

Evangelism, Baptisms, and Church Planting Continue Despite the Pandemic

By Bob Young

The news headline was eye-catching: “Southern Baptist Missionaries See Baptisms and Converts Surge With COVID-19” (*Christianity Today*, February 2022). Many of us, especially in the U.S., experienced something quite different – lower attendance, stagnant evangelism, limited growth.

How is it possible that, at least in some places, church growth has occurred over the past two years? David Garrison, former missionary, explains that the increase has come through church planting. Worldwide, church planting is a major factor in increasing baptisms and church growth.

Garrison’s observation matches my own observations and experiences. In many places in Latin America, growth has continued during the past two years through church planting—new groups of believers are being established and nurtured. Smaller groups that had all but disappeared are being revitalized. Many of the new churches are small, but gospel footholds are expanding and the gospel more readily echoes forth. Church planting often strengthens existing churches in a region. In the network of churches with whom Latin American Leadership Development partners, national workers plant and revitalize churches and God gives the increase – Uruguay, Chile, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Guatemala, Dominican Republic, and more. What God is doing is marvelous—missionary churches planting missionary churches in their own cities, regions, and countries.

What would happen in the U.S. if churches transitioned to focused disciple-making models and increased efforts to plant new churches? In the churches seeking to plant new churches, other ministries and priorities would often need to be cast aside and excluded in favor of evangelism and discipling. In the churches planted, the leaders and members would evangelize more and reach new people with the gospel. New churches increase involvement and grow faster than older churches. In Jesus’ ministry, he kept expanding, preaching in nearby villages, traveling to new regions.

The work of Latin American Leadership Development focuses on both – church planting and strengthening existing churches. Anticipating a frequent objection, I admit that planting churches is not a command of Jesus. In Jesus’ final words, the Great Commission, he instructed his followers to go and make disciples. However, a quick overview of the book of Acts shows that when the early disciples went forth and obeyed the command to make disciples, churches sprang up. It is true that new disciples may become part of an existing church, but when we think of the mission field, disciple-making is essential to establishing new churches.

It has been said that when we make disciples we get a church. The reverse is not true. When our focus is on “making” a church, we don’t always get disciples. Making disciples means the establishment of a fellowship of Christ-followers who exist in relationship with one another to accomplish God’s purpose.

Often we tend to plant the framework. It looks right from the outside, but it never grows and functions and prospers and multiplies. A church may have worship services, classes, and ministries, even grow by attraction, and yet fail in long-term growth and maturity. A church may create events hoping that discipleship will occur. God’s plan is to create disciples so that genuine church will occur.

When people ask me where and how the churches in Latin America are growing, I nearly always point to churches with missionary hearts for disciple-making, increasing the harvest, and putting God’s people to work for the expansion of the kingdom. New churches are a natural result. If you want to see a historical example of the process, read again Luke’s description of missionary expansion and church planting in the Book of Acts!