

Qualifications for missionary service—a strong challenge

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

What does it take to be a successful missionary? “A good sense of humor and a bad sense of smell,” joked one veteran missionary in Ecuador in response to that question. Her observation was right on target as she highlighted the contrast between the joys and delights of missionary service and the frustrations and disappointments that missionaries experience trying to live in another culture.

Sharing the Gospel with people who don't care, whose eyes are on wealth or prestige, who easily succumb to the temptations of Satan is not always easy. Statistics show that fifty percent of all missionaries do not return to the field for a second term, often times because of culture shock and the realities of spiritual oppression.

On the other hand, missionary biographies abound telling the story of those who have spent a lifetime of service to the Lord in a far away land where a growing church is testimony to their faithfulness.

Take Laura and Manuel Vivanco. These relatively young missionaries with the Latin America Mission are planting churches in a lower income area an hour north of Mexico City. There, in the midst of witchcraft, spiritual oppression and difficult living conditions, a church is blossoming in a crowded squatter settlement sprawling up over a hill.

“I believe that the growth is the result of a large focus on prayer and also the fruit of many years of working with people and taking them by the hand,” Laura says. “Now the members are the ones bringing their neighbors and teachers.”

Manuel says that the church offers a concentrated 24-hour prayer period each week beginning Wednesday morning. “Each person goes to the church and prays for an hour,” he says.

Manuel and Laura say that prayer in depth is important for the growth of the church in light of the problems they face in the community. Chiconaultla is what is termed a popular community as opposed to a planned development where the infrastructure, such as streets and utilities, are already in place when people move in. “Here it is just the opposite,” Laura says. “The pavement is just arriving. A sewer system was put in three years ago, telephone lines have been popping up over the last year or two.”

“The socio-economic background makes our type of work a lot more difficult, a lot slower because the people have low education,” she says. “Poverty also makes for low self esteem. A poverty mentality says ‘I'm not worth anything, I can't go anywhere with my life, so don't even try anything with me.’” Laura laments that many parents tell their children repeatedly that they are ‘stupid,’ so the children grow up thinking that.

“When people become Christians it gives them a new hope,” she affirms.

The Vivancos say that they come into contact with spiritual opposition as they labor among the residents of Chiconaultla. “Our community is big on witchcraft,” Laura explains. “There are certain times when we have all kinds of encounters with people who are struggling with some effect of spiritism, either demon possession or oppression.”

The couple prays and works long hours to help people free themselves from such spiritual darkness. “I was thinking recently, we see so much of the Devil and the power he has over people. Why shouldn’t we see the power of Christ? So, we’ve been getting to know God’s power and see what he can do,” Laura says.

With faithful work, the church is growing and looking for new fields of service. Several members have been commissioned to help start two new churches in nearby towns.

An alliance with satanic practices is a common phenomenon throughout Latin America. Satanism and other occult groups are becoming a growing concern in Colombia. So much so, in fact, that local government authorities in Valledupar in northeast Colombia have begun an educational and orientation campaign for parents and students following an outbreak of satanic activities in the region.

Parents say that they are fearful their children will be kidnapped on their way home and local radio stations report that anonymous letters have been sent to some families threatening their children.

Government officials say that it is difficult for authorities to take action against the sects because the Colombian constitution guarantees freedom of religion.

The life style of those who do not know the Lord can be a challenge to those whose job is to proclaim the Gospel. “It is very typical for a couple to just move in together and never formalize their marriage,” says Rebekah Meyerend, an LAM missionary working in the Chalco district of Mexico City. “We have one family that has a difficult situation because the husband and wife are not legally married. The church will not let them join until they work out their marriage situation, but they still attend.” Others face the common cultural problem of husbands with multiple families.

“Drunkenness is another problem and the church needs to learn to deal with that,” Rebekah says. “We don’t have a lot of men in the church. It is a challenge for men to come to the Gospel and be saved.”

Witchcraft is a challenge to Rebekah. “There is still some black magic that goes on in the community,” she says. That practice is combined with idol worship and a mixture of Catholicism with ancient Indian practices.

Of particular concern is the apathy. “They know about God, they know about Christ, but it just doesn’t sink in. I have given many Bible studies over the years and have seen people pray to accept Christ. But they just don’t follow up and continue in their faith.”

In the face of the impression that satanic forces thwart the work of missionaries, one needs only to remember Laura’s comment that prayer and years of work have lead to a

rapid growth in their church, or to hear Rebekah as she says that her most successful work is with children. “Children are very open here,” she reports. “Because this is a poor community, children are not kept behind doors like they are in a middle-class community.” Rebekah teaches several Bible classes a week, sponsors clubs for children, holds tutoring sessions for students and is rejoicing that the Lord is blessing her work as the Presbyterian church she serves is expanding and recently had to purchase an additional building to house all of her projects.

