remain. Seizing the moment, reaching the unreached, strategically cooperating, mobilizing the entire Church, and committing to prayer are counterintuitive to human ways. Divine intervention is required to overcome the challenges to missions and unity.

Contemporary Challenges to Ecclesial Unity

Contemporary challenges to ecclesial unity in the Church in Latin America include challenges that emerge from the history of the ecumenical movement including a loss of focus on the unreached, challenges related to the definition of ecumenism, unity and cooperation, and Latin American contextual challenges.

Historical Challenges

In view of the history of the World Council of Churches, A. Scott Moreau articulates four issues of concerns for evangelicals,

(1) a perceived lack of commitment to full biblical authority, (2) an undue influence of pluralism, as seen in the implicit universalism and lack of commitment to the traditional understanding of evangelism, (3) social and political biases and agendas that have tended to exclude emphasis on personal salvation, and (4) linguistic imprecision in WCC documents, allowing an unacceptably broad range of interpretation.³⁶

³⁵Together in Missions, 2-3.

³⁶A. Scott Moreau, “World Council of Churches,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, ed. A. Scott Moreau, 1024 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Company, 2000), 1034.

DeLonn Rance, “The Church in Latin America...”

The political and liberation agenda adopted by the WCC, that served as a motivating factor for the Lausanne Congress,³⁷ was rejected by conservative evangelicals and Pentecostals throughout Latin America, making them very cautious regarding interdenominational cooperation particularly when church leaders are involved. As Winter observes,

...while there have never been many “liberals” among the missionaries themselves, once you invite a wide spectrum of church leaders you will find that the theological debates and issues of liberalism tend to crowd out the kind of strategic mission discussions that are the hallmark of dedicated mission leadership who have most of such discussions behind them.³⁸

Definitional Challenges

Much of the ecumenical controversy revolves around definitions and what constitutes cooperation, unity, and ecumenism. Cecil (“Mel”) Robeck identifies three positions in the movement defining ecumenism as “(1) intra-Christian relations, more broadly as (2) Christian-human relations, or more broadly yet as (3) Christian-creation relations...”³⁹ T. P. Weber notes that by the 1980s two models of “ecumenism” existed:

The federation model of the World Council of Churches tended to downplay the necessity of doctrinal agreement and evangelism while stressing concerted social and political action in Christ’s name. The cooperative model of conservative evangelicals sought to restore evangelism to primary place in the church’s mission in the hope that more visible kinds of unity would follow.⁴⁰

David J. Bosch links ecumenism, ecclesiology, and mission by identifying the “Elements of an Emerging Ecumenical Missionary Paradigm.”⁴¹ He asserts, “mission is *missio Dei*, which

³⁷Colin A. Marsh, “Unity,” in *Dictionary of Mission Theology: Evangelical Foundations*, ed. John Corrie, 410-412 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 411.

³⁸Winter, 13.

³⁹Cecil M. Robeck Jr., “Pentecostals and Ecumenism in a Pluralistic World,” in *The Globalization of Pentecostalism: A Religion Made To Travel*, ed. Murray W. Dempster, Byron D. Klaus, and Doug Petersen, 338-362 (Carlisle, U.K.: Regnum Books International, 1999), 346.

⁴⁰T. P. Weber, “Ecumenism,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, 340-342 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984), 342.

⁴¹David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 368.

DeLonn Rance, “The Church in Latin America...”

seeks to subsume into itself the *missiones ecclesiae*, the missionary programs of the church. It is not the church which “undertakes” mission; it is the *missio Dei* which constitutes the church.”⁴² However, his paradigm and the blurring of church and mission seem to undermine the unique need for cross-cultural missionaries to communicate the gospel to unreached peoples.⁴³ Though the lack of unity in the church is sin, the proliferation of churches and the sending and receiving of missionaries is required by the missionary mandate “to make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19). The Church is both the community of the redeemed and the redeeming community, the missionary people of God who do missional activities.

Marsh describes four models of unity: 1. Organic unity; 2. Unity in action—participating together in evangelism and mission projects, which “Affirms the importance of unity for the sake of mission and values the differences between churches as opportunities for enrichment;” 3. Bosch’s ecumenical paradigm for mission; and 4. Networking—local, relational, spontaneous unity for mission, “working together for the sake of the kingdom.”⁴⁴ Models two and four are the most popular in the Pentecostal missions movement in Latin America. As Robeck notes, when Pentecostals “reach out to cooperate with, and to coordinate efforts to meet the mutual concerns of, other believers, or when, in the name of Christ they cooperate with other believers on issues of justice, peace, or even ecology,” they are “already participating in the larger ecumenical movement.”⁴⁵

⁴²Ibid., 519.

