

# The Search for a Creative Response to Obstacles to the Growth of Mission out of Latin America



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The phenomenal growth of the evangelical churches in Latin America over the last few decades, particularly those of a Pentecostal persuasion, is widely appreciated. The resulting transformation of Latin American nations from missionary-receivers to missionary-senders is also well documented, and the practical effects of this are felt in the growing number of Latin – particularly Brazilian – Protestant missionaries spread across the globe. This is well expressed in the adaptation of the Lausanne Covenant's motto adopted for the Third Latin American Conference of Evangelism (CLADE III, Quito, Ecuador, 1992): "The whole Gospel, from Latin America, for the whole world."

With the incorporation of such workers, along with others from Africa, India and South East Asia, into the global missionary task, Protestant missions – thankfully! – are no longer solely a white Anglo-Saxon concern. As the theological centre of Evangelical Christianity moves towards the "Global South," the corresponding predominance of non-western missionaries which will characterise this new century is only to be welcomed.

So far, so good. But the emergence of this new missionary force cannot be evaluated solely in terms of numbers – or of potential numbers, which is actually more often than not the object of discussion. The vitality of any Christian movement has to be seen in its long-term durability, the depth of influence it holds within the Christian population it draws on, its theological maturity, and its creative ability to overcome the inevitable obstacles that it encounters. Certainly as far as Latin America is concerned (I am not familiar with how other non-western missionary movements fare in this respect, and thus cannot comment) much is still left to be desired.

The following thoughts are not offered in any way as a critique of what has been achieved so far – as Paul would say, God forbid! Rather, it is a plea for innovative faith and courage in order that the Latin American mission movement can fulfil its God-given destiny. I thus write out of a concern to see the gains of the last few decades consolidated, and a secure foundation laid for the future, not out of any sense of regret over the past.

As a European, I have consistently been surprised how *American* (i.e. North American) the churches in Latin America are. Perhaps all I reveal here is my own ignorance! But nevertheless, the Americanisation of Latin American Protestant Christianity is a remarkable phenomenon of cultural transformation. Whilst obviously not a simple mirror-image, being grafted in alongside patently Latin characteristics, certain trends of "successful" North American Christianity – size of congregation, ambitious building programmes, a conservative socio-political agenda – have been transplanted into the heart of Latin American evangelicalism.

It is then perhaps not so surprising that the majority of Latin efforts follow essentially North American lines in terms of the process of sending and supporting missionaries. The classic model of the "faith-missionary," who lives on the promised support of churches, friends and family, has generally been adopted (along with the denominational missionary who is fundamentally supported in the same way but under the direction of a specific denomination) as *the* model for missionary action. How far, though, can this model take Latin American missions? It has allowed a good few to be sent, but will it supply the means to send out the stream of new missionary candidates that the next years will undoubtedly produce?

The modern Protestant missionary movement, effectively beginning at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, was born at one particular moment in western religious, economic and political history. Its development was fully dependent on the growing colonial empires, growing economic surpluses and opportunities, and growing voluntary societies, such as the new mission agencies (see Walls 1996: 259). The North American missionary enterprise continued in line with the development of a new nation, fired both by its rapid industrial and economic development and by its sense of Manifest Destiny, making the United States into the powerhouse of Protestant missionary expansion in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

It would be utopian to believe that these conditions will emerge in 21<sup>st</sup> century Latin America. But without this kind of background, it is just as utopian to pursue the missionary task without seeking alternative means to fulfil our calling. Andrew Walls comments:

... there are good reasons for not expecting a general burgeoning of third world "overseas missions" societies. Such societies can only emerge, whether in the west or elsewhere, against the background of a certain type of economy. They cannot operate where the economy is based on marginal agriculture, or in countries with chronic economic disabilities, or in countries with tight monetary controls (1996: 259).

How many Latin American nations do those few words not apply to?

It seems that few in the Latin American missionary movement have fully grasped the implications of these fundamental differences. We have yet to see significant change in this aspect of missiological thinking since COMIBAM, the first Ibero-American Missions Congress, in São Paulo in 1987. Samuel Escobar holds that this congress:

... expressed a great amount of enthusiasm for the missionary task. Yet it failed to grapple with basic concepts in the understanding of mission including both the blatant reality of poverty that surrounded the very place where the delegates met, and the structures of mission at a time of crisis for traditional Latin American structures. Probably because of the North American model on which the conference was patterned, its observers missed a note of realism" (in Phillips and Coote 1993: 130, 131).

