

As Goes Costa Rica, So Goes the World?

Deann Alford

Costa Rica's church is big on outreach but small on discipleship, and that has led to a "backdoor phenomenon" with as many as half of new believers deserting evangelism. A quarter of Costa Rican evangelicals believe they aren't called to share Christ because that's the leader's job.

Many still view door-to-door visits as a good way to share the gospel. And a prevalent teaching that prayer boils down to "I ask, I receive" is reducing a believer's relationship with God to that of simple transaction.

Duane "Chip" Anderson, president of the Omaha, Nebraska-based Christ For the City International, and Jorge Gómez, director of the Latin America

Mission [LAM]-affiliated Evangelism in Depth Institute in San José, Costa Rica, uncovered these and other troubling characteristics of the church in this Central American country. Each conducted separate but complementary doctoral studies at Columbia Biblical Seminary. Anderson's 1999 dissertation, "The Costa Rican evangelical pastor: His person and his ministry," profiles this land of 3.2 million souls—around sixteen percent of whom are evangelical—and details its church leaders' leadership styles and direction for the future. Gómez' dissertation was later published in Spanish as a book, *Crecimiento y Deserción*, or *Growth and Desertion*.

To those who follow the church in Latin America—and even on other continents—these and other pitfalls that the two missiologists detail read

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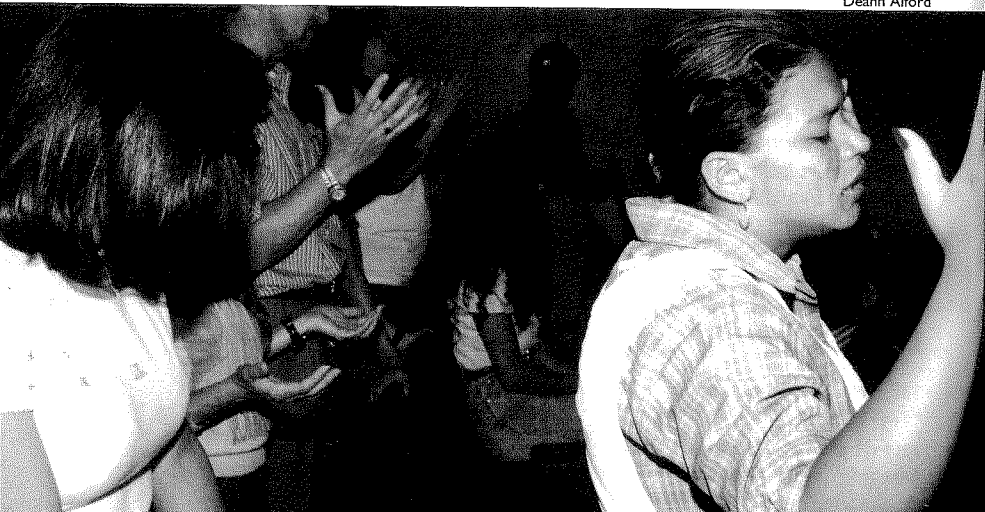
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all too familiar. Are these problems distinct to Costa Rica or common in other national churches as well?

First, can Costa Rica be viewed as a microcosm of the rest of Latin America? Not even of Central America, says retired Latin America Mission president David Howard. Its small population, combined with its near-dearth of indigenous people and high population of those with European ancestry, make it distinct sociologically from other Latin countries. "Politically, Costa Rica has been a model of stability," Howard said. "Revolutions are almost unknown." These and other traits, such as the relative prosperity of Costa Ricans compared to other Latinos, earns Costa Rica the nickname "Switzerland of Latin America."

But still, many characteristics of Costa Rica cited in the study do hold true elsewhere in the region—and the world. Paul Landrey, president of TOPIC, says that while not all the conclusions Anderson reached in his study hold true for Latin America as a whole, some do.

Pastoral Poverty. Anderson noted that most pastors receive paltry pay. In Costa Rica more than three-quarters of them earn less than half the pay of a community service worker. Two-thirds of pastors have no other income to supplement what they earn from their churches. "In Latin America, many local pastors would be identified as poor, even by the standards of the United Nations," Landrey said.



