

Partnering with Latin American Churches to Complete the Great Commission

By Steve Nolen

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My wife, children, and I served 8 years as missionaries in Latin America. While there, we were able to witness first-hand the incredible work God was doing calling many Latin American believers to become cross-cultural missionaries. Then, in 1996, God clearly called us to South Asia where we served as Strategy Coordinator in a large megacity. While there, our sending agency allowed us to work with Latin American missionaries in that country, as well as to travel several times to do mobilization in Latin America.

Through that process we learned some key issues being addressed by the Latin American leaders, and in 2003 God once again called us to return to the United States to form Conexión 10/40, a ministry that seeks to work alongside the Latin American church in a servant role to meet needs defined by the Latin American leaders.

Currently, the needs we are addressing are 1) to facilitate strategic partnerships between U.S. churches and Latin American churches sending missionaries to the 10/40 Window; 2) to develop a training center to train trainers in Second Language Acquisition, Church Planting Movements, and Strategy Development; and Missionary Pastoral Care and Spiritual Life. Through those experiences, as well as from the Strategic Alliance Summits we have held the past two years, we have learned some valuable information about partnering with Latin American sending churches. In dealing with this topic, the first obvious question is: **Why should a church in the United States partner with a Latin American church to send a Latin American missionary to the 10/40 Window as well as continue to send North American missionaries?**

First, there are pragmatic reasons to partner with a Latin American church. It is commonly recognized that many Latin Americans and others coming from a non-Western background may have certain advantages. Various people have identified several of these advantages. They can be categorized as political, economic, cultural, and spiritual.

The political image of the United States and Europe and of the anti-colonial and imperialistic mindsets of the Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist world is perhaps the major

advantage of missionaries from Latin America. This is a statement affirmed by almost all Latin American missionaries and mission leaders addressed on this issue over the past three years, including in a personal conversation with the author, Federico Bertuzzi, President of Pueblos Musulmanes Internacional, the oldest and largest Spanish-speaking Latin American missions agency.

This sentiment has been much verbalized by President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela. In April people were shocked that he gave U.S. President Barak Obama a book by Eduardo Galeano at a Summit entitled "Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent." While most are not going to be as verbal and openly indignant as Chavez is, the fact is that in some places of the world there is prejudice toward North Americans on that level. Latin Americans do not have to confront this underlying sentiment.

Dr. Ergun Caner, a Muslim-background believer and author of the study *Collision of Worldviews*, stated in the introductory video that as a Muslim teenager coming to the United States as a missionary with his family the only thing he knew was that North Americans hated him.¹

Meic Pearse provided a strikingly honest observation on this subject when he wrote:

The truth is that Westerners are perceived by non-Westerners...as rich, technologically sophisticated, economically and politically dominant, morally contemptible barbarians....

For the moment, we simply note that they do, in point of fact, generate resentment – a resentment that can, as with the man driving the truck-bomb, amount to hatred.²

This is a world-wide reality for North American missionaries that gives Latin American missionaries more of an advantage in reaching some people groups. In fact, there are Latin Americans who also share the view stated by Pearse.

As stated, in some places this emotion surfaces in hatred and at other times it may only be revealed in passive prejudice. But it is a reality for North American (particularly United States) and European missionaries. It is a barrier that Latin American missionaries do not have to confront. In fact, due to the similar conquering of Latin America by the Spanish and Portuguese, there is what the author refers to as “third-world camaraderie.” The use of the term “third-world” is not intended to be negative. It is used to distinguish what is known as the “imperialist world” from those who were colonized.

By economic advantage, what is referred to is not the economic resources of Latin Americans, but rather their economic identification with those to whom they minister. Jenkins stated, “For the foreseeable future, members of the Southern dominated church are likely to be among the poorer people on the planet, in marked contrast to the older Western-dominated world.”³

¹ Ergun Mehmet Caner, *When Worldviews Collide* (Nashville: Lifeway Press, 2005), Introduction to Course video.

² Meic Pearse,

Urbanization and the urban poor play a role in this advantage as well. Namely, a Latin American from Mexico City or Buenos Aires is not going to be overwhelmed by the poverty in New Delhi, India or Dhaka, Bangladesh. As one Latin American commented to the author years ago, “Calcutta reminds me of Mexico City.”⁴

Laure Heikes also listed “standard of living” as an advantage of Latin American missionaries. She stated, “The missionary movement in Latin America is growing among a people economically suited for missionary work....The standard of living in Latin American countries is also closer to that of many unreached people in the 10/40 Window.”⁵

She observed that an additional advantage of Latin Americans was that many were familiar with migrant work and noted that the Latin migration to the United States is only a part of the total migration in Latin America whereby family members are separated due to the economic need.⁶

While these observations may be true, extremes should be avoided. For example, the statement, “Latin American missionaries are cheaper to send than North American missionaries” is not a valid reason and may very well be offensive. It shows a lack of biblical understanding in missiology.

