

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO CENTRAL AMERICA AND PROTESTANT CHURCH GROWTH IN THE REGION

THE LAND AND ITS PEOPLE

Central America, a narrow bridge of land that connects the continents of North and South America, covers an area of 205,721 square miles. The region includes the republics of Belize (formerly British Honduras), Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama. Bordered by Mexico in the north and Colombia in the south, Central America stretches more than 1,100 miles in length and varies from 30 to 300 miles in width. Larger than California but smaller than Texas, the region separates the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, which are joined by the Panama Canal. It is usually considered part of North America and is sometimes referred to as Middle or Mesoamerica.

Central America is composed of three dominant geographical areas: the Caribbean lowlands, notoriously warm and humid tropical forest or savannah; the Pacific coastal plains, somewhat drier with a long history of volcanic activity; and the central highlands, which form a mountainous barrier that stretches the length of the isthmus. Numerous mountain peaks rise to more than 10,000 feet and tower above the tropical rainforest and coastal lowlands. The Caribbean coast often receives 100-250 inches of rain between May and November, whereas there is only about 50 inches of precipitation on the Pacific plain, which has a longer dry season. Traditionally, the bulk of the population lives in the central highlands between 3,000 and 8,000 feet, and the coastal lowlands have remained sparsely settled and underdeveloped.

The people of Central America are predominantly of Indian, Spanish or mixed Indian and Spanish ancestry (called mestizos), although a few countries have a significant negro population: Belize (30%), Panama (14%), Honduras (8%), Nicaragua (4%) and Costa Rica (2%). The Indian population is large in Guatemala (44%), whereas Belize, El Salvador and Honduras are about 20% Indian, Nicaragua 9%, Panama 5% and Costa Rica .7%. Other minority groups include Chinese, Lebanese, East Indians and Jews (1980 data).

Spanish is the official language in every country except Belize, where English is predominant. English is still widely used among the black or creole population along the Caribbean coast of Central America, as well as among the growing population of North Americans (citizens of the USA and Canada) who reside in the major cities or beach towns, especially in Costa Rica and Guatemala. Small groups of Europeans have migrated to the region from Great Britain, France, Holland, Germany and Italy.

Most of the major cities of the region developed at the higher elevations in the central highlands, where the population enjoys milder temperatures. However, there are some important commercial and population centers at or near sea level: Panama City, Colon and David in Panama; Belize City; Managua, Leon and Granada in Nicaragua; Puntarenas and Limon in Costa Rica; and San Pedro Sula in Honduras. Today, only a handful of cities in the region have a population of more than 100,000. The largest is Guatemala City (an estimated 1.4 million in 1980) followed by San Salvador (858,000), Panama City (794,000), Managua (662,000 according to projections, but recent reports indicate more than one-million), San Jose (585,000), Tegucigalpa (406,000) and San Pedro Sula in Honduras (238,900), and Santa Ana in El Salvador (131,300).

AN OVERVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY PROBLEMS

Central America's population is growing faster than almost any other region of the world. The population nearly doubled between 1900 and 1950, and it grew from 8.9 million in 1950 to 22.2 million in 1980 (an increase of 150% in 30 years). By 2000, the population of Central America is expected to reach 39 million. In the light of this tremendous demographic increase, an important question that must be faced is how to effectively integrate such a great number of people into the national life during the next generation. The problem is enormous, since it involves anticipating the future needs of a growing population, while at the same time trying to solve the present deficiencies in the areas of employment, housing, health and education.

Today, the isthmus is one of the most underdeveloped areas of Latin America, noted for its poverty and not prosperity. Honduras, for example, is only outranked by Haiti as the poorest country in the Americas. Despite the great fertility of the soil and temperate climate, centuries of uncontrolled exploitation of tropical forests and generations of slash-and-burn agricultural methods have caused the erosion and destruction of millions of acres of arable land. The combination of torrential downpours in rainy season, followed by 4-5 months of drought in most countries of the region, has created serious problems of production, distribution and communication internally and between countries.

