

CHAPTER 1

CONFUSION ABOUT THE CHURCH GROWTH MOVEMENT IN GUATEMALA

Introduction

Guatemala has enjoyed an explosive numerical growth of evangelicals since the early 1960s. In 1960, around 3% of the population of Guatemala was evangelical,¹ but in 1992 nearly 33% of the population was reported to be evangelical.² Clearly, Guatemala is the most evangelical country in Latin America and generally has one of the more successful evangelical churches than the other countries. Because God profoundly has blessed the Evangelical Church of Guatemala, the lessons of missions and church growth can be studied and applied to similar cultures. There still remains much to do in Guatemala. The Guatemalan Evangelical Church is responsible to encourage the weak and to take the message to peoples walking in darkness. The strengths and lessons of this Church can and should make a stronger impact upon Guatemalan society, as well as countries outside her borders.

Since the last in-depth study of Guatemala was completed in 1987 by SEPAL (*Servicio Evangelizadora para Latino America* or Evangelical Service for Latin America), there is a current need to analyze and describe the Guatemalan Evangelical Church. Most descriptions of Guatemala have been based upon polling data or anecdotal information. Though successive polling data are useful to demonstrate numerical growth

¹ Peter Briarly, ed., *World Churches Handbook* (London: Christian Research, 1997), 371. Data were adjusted to include only the groups considered evangelicals by Guatemalans.

² Manuela Canton Delgado, *Bautizado en Fuego* (La Antigua, Guatemala: Centro de Investigaciones Regiones de Mesoamérica, 1998), 96, quoting Virgilio Zapata who was the president of the Evangelical Alliance of Guatemala at that time.

trends, they do not explain the nature and health of the church. Some church leaders suspect that the church is fraught with Mayan and Catholic syncretism, which compromise its strength. Others have stated that the Evangelical Church has "closed upon itself as it is interested in making personal kingdoms rather than expanding the Kingdom of God. The evidence is lack of intercultural missions at large."³ Though this is a personal observation, made by a sympathetic observer, some would disagree with this statement. There is not a consensus as to the percentage of evangelicals, the health of the Church, or the direction of the Church. A clear, authoritative study of the Guatemalan Evangelical Church is needed. With such a study, local agencies and denominations can rejoice in current victories and address general challenges that will strengthen the Guatemalan Church. Such a study would illuminate lessons and models of effective missions and church growth that can be applied from Guatemala to other cultures. Defining the current state of the Evangelical Church establishes a clear knowledge of current trends and conditions, and this knowledge forms a foundation to direct the future trajectory of the Church.

An Unclear Picture of the Evangelical Church in Guatemala

An unexpected news release from Dawn ministries precipitated the need to perform a thorough study of Guatemala. The Dawn report asserted that in 1999, 72% of the population in Guatemala identified themselves as evangelicals.⁴ The "study" contributed to the fog of confusion about the size and health of the Evangelical Church of Guatemala. This optimistic report created legitimate concern among the board of trustees of the International Mission Board. They rightly questioned the validity of having

³ Mynor Giron, at the Alianza Evangélica meeting in Guatemala City, Guatemala, as noted by the author, 28 April 2002.

⁴ James Montgomery, "Guatemala 14 Years Later: 72 Percent Evangelical," February 1999, interoffice correspondence from the Dawn Report to SEPAL.

missionaries in Guatemala when other population groups in the world have no Gospel witness. Shortly after this report was circulated, a missionary couple in Guatemala City in frustration left the field as they said, "Guatemala is mostly Christian, we need to go somewhere else."⁵ False perceptions have consequences.

In addition to a question about the size of the Evangelical Church, many denominational leaders and missionaries expressed concern that in spite of the high levels of evangelicals in Guatemala, there was little improvement in society. They cited that as the Evangelical Church had grown in Guatemala, the general crime rate had also increased. Some were concerned that the Church was not having a strong preserving effect upon society in general. Others observed that within the Church there was a general ignorance of the Word of God and unacceptable levels of moral failures by Christian leaders. Still others were worried about the high level of syncretism within some groups of Christians that muddle the message of the Gospel.⁶

Claims about evangelicals in Guatemala come easy. Consider the following quotes from reputable sources. Are they true? Do they represent the Church at large?

- ♦ "My father is an elder in his church and is not happy with what is going on. He says that in his church, the mother church of the denomination, that the women's group met last week to discipline one of the sisters for not receiving the Holy Spirit correctly. They took off the belt of her falda [customary wrap around skirt] and dragged her around the church by her hair and beat her until she repented."⁷

⁵ Jimmy Smith, IMB missionary to Guatemala City, phone conversation with the author, Guatemala, Guatemala, December 1999.