Samuel Olson, a missionary based in Caracas, Venezuela, is coordinator of Latin American alliances for the World Evangelical Alliance. Olson says that the pay issue is relative because Latin America is comprised of diverse nations. Costa Rica's basic wages are better and more stable—as is the country's overall economy—than many other nations, but still, inflation has eroded buying power everywhere. "That makes it very difficult on the pastors, particularly if they are not holding two jobs," Olson said. "Church finances usually will depend on the people who are also affected by the economic changes." Churches not run well administratively, with little planning or control over finances, make it hard for a congregation to grow and pay their pastors.

Much of that, Olson says, is because parishioners often don't respect untrained pastors who don't know how to handle finances or grow a church, so they don't pay them as they might. But another factor is that people are taught the virtues of "living by faith," akin to the Catholic priesthood's vow of poverty, but the Catholic church offers priests necessities of living. Applied to the evangelical world, where a pastor's salary must support a family and the local church must support its pastor, "Living by faith is a very different issue," he said. That means families suffer because pastors often don't receive government social and healthcare benefits, and few of their children will follow their pastor-parent's lead into the ministry. "The kids take off and forget this type of a gospel," Olson said. "Sadly, a bivocational leadership was disdained until recently."

In One Door, and Out the Other.

The backdoor phenomena is "universal," coinciding with the Costa Rica studies' findings, says Keegan Williamson, vice president of the Dallas-based CAM International. "That's a spiritual dynamic regardless of culture." And, Williamson says, the best way to combat that exodus is discipleship.

Howard agrees. For a long time, "The general word around Costa Rica was that the evangelical church composed up to twenty-four percent of the population—a huge increase from former years," he said. But Gómez showed that evangelicals, at best, numbered about half of that. "This caused some distress and negative reactions by those who wanted to believe the bigger figures. But I believe Gómez was on solid ground."

Enter the "backdoor syndrome"—almost as many people were leaving the church as were coming in. That's what Howard said in a 1992 *Christianity Today* special issue on Latin America that included articles by key leaders. "One of my major comments at that time was precisely this point of the 'backdoor syndrome' that had not been openly acknowledged as yet," he said.

Gómez and Anderson's works reveal that the church has made little progress over the years in discipleship. When Howard served in Costa Rica with LAM in 1953, he found the same problem, "although few were even aware of it and surely not talking about it," he said. "There was the usual emphasis on evangelism, but the church was woefully deficient in discipling."

"When people come in the front



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door, so to speak, whether they're re-dedicating their lives or come to know Christ, really it's a biblical mandate," Williamson said. "The Great Commission isn't about evangelism, but about making disciples. We often err in believing evangelism is the first and last step, when it's simply the first step in making disciples."

Clifton Holland, a Costa Rica-based Latin America church researcher with PROLADES, the Latin American Socio-Religious Studies Program, says that evangelicals indeed are deserting their churches because of lack of discipleship. But, Holland adds, that's not the only reason. His studies have found a virtual spiritual fruit-basket turnover in the region, as illustrated in titles of articles posted on his Web site (www.prolades.com): Why are

Roman Catholics leaving their church to join evangelical churches? Why are evangelicals leaving their churches to join "other religious groups" or stop participating in any religious group?

"Based on my research, I would be surprised if more than fifteen or twenty percent of the members of any congregation are involved in direct ministry, whether in evangelism or anything else," Holland said. "Of course, this would be true of most evangelical congregations in the USA as well."

While Holland knows of no comparable statistics from other Latin America countries, he says he has heard plenty of anecdotal information to say with confidence that it's a generalized problem throughout the region. A CID-Gallup study found that from 1989 to 1991, evangelical

church desertion in Latin America ran around fifty percent.

Olson believes that other factors behind the backdoor syndrome are the lack of a multiple number of leaders and shepherds in bigger churches, and also in the lack of personal pastoral attention to individual and family needs. "People search for healing, and often true healing is not to be found," Olson said. "Disillusionment sets in when people do not receive the ministry of the gospel to their hurts, profound needs and to their conflicts, so the gospel is not translated practically," so people change churches.