⁴³Bosch draws the following “contours” of the new paradigm: 1. the mutual coordination of mission and unity is *non-negotiable* derived from “God’s gift of unity in the one Body of Christ.” 2. “holding onto both mission and unity and to both truth and unity *presupposes tension*. It does not presume uniformity.” 3. “a united church-in-mission is essential in light of the fact that the church’s mission *will never come to an end*.” 4. “mission in unity means an end to the distinction between “sending” and “receiving” churches” 5. a stand against “*the proliferation of new churches*, which are often formed on the basis of extremely questionable distinctions.” 6. unity does not just serve the church but serves humankind and seeks “to manifest the cosmic rule of Christ.” 7. the “*loss of ecclesial unity is not just a vexation but a sin*.” Ibid., 464-467.

⁴⁴Marsh, 412.

⁴⁵Robeck, 348.

DeLonn Rance, “The Church in Latin America...”

Contextual Challenges

Although Walter J. Hollenweger, citing Roebek, makes a case for Latin American Pentecostals being a prophetic voice in the worldwide Pentecostal movement for dialogue and involvement with organized ecumenism,⁴⁶ the reality remains much more complex. For example, in El Salvador the Pentecostals involved in organized ecumenism associated with the WCC come from smaller church movements and are viewed with suspicion by the Pentecostal majority. On the other hand, Hollenweger, citing Dayton, recognizes the marginalization of Pentecostals by organized ecumenism.⁴⁷

The writing related to Pentecostal ecumenism seems to neglect the link between ecumenism and missions. Anderson addresses both mission and ecumenism in “An Introduction to Pentecostalism,”⁴⁸ but in separate, seemingly unrelated chapters. Neither Hollenweger in his epic work on Pentecostalism⁴⁹ or Roebek in his chapter on “Pentecostals and Ecumenism” make a connection between unity and missions.

Pentecostalism, particularly in Latin America, is far from monolithic or unified. As Roebek notes, “In a real sense, then, the Pentecostal movement has managed, in just less than a century, to contribute to nearly as many different divisions as it took the rest of the church a millennium to produce.”⁵⁰ In Latin America this is exacerbated by cultural understandings of leadership and the use of power. “Caudillismo” refers to strong centralized charismatic leadership that when exercised in the context of the church frequently results in a “revolution” and a church split. Contemporary expressions include the “New Apostolic Movement,” some

⁴⁶Walter J. Hollenweger, *Pentecostalism: Origins and Developments Worldwide* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publisher, 1997) 368.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 369.

⁴⁸Allan Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁴⁹Walter J. Hollenweger, *Pentecostalism: Origins and Developments Worldwide* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publisher, 1997).

⁵⁰Roebek, 340-341.

DeLonn Rance, “The Church in Latin America...”

expression of “post-denominationalism,” and the “vision of the governance of 12” or the “G12 movement.” Inadequate motives such as a thirst for power, fear of the encroachment of Islam, and a desire for access to resources can undermine unity, create dependency, and be expressions of imperialism. Often denominations are vilified as sinful divisions in the body of Christ. In Latin America, they can be indigenous expressions of the Church that function as extended families. Many of these families are coming together as the missionary people of God.

Coming Together as the Missionary People of God

Despite the challenges, and as a part of the exponential growth of majority world missions, the Latin American Church is coming together as a missionary people. The historical narrative of the missionary movement of the Assemblies of God of El Salvador and of Latin America provides powerful witness to this reality.

The Coming Together of the Latin American Missionary People of God

Missionary activity is no longer predominantly the domain of Western Christianity. Increasing numbers of missionaries are being commissioned and sent out from churches in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Oceania. While missions experts do not agree on the exact numbers of majority world missionaries, all agree that they are rapidly growing both in terms of numbers and influence. In 1972 there were 2,951 majority world missionaries. Eight years later that figure had increased to 13,238, then in 1988⁵¹, the number more than doubled to 35,924. By 2006,⁵² there were an astounding 98,000 majority world missionaries, representing 22% of

⁵¹Larry D. Pate, “Pentecostal Missions from the Two-Thirds World,” in *Called and Empowered: Global Mission in Pentecostal Perspective*, ed. Murray A. Dempster, Byron D. Klaus, and Douglas Petersen (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 245.