⁶ Taped interviews with the author: Orlando Pinzon, president of Assembly of God, Guatemala, Guatemala, 10 May 2001; Rigoberto Alvarado, co-pastor of Familia de Dios, Guatemala, Guatemala, 20 May 2001; Oscar Benitez, co-pastor of El Shaddai, Guatemala, Guatemala, 20 March 2001; Steve Sywulka, director of Radio TGN, Central American Church, Guatemala, 4 May 2001; Rosalio Ramirez, General Secretary of the National Convention of Baptists of Guatemala, Guatemala, 7 July 2001.

⁷ Cory Mazariegos, interview by the author, Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, April 2001.

- ♦ "According to studies, the city of Almolonga is 90% evangelical. God has blessed the city with miraculously large crops and in turn has prospered the residents. There used to be fifteen cantinas and bars in the town and the city jail was always full. The only drunks in the street are out-of-towners. Today, there are no bars and the jail has been turned into a community meeting room."⁸
- ♦ "Those Indians are really superstitious in Almolonga. They bring their babies to the Cathedral in Quetzaltenango to baptize them so that their pastor does not know, just to be sure that they are really covered. They actually have a lot of Mayan religion mixed in with their religion."⁹
- ♦ "Of all of the places we went to, the people of Almolonga were the most superstitious and hostile. We have surveyed many primitive Indian villages, but this one has the most syncretism . . . and it is next to [the big city of] Quetzaltenango!"¹⁰

Specific Information Needed by Agencies

Percentage and Location of Evangelicals

Anecdotal reporting can prove anything in an interesting way, and careless numbers can be taken as if they were facts from a non-biased, scientific study. In February of 2000, the interdenominational research organization, SEPAL, presented concerns about the current direction of missions at the Inter-Missions Conference in

⁸For example, in 1992 the Sentinel group produced a video called "Transformations" that was popularized in many evangelical sectors and endorsed by *Charisma Magazine*, CBA Marketplace, the National Prayer Committee and distributed by YWAM, Campus Crusade, Promise Keepers and Aglow.

⁹ Ariadna Cifuentes Sosa, medical doctor and arthroscopic surgeon, interview by the author, Quetzaltenango, 15 January 2001.

¹⁰Roger Grossmann, unpublished field notes from the Joshua Project, quoting a surveyor from the General Survey, Guatemala, Guatemala, 15 April 2001.

Antigua, Guatemala, and the need for a new, in-depth study. Phil Templin, Region Leader of Middle America of the IMB, appointed this author to conduct a serious, scientific study of the state of the Evangelical Church in Guatemala. Templin's concern was not only to establish the percentage of evangelicals in Guatemala but also to identify areas of "lostness" or areas of low concentration of evangelicals. These areas could be geographical or ethnic groups.

The Degree of Syncretism

Background

Gary Lengkeek, the director of SEPAL of Guatemala, raised issues at the February 2000 Inter-Missions Conference in Antigua, Guatemala, about the Evangelical Church's growth rate, general health, and syncretism. This author, along with other missionary colleagues, has questioned for years the level of syncretism in the Guatemalan Church, especially in the Indian sectors. If the level of syncretism is too high, will the Church no longer be Christian? Can the Church continue to grow?

Definitions of Syncretism

Mixing true religion with local religions has been a problem since recorded biblical history. There is currently a lively debate within theological and anthropological circles as to the definition and effects of syncretism. Schreiter states that in the beginning of the twentieth century, von Harnack along with Barth, Kraemer, and others defined syncretism in theological terms as a distorted form of the Christian faith that is skewed by cultural and religious forces in the environment.¹¹ Others in anthropological circles

¹¹Robert J. Schreiter, "Defining Syncretism: An Interim Report," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 17 (Apr 1993): 50.

define syncretism in neutral terms as simply a mixture of competing world views. This view is more of a phenomenological description rather than a theological judgment. Authors such as Hugo Nutini and Betty Bell look at syncretism in strict sociological terms as a specialized form of acculturation. ". . .syncretism and acculturation are essentially the same concept, involving different degrees of amalgamating intensity and original contributions from interaction of cultural traditions. . ."12 Conn defines syncretism as, "when critical and basic elements of the Gospel are lost in the process of contextualization and are replaced by religious elements from the receiving culture."13 The premier missiologist, David Hesselgrave, described syncretism as a condition formed when "beliefs and practices of opposing systems are accommodated to each other by limiting the sphere in which each will be accorded allegiance and allowed to operate. . . they essentially become one new system."14 In the Christian context, syncretism is a dilution and distortion of Christianity that compromises the basic tenets of Christianity. The resulting religious form may remain, but the heart of Christ's work and grace is undermined.

Church Growth Strategies

Guatemala has long been the showcase for evangelical growth. This growth has not occurred in a vacuum. The Evangelical Church has grown in Guatemala because of certain personalities, methodologies, and strategies. These have come at key formative

¹²Hugo G. Nutini and Betty Bell, *Ritual Kinship: The Structure and Historical Development of the Compadrazgo System in Rural Tlaxcala* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 378.

