

Co-participants: Missionaries discover new paradigm for service in Latin America

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Panama City, Panama—For some, missionary work in Latin America is in crisis, and its usefulness is in serious doubt.

Numerous mission agencies are refocusing their attention on other needy parts of the world while others are shutting down programs and pulling out missionaries. Declining economic resources combine with changing emphases and priorities to reduce the attention paid to this continent and raise questions about whether mission activity in the region is even appropriate.

To address the issue and ascertain the appropriate role for a North American missionary organization in the region, the Latin America Mission recently called together nearly 100 Latin pastors and leaders as well as missionaries and representatives of mission agencies to explore the needs and the appropriate form that missions should take in the 21st century.

Laying the groundwork for the congress, LAM president David Befus reminded the participants that more than 100 years ago, mission agencies debated the appropriateness of missionary work in Latin America. “From their first communications and promotions, the Strachans (founders of LAM) defended the need for missionary work in Latin America,” he said. “The cover of the first edition of (the mission’s) magazine declared that ‘God is calling us to evangelize the abandoned continent.’”

Befus challenged the notion that the withdrawal of organizations and missionaries from the region can be characterized as “nationalization” of the work. “From the point of view of the national church, it is abandonment,” he charged.

“With the growth of the Church, especially in non-traditional denominations, there is now more need for biblical teaching,” he said.

Pointing to the many changes that have taken place in mission strategy in Latin America during the last century, Chuck Van Engen, who teaches Missions at Fuller Seminary, stated “we are at the sunrise of the greatest missionary era ever in the history of the church.”

With the ability to speak languages, travel quickly, use technology, and use the Bible in many languages, Van Engen said that “for the first time in human history the Church can present the Gospel in an understandable way to every human being on the face of the earth.”

However, the missionary professor reminded participants that missionary style today is to “partner with other members of God’s family around the world.”

“Every Christian congregation everywhere in the world is part of the world church,” he reminded his audience.

Van Engen said that the growth and expansion of the church highlights the fact that Christianity is no longer a Western religion. “In this new century, Christianity has become a truly global religion with much of the vitality and fresh expression of its life to be found primarily in the two-thirds world.”

Missionaries of this new generation will need to know how to testify to their faith in the midst of religious pluralism, and will have to have a better knowledge of the Bible, he said.

Van Engen called on Christians to form multi-cultural mission teams, partnering with other congregations and other Christians around the world to proclaim the word.

In addition, he said, “We no longer have the luxury of creating a split between evangelism and social action. More than being relevant, the church must show that it is good for something. Rather than simply compete for adherents, the church must demonstrate that it is a positive force for good in a country.”

“The mission is Jesus’ mission, not ours,” Van Engen said. “We are all equally disciples of Jesus, called to participate in his mission both globally and locally. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave or free, male or females, Latin or gringo—we are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Arturo Piedra, who teaches at the Latin American Biblical University in Costa Rica, said that missions need to continue their work in Latin America, but with “a greater willingness to readapt (their) objectives and structures. To recognize and rectify its course of action is healthy for any organization, and that would become evident in a missionary project seriously committed to the proclamation of the Christian message.”

The changing platform for mission work in the region is a struggle for some missionaries and their sending organizations. “The harsh socioeconomic realities and the differing perspectives regarding the direction of God’s program...in both North and Latin America are the main barriers preventing our cooperative missionary effort,” said an “Affirmation” developed after lengthy discussions by congress participants.

The participants agreed that church and mission leaders need to stop thinking in terms of North Americans and Latin Americans with separate roles, but as co-participants in the mission given by God.

The congress’s “affirmation” stated that the current need in Latin America is for missionaries to go and work in specialized ministry areas in an attitude of mutual respect and teamwork. “Latin America is no longer solely a missionary destination for North American believers. We are co-participants in the mission given by God.”

Copies of presentations and summaries of dialogue and discussion are available from the Latin America Mission.

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