

Philosophy of Missions: From Resident Training to Extension Evangelism

By Carlos Ulate

[reprinted from: <http://carlosulatecostarica.blogspot.com/p/our-phylosophy-of-missions.html>]

Most churches within the fellowship of churches of Christ in Latin America have not been successful in the development of elders and deacons, and much less in the hiring of a preacher to work fulltime with total support from the local church.

In my opinion, this is the result of using a missionary approach that should be reconsidered. The first missionaries came to Costa Rica almost fifty years ago, and to date, not a single church has elders, and I only know of one that supports its own preacher on a full time basis (Hatillo church of Christ in San José).

In Costa Rica, after the missionaries left at the end of the 1980's, most churches went under the leadership of locals with support from churches from the States. Many more churches were started, there are almost 50 of them now, but all of them lack the biblical pattern for leadership.

What have we done wrong? I think I learned the lesson in Honduras, where I was a missionary for six years. When I first arrived to Catacamas, Olancho, in 1988, I became the director of the preacher school called Escuela Biblica Honduras. This school was totally under support from the States. It was a two-year program and, when I arrived, there were close to twenty graduates all over Honduras who had already started churches with full time support from the States. They were receiving around 300 dollars each, some more, some less, depending on the US church or the US individual they were getting support from. Some were very able and attracted not only support for themselves, but also funds for the buildings and many other needs.

I was expected to teach and graduate a new group of preachers. After the first two years I was able to get 7 men through the program, for whom my US coworkers had to go fundraising in the States for more support, so that seven new churches could be started, because the support they had as students had to continue for the new students we hoped to recruit for the new generation. Every two years we would have to go through this process. Let's give this method of mission work the name of Resident Training.

When my sponsors and I began to question what we were doing, we came to the conclusion that we were doing something wrong. It didn't make sense to us that, for a new church to be started, there would have to be a graduate in place, and new support would have to be sought for him in the States. There was also this frame of mind in our graduates: if they started new churches in nearby villages, they felt there was no way the new church could go on its own unless there was more US involvement — more money for fulltime workers, for buildings, for benches, etc.

The reason why it didn't make sense to us was this: almost all the churches were incapable of developing its own leadership, starting new churches, supporting their own preacher. In other words they didn't meet the qualifications of indigenous churches, churches that are self-

governing, self-propagating, and self-supporting (as specialists in missions call them). Let's give this method of mission work the name of Leadership Training Evangelism (LTE, a term coined by Dr. Ed Matthews, ACU).

My coworkers in the States were very kind to send me Dr. Ed Matthews to spend a week with me in Catacamas to analyze this situation. He was very instrumental in helping us to make a transition from Resident Training to LTE. After my second year of work there, we immediately closed the Resident Training program and started to use some of the graduates, still supported by our program, to do extension work. They would go to a village every weekend to hold the Sunday morning service, and they would try to train the locals to help them become the local workers with self-support. During the week, I would spend time with them helping them with further training in Catacamas. I was able to do this for the next couple of years, and soon had to come back to my home country. The work went on with the Escuela Biblica people helping the graduates, however, I am afraid that the results of what happened after that have gone unrecorded.

According to the Resident Training method of mission work, there would not be any natural sustainable long-term growth. Any growth at all would have to be artificial; in other words, the people in the States would have to keep injecting an ever-increasing amount of funds for any growth to be accomplished. When I talk about growth I mean more villages reached, more churches planted.

Regarding local growth some preachers would be very successful converting great numbers of people, but soon this people would find themselves with a US supported preacher controlling everything and little responsibility given to the locals so that they could develop leadership. The development of local leadership would be stifled from the very beginning by the precedent set by the US supported preacher. This is what I call the wrong precedent.

The problem with the wrong precedent at a very critical time, which is the starting of the church is this: When there is significant involvement of U.S. money in the process, for example a building, this sets a precedent, which is very difficult to overcome, the locals will inevitably continue to expect more stuff to come from brethren in the States, in other words, they become dependent.

Another example of the wrong precedent is the role of the US supported preacher. He is perceived and perceives himself as the local preacher. He is expected to function as the "pulpit minister", and in the absence of elders, he has to do elder's work; in the absence of deacons, he has to do deacon's work. In some cases, he and his family end up controlling most of the church's work. The locals depend totally on him for everything. He gets frustrated and blames the locals for not assuming responsibilities. Now, it is important to note that he and his sponsors in the States are totally well meaning throughout the whole process.

There is nothing wrong with him receiving support from the US, there is nothing wrong with him having to function as the local preacher for the first few months or even years. What could

be wrong is the missionary approach. Maybe our Bible schools in the US and in Latin America are not preparing them well regarding missionary strategies.

There is a different approach, a sound strategy that could be used. The US supported preacher or evangelist, should look at the apostle Paul, and learn from him, what he did. There are of course enormous differences between his context and ours, but in the main, he was successful because from the very beginning he set the right precedent, he didn't make the locals dependent on him.

This is what the apostle Paul would do if he lived in our time: He would go into a village or town, and he would not worry from the very beginning about the church owning its facilities. He would understand from the very beginning that since there is no church yet, it doesn't make sense to have a building yet, so he would use the facilities that are already in place: the homes of the families that open their doors to the gospel.

Buildings are important to have a respectable image and to give the church an identity to attract people, however, at this stage this should not be important. He must have patience; if he wants sustainable growth and an indigenous church to be the outcome, he must understand what is really important at this time: the first fruits. The first family or families that open the door can perfectly meet in one location of their own. The apostle Paul would want to concentrate on them. He would want to convert them and then train them. There would be of course others who would be converted later and would be considered first fruits too.

The first fruits are important; because in the absence of elders they are the natural leaders (1 Corinthians 16.15, 16) the rest of the converts should subject themselves to. If the evangelist does this well, he would not be the only one people would subject themselves to, he would be a first fruit too. It would be easier for him to leave and start new works.

At this stage the church is small and doesn't own its own building, and this should not be an issue yet. When the building becomes an issue, the evangelist would not have to be the only one to worry about it; at this time there would be others to worry with him. Or, he could perfectly tell them that he wishes to move on and start new works, and let them as locals worry about the building. At this time he would have done a good job training them to be preachers and teachers. All his energies would have been concentrated on developing them as people and not on developing and controlling structures such as buildings and organizations. He would have done a good job at training them in doing personal evangelism, which is the best method to save souls. He would have taught many other skills like holding business meetings and making decisions, etc.

Planting new churches would be easier for him, because there would be families in the initial congregation who would live in the places where he wishes to start the process all over again. He would convince the brethren in the first congregation to let these families go. Some of the brethren from the initial congregation would want to accompany the evangelist to learn from him. Eventually, the evangelist could come back as a coach to help the first congregation in the

process of appointing elders and hiring their own preacher.

This approach is natural. It does not require raising funds forever in the States for new preachers or for church buildings. It is totally indigenous, in other words, the churches are planted in such a way that they soon become self-sufficient in three important areas: organization, finances and evangelization (they will be self-governing, self-sufficient, and self-propagating). The churches would be taught from the very beginning to be responsible for such endeavors. There will not be precedent of dependence on US funds, which is what has kept many churches in Latin America from becoming self-sufficient.

I am presently partnering with the Bammel church of Christ in Houston, Texas, to help with the planting of the church in Heredia, Costa Rica. It is my prayer that this work will be the platform to help with the planting of new churches around Heredia, as it was already proved with the Hatillo church.