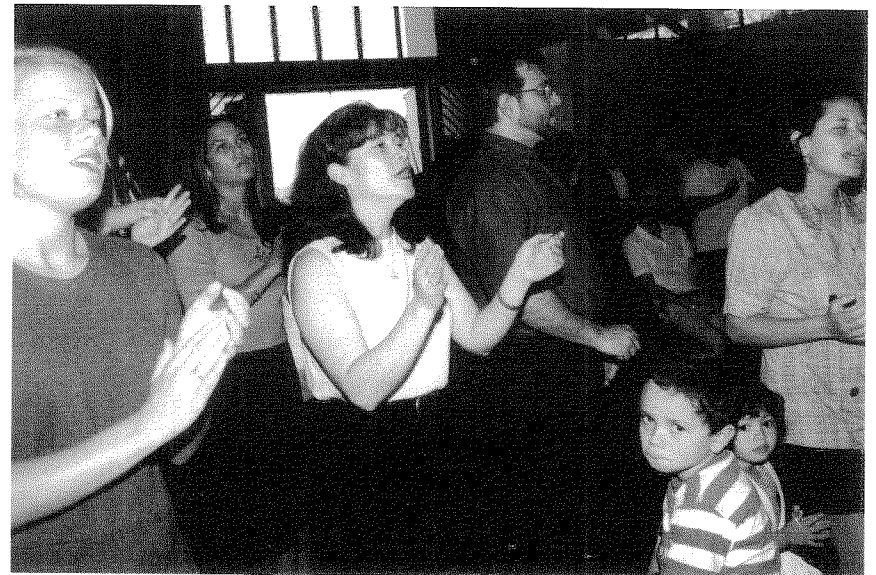
The backdoor syndrome seems to be abating. The Demoscopía study in November 2001 showed that only 2.9 percent of the total population "used to be evangelicals but at the time of the survey were no longer evangelicals," Holland said. This same poll showed that eighteen percent of the population was evangelical. Only about fourteen percent of those who were evangelicals at any time in their lives have deserted—that is, are no longer evangelicals. That's a big drop from the more-than-fifty percent desertion reported in 1991 by CID-Gallup when only 11.3 percent of population said they were evangelicals. "It appears that the crisis among evangelicals during the 1980s, when the desertion rate was high, has now been overcome by the conversion of a new generation of people who tend to remain within the evangelical fold."

Therefore, Go and Make Disciples. "It's the leader's job to disciple," hold twenty-five percent of Costa Rican evangelicals who aren't

involved in evangelism because they believe this, too, is the pastor's job. Olson believes this attitude prevails because it was the understanding of the pastoral role during much of the twentieth century because missionaries modeled that attitude, if not taught it. Also, the attitude is fed because the very notion of discipleship is new in Latin America because evangelism was always the thrust during most of the last century. "Why? Because the continent was not evangelized and is still not," Olson said. While European and "Anglo" countries had a natural Protestant background, Latin America was nominally Catholic and syncretistic. "The great majority [of Latin evangelicals] unconsciously present what it means to reject Catholicism and witchcraft rather than learning the essentials of the gospel."

Only twenty-nine percent of evangelical churches in Costa Rica had discipleship plans, according to Gómez and Anderson. "I do not know of similar studies on other countries from which to do a comparative analysis," Holland said. "In the absence of such studies, the only answer that anyone—including myself—can offer you about this are just subjective opinions and guesswork. However, I would be surprised if more than ten percent of the evangelical churches in any country of Latin America have well-established programs of discipleship training."

Don Parrott says his own anecdotal information leads him to believe that figure is less. Parrott, director of mobilization of Colorado Springs-based OC International, ministered in Argentina and Guatemala



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for eleven years. "In churches that say they have a plan, often, the majority of the time, it is not a functioning plan," he said. "It is a plan on paper or in the pastor's mind, or it is called a discipleship plan, but in reality it is hoping that people attend the program of the church, for example, Sunday services, midweek services and the like."