Dwight Smith referred to this as “lackeyism.”⁷ Lackeyism says, “You can support a national missionary for one hundred dollars a month, or a North American for \$3,000 a month.” Likewise, “You can support a Latin American missionary for \$1,000 a month, or a North American for \$3,000 a month.” The inference in either case it is cheaper. But if we are consistent and think like that, why send *any* Latin American or North American missionaries?

While it is known and accepted that biblically solid, well-equipped, Spirit-filled, national believers are the key to reaching any people group, that does not mean that God has ceased to call cross-cultural missionaries to train and equip national believers in reproducing churches among their group. Cost is not the primary issue. The Great Commission is the primary issue. Likewise, it is illogical to say that our motive for partnering to send Latin American believers is because it is cheaper.

Third, Latin Americans in some areas are more culturally similar to those in the Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist worlds. Such statements refer to the personality of cultures and not to individual personalities as people are different. The offense (or lack of offense) comes because everyone thinks that everyone else thinks like them.⁸ The advantage of Latin Americans is that they *do* think like many of those living in the 10/40 Window.

One area of similarity is the concept of time. Whereas the Westerner will be more task-oriented and sequential in their thought pattern, the non-Westerner tends to be more people and event oriented. Lanier stated, “being structured, planned, and time conscious

³ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 7.

⁴ This occurred in a conversation of author with Esperanza Rodriguez (not real name), 2001, in Calcutta, India.

⁵ Laura Heikes, “Una Perspectiva Diferente: Latin Americans and the Global Missions Movement.” *Missiology: An International Review*, 31:1 (January, 2003), 72-3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁷ Dwight P. Smith, “Slaying the Dragons of Self Interest: Making International Partnership Work,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (January 1992), 20.

⁸ Sarah A. Lanier, *From Foreign to Familiar* (Hagerstown, MD: McDougal Publishing, 2000), 27-28.

go hand in hand. Being spontaneous, unplanned and event oriented do, too.”⁹ The Western missionary can learn this, but for the Latin American missionary it is natural. Two other cultural areas mentioned by Lundy that are advantageous to Latin American missionaries are the degree of formality expected in different contexts and the manner of resolving conflicts.¹⁰

Heikes added to this list of cultural and worldview similarities the political climate of Latin America.¹¹ By this she referred to the fact that many people in Latin America can readily identify with political upheaval, turmoil, and even revolutions. Many have come from contexts where political and religious oppression are not new to them. Two additional advantages she mentioned were the Latin American history of being missionary receptors and that they are not yet known for their missionary work.¹²

Two observations should be noted regarding these last two advantages. One, it will also be seen later as a need that the Latin American worker be able to contextualize methodologies. This is important in that just because Latin Americans have witnessed the mistakes of North American missionaries this does not insure that they will not make the same mistakes as it relates to Latin American culture. Two, in some places Latin Americans are becoming known for missionary work and receive the same scrutiny that North Americans receive due to the internet and ease of information flow it provides.

On a spiritual level, Jenkins noted that the “Southern Christians are far more conservative in terms of both beliefs and moral teaching” and that they “retain a very strong supernatural orientation.”¹³ Although Jenkins does not come from a conservative, evangelical background there is still validity to his statement, particularly concerning the “supernatural orientation.” This is because the Latin American spiritual worldview includes what Hiebert referred to as “the flaw of the excluded middle”¹⁴ As Pocock observed, “Although Bible-believing Christians knew that the middle area contained activity of angels or demons, they paid little attention to it.”¹⁵ Latin Americans, however, except for those trained in the Western world, do not exclude the middle. This allows them to connect with others who have this same worldview toward spiritual realities.

However, it should be recognized that the Latin American missionary has the same challenges as any other missionary in several areas. First, the religious barrier between any Christian and a Muslim or Hindu is the same regardless of the nationality of the Christian. Second, Latin American missionaries have the same challenges as any other missionary with regard to learning a second language, or understanding the culture of the host country or people group. Third, there is no respect of culture with spiritual warfare. Interpersonal conflict, temptation, and other issues related to spiritual growth are equal. Any missionary who does not maintain a consistent walk with God will not do well. Fourth, the same economic background that gives the Latin American an advantage

⁹ J. David Lundy, “Moving Beyond Internationalizing the Missions Force,” *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 16:3 (Fall 1999): 148.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 151-152.

