

PREFACE

This study has been a work in progress since the September 1980 to June 1981 school-term at the School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, CA, when I began my Doctor of Missiology degree program.

My original idea was to write about “Church Growth and Social Responsibility in Central America” in order to communicate my concerns about the general state of the Protestant Church in that region and the challenges that it faced during the decade of the 1970s, amidst the chaotic situation of repressive military dictatorships in every country except for Belize and Costa Rica and the bloody civil wars in Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua.

I also wanted to provide a general understanding of the historical development of the Protestant movement in Central America, from 1750 to 1980, as part of the worldwide phenomenon of the historical expansion of Christianity, which was a particular concern of my mentor, Dr. Ralph D. Winter. I had already done extensive research on this subject during my missionary travels in Central America between 1972 and 1980, while serving with the International Institute for In-Depth Evangelization in San Jose, Costa Rica (on-loan from the Latin America Mission).

In order to help finance my studies at Fuller, I had made arrangements to teach two courses there while studying in the Doctor of Missiology program: “Church Growth and Social Responsibility in Central America” for the School of World Mission (under the supervision of Dr. C. Peter Wagner) and “The Religious Dimension in Hispanic Los Angeles: A Protestant Case Study” (using my published Master’s thesis in Missiology at the School of World Mission in 1974) for the Hispanic Ministries Department of the School of Theology. Also, World Vision International (in nearby Monrovia, CA) had asked me to edit a volume in their World Christianity Series on Central America.

However, the later project began to take up most of my free time during 1980-1981. Consequently, I made a logical choice to change the topic of my dissertation to “A History of the Protestant Movement in Central America: 1750-1980,” so that I could use much of the same material for my dissertation that I was writing for the “World Christianity: Central America” volume, with the consent of my new mentor, Dr. C. Peter Wagner, who took the place of Dr. Winter who was on sabbatical that school year. As it turned out, ***World Christianity: Central America and the Caribbean*** (published by MARC-World Vision International in 1981) was a condensed version of my doctoral dissertation (except for the section on the Caribbean region, which was written mainly by MARC staff members).

For this reason, the main body of my dissertation became “Expanded Status of Christianity Country Profiles” for each one of the Central American countries, which could be used as stand-alone volumes, in addition to fulfilling my research design to write “A History of the Protestant Movement in Central America: 1750-1980.”

In addition, in Chapter One, “An Overview of Central America,” I describe the socio-economic and political realities of the region during the Cold War period, while setting the stage for describing the historical development of the Protestant movement in each country. The final

chapter, "Analysis and Conclusions," provides me with the opportunity of summarizing my research findings and personal observations in each country of the region, as well as of stating my conclusions regarding the overall church growth patterns for each country and for each major Protestant denomination.

Also, I have added my own personal critique regarding the importance of evangelical social responsibility in this region despite the consequences of addressing social problems and human rights issues in this conflictive region. One of the risks was wrongfully being labelled a "communist sympathizer" or a "supporter of Liberation Theology" for criticizing the controversial foreign policy of the US government in the region, while defending "the poor and oppressed" and denouncing the repressive rightwing military dictatorships of the region that received US military aid: Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua (until July 1979). Belize, Costa Rica and Panama were the exceptions to the rule.

In retrospect, it has taken a long time to finish this project and to make the contents of this dissertation available to the general public. However, the final product provides us with a mental picture of the growth and development of the Protestant movement in this conflictive region at the height of the Cold War, especially from 1950-1980, as well as the historical context of the pioneer stage of its development from 1750 to 1950.

Clifton L. Holland
San José, Costa Rica