⁵²www.WorldChristianDatabase.org

DeLonn Rance, “The Church in Latin America...”

foreign mission personnel. Jason Mandryk notes that 49% of cross-cultural missionaries are from the majority world as compared to 47% from North America and Europe.⁵³

Recognized as the primary ecumenical missions movement in Latin America, COMIBAM celebrated its first congress in Sao Paulo, Brazil in 1987. At that time, the movement estimated that 60 organizations had commissioned 1,600 cross-cultural missionaries. Ten years later in 1997 at the second COMIBAM Congress in Acapulco, Mexico approximately 300 sending agencies reported more than 4,000 cross-cultural missionaries. According to COMIBAM statistics from 2006, 9,000 missionaries have been sent by some 400 sending organizations.⁵⁴ Yet missions mobilization continues to be one of the principle challenges. Carlos Scott former president of COMIBAM observes,

We are a capable missions movement, but we are still not a missions movement that has come to a point of developing all of its potential to bless all nations. Despite the number of Iberoamerican evangelicals (70 millions) [sic], still we observe that there is not a correlation with a greater sending of missionaries to the least evangelized or unreached peoples...

The mission could be the foundation for our unity. Cooperation in the practical task of missions is the first step towards a deeper unity. We will grow in our testimony based on the unity of Christ, that calls us all to participate in God’s mission.⁵⁵

The Assemblies of God of El Salvador: Coming Together as the Missionary People of God⁵⁶

The Assemblies of God of El Salvador has always had a passion for the lost. In the early days of revival, men and women of faith, filled by the Spirit with courage and boldness, fanned out across Central America with the message of the gospel with little regard for political

⁵³State of the World 2006 www.gmi.org/ow

⁵⁴Carlos Scott, “Comibam Projections and Challenges for the Iberoamerican Mission Movement,” Comibam, <http://comibam.org/docs/projectionsandchallenges.pdf> (accessed July 28, 2009), 3.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶Much of the information for this section of the paper has been adapted from DeLonn L. Rance, *The Empowered Call: The Activity of the Holy Spirit in Salvadoran Assemblies of God Missionaries* (Ann Arbor, MI: ProQuest Information and Learning Company, 2004), 140-159.

DeLonn Rance, “The Church in Latin America...”

boundaries. As early as 1936, pioneers like Ramon Bruno and Jose Maria Bermudez carried the revival to the neighboring country of Guatemala. The churches planted were cornerstones of the work in that country. Other pioneers went to Honduras, including Carlos Flores (1938) and Ramiro Alvarez (1963). The influence of the church in El Salvador extended throughout Central America.

Much of this early missionary work was less a result of organized planning than it was a spontaneous response to need. Men and women of God became aware of a need and in faith responded without any real support from the sending body. With an increase in nationalism and the conflict between the various Central American republics, international evangelistic outreach diminished, and efforts turned inward. For several decades the Assemblies of God of El Salvador failed to respond to the missionary mandate. No challenges to missionary service were issued; no missionary support base developed.

In 1968, an Assemblies of God missionary from the United States serving in Costa Rica impacted the entire region when he prophetically challenged his fellow missionaries to redefine the indigenous church in order to develop national churches with world missions vision. He declared that “every Christian in every church throughout the world IS EQUALLY OBLIGATED to spread the gospel to the entire world either by going or by giving.”⁵⁷ He asserted, “We are falling short in our concept of the indigenous church. That is on the point of emphasizing self-propagation instead of worldwide propagation.”⁵⁸ The demand of the world’s unreached required that the missionary help national Christians to catch a vision of their

⁵⁷David Kensinger, “Integrating National Missions into our World Evangelization Program,” Unpublished Address to Assemblies of God Missionaries (Springfield, MO: AGWM Archives, 1968).

⁵⁸Ibid.