¹¹ Heikes, “Una Perspectiva,” 75.

¹² *Ibid.*, 75-6.

¹³ Jenkins, *Next Christendom*. 7

¹⁴ Hiebert, “The Flaw of the Excluded Middle.” *Missiology: An International Review* 10 (January, 1982), 35-47.

¹⁵ Michael Pocock, *The Changing Face of World Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 197.

also places them at times in a disadvantage due to the lack of or inconsistent financial support.

Finally, there are times when being Latin American may actually work against the Latin American missionary. For example, in most countries it is much more difficult for the Latin American missionary to live near an embassy or consulate than a North American. In some countries, it is much easier to obtain tourist and business visas from the United States than from a Latin American country.

Therefore, while it is pragmatic for U.S. churches to partner with Latin American churches, one should not believe that Latin American missionaries do not have similar challenges that must be overcome to become effective missionaries. The aforementioned advantages do not signify that cross-cultural missions is easier for Latin Americans.

A second reason to partner with Latin American church to see the Great Commission fulfilled relates to an understanding of the history of missions. Andrew Walls stated, “It is a feature of the Christian faith that throughout its history it has spread through cross-cultural contact; indeed, its very survival has been dependent on such contact.”¹⁶ As the missions center in the New Testament book of Acts shifted from Jerusalem to Antioch in the first century, so the center of missions has continued to shift throughout history. This shifting has always been in accordance with the sovereign moving of God to fulfill His purpose for the nations.

Walls continued, “For Christian expansion has not been progressive, like Islamic expansion, spreading out from a central point and retaining, by and large, the allegiance of those it reaches. Christian expansion has been serial. Christian faith has fixed itself at different periods in different heartlands, waning in one as it has come to birth in another.”¹⁷

Walls then goes on to show how Christianity started out in Jerusalem where they did not change their religion; in 600 A.D. the Christian heartlands lay predominantly among Greek-speaking people in the eastern Mediterranean. By 800 A.D. they were under Muslim rule and large sections were becoming Muslim. But by then the Christian faith was taking hold among the northern and western barbarians. New Christian lands emerged.

He continued explaining that for several centuries Christian presence was concentrated (principally, not exclusively) in Europe.

Over a long period Christianity in Europe was receding; only after World War II did it become clear how far that recession had gone and how it was accelerating. At present it seems that Europe and North America are the only continents where Christian faith and commitment is statistically receding. Everywhere else it is expanding....In Latin America lies the largest single Christian culture group. The new Christian heartlands are in the south, in Africa, Latin America, parts of Asia, in the Pacific, and the European empires that looked so permanent in 1914, nay in 1940, have all disappeared. This vast shift in the Christian constituency, parallel to those that followed the fall of Jerusalem, the western progress of the Arabs, the fall of the western Roman Empire, could not have occurred without that previous

¹⁶ Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2004), 256.

¹⁷ Ibid.

cross-cultural diffusion of Christian faith centered [sic] in the missionary movement.¹⁸

What would have happened had the church at Jerusalem not acted upon what they saw God doing to further His Kingdom? Throughout the centuries of time the sovereign God continued to fulfill His plan of world redemption that will culminate in the scene encountered in Revelation 7:9:

After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

Rick Warren opened his best-selling book *The Purpose Driven Life* with four words: "It's not about you."¹⁹ Revelation 7:9 is not about an individual church, denomination, or country. It is about the Kingdom of God and people coming to know the Lord Jesus Christ as He is at work in the world. The independent North American "we can do it alone" worldview where every decision and every church are meticulously counted so the church can feel good about its mission work must give way to a Kingdom mentality that genuinely is more concerned and willing to do whatever it takes so that the 1.6 billion people who have never heard the gospel may not only hear it but understand it and respond in faith that leads to reproducing disciples.

If we are genuinely concerned with those who have never heard the gospel the church must move beyond a position of everyone must believe all the biblical doctrines exactly alike and realize that God's hand is evidently at work in Latin America, in Africa, and in Asia. Would the North American church not be wise to imitate the Jerusalem church by partnering to see more people hear the Gospel and come to Christ? Would it not be strategic for those churches already working in Latin America to include working with their Latin American partners so that they can send missionaries? The sovereign movement of God in the world forces us to develop a Kingdom mentality. Billions of people's spiritual lives depend on the church recognizing this truth.

But the most important reason why U.S. churches should partner with Latin American churches to see the Great Commission fulfilled is a biblical reason. The Great Commission was given to the entire Body of Christ. We have not only divided it by denominations and organizations but also by geo-political lines and nationalism.