Part of the discrepancy may be differing definitions of discipleship. "Some churches, if they had a Sunday school program, would call that a discipleship program," Williamson said. "Others might say if they have a home Bible group, that's a discipleship program."

"Personally, I would say that it's discipleship if it's something that's geared to the individual needs of the believer and helping them to become mature in Christ."

According to Anderson's study, a quarter of the pastors said they themselves were not disciplined when they first became converts, but Williamson believes that figure is high. "Probably nine-tenths were never disciplined," he said. "If you're talking about somebody who walked with them and taught them and modeled the Christian life, I would be surprised if ten percent of pastors throughout Latin America had that blessing. Of course, the greatest cost is time, and that's one

thing we don't have in today's world."

"In the past, discipleship was confined to that [which was] taught to those who were preparing for water baptism," Olson said. "Likewise, discipleship was often defined as those tenets which distinguished the evangelicals from the Roman Catholic Church." These tenets, Olson said, generally were founded in a legalistic definition of Christian conduct—and therefore upon a particular understanding of sanctification—rather than on ethical and moral principles that grew out of a new relationship with Jesus Christ.

But Olson believes that the future bodes better for discipleship in Latin America. "We are now breaking out of that mold as the churches harness the vast lay multitudes in the local churches and recognize this potential," he said. A vastly different definition of discipleship has existed during most of the evangelical movement's history. Olson says this only recently is changing as leaders catch on to the meaningfulness of discipleship in the style of the Navigators, Campus Crusade for Christ and small groups.

Door-to-Door, Down and Out?

Anderson found that eighty-five percent of pastors he polled in Costa Rica agreed that while the best discipleship program is person-to-person, the best evangelism strategy is house-to-house. But in Latin America is door-to-door really an optimum way to tell others about Christ?

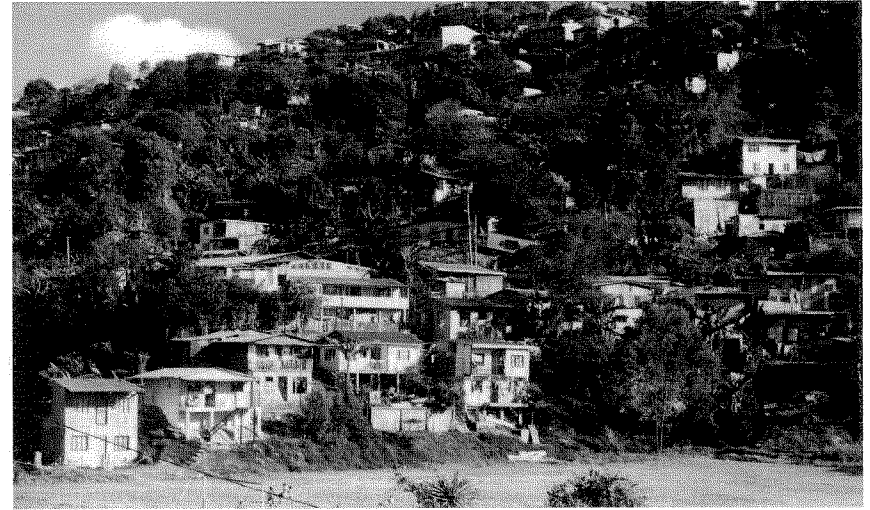
Holland thinks not, though he adds, "It is one of the strategies that some denominations and local churches use, along with others, to win new people to Christ and to

membership in their churches." Most new converts to evangelicalism come to church as a guest of friends and relatives who use personal "friendship evangelism" to share the gospel in their personal networks, such as school and work associations. "However, door-to-door evangelism can be an effective strategy if done by members of a local congregation who conduct visitation in their own neighborhoods, where people know who they are and can appreciate their personal testimony."

Nor does Williamson believe it's a good way to share the gospel. He says that CAM International workers saw the window close to door-to-door in the early 1990s after great openness and a huge positive response. Rising crime and abrasive or persistent cults, such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons, began using the method and ended the heyday.

Williamson cited examples of both when he served as a missionary in the Mexico City area. "We used to [go door-to-door] in high-rises, but as crime began to grow, they put gates at the bottom. It got to where we couldn't even get in," he said. Soon after, CAM workers gave up on door-to-door. In another part of the city where he worked, for two years his door-to-door evangelism yielded big results. "By the third year, the JW's (Jehovah's Witnesses) had basically closed off that opportunity."

After those initial years of great response to door-knocking, Williamson says that Mexico City residents have become almost like people in the United States in their attitudes toward the practice. "If you go door-to-door, you'll be lucky if anybody answers,



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Throwing out the Big Net.

Williamson and Holland agree that the age of mass evangelism for bringing large numbers to Christ is also over. While Luis Palau and Franklin Graham still fill stadiums, it's not as effective as it once was.

"That goes back to the general ambience there—a lot more confusion and a lot more cults," Williamson said. "Not that you couldn't use large campaigns to get contacts, but I think the average church on a daily basis is committed to winning people by a relational process."

Williamson says that a famous evangelist such as Billy Graham can

draw 100,000 people to hear the gospel. "But when that's all said and done, would that be an effective way of seeing mature believers integrated into a church? From our experience, we'd say no, it's not."

Olson refers to stadium events formerly known as "crusades" as "great festivities." They mean making a big investment for something with little meaning that yields few results in Latin America beyond drawing public attention. "Person-to-person evangelism is much more meaningful and has far greater results," he said—results strengthened by radio teaching and the work of the local church.

Why Generalize ... or Why Not?

Olson says that drawing conclusions over the whole of Latin America from the Costa Rica study—or any other

individual country study—is a case of comparing apples to oranges. The sheer numbers of evangelicals in each Latin American nation varies drastically, thus different factors should be considered. For example, because Venezuela's church is relatively small, it has fewer resources than, say, Brazil. Territorial size, communications systems or lack of them; racial and cultural makeup, and philosophical, financial, militaristic and global influences have impinged on nations in far different manners.

Also significant, the influence of missionaries on a country. Olson says that the nineteenth and twentieth centuries' missionary movement was vastly different and of much lesser impact in the Central American countries than in other parts of Latin America. Then there's the vastly different theological emphases of missionaries who came to each of the Latin American nations. For example, Olson said, "Brazil was greatly impacted by the Pentecostal movement which had its origins in Sweden rather than in the States. Chile's evangelical movement was influenced by the Methodist movement that came out of England rather than the States. It later was influenced by its own indigenous Pentecostal movement."

Olson notes that the origin of evangelicalism in Argentina is from England's Darby Movement and in the historical Protestant churches. Other countries—such as Guatemala—had a much stronger Pentecostal movement that originated in faith missions from the United States.

"It would be very interesting to see what the results of the same research in other nations would be," Olson said.

He may have his wish. Chip Anderson says studies similar to the ones carried out on Costa Rica are planned for other Latin American countries.

Anderson's Take. Does one of the studies' authors believe that the trends his survey detected can be generalized to the whole of the Latino world? Largely, yes, Anderson says.

Four factors make Costa Rica unique for anyone studying church growth in Latin America, he says. It has one of the better economies in Central America, a very good educational system, and excellent church growth over the last thirty years. Its pastors have easy access to very good theological training.

"Given these advantages, this study on Costa Rica can help to highlight both the strengths and weaknesses that may be found in other countries, especially Third-world countries, throughout the world," he said.

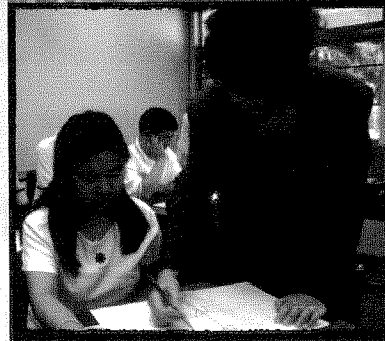
"In general, I would say that the problems that we see in Costa Rica are endemic to the rest of Latin America, and probably to many other Third-world situations."

Anderson's dissertation is posted at <www.ideaministries.com/chip/chipdiss.htm>. ♦

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