Central America has a long history of natural disasters that have worsened living conditions and brought misery and suffering to large segments of the population. Each year the rainy season brings storms that cause damage to crops, roads, bridges and buildings. Hurricanes sometimes create heavy flooding, such as occurred in 1975 on the northern coast of Honduras when Hurricane Fifi caused widespread death and destruction to a large area. Belize and the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico have often suffered the same fate. However, in the central highlands and along the Pacific coast, disaster often strikes due to earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. Since 1960, several eruptions have destroyed farmlands and villages in Guatemala and Costa Rica, but far greater destruction has been caused by deadly earthquakes that have taken tens of thousands of lives. The center of Managua was destroyed by a large earthquake in 1972, Guatemala City and other parts of Guatemala were flattened in 1976, and San Salvador was seriously damaged in 1986. Immediate assistance was provided to disaster victims by international relief agencies, other governments, and volunteer workers from many nations.

Civil unrest has reached crisis proportions in Central America due to deep-seated problems of poverty, oppression and disregard for human rights in most countries of the region, together with the effects of the current world economic recession. Because Central American societies are predominantly agricultural, a few wealthy families and transnational corporations have been able to acquire most of the best land upon which they produce major cash crops for export. Traditionally, the oligarchy has protected its economic interests by monopolizing politics and resorting to repressive military and police activities to control labor unrest.

The people's efforts to obtain their constitutional rights through voting, collective bargaining, boycotts, strikes, peaceful protests, etc., often have been met with violent repression by security forces. Repression, torture and political murder have been widespread in Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua from the mid-1960s. However, such repression does not always stop opposition movements as witnessed by the growing solidarity of political parties, labor unions, student organizations, religious and other pressure groups who have joined forces demanding that the government address their grievances. The rise of "popular organizations" during the 1970s that united diverse groups around a common cause, such as opposition to the Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua, have exerted tremendous pressure for social change despite threats of violence. When peaceful social reform was denied, violent revolutionary struggles were undertaken by guerrilla organizations with the strong support of "popular organizations." Whereas the

popular uprising in Nicaragua, led by the Sandinista Front for National Liberation, was successful in July 1979, guerrilla movements in and El Salvador have been brutally crushed by military forces that massacred entire villages of peasants and groups of refugees fleeing from battle zones.

More than 15,000 Guatemalans have sought refuge in neighboring Mexico, whereas tens of thousands of Salvadorans have fled to Honduras, Guatemala, Belize and Costa Rica. Hundreds of thousands of displaced peoples live in refugee camps in Central America, and more than 500,000 Central Americans have fled to cities of refuge in the USA in the past decade. Included in that number are tens of thousands of Nicaraguans who have fled their homeland due to severe economic hardship, political discontent, fear for their safety or other reasons. After the Sandinista Revolution, many wealthy Nicaraguans relocated in Costa Rica or Florida, but they were soon followed by people of lower income, including many who became active supports of the contra-revolutionaries.

The “contras” were created and organized by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) of the U.S. government in 1981, allegedly to put pressure on the Sandinista government to fulfill its promises to the people of Nicaragua. The U.S. Government under the Reagan administration provided arms, training and logistical support for the “contras,” sometimes with the support and blessing of Congress and at other times despite congressional sanctions and prohibitions. The so-called, “Iran-contragate” affair raised serious questions about U.S. Government support for the “contras,” and it strengthened voices of opposition in Congress and created a credibility gap between President Reagan and the American people. In mid-1987, opposition was growing in the U.S., Europe and Latin America against the U.S. foreign policy in Central America due to Reagan’s determination to force a military solution to the problems of the region, rather than searching for a peaceful solution to regional conflicts through the *Contadora* Peace Initiative, the Peace Plan of President Arias of Costa Rica, or other negotiated settlements.