The efforts of missionaries can go a long way to overcoming the influence of evil and eternally influencing the lives of people they serve.

“If students don’t finish high school, they go to work and the young girls end up getting married and having babies at age 14 or 15 says Assemblies of God missionary Donnie Daniels. “We want to help break that cycle and the only way to do that is through education.” Donnie is convinced that providing a high school education along with study of the Bible can make a difference in the lives of Mapuche Indians living in southern Chile. To do that, he supervised the construction of a school that opened this past March.

“We did a study not long ago and found that while there were 540 eligible young people of high school age, only twenty percent were actually enrolled in high school. So, we felt the need to help provide education for young people,” he says.

The members of the indigenous Mapuche Indian group populate a long narrow valley stretching from the resort town of Pucón, near Temuco, to the border with Argentina. Living at an altitude of around 3,000 feet, the Mapuche are descendents of the only tribe in South America not conquered by the Spanish. But now, centuries later, this once proud tribe is fighting social isolation, poverty, employment problems and the isolation brought on not only by their remote territory, but also by their separation from Chile’s dynamic society and economy.

“The Mapuches have little opportunity to attend high school,” Donnie explains. “There are five elementary schools in the area, but the only high school is some distance. In order to attend, most of them have to live away from home. It is costly—more money than they can afford.” In addition, Donnie finds that many young people who go away to attend high school never return to their community to contribute and work among their own people.

In their work, the Daniels see many miracles. “We were traveling with a work group (from the United States) and stopped by the house of the man who is a witch doctor,” Donnie reflects. “It happened to be on their sacred grounds where they have sacrifices every year. His daughter had visited one of the all-night prayer meetings and really liked what she heard and what she felt. The group and the witch doctor talked, and finally the doctor, his wife and daughter accepted Christ. He offered a piece of land at that site where they have their sacrifices. That’s just like the power of God, to move in and just move the enemy out!”

Missionaries universally witness the power of prayer by those back home. “In our case, I think that there is a world-wide awareness of Colombia these days because of our multiple problems of drugs and violence,” reports Jean Spahr, an LAM missionary who is an administrator at the Colegio Lationoamericano in Cartagena, Colombia. “This has resulted in more people praying than ever before.

Indeed, missionaries report that while they cannot continue on the field without financial support, they consider prayer support to be more important. In fact, they readily list prayer requests: “The U.S. church can pray that more missionaries would be sent to the cities of Latin America to work with the urban poor and downcast,” requests a former Miami resident who is a missionary in Bogotá. He asked that his name not be used for security reasons. “Also pray that national workers would spring up from the national church and take a larger part in their home countries,” he asks.

With Latin America on Miami’s doorstep, or with Miami on Latin America’s doorstep—depending on your viewpoint—some believe that this city can play a crucial role in Latin American missions. While believing that many in the North American church are indifferent to what is happening to the south, Pastor Guillermo Maldona of Miami’s Iglesia el Rey Jesus says that Latin Americans need training and equipping and he believes that Miami churches can help out with that. “I believe that God is raising up Latins,” he proclaims. “I believe that we (Latins) are going to impact, not only this nation, but other countries such as those in the 10/40 Window and in Africa. I believe that in these last times, God is going to use three types of people: the Latins, the Chinese and the African-Americans. This is the time for Latins.”

Denise Reid, a Miami-based missionary from New Zealand who is working in many countries around the world including some in Latin America, agrees. “I see great potential for the Latin population of Miami to promote and assist the growing church in these nations. There is definitely a greater sympathy for the Latin cause in Miami.”

But, Denise says, the impact could flow the other way. “I know that there is much aid in money and goods that is sent to Latin America from Miami, but I sense in my heart that there could be so much more. From my experience, I think that where spiritual revival has broken out, as in areas of Cuba, these people are more likely to influence Miami than the other way around!”

In contrast, some growing churches in this community are reaching out to Latin America and planting churches unilaterally without the benefit of a denomination or mission society. La Iglesia Jesucristo el Todopoderoso is one example. This twelve-year-old church of 3,500 members has planted a half-dozen or more churches around south Florida and now is expanding into Nicaragua.

The church’s pastor, Oscar Aguero points to charismatic leaders such as Charles Wesley who began the Methodist movement as an example of today’s leaders who have begun independent churches throughout Latin America which are now growing into today’s new denominations.

“Inevitably all depends on the vision and the faith of the leader to say that Jesus is the conqueror, and all depends on the faith that we have in Him,” Aguero explains. He says that his church and staff have provided leadership, training and resources to the Nicaraguan church. “If they (the Nicaraguan leaders) are able to imitate the faith of the leaders, and all imitate the faith of Jesus Christ, we cannot fail,” he says.

Ana Rodríguez contributed to this story.

Qualifications for missionary service—a strong challenge, *Trumpeter magazine*, June 8, 2000