DeLonn Rance, “The Church in Latin America...”

responsibility to reach out to the whole world. If this could be done, “it could mean a whole new dimension in missions.”⁵⁹

In the 1970s with the sending of Ricardo Parada to Belize, the Evangelistic Center of San Salvador, pastored by John Bueno, began to apply the same evangelistic fervor that produced the phenomenal growth of the church and its daughter churches, to the evangelization of Latin America and the world. Its first missionary endeavors were more the result of administrative decisions by visionary leadership than the product of a grass roots movement.

In 1983 Rene Escobar Jimenez, a local evangelist, was sent as a participant in the Evangelistic Invasion of Paraguay. The general fund of the National Church of El Salvador (General Conference) provided his salary with little or no support from local congregations. As a result of various missions seminars, camp meetings, and newly revised and additional missions courses at the Bible school, a new missions awareness began to emerge. National leadership began to feel a need for better organization and promotion dedicating the entire annual National Conference in 1986 to foreign missions. During that year a constitution and by-laws were drafted, creating the Department of Foreign Missions with its adoption in January 1987. The Foreign Missions committee, appointed in December of that same year, has worked to maximize El Salvador’s potential as a sending body. It took time to develop disciplined sacrificial giving, but in 2007 the churches of the Assemblies of God of El Salvador gave \$341,596 to support over eighty missionaries serving in twenty-two nations of the world.⁶⁰

Several events and resources assisted in the development of missions in El Salvador. These include: 1. an increased global awareness due to significant Salvadoran migration caused by the civil war; 2. international congresses on missions and evangelism (e.g., Amsterdam 1983,

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Information from the annual report for 2007 provided by the Foreign Missions Department of the Assemblies of God of El Salvador.

DeLonn Rance, “The Church in Latin America...”

1986 sponsored by the Billy Graham Association, COMIBAM 1987/1997/2007 and Korea 1995 -- the Global Consultation on World Evangelization II); and 3. the proliferation of books, other publications, and media tools focused on missions awareness. Significant among these are: *Misión Mundial*⁶¹ in three volumes edited by Jonathon Lewis, *Misionología: Nuestro Cometido Transcultural*⁶² by Pate (a pentecostal missiological textbook), several books published by COMIBAM, a “World Guide to Prayer” published by the Latin American Division of the U.S. Center for World Mission, and *La Ventana Misionera*, a bulletin published by the Department of Foreign Missions of El Salvador.

A new level of ecumenical missions collaboration emerged in El Salvador after COMIBAM 1997. A national network of missions agencies, COMISAL, organized with various Pentecostal and evangelical churches represented in leadership. Past denominational conflicts were set aside as Assemblies of God missionaries received support from MIES, a nondenominational missions’ agency largely supported and led by members of the Central American Mission and Assemblies of God churches supported missionaries sent out by MIES. Missionary training seminars continue to be open with a free interchange of professors and students from various traditions. At the Christian University of the Assemblies of God, students from Pentecostal and evangelical denominations (e.g. Baptists, Apostles and Prophets, Central American Mission, the Church of God, and independent churches) study together the Licentiate in Missiology in preparation for missionary service. The Church in El Salvador has come together in missions.

⁶¹Jonatán Lewis, ed. *Misión Mundial* (Miami, FL: Editorial Unilit, 1990).

⁶²Larry D. Pate, *Misionología: Nuestro Cometido Transcultural* (Miami, FL: Editorial Vida, 1987).

DeLonn Rance, “The Church in Latin America...”

The Assemblies of God of Ibero-America: “Together in Missions”

While a collegial bond exists among executive leadership on a regional level among Assemblies of God national churches, there has been minimal collaboration. National sovereignty is guarded closely, often at the expense of effective missional action. National superintendents and executives meet every three years for fellowship and encouragement, but only occasionally collaborate for the purpose of an evangelistic emphasis in a given country.

However, as the various countries began to develop missions programs, the need for cooperation between the national church missions agencies surfaced. In 1989 at a regional meeting, national executives named a committee to facilitate the development of missions agencies in the various countries of the region and facilitate communication between these agencies and the fields where Latin American missionaries served. In 1998 this committee was reconstituted as a network called “Together in Missions.” This Assemblies of God network serves all the missions agencies of Spain and the Spanish speaking countries of Latin America becoming an effective region-wide expression of unity.