CAUSES OF THE CURRENT CRISIS

Traditional dependence on a few cash crops for export (coffee, bananas, cacao, African palm oil, sugar, cotton and lumber), and the utilization of vast areas of fertile land for cattle production also largely for exportation, have hindered the diversification of agriculture and the development of food production for domestic consumption to the detriment of the lower socioeconomic levels of society. The result has been to increase the gap between the rich and poor, thereby frustrating the aspirations of the lower classes for improved socioeconomic conditions, greater equality and social justice.

Whereas the causes of insurgency in Central America lie in an unjust social system, the current economic crisis in the region stems from the effects of a worldwide recession. The economies of Central American countries are at the mercy of plummeting export commodity prices, raising imported oil prices, high interest rates for foreign loans, and traditional dependence on grants from international organizations and foreign governments for development projects. According to some observers, this situation has created a neo-colonial legacy between the nations of Central America and the dominant economic, political and military power in the Americas in this century: the United States of America, known as the “northern giant.”

This legacy began with the decline of Spanish influence in the region following their defeat by the USA in the Spanish-American War (1898), together with waning British influence. In 1906, Great Britain finally relinquished all claims to the Misquito Coast, thereby ending nearly 300 years of colonialization and intrigue along the Caribbean coast of Central America, with the exception of British Honduras (now

Belize) where the British continued to maintain a foothold until Belize became an independent nation in 1981.

Thus began a period of U.S. domination in Central America, especially after 1903 when the U.S. helped Panama acquire its independence from Colombia and proceeded to negotiate a 99-year lease from the new government to build and run the Panama Canal Zone. Under U.S. administration, construction of the canal began in 1907 and it was opened to shipping in 1914. However, despite the economic benefits to the Panamanian people, less convincing was the creation of a state dominated politically and economically by a foreign-controlled canal and the irritating perpetual presence of U.S. troops on Panamanian soil. This situation has occasioned prolonged and bitter controversy, as well as demonstrations and bloodshed, among Panamanian factions. As a result of these controversies, several revisions of the treaty were put into effect. This culminated in the adoption of the Carter-Torrijos Treaty (1977-1978), which clearly established Panamanian sovereignty over the Canal Zone and led to joint administration of the Canal. The Treaty also contemplates U.S. withdrawal from Panama in 2000.

After President Theodore Roosevelt sent his “Great White Fleet” around the world in 1900 to demonstrate that the U.S. was now a “world power,” the U.S. government also began to assume that the Caribbean Sea was an “American lake” and that Central America was its own “backyard.” Thus began an age of aggressive U.S. domination of, and interference in, neighboring American states in the Caribbean and Central American regions.

Although the record of U.S. intervention in the internal affairs of sovereign nations in the Americas is too long to mention here, the case of Nicaragua is one of the most serious to date. While the U.S. maintained diplomatic relations with Nicaragua and had an embassy in Managua, it also organized, trained and financed an army of “counter-revolutionaries” (termed “freedom fighters by President Reagan), known as the “contras,” who were committed to overthrowing the popularly elected Sandinista government (leftist-oriented). Whereas Reagan and his supporters, largely Republicans, were committed to overthrowing the Sandinistas by military force (indirectly by aiding the “contras,” or through direct U.S. military intervention), most Democratic congressmen and a few Republicans (as well as a majority of the American people, according to public opinion polls in mid-1987) favored a negotiated, peaceful settlement to conflicts in Central America (specifically in Nicaragua and El Salvador). Most U.S. allies in the Americas and Europe also favored peaceful negotiations and feared that the current U.S. policy in Central America might lead to another Vietnam-type conflict in the region.

GROWTH OF THE PROTESTANT MOVEMENT IN THE REGION

Although Roman Catholicism is the dominant religion of most of Central America, the exception being Belize with its British influence and traditional Anglican Faith, there has been a growing Protestant presence throughout the region since the 1890s. The rapid growth of Protestant groups in every country of Central America since the mid-1960s has made this region “news-worthy” as one of the world’s fastest growing areas of Protestant influence. Most of the nations of Central America are in the “top 10” list of countries with the highest average annual growth rates of Protestant church membership, according to the Global Mapping Project at the U.S. Center for World Mission in Pasadena, California.

