

Do We Need a Different Missions Philosophy for Latin America?

By Bob Young

My friend, Carlos Ulate, has written an interesting article on his blog about the best way to help Latin American churches of Christ move toward a biblical model of self-sustaining, self-governing, self-propagating congregations.¹ Carlos formerly served as director of Escuela Biblica Honduras and also has experience in church planting in Costa Rica. He believes that the current model of church planting and church development is not working to establish healthy reduplicating churches. He contends that “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.” His statement suggests the need for a better model of church planting and development—one that can help local churches toward an autonomy characterized by self-governance and self-sustenance, and also toward the ultimate goal of additional church plants accomplished within the local church and cultural context.

The flaws in the current system are deep-seated and will not be easily changed. Very few Latin America churches are self-sustaining, independent of external dollars. Few Latin American churches are self-governing with a biblical leadership system functioning with elders and deacons. Some of this may be the result of a cultural expectation of church and ministry based on a long history of Catholicism and the priesthood. Ulate believes that the problem is a product of the missionary system that has been used. He contends that the problem has roots in the philosophy reflected in our missionary and ministry training.

The situation in many Latin American churches is something like this. Churches are established through the combined efforts of US missionaries, US churches, and perhaps some local Christians. A preacher is located and hired with US dollars so that many (most) of the churches are under the leadership of a native minister who is supported from a church or churches in the US. Many churches begin with a recent graduate of a ministry training program. The newly-minted minister (or perhaps a team of ministers) is put in place and supported with US dollars.² Those dollars are often given directly to the minister, bypassing and discouraging the development of autonomous local leadership. The US supported preacher controls everything and gives little responsibility to the local leaders so they can develop additional leadership skills. The development of local leadership is stifled from the very beginning by the precedent set by the US supported preacher. Further, because of language differences, often the minister, with at least some English skills, communicates with the “overseeing church” but the

¹ You can access his article at <http://carlosulatecostarica.blogspot.com/p/our-phylosophy-of-missions.html>. I have also reproduced the article on my website: www.bobyoungresources/missions/ulate_philosophy-of-missions.pdf.

² The use of a U.S. missionary or missionary team to plant the church simply puts one more step in the process, for eventually the U.S. presence is withdrawn, after which the local church is left on its own, most often under the leadership of a single minister who continues to receive U.S. dollars. Two additional variations are common. One, the U.S. missionary stays and assumes a pastoral role which discourages development of a local lay leadership with elders and deacons. Two, the U.S. missionary or team develops church leaders to oversee the church and to guide the ministry, including providing guidance to the minister.

local church leaders do not. Representatives of the US church seldom if ever visit the mission point. Those who are providing dollars from the US expect the church to grow. Yet the minister has little motivation to help the church become self-sustaining and responsible for itself because that will put him under the direct supervision of locals whereas he is currently “overseen” only indirectly by a groups of elders who are thousands of miles away. Giving the control to the local church as the recipient of US funds with the responsibility of paying its own minister may result in a decrease in the minister’s pay, since the US churches tend to pay more than the normal wage, and the local church will likely expect the minister to receive a more typical wage.³

Ulate concludes that it does not make sense from a church planting and church growth point of view to start a congregation by putting a minister in place with US dollars and by immediately building a church building (also with US dollars). Yet, this is the mindset that is often present in graduates of ministry training programs. Graduates expect that some US church or individual will come along and provide the funds for personal support and also for a working fund and other needs in a local church. The result is more and more US involvement because there are always new needs—song books, materials, benches, etc. This mindset in the ministers has permeated local churches so that a majority of the churches established are not independent churches but dependent—dependent on someone else paying the costs of ministry and various needs. There is no plan to develop local leaders and local resources consistent with the contributions provided by the membership. The churches are not encouraged to develop their own leadership, to support their own preacher, or to start additional churches. They fail to become indigenous churches that are self-governing, self-sustaining, and self-duplicating.

The conclusion drawn from this description is not that there is never a need or place for US support, but that there must be a plan for moving a local church toward self-sustaining capability rather than injecting ever-increasing U.S. funds to generate growth. Growth that is forever dependent on US funds is artificial growth. Further, such “growth” is usually limited to one local congregation rather than seeing more communities reached and more churches planted.

Ulate contrasts the present situation with the approach of the apostle Paul as described in Acts. Paul went to towns or cities and taught enough people to begin a church. The church met in homes in this early stage. Paul was not concerned with a church building. He established strong relationships with the first members, but he did not make them dependent on him. This allowed him to move on to new fields, often very quickly and under duress. Paul’s goal was sustainable growth that would be continued by his first converts after he left a city, resulting in an indigenous church. He focused on producing and training the first fruits, knowing that the

³ Just as a rule of thumb sometimes used in the US is that ministers should make about what the average member of the congregation makes, such is also an expectation in Latin America. In the US some churches use the salary scale of the teachers in the local school district. If such a process were used in Latin America, the wages of many ministers would be severely cut. US churches tend to look at the low cost of the native minister in comparison with a US missionary, and inadvertently contribute to the ongoing inequity between ministers’ income and the standard of living of the average church member.

first converts would be the future leaders who would in turn train others. Until elders could be chosen, these first converts were the natural leaders of the local church.

The churches at the early stages did not have buildings. The building comes naturally when there is a need for a building. There is no need to build an “artificial” building so that 15 members can rattle around in a building for 100 or 150. The need at this point is for effective training for more leaders, teachers, and preachers. The need is training in Christian living.

Paul’s approach was natural. It did not require fund-raising for more preachers and more buildings so that new local churches could be established. Paul built indigenous works that became self-sufficient almost immediately. The churches accepted the responsibility for themselves.

The danger is this: when a precedent is set for dependence on US funds, the local church nearly always struggles to become self-sufficient. It is comfortable to be dependent. It is not demanding. Many churches in Latin America have failed to become self-sufficient. One cannot deny that Latin American Christians generally have a lower level of income and a lower standard of living, but there has developed a failure to give sacrificially to the cause of Christ so that independent churches can flourish with their own leaders, their own preachers and ministers paid from church funds, and their own efforts to spread the gospel in their communities and to other places through church planting.