The increase in the number national missions agency who have joined the network along with the growth of the number of commissioned missionaries provide evidence to the Church’s coming together in missions. In 1994, the Assemblies of God of the Spanish speaking countries of Latin America listed sixty appointed missionaries. In 1996 thirty missions leaders representing eleven countries gathered in Puerto Rico, reporting 140 appointed missionaries. In 2000, fifty leaders from seventeen countries met in Panama informing the commissioning of 305 missionaries. In 2002 there were 334 missionaries serving in 53 countries; in 2003, 354 missionaries in 56 countries; in 2005, 656 missionaries in 59 countries; in 2006, 792 missionaries in 64 countries, including 56 missionaries serving in Muslim contexts. By 2007 all the

DeLonn Rance, “The Church in Latin America...”

Assemblies of God churches of the twenty-one Spanish speaking countries of Latin America and Spain had organized a duly constituted missions agency. These agencies reported a total of \$3,564,032 given to support 832 appointed missionaries, serving in 72 countries—including 95 missionaries in 21 Muslim contexts.⁶³

Increasing numbers of local churches are sending and supporting missionaries, but the majority of potential is still unrealized (e.g., in El Salvador, church participation increased from 0.1% in 1987 to over 70% in 2005. That same year, Costa Rica reported only 20% participation.)⁶⁴ The majority of Assemblies of God agencies in Latin America has yet to reach critical mass and is in the early development stages with no missionaries or just one or two and a national leadership of limited missionary experience.

In the document “Fundamental Missiological Declarations” under the subheading “How to Relate to Each Other through Networking,” the participants in the “Together in Missions” network affirmed the need for biblical unity allowing freedom to the members to fulfill their call without losing their unique identity. The document sets the parameters of cooperation for this ecumenical network. Cooperation does not mean: 1. A single world organization (organic unity); 2. A single Latin American AG or a single Latin American missions agency; 3. Giving up AG identity and working philosophy to satisfy other missionary movements; or 4. Raising up local and national churches on the mission field that do not directly identify nor affiliate with the AG because of pressure from the ecumenical community.

However, cooperation does mean: 1. Communicating with and sharing support and respect with other missionary movements of the body of Christ, even when they have a different missionary working philosophy; 2. Respecting the national church of the AG that already exists

⁶³Information extracted from the annual reports of “Together in Missions.”

⁶⁴Ibid..

DeLonn Rance, “The Church in Latin America...”

and not raising up various national churches of the AG in a single country and/or people group;

3. Uniting the missionary efforts of the AG of different countries with the purpose of establishing, developing, and serving a single national AG church in the target people group while allowing and supporting missionaries in the exercise of a diversity of gifts given by God for the edification of the national work; and 4. Communication between AG missions departments and agencies of Latin America and the world while respecting the autonomy of each nation.⁶⁵

Missions presidents and executives of the network meet each year to organize collaborative activities and author strategic documents. Every third year the network schedules a congress for missions mobilization that focuses on prayer, powerful Spirit anointed preaching, celebratory worship, vision casting, relationship building, strategic workshops and concrete missional activities. These two distinct types of meetings respond to Winter’s admonition: “The fact is that we need both kinds of meetings—meetings of church leaders, church people, church and mission people, and now and then, meetings exclusively of mission executives.”⁶⁶ The most recent meeting of missions executives produced a “Manifesto” signed by national superintendents and “Together in Missions” leadership to address the issues of immigration in Europe and the missional opportunities open to Latin American immigrants. The coming together of the AG of Latin America has stimulated the growth of AG missionary activity worldwide and produced a global missions network called Acts 1:8.

Conclusion

The Church in Latin America is coming together in mission. As the Church continues to commit to the fulfillment of the missionary mandate and yields to the Spirit who empowers both

⁶⁵Together in Missions, 4.

⁶⁶Winter, 41.

DeLonn Rance, “The Church in Latin America...”

unity and mission, the Church will overcome the challenges and be drawn together in unity giving witness to the world as the apostolic/missionary people of God.

