

LATIN AMERICAN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT: WHAT I SEE ENCOURAGES ME

By Bob Young

Between the 1st and 3rd centuries, the New Testament church became a dominant force with growth rates of no more than 3-4%. The key was their constancy. Can that be duplicated in our world today? I believe it can.

Here's some of what I have seen this year....

- A church has several capable teachers who share teaching/preaching responsibilities. The church is supporting a church plant 7 hours away by sending two-person teams every other weekend. On the other weekends, the members of the new church must lead.
- Church planting efforts in rural Central America
 - Four evangelists work in 12 churches, so the local members are trained to lead in the absence of an official “minister.” This requires the development of leadership teams at the local level, supported by periodic training sessions.
 - A chain of churches has a constant process of establishing new churches, with the most recently established church responsible for continuing the chain. Most of the work done by one indigenous couple who have their own employment and do not receive US support. Very few churches in this region function with a “minister.”
 - In a recently established church (5 years old), a US church helped construct a building, and the church is growing rapidly with about 30 baptisms this year. This church has a “missionary-minister” supported from the US, so when they saw a need for a church in a neighboring town they began sending local Christians to assist in the new church plant.
- Elders were named in a mission church that has no full-time minister. The work is shared by a team, with 3 elders and 4 deacons identified as the primary leaders. (This church built its own building.) The church has a vision for church planting and helping smaller, newer congregations in their region, by sending team members to assist.
- Elders lead a team, preaching responsibilities are shared, the three evangelists each have their own employment, the local church is buying its own building with its own funding. The church is growing—there were five baptisms the weekend I was there.
- A church is 7-years-old, has own its building; attendance is about 50. The man who functions as primary leader has his own business. When I was there, church members had 5 different Bible studies in progress with 5 prospects; there were 3 baptisms. The church is constantly growing.
- Leadership team is led by 2 elders and 5 deacons; 8 men rotate preaching, almost 30 baptisms this year, no one functions as “minister”, building is overflowing.
- New church plant, 1 ½ years, the missionary couple doing the church plant has a five-year commitment and is supported from US; two baptisms the week I was there, couple is building a team; there were 15 present in the small group, with several visitors and newcomers. Church is virtually self-sustaining after 1 ½ years, renting a facility near center of town.
- No local minister, members share responsibilities, working toward purchase of property
- No local minister, shared responsibilities, church is buying its own property and will be able to much of the construction work themselves.

Observations

- Church planting is best done with the continuing presence of a missionary or missionary team.
- Genuine (local) evangelists who continually work in planting new churches may need to continue to receive financial support as the new churches are not able to pay the evangelist's support.
- As one considers the goal of establishing self-sustaining churches, in much of Latin America that is being done by developing a team that can handle local needs so the church can become self-

sustaining. (If we have to wait until the local Latin American church can support a “minister” internally, most of those churches will be on US life-support until Jesus comes.)

- Most of what I do is with churches that have been established. Often there was a US presence at some time in the past, but the church failed to grow after the team departed. I facilitate evangelism, healthy leadership, capable spiritual Christians, strong families, and discipleship studies.
- I seek to develop healthy churches that are spiritually mature, evangelistic, self-governing or self-directing, self-sustaining, self-edifying, and self-duplicating.

SUMMARY OF CHURCH DEVELOPMENT

Establishment. During this phase, almost every church planting effort needs outside support since there is no local group of Christians capable of paying expenses. This outside support often comes from the US, but as I seek to demonstrate in the models above, more and more indigenous churches are being developed as missionary churches capable of self-duplication. The ideal is that the gospel be planted in a new location, and that the Christians in that new location accept the responsibility of taking the gospel to their own nation.

Evangelism. The establishment phase is the time to develop **evangelistic** fervor as a part of the DNA of the local church. Initial evangelism efforts are often done by the missionary or missionary team. Churches are established by bringing people to Jesus, and that process must be encouraged as a part of the activity of every member of the new church. When this focus has been lost, the local church must be reminded of the importance of evangelism.

Edification. The establishment phase also includes the development of a servant-leader team that can direct the local church. This process is often short-circuited when someone is named as “the minister” or functions as such. The development of spiritually mature local servant-leaders occurs as a process of edification. The word simply means “building up.” Members need to develop spiritually. The local church needs families where spiritual goals guide relationships. Servant-leaders must be developed and equipped. This is a frequent focus on my visits to churches.

Equipping. Once a church is established with a small group of servant-leaders, the next need is **equipping**. Equipping involves every member. Every member must be equipped for participation in the ministry of the body. This is the responsibility of leaders, but leaders (especially new, inexperienced leaders) must be shown how to do this. Equipping often involves “how to.” The largest danger I see that well-meaning North Americans try to insert our “how to” into a culture where our “how to” is not the most efficient nor culturally consistent method. A part of the equipping phase involves a continuing focus on evangelism.

Education. Finally, churches must be **educated**. New Christians and new servant-leaders do not automatically know every detail of biblical teaching and doctrine. They must be taught. Here biblical seminars are essential.

What do the churches need once they are established? They need (1) encouragement to keep growing, (2) more understanding of the Bible, (3) to develop Christian attitudes of peace, unity and love, (4) to develop spiritually, relationally, (5) to develop biblical leaders, and (6) to develop into missionary churches. They need to continue to evangelize. They need edification that will develop spiritually healthy Christians, families, and leaders at the local level. They need training that can equip all potential leaders, including new Christians, in the local church. They need education.

The missionary and ministry training efforts of our institutes and other programs are helpful, but those seldom touch the members of local churches. My work in regional seminars that attract the most spiritually mature, and my work in local churches where I follow the sequence above is developing a network of churches where team-ministry is the model and the churches are growing with a minimum of external resources and support.