Beyond economic realities, it is important also to highlight the cultural identity that made "faith missions" possible. Guillermo Cook asserts that "the (Latin American) missionary movement has relied perhaps too much on exogenous models that are out of touch with sociocultural realities and church practice" (1994: 51). Most northern European or North American missionaries and mission agencies are supported through voluntary donations and "faith promises" on the basis of which individuals embark upon their ministries, agencies plan their activities, and denominational mission boards budget for their workers. Cook again points out that

in North America, the Calvinist ethic ensures that the pledges will be fulfilled unless a crisis occurs, thus missionaries can count on steady support. This is not so in Latin America, where the enthusiasm can easily shift from one cause or person to another, to the detriment of the unfortunate cross-cultural missionary (1994: 51).

Though there will always be individuals whose personal charisma or ability in communications will enable them to overcome this, such a model simply will not function adequately within the Latin American cultural context.

Experience of the last decade confirms this overall picture. A good number of missionaries have been sent out, albeit with considerable economic difficulties in many cases. The financial insecurity involved has led to a premature return for many – too many – and condemned others to a permanent state of suspense, awaiting the Damocles' sword of unfulfilled financial pledges to fall. And this is not to mention those who have been unable to go because of lack of finance, the thousands who will want to be sent in years to come, or those in my own mission<sup>1</sup> who have been trained but cannot find even adequate “promises.” It is unrealistic to anticipate that such a model will ever provide the financial basis to allow Latin American missions to flourish.

There have been various proposals to overcome this. The most common is simply “we must try harder”, spending more time and effort to gain a greater number of supporting churches and individuals. However, despite economic growth in Latin America's industrial giant, Brazil, financial resources across the continent are still relatively scarce. The natural ceiling to growth in mission support through these channels for the immediate future is clear: without a supernatural multiplication of the loaves and fishes, existing provision just cannot be further divided between an increasing number of would-be recipients. It would seem that God's promised provision for his work must be sought elsewhere.

Foreign funding is often seen as an alternative, and usually something of a “magic wand” solution, though this would only seem to work well where personal relationships are formed so that donors then respond to the individual, rather than to a general need or vague idea. Matching funding from foreign foundations may provide some level of answer, though this carries the risk of creating dependency. PMI (Pueblos Musulmanes Internacional – Muslim Peoples International) are to be admired for their decision not to allow more than 30% of the budget for any project to come from outside Ibero-America. Some would also object that, whilst western churches must surely aim to support their own people moving into missions as a natural outworking of missionary vision, “national missions” is a different matter. In this respect, western foundations are in their rights to ask why they should contribute \$250 to half fund a Latin to go to India, with the years of learning and adaptation that he or she will need, when two national missionaries could be fully supported with the same money, workers who certainly have more idea of the culture if not the language, and no visa difficulties. Finally, some individuals have taken a “tent-maker” or bi-vocational approach, but this rarely goes beyond the level of personal initiative, and is yet to be seen as a serious alternative to the traditional model.

At some point, we need to realise that the concept of “supported missionaries” is ultimately a modern and western phenomenon and cannot be made into the mainstay of contemporary non-western mission strategy. Non-western mission leaders need to look back beyond today's practice into the history of the expansion of the Christian movement to find fuel for creative solutions today. In the words of Spanish philosopher Marina, “The Greeks were right: there is no creativity without memory, no Muses without Mnemosyne, who is their mother” (2005: 11). The apostle Paul generally chose to exercise his trade in order that his witness might be credible and his model of workplace evangelism be readily copied by his disciples.<sup>2</sup> Catholic missions were largely part of a monastic movement that encompassed agricultural exploitations as well as living from charity. Self-supporting ministry amongst the most neglected was the aim of the fore-runners of evangelical missions, the Moravians, an emphasis which “led to the creation of industries and business concerns which not only supported the work but brought the missionaries into intimate contact with the people” (Beaver 1970: 246). Although dependent on contemporary colonial practice, the majority of funding for William Carey and the “Serampore Trio's” enterprise came through their own private business initiatives.

Whilst there is no need to reject other sources of funding *per se*, Latin American missions will only “take off” when initiative for its financing is put back into the hands of its protagonists, the missionaries themselves. Rather than being taught to wait for an elusive handout, successful missionaries will be prepared – through secular training too – to work their way to the nations. To avoid visa difficulties, appropriate career choices will need to be made in accordance with the particular needs of the regions where different ones are destined. And missionary recruitment must present this reality, rather than simply inspiring people with visions of the unreached. All this must become part of Latin American missionary strategy, actively and diligently researched and applied by mission leaders and analysts, rather than simply left to chance or individual prerogative.

