

Raising support difficult for Latin American missionaries

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

The number of Latin American missionaries is mushrooming. Luis Bush of the AD 2000 and Beyond movement says that there are now around 4,000 Latin American missionaries throughout the world.

But, financial resources to support these committed church workers can become a major stumbling block.

“The missionary movement among the churches in Latin America is very alive,” says Craig Rice, a missionary with Latin America Mission (LAM) in Costa Rica. However, “it is tragic that very gifted people cannot serve as missionaries simply because they do not have the financial support to do so.”

Among Latin Americans who serve with the Latin America Mission, many report that contributions to their support are not adequate to cover their salary needs. “We are receiving only about 50% of our salary from mission support,” says Alvin Góngora from Colombia. To make up the difference, Alvin does translation work for publishing houses and his wife teaches courses at a university.

Latin Americans who work through mission boards such as LAM find themselves caught between two economic systems and differing methods of supporting full-time Christian workers.

“Sufficient resources (in Latin American churches) are a great problem for most churches,” says Alan Mullins, a North American LAM missionary married to a Brazilian and working in Brazil.

For others, it is an issue of education and motivation. “The question (for some) is not whether they have the resources, but whether they are willing to contribute to the advance of the kingdom,” Góngora says.

“I do not believe money is the problem,” says William H. Cuke, pastor of the Abundant Life Assembly in Barbados. “It is the people’s attitude to missions that needs to be corrected. Cuke’s independent church gives over \$8,000 a month to missionary causes. “Ten years ago we were very much still in a receiving mode mentality, but this has changed,” Cuke says.

LAM missionary Ralph Tone reports that an Argentine family from La Plata was recently sent to Gabon in Africa. “They are being supported by the churches of the city,” he says.

“If a Latin American church decides to send out a missionary, they have the responsibility to provide support,” says Eugenio Orellana, a Chilean working with LAM in a Miami-based literature ministry. “But, if an organization invites a Latin American to work with it as a missionary, then the organization has a responsibility to work with the missionary in raising support.

Orellana says that when he first served in Costa Rica (in the early 70’s), the mission made contacts and set up an itinerary for him to visit several churches in the United States. “It would be irresponsible to invite a Latin American to be a missionary if a mission was not prepared to help with support,” he said.

Mullins supports the idea of a shared partnership between the Latin American missionary and the mission agency. “If a mission is willing to present the Latin to the churches that will be of great help to the person who will not be going into the churches as an unknown.”

This issue is complicated and controversial says LAM’s president, Dr. David Befus. There is the issue of how missionary candidates from Latin America can raise sufficient support to serve with an international mission such as LAM. One common problem, he says, is that many local currencies are unstable (as evidenced by the recent severe devaluation of currencies in countries such as Brazil and Ecuador), often forcing missionaries to return home prematurely.

Missionary Jack Voelkel who teaches at the Biblical Seminary of Colombia in Medellin, suggests that Latin missionaries be encouraged to seek local support before they turn to outside sources. “To say that it is difficult (to raise support from Latin American churches) is not a sufficient argument,” he says. “Most of these folks have close friends who are pastors of some of the large, middle class congregations.” Noting that some must look abroad for help, Voelkel says that a healthy compromise would be to strike a balance between home country resources and those from North America. Such a sharing “also gives the individual a breadth of contacts and experience,” he says. But, he cautions, such missionaries should be willing to learn English in order to “maintain adequate contact with their supporting churches. We cannot expect people to either pray intelligently for or continue to give to people with whom they cannot communicate.”

Those with experience find a mixed reception among North American churches. “Financial support reinforces relationships. It’s important for a Latin American missionary to establish relationships within a context wider than the Latin American milieu,” says Góngora. “Being supported by churches and individuals from the North might help the Latin American missionary to grow in maturity and humility. At the same time it might contribute to bring healing to the North/South unequal relationship.”

Some North American churches are interested in supporting Latins, while others are hesitant. “The propaganda of the 10-40 Window of missions has led many to believe that Latin America has been evangelized,” Mullins says. (The 10-40 Window is that area of Asia and Africa between the 10th parallel North and 40th parallel South in which the percentage of Evangelical Christians is very low.)

With the Evangelical church growing rapidly among Hispanic North Americans, some Latin missionaries are hoping for help from that sector. “We are in contact with some Hispanic Churches and are waiting for a response,” says Ramón Carmona of Colombia. Others doubt that such support will be available. “Among the Spanish-speaking churches in Miami there is little mission’s consciousness and tithing is not taught,” says Victor Rodriguez, a LAM missionary from Colombia who does counseling in Florida. In addition, he says, most Latin Americans who relocate to the U.S. send large sums of money back to family members in their home country for eight to ten years, even longer. “They don’t have a lot of extra money for missions after they do that,” he says. In addition, most Hispanic pastors have to be involved in outside work because their churches do not have enough money to pay a full-time salary.

Dr. Befus wants mission agencies to look for creative ways to partner with Latin American churches and potential missionaries. “One model is that of the Tentmaker where a Latin American could start a business in a country where he is serving which would give him a financial base and a platform for doing ministry.” Befus says he knows of one Mexican missionary who has begun a very successful Mexican restaurant in Romania. That business supports his work and gives him an inroad into the local population.

Befus said that LAM is looking for organizations and churches that would offer grants to help Latin American missionaries start their own tentmaker businesses. And he said that he would like for the Mission to become a link or “strategic alliance” between those who have a vision and the resources and missionaries who need assistance, helping to set up a network whereby they can be helped.

Missionaries on the field agree that shared responsibility may help to address the lack of adequate support. “I see support raising as a team effort, which means that LAM and its missionaries are working together in ministry,” said Rice who trains Latin American missionaries in Costa Rica. “The Latin America Mission has a long history of sending missionaries to Latin America and a strong reputation.”

SIDEBAR:

Churches and individuals wishing to contribute to the mission in support of Latin American missionaries should send their tax-deductible contributions to:

Latin Missionary Support
Latin America Mission
Box 52-7900
Miami, FL 33152

For information on linking with a Latin American missionary family, write to LAM's Personnel Department at the above address or via e-mail at info@lam.org.

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