Unity is a gift of grace from God and centres on a shared relationship with Christ (Eph. 4:16). It emulates the aspiration of Jesus in John 17:21: that ‘all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you’: this unity immediately has a specifically missional intent: ‘that the world may believe’ (v.23). It witnesses to the oneness of the Trinity and the intimacy that exists between Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and therefore glorifies God by demonstrating to the world the relational potential and reconciling power of being one in Christ. Unity and mission are therefore inseparable: unity without mission is inconceivable, but mission without unity is a failure of witness and a faithless denial of the trinitarian glory shared by Christians as the gift of God in Christ through the Spirit ... If mission is at the heart of the identity of the church, it is therefore also the key to unity: with integral mission as the shared priority, all other differences are put into their proper perspective.⁶⁷

God, the author of missions, is not willing that any should perish (2 Pet. 3:9), but His desire is that every person and every people be restored to relationship with Him and each other. He waits patiently for the Church to fulfill its commission (2 Pet. 3:15). The Father has set the date of the coming of the fullness of the kingdom (Acts 1:6-7), but until that moment, the apostolic/missionary people of God continue the ministry of revelation and reconciliation of Jesus through the continuing presence and power of the Holy Spirit. Pentecostals resolve the tension between unity and diversity, between *missio Dei* the mission of God and *missiones ecclesiarum* the missions of the Church, by recognizing and affirming that the activity of the Church in missions proceeds out of the mission of God as directed and empowered by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit communicates the good news of the kingdom of God through the agency of the Church. “The Holy Spirit poured out at Pentecost is a missionary Spirit, the church full of the Spirit is a missionary community by nature and the church’s witness is the release of an inward dynamic.”⁶⁸

⁶⁷Marsh, 410-412.

⁶⁸Anderson, 207.

DeLonn Rance, “The Church in Latin America...”

J. Philip Hogan made the following significant missiological statements to the Evangelical Foreign Missions Association (EFMA) in 1970, as president of that association:

Make no mistake, the missionary venture of the church, no matter how well planned, how finely administered and finely supported, would fail like every other vast human enterprise, were it not that where human instrumentality leaves off, a blessed ally takes over. It is the Holy Spirit that calls, it is the Holy Spirit that inspires, it is the Holy Spirit that reveals, and it is the Holy Spirit that administers. ...

I have long since ceased to be interested in meetings where mission leaders are called together to a room filled with charts, maps, graphs and statistics. All one needs to do to find plenteous harvest is simply to follow the leading of the Spirit. ... The essential optimism of Christianity is that the Holy Spirit is a force capable of bursting into the hardest paganism, discomfiting the most rigid dogmatism, electrifying the most suffocating organization and bringing the glory of Pentecost.⁶⁹

The Lausanne Covenant affirms,

Further, the Holy Spirit is a missionary Spirit; thus evangelism should arise spontaneously from a Spirit-filled church. A church that is not a missionary church is contradicting itself and quenching the Spirit. Worldwide evangelization will become a realistic possibility only when the Spirit renews the church in truth and wisdom, faith, holiness, love and power. We therefore call upon all Christian to pray for such a visitation of the sovereign Spirit of God that all his fruit may appear in all his people and that all his gifts may enrich the body of Christ. Only then will the whole church become a fit instrument in his hands, that the whole earth may hear his voice.⁷⁰

The “two basic needs” identified by Graham at the start of the Lausanne Congress were “a tremendous emphasis on prayer” and that all would be “filled with the power of the Holy Spirit.”⁷¹ A Spirit-driven mission in unity begins by creating space for encounters with God in prayer. In prayer we discern His direction and are reminded that God can, we cannot. The power to fulfill mission must come from above. God’s answer to the challenge of the harvest is clear: Pray (Luke 10:2). When we pray, we yield to apostolic power. We become in reality what we are

⁶⁹J. Philip Hogan, “The Holy Spirit and the Great Commission,” *United Evangelical Action* (October 1970): 4-5, quoted in Everett Wilson, *A Strategy of the Spirit: J. Philip Hogan and the Growth of the Assemblies of God Worldwide 1960-1990* (Carlisle, UK: Regnum Books International, 1997), 136-137. This article was later published in *World Pentecost*, 1st Quarter, 1972 and *The Essential J. Philip Hogan*, ed. Byron D. Klaus and Douglas P. Petersen (Springfield, MO: Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, 2006), 31-35.

⁷⁰Stott, 49

⁷¹*Ibid.*, xiv.

DeLonn Rance, “The Church in Latin America...”

already by faith—the apostolic/missionary people of God, fulfilling the apostolic mandate in apostolic power. “Therefore, in light of this our faith and our resolve, we enter into a solemn covenant with God and with each other, to pray, to plan and to work together for the evangelization of the whole world.”⁷²

⁷²Ibid., 54.

DeLonn Rance, “The Church in Latin America...”

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