Looking at missions to the old world, Europe, it is inconceivable for most Latin American churches to even imagine providing the £10,000 plus a year needed to keep a missionary family in most of Europe today. Yet with nearly half a million Ecuadorians, for example, living in Spain,<sup>3</sup> there surely is another way. If even 5% of these Ecuadorians are evangelical believers,<sup>4</sup> then there are now some 24,000 potential extra witnesses to Christ in Spain. The same applies to other countries in Latin America: an editorial to the Peruvian newspaper *La República* entitled *Casi Un Millón de Compatriotas Ilegales* comments that:

Government official reports state the main Peru [*sic*] export is neither cotton nor copper, but Peruvians. Almost one million Peruvians have fled the country and established themselves in foreign lands as illegal immigrants (8 February 1999).<sup>5</sup>

Space does not permit entering into a discussion of the ethics of entering Europe as illegal immigrants – suffice it to say that many ask God’s blessing on their attempts to get here, and those who have to balance the books for Europe’s ageing social security system are heard to mutter a loud “Amen.” History is the story of the flow of peoples across the face of the globe, and more often than not the gospel – not to mention other ideologies – has travelled with these movements of people. Contemporary Latin American missionary strategy will not be complete without entering this arena.

We thus cannot continue to attempt to raise Latin missionaries for Europe with scarcely any reference to the massive immigration that is taking place across the continent. Beyond attempting to harness existing immigrants,<sup>6</sup> there is also a place for raising a new workforce of committed and called missionaries, who will minister in Europe from the role of economic refugees. Adequate pre-field training, prayer support from home churches, preparation and co-ordination of placements, and on-field support and supervision should all be taken into serious consideration, just as much as for “full-time” workers in any other part of the world.

This scenario will only allow for a flow of new workers to Europe or other “lucrative” destinations – it is highly optimistic to think that “the South-to-North migration could prove to be instrumental in the completion of the Great Commission” (Palomino 2005). Few economic refugees are likely to find themselves working among the Fulani! It is here that other avenues for successful ministry will need to be found, drawing extensively on the business and commercial opportunities that today’s globalised world offers.

Leaving for one moment the search for innovative means to overcome the financial restrictions on Latin American missionaries, I would like to briefly comment on two other areas where it seems to me that existing models are proving inadequate. I realise that I can do little more than open these up for discussion, but hope that this may provide the stimulus for further creative missiological thought.

Mission agencies, whether denominational board or voluntary society, have been the major means by which western missionaries have moved into overseas ministry. The role of

sending churches has often been limited to one of support at a distance, with workers sometimes drawing on a wide constituency of different churches or individuals to meet their financial needs. Whilst links may be maintained with one home church, these are rarely exclusive or particularly strong. Loyalty is often felt powerfully towards the mission agency itself, and local churches rarely participate in decisions about on-field ministry. (The British charismatic churches, which have taken a much higher profile in the sending and support of their missionaries, are a notable exception to this.)

For the majority of Latin missionaries this is not the case. Pastoral leadership in the sending church still considers the worker to all intents and purposes a member of that church, ultimately under its authority, and the workers themselves will share this perspective. The mission agency is a means to an end – reaching the field – providing the link between church and unreached people. It is “para-church” – a designation I personally reject<sup>7</sup> – a sort of God’s “Plan B” that is only needed because the church is not doing what it was supposed to. “Local church” is to be the means and the motor for mission.<sup>8</sup>

The results for overseas workers of this dichotomy of identity and points of reference are numerous. I have witnessed its effects in terms of lack of stability for long-term work, confusion over the source of authority for decisions relating to local ministry, the imposition of foreign denominations or liturgical forms, unavailability of adequate member care and culturally sensitive advice, tensions in relationships with existing evangelical expressions (particularly of the same denomination) and in some instances the discrediting of the whole missionary enterprise in the eyes of the church and the abandonment of any ongoing commitment to cross-cultural missions.

I am in no way advocating a return to western-style agencies and church-agency relations. Rather, a re-definition of the relationship between local church and the necessary “means” of missions is called for, in which due place is given to each in a way which genuinely serves the ultimate goal of cross-cultural mission. Anything less than this will fail either to give adequate expression to the tremendous dynamism of Latin American churches, or to ensure the viability and necessary cultural relevance of ministries in cross-cultural contexts.

I should like finally to draw attention to one further area of concern, that of the absence of theological reflection in missions, which, according to Cook, “often produces a univocal, dogmatic, arrogant and impositional kind of witness to the grace of God in Jesus Christ” (1994 :49). Latin America has produced much seminal indigenous Catholic theology, exploring the nature of the Christian mission within a continent beset by the sociocultural legacy of colonial forms of government and unequal participation in the global economy. Whilst not totally absent, theological reflection on the nature of the cross-cultural missionary task before the Latin American evangelical church, and how to equip its agents to fulfil this mandate, has yet to appear with force.

The drive behind Latin American missions is generally a “passion for the lost” held in a pre-millennialist framework which tends to produce as an unfortunate by-product an unhealthy concern for numbers. Though it is to be anticipated that missionary motivation will mature to become more God-centred with time, for the majority of sending churches today the only real measure of missionary success is the number of converts gained or churches planted. A facile triumphalism thus colours most mission reports, often hiding reality under a veneer of “evangelistic” statistics.

Adhering to little more than a *tabula rasa* approach to religious encounter and cultural transformation, and dismissing the whole lot as “of the devil,” few missionaries are in fact prepared for dialogue with convinced devotees of other religions. Superficial evangelistic “chat-up” lines, which (perhaps!) suffice in a nominally Christian culture, cannot be

transported for use with people of long-standing non-Christian traditions. In order to offer a challenging, relevant and ultimately credible witness, essentially non-biblical notions such as "inviting Jesus into one's heart" must surrender to a more biblical and culturally intelligible message.

Furthermore, to avoid the pitfall of simply reproducing the churches that Latin American missionaries have left behind, or even the North American models on which these themselves were based, theological reflection must also impinge on ecclesiological concerns. Missionaries should learn to hold not only truth in an open hand as they engage in dialogue, but also their patterns of church government and liturgical convictions as they develop church with new disciples.

So, as the Latin American mission movement builds on its short past, there is need for innovative solutions: to financial obstacles, to inadequate structures, and to the shallowness of theological reflection. These will lead to a growing ability to play a significant part in global evangelisation. That, at least, is my prayer, and it is to that end that I submit these thoughts.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The *Radical Project* run by Horizontes América Latina – see Decker and Keating 2003 and Pierson 2004 – is certainly an innovative and contextualised approach to training, using a common purse and rock-bottom minimum budget whilst living in teams. It has aimed to give participants good experience that would then allow them to find their own support more easily once they finished the five-year project. However, whilst this has been the case for some, others still look for finance and have been unable to return to the field.
- <sup>2</sup> See Siemens 1981 for an excellent introduction to the whole concept of tent-making, and Paul's ministry in particular.
- <sup>3</sup> According to figures published by the Spanish National Institute of Statistics in March 2005, the 2004 national census registers 475,698 Ecuadorians as living in Spain. Source: El País, 31<sup>st</sup> March 2005.
- <sup>4</sup> Operation World gives a figure of 6.1% Evangelicals for 2001, with an annual growth rate of 6.9% (2001: 230). Furthermore, many of the Ecuadorians in Spain are drawn from the Quichua population, which has a much higher proportion of Evangelicals, so this is a highly conservative estimate.
- <sup>5</sup> Quoted in Palomino 2004. Palomino's article is an indication of the growing interest in this whole concept and gives an excellent overview of the extent of and reasons for Latin American emigration. He provides some pointers to help Latin émigrés and projections for their future in Europe.
- <sup>6</sup> For one attempt to do this in Spain, see the work of North American Baptist missionary David Rogers at [www.nuevosobreros.org](http://www.nuevosobreros.org)
- <sup>7</sup> See Snyder 1977: 137-168, "The Form of the Church" for an understanding of all expressions of the one universal "Church" as "para-church," whether local church, mission agency, denomination or training establishment.
- <sup>8</sup> See Queiroz 1990 for one example of this perspective.

### ***Biography of the Author***

*A graduate in languages from Bradford University, Neil Rees joined World Horizons in 1984. He has lived in Spain since 1985, being involved in evangelism and church-planting, establishing the WH training base in Spain, and overseeing the development of World Horizons teams in Spain and Portugal. Married to Lynn, they now have two children aged 11 and 9. Receiving Latin missionaries in Spain has led to a growing involvement in Latin America, particularly Brazil. Neil has recently completed an M.A. in international development, and took on the role of International Co-ordinator for World Horizons in 2004.*

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