¹³Harvie M. Conn, *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 176.

¹⁴David J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 186.

times in the life of the Guatemalan Church. Understanding what has occurred in the past will help other missions in similar stages and contexts to apply these valuable lessons.

The Problem:
Mission Agencies and Denominations Do Not Have a Clear Comprehension of the Current State of the Evangelical Church of Guatemala

Many of the concerns about the Evangelical Church, and the direction it is taking, are based upon anecdotal information, which is neither consistent nor reliable. Mission agencies and denominations within Guatemala do not have a clear picture of the state of the Evangelical Church, or in some cases, even their own denominations. A mature church fulfilling the Great Commission needs accurate information to evaluate its situation in order to reasonably ascertain its strengths and weaknesses. With this in mind, its weaknesses can be identified and healed to allow the Church to move forward. The purpose of this study is to determine the percentage of evangelicals, their location, and the general health of the Church in Guatemala. It will seek to explain the former explosive growth of the Evangelical Church and analyze the current state of health of the major denominations. These data, lessons, and insights will have an impact on future strategies of the International Mission Board, SEPAL, and the *Alianza Evangélica*.

Subproblems

The first subproblem is to measure the size of the Evangelical Church in Guatemala, and determine its location and level within major population groups. (What is the percentage of evangelicals in Guatemala and where are they located?) These results

will enable the Church to target areas of "lostness" or low reached "people groups" within Guatemala. This information will be discovered by a primary research project that will employ the administration of personal surveys to representative samples of the general population of Guatemala.

The second subproblem is to measure and analyze the general level of internalization of the Gospel within the evangelical population of Guatemala, and thereby determine the health of the Church. (What is the general measure of health of the Church in Guatemala?) This will be accomplished through the administration of surveys that record information from the general population of Guatemala on basic Christian doctrine, Christian ethics, morality, Catholic beliefs, and Mayan beliefs. The relationship of these data give the criteria for making such measurements. Comparisons will be made by denomination, race, and literacy.

The third subproblem is to identify and analyze the reasons why certain denominations have experienced an explosive growth in Guatemala. What are the denominations that have experienced explosive growth? What are some common reasons for the growth? Research along these dimensions will be based upon extensive search of published materials pertaining to church growth in Guatemala. The research will examine key actions, circumstances, and strategies that were instrumental in the growth of the Church in the context of the general sociopolitical backdrop of Guatemala. Many of these are the human factors, but the research will also highlight some of the instances of the intervention of God.

The fourth subproblem is to glean lessons from successful denominations with the Guatemalan evangelical leadership at-large through the *Alianza Evangélica*.

Denominations have their unique histories, subcultures, and valuable insights that are unknown to outsiders. This research will be based upon structured interviews with key leaders from the major denominations and typical denominations focusing upon reasons for current successes, current challenges of the Church, reasons for growth or lack of growth, future missionary roles, qualities of leadership, and internal dynamics that contribute to the current status of a denomination.

The fifth subproblem is to share general data, conclusions, mission strategies, and recommendations relevant to church growth and health that could be applied in Guatemala by the IMB Middle America Regional Leadership Team and SEPAL. (How can the results of the study be put into practice?) Since most denominations are unaware of what others are doing or their successes and learned lessons, these data and recommendations will be shared by SEPAL to the entire evangelical community. The purpose will be to motivate all evangelical groups in Guatemala to shore up their weaknesses and rejoice in their strengths.

The Hypothesis

General

Using a current and accurate understanding of the health and growth of the Evangelical Church in Guatemala, the researcher can make valid recommendations to the IMB Middle America Regional Leadership Team to make more effective and appropriate missiological strategies.

Specific

If an appropriate religious survey is conducted to stratified random samples of the general population of Guatemala, then from the data, the following may be determined:

- ◆ the true level of evangelicals in Guatemala.
- ◆ the identity of yet unreached people groups in Guatemala.
- ◆ the growth rate of the Evangelical Church in Guatemala.
- ◆ the relationship between literacy and the level of internalization of the Gospel.
- ◆ the relationship between the level of doctrinal knowledge and the level of Christian living.
- ◆ the relationship between the level of doctrinal knowledge and the level of Christian ethics.
- ◆ the relationship between doctrinal knowledge and the level of syncretism.
- ◆ church growth dynamics and strategies.
- ◆ the robust evangelical denominations and the characteristics of these groups.

The Delimitations

Because of the enormity of the information that will be produced by this project, the study conforms to the following specifications:

- ◆ A minimum of ten percent of the *municipios* in the Interior of the country of Guatemala will be sampled. Twenty percent of these samples will be urban and eighty percent will be rural.