Phill Butler stated, "I'm convinced of one thing: The brokenness of the church, the divisions that abound, and our consistent resistance to the God design of restored relationships and practical unity is our (the church's) truly great sin. It is the world's roadblock of all roadblocks to belief."²⁰

But these divisions are not just denominational. Our independent and individualistic U.S. worldview demands that it get done and it get done as fast as possible. Some churches do not want to partner with other churches in their city to impact their community. How much more difficult is it to grasp the vision to partner with other ethnic groups to accomplish the task?

¹⁸ Ibid., 257.

¹⁹ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 17.

²⁰ Phill Butler, *Well Connected: Releasing Power, Restoring Hope Through Kingdom Partnerships* (Colorado Springs: Authentic Publishing, 2005), 6.

Can the Great Commission and the fact that so many who have never been exposed to the gospel unite continents of believers and overcome the cultural, linguistic, and denominational walls that separate Christians? Not without humility. Guthrie quoted an observation of Brazilian Alex Araujo, one of the founders of COMIBAM:

Westerners need, most of all, to get used to the idea that they are not the only ones who can do the job well. While this change in understanding may initially feel deflating, we can find scriptural grounds for being delighted with being only one of God's many servants, and derive our motivations not from the relative importance of our part but from the absolute mandate from God to make disciples of all nations.²¹

While it is true that the Latin American church may learn from the successes and failures of more than one hundred years of missions experience in the U.S., this cannot and should not be done out of arrogance or superiority.

If the Body of Christ is understood correctly, it means that Latin American missionaries will be able to develop relationships and share the gospel with people that might be closed to someone from the United States. However, it also teaches that North American missionaries will be able to develop relationships and share the gospel with people that would not be open to Latin Americans. The same holds true for Chinese, Korean, African, etc. God will use His Body, all of it, to communicate the gospel to a world in need.

Not only is the concept of the Body of Christ a valid reason to partner, but also the partnerships seen in the life and ministry of Paul provide a viable example to us today. One issue that repeatedly has surfaced from North American missionaries working in Latin America is the need for the Latin American Missions Movement to be indigenous. Normally what is meant by that is that there should be very limited funding if any from the North for the endeavor. In short, the Latin Americans need to raise all of their own money. While the fear behind this attitude is that financial support from other countries will create dependency, it does not appear to be the Pauline model.

Paul collected and received cross-cultural offerings. He collected an offering from Macedonia and Achaia (Corinth) for the church at Jerusalem that was suffering economically (Romans 15:26). It is also known that Paul accepted aid personally from the Macedonians more than one time (Philippians 4:15-16) although he was not Macedonian. He did not tell the Macedonians not to send any more and that he was going to wait for his sending church at Antioch to send all that he needed. Instead, he told them that what they sent was "a sweet-smelling aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well pleasing to God (Philippians 4: 18)." Paul had created with the Philippian believers an effective partnership since the foundation of the church, as he did with other churches. Paul's church planting created inter-dependent partnerships. They needed Paul, but Paul also needed them.

The U.S. church needs to be careful not to develop an attitude of "Let's help the Latin American church. They need us." The better attitude is, "Let's work with the Latin American church. We need each other in the Great Commission to see God glorified among the nations!"

²¹ Alex Araujo, quoted in Stan Guthrie, "Looking Under the Hood of the Non-Western Missions Movement," in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, (January 1995), 95.

May God give us His heart and His motives for working with Latin American churches, as well as other churches from across the globe, to see the gospel extended among those who do not know Him. May we do it cooperatively in a spirit of humility and servant hood.

Therefore, our foundational philosophy at Conexión 10/40 is to serve the Latin American churches sending missionaries to the Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist world. God has led us to do that in two ways. First, by connecting the U.S. church with the Latin American church and the receiving team in the field when possible in partnerships that can be reproduced as models are developed. Conexión 10/40 will conduct the third Strategic Alliance Summit this October near Atlanta, Georgia. From the first two meetings there are currently nine partnerships in process. As successful models are developed these will be multiplied in the coming years. This year's event in October will have 18 Latin American missions leaders and pastors from 10 countries present to share various projects.

Second, by offering an alternative, niche training to train Latin Americans who will in turn train other Latin Americans in subjects that were defined by listening to the Latin American leaders and missionaries. It is not designed to replace the training already being done by Latin American agencies but to supplement their training in areas in which God has uniquely prepared us to contribute from 15 years of practical field experience.

Our vision is to train 500 Latin American missionary trainers in the next 10 years in second language acquisition, reproducible church planting in the 10/40 Window, and Pastoral Care of missionaries. Conexión 10/40 believes as God brings this to reality that He will continue to be glorified among the nations through Latin American churches and believers committed to the Great Commission.

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