Extensive research has been done on this region by the Latin American Socio-religious Studies Program (known as PROLADES in Spanish), formerly a ministry of the Missiological Institute of the Americas (IMDELA) with headquarters in San Jose, Costa Rica, but now under the sponsorship of In-Depth Evangelism Associates (IDEA) of Orange, California. Reports published by PROLADES

demonstrate the fact that a significant shift in religious affiliation is occurring in Central America, and projections of Protestant church growth reveal that several countries of the region may become 50% Protestant by 2010-2020. The following table shows the current status and future projections of Protestant population in the region:

| COUNTRY | % PROTESTANT 1980 | % PROTESTANT 1990 | % PROTESTANT 2010 |
|---------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Belize | 34.9 | 40.0 | 60.0 |
| Costa Rica | 7.9 | 16.8 | 39.9 |
| El Salvador | 9.8 | 13.4 | 25.2 |
| Guatemala | 16.9 | 40.3 | 73.9 |
| Honduras | 7.7 | 21.3 | 55.8 |
| Nicaragua | 11.2 | 26.3 | 65.2 |
| Panama | 12.7 | 17.7 | 25.4 |
| Region | 12.4 | 26.9 | 54.3 |

The average annual growth rates (AAGR) of Protestant church membership for each country of Central America between 1965 and 1988, according to PROLADES, was the following:

| COUNTRY | AAGR 1965-1980 | AAGR 1980-1988 | DGR |
|---------------|----------------|----------------|-------------|
| Belize | 6.6% | 3.2% | 37% |
| Costa Rica | 11.5% | 14.5% | 286% |
| El Salvador | 9.6% | 11.3% | 191% |
| Guatemala | 11.9% | 12.2% | 217% |
| Honduras | 13.7% | 10.3% | 167% |
| Nicaragua | 12.5% | 12.8% | 234% |
| Panama | 6.2% | 6.2% | 83% |
| Region | 10.4% | 11.3% | 191% |

However, the high AAGR of the Protestant population in many of these countries will tend to decline because it is unsustainable due to a series of factors: (1) the national political and social context may provoke massive migrations of people to other countries of the region or north to Mexico, the USA and Canada as refugees; (2) the internal dynamics of the Protestant movement in each country may lose energy (social strength) due to problems within its national leadership that cause a loss of confidence among its constituency (due to sexual misconduct, financial mismanagement, internal conflicts, abuse of power, poor leadership, etc.) with the resulting loss of members to a secular society or to alternative religious movements; (4) the Evangelical Church in Central America also has to deal with a growing problem of nominalism among its members, which tends to affect the second and successive generations of converts from Catholicism due to a lack of consolidation and discipleship in local churches; or (3) the pool of available receptive people within the national population shrinks due to reaching a balance between receptivity and resistance to change among the dominant Catholic population (for example, 60-40% or 50-50% balance between Catholic and Protestant populations).

Reliable statistical information may become available by means of national censuses or public opinion polls during the coming years, although the former is highly unlikely due to resistance from Roman Catholic authorities who do not want the census department to report religious affiliation, because the Catholic population is declining while the Protestant population is growing in each country of the region; and the cost of sponsoring public opinion polls on religious affiliation is too expensive for most Evangelical organizations, whereas this is a common practice in the USA by Gallup and other polling

organizations. In addition, other Evangelical organizations, missiologists or social science researchers may decide to conduct field work in Central America that would help us update and continue to monitor Protestant church growth in this region.

Rather than being overly optimistic about the possibility of continuing to witness high Protestant church growth in the Central American region, we should recognize that this is highly unlikely and plan accordingly based on a strategy of holistic or integral church growth (Ephesians 4:11-16).

With this introduction to the Central American region, we will now survey the historical development and current status of the Protestant movement in each country of the region based on our extensive field work in each country between 1974 and 1980.