

CORONAVIRUS: AN “OUT OF SEASON” REPORT

By Bob Young

March 15, 2020

Travel restrictions! Borders closed! Entry denied! Red alert in Honduras, Colombia closed to outsiders, prisons forbidding outside visitors. A new world! A new world for mission works! Many mission works face extreme challenges in coming days.

With the continuing spread and growing concern about COVID-19, Christians are gaining a new awareness of how connected our world is; we are presented with new problems and concerns along with new opportunities and possibilities for advanced, more effective methods. Since I work in international missions, I share the concerns, but I also relish the new possibilities. Jan and I just returned from a week in the Dominican Republic. Before we left, I wrote that we were putting the work in God’s hands, using wisdom and caution while seeking to serve faithfully. He marvelously blessed the mission trip with baptisms in the new churches and the anticipation of more baptisms.

Since my return, several have asked what impact the coronavirus will have on my specific mission work. The answer is that the coronavirus will have little impact. The impact will be minimal for two reasons. First, the mission activities will continue without travel by using existing resources and the technology that is readily available. Second, capable persons have been trained in each country, and the national Christians will continue the work in their own countries as God gives them opportunity and strength.

In the work of Latin American Leadership Development, the impact of the coronavirus will be minimal because of the nature of this mission work, how it is done, and who is being empowered for the mission. This mission work can be described briefly as follows: the development of national workers through training, mentoring, teaching, and encouraging; mentoring, modeling, and training for spiritual development through seminars and teaching; providing counseling and mentoring through regular contact and conversations using modern technology. Many of the national workers are volunteers who have their own livelihood and receive little or no church funding. Their social, familial, emotional, and financial support systems are already in place.

An essential part of this mission over the past 11 years has been the training and equipping of national teachers and trainers, national leaders, and model churches that now assist other Christians, leaders, and churches within their own countries and across borders. The network of churches who seek and receive training continues to expand. Increasingly, the work of teaching and training is being done through video. The virtual classroom project in development will allow increased interaction between remote teachers and students in their home areas, without the need to travel.

During this crisis, I anticipate little change except for the need to reschedule a trip or two. The mission work, with the help of generous donors, will continue to provide support for national workers. That support includes helping with various resources along with emotional support, mentoring, and consulting via modern technology, videoconferencing and immediate “chat” and conversation tools.

Another question I am often asked concerns the future of this mission work -- passing the baton. Who will pick up the work? How will it continue? The baton is already being passed, or has been passed, to churches and church leaders I have worked with in Chile, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, and Venezuela. The mission is multiplying as these Christians are doing much more than was possible 10 years ago. That multiplication is seen in the constant increase in baptisms, new churches, increased attendance, and faithful disciples who make disciples. I serve on the board of trustees at Baxter because I see great hope in the leaders being developed there. I am blessed to interact with Christians and national churches that represent the future rapid growth of the church in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Costa Rica and Panama. I rejoice that elders have been named who have evangelistic hearts and that they are establishing dozens of churches; elders are helping other

congregations establish elders; evangelists are training more evangelists, disciples are making more disciples by baptisms, through faithful assimilation into local churches, and by planting new churches.

When asked about my successor, I sometimes point out that Paul did not seek to replace himself. He trained coworkers, but for the most part he passed the work to future workers in the places where they lived.

In local church ministry, I saw my task as equipping the local members of the church for the work and passing the work to them. I see the task of mission work in the same way.

The current world stage suggests the importance of rethinking our models of ministry and missions. How will we do ministry and missions in the midst of circumstances like these -- prisons closed to outsiders, countries where outsiders cannot enter, travel bans, limited assemblies of Christians?

My answer is that the prisoners who have become Christians accept the responsibility of teaching others (the model used in a nearby prison work), the Christians in restricted countries will continue spreading the gospel where they live, the national leaders and churches with whom I work will make any travel less important. The focus must move to developing national workers and providing resources more than sending North Americans. The focus must be in developing capable, multiplying mission churches that in turn plant more churches. The focus must be on developing healthy mission churches and not on the sending churches.

I have been using technology, teleconferencing, and alternative communication options to replace some international travel for several years. For the past 2-3 months, I have been working on additional technology options, even before the coronavirus. I understand the value of the personal connection. That is why it is essential to use technology that allows more interaction with a remote teacher. For over 10 years, I have been training nationals who travel where North Americans do not want to go. Now they will go where North Americans cannot go. I am also planning more group events that will use remote speakers and teachers.

Finally, I urge you to join me in prayer. May we pray diligently and more regularly for God's mission work, for brothers and sisters who work sacrificially to advance the gospel of the kingdom, for those countries that have been hardest hit by the virus, and for the problems many refugees face (we have brothers and sisters in Christ who struggle with refugee status in the Mediterranean region, on the border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, and among the millions of Venezuelans who have been scattered across many nations).

I began by writing that Jan and I decided to go ahead with our most recent mission trip, putting the trip and the details into God's hand since he is the one in control. We have his promise to work all things for good. God works in the midst of problems, challenges, and our weaknesses. Our part is to continue to do his will with faith, enthusiasm and energy, while exercising wisdom and caution. Let us be examples of calm in the midst of chaos, of peace in the midst of panic.