- ◆ Two sample groups of six distinct socioeconomic classes will be surveyed within the Capital at a level to assure a 0.5 percent level of confidence for each sample.
- ◆ Random samplings will be taken from the eight largest Indian groups in the Interior of the country, using a central *municipio* as the ethnocenter.

Further, the General Survey itself conforms to these limitations:

- ◆ Survey information for the level of Christianity in the General Survey will be limited to forty-nine questions.
- ◆ Survey responses for the level of Christianity will be limited to "yes," "no," or "I do not know" due to low literacy, time factors and unfamiliarity by the average Guatemalan to this type of survey.
- ◆ For the Catholic population, only thirteen questions will be asked that relate to Mayan syncretism and general religious attitudes.

For the Denominational Leader interviews:

- ◆ One key leader is interviewed from each of the twelve largest or fastest growing denominations in Guatemala.
- ◆ Only the responses relating to the directed interview are considered and published.

Other general delimitations include:

- ◆ the definition and criteria of an "evangelical" and a "Christian" is determined in consultation by the *Alianza Evangélica* of Guatemala and SEPAL.
- ◆ Databases are the property of the IMB and SEPAL.

- ◆ Recommendations are delivered only to SEPAL and the IMB, Middle American Regional Leadership team.
- ◆ Recommendations from this study cannot be imposed upon mission agencies or church entities.

Definition of Terms

Aldeas- small towns or segments of territory within a municipio that are governed by the *municipio*.

Alianza Evangélica- an interdenominational organization that formed in 1938 that is composed of the leadership of mainline evangelicals. The *Alianza* has representatives from participating denominations and plans inter-church, large-scale activities.

Asentimiento- overpopulated housing areas comprised of shanties built on seized lands by the poor. They commonly do not have running water, sewer, or electricity.

Campesino- a peasant subsistence farmer who lives in the primitive rural areas in the countryside.

Caserio- small hamlets that are governed by aldeas.

Church- refers to a denomination, an alliance of churches or a local congregation. When referring to a denomination, this paper uses "Church." When referring to a local congregation, this paper uses "church." "The Church" in Latin America always refers to the Roman Catholic Church.

Colonia- a Spanish word in this paper refers to a closed, gated neighborhood settlement in the large cities. Usually *colonias* are relatively new areas.

Denominational Interview- the structured interview directed toward key leaders that gives narrative information about their denomination.

Department- the largest geopolitical division of territory in Guatemala that is governed by the local government located in the *cabecera* and is responsible to the central government in Guatemala City. In order to differentiate this word from the common English word, "department", the Guatemalan geopolitical term is "Department" in this document.

Ethnocenter- the geographical center of cultural life for a particular ethnic group.

Evangelical Church- consists of the typical "Protestant" and Pentecostal denominations and groups. The *Alianza Evangélica* recognizes the Evangelical Church in exclusive terms as a Christian church that is not the following: Catholic, Catholic Mayan or a cult such as: Mormon, Jehovah's Witnesses, or Seventh Day Adventists. In inclusive terms they are Protestant Trinitarian churches. The Evangelical Church is not a formal entity, but this term describes a specific part of the Body of Christ.

Evangelical- as defined in the survey, a person who self affiliates with being a Christian and attends an evangelical church at least once per month.

Interior of Guatemala- refers to all of Guatemala except for urban Guatemala City. Colloquially it is referred to as "the Interior."

Joshua Project- the name of this research project as approved by the *Alianza Evangélica*.

Ladino- a unique Guatemalan term that identifies Guatemalans who speak Spanish, and have identified with the Spanish culture rather than Indian culture. This term is loose and may refer to an Indian who has taken on Western culture or a racial mix of Indian and Spanish who has taken on Western Spanish culture.

Lostness- a term coined in mission circles to describe a population's lack of Christianity.

Essentially it is antonym of an evangelized population.

Masses Populares- since there is not much of a middle class in Guatemala, the usual North American terms of class are not used in Central America. This is the most populous group in urban areas who roughly equate to middle lower class. This class commonly has far less than a high school education and works in manual labor.

Missionary- a person who has an apostolic call to incarnationally (i.e., he lives with the people and identifies with them as he learns the culture and language) make New Testament disciples in a different culture. This is in contrast to a person who has a burden for missions or a participant in a missions project.

Municipalidad- the governing city or town in a *municipio*.

Municipio- the second largest geopolitical division in Guatemala that grouped with others, form a Department.

N- a statistical symbol representing the entire population of a given studied group.

n- a statistical symbol representing the sample size from a given studied group.

Neo-pentecostal- refers to the newer type of Pentecostal denominations that are usually more educated, better taught, and utilize a moderated worship form in comparison to the old line Pentecostals, such as Assembly of God, Church of God or Prince of Peace. This is a term that is widely used in Latin America with this type of church. These denominations are usually led by strong, central, charismatic leaders from a central church.

People Group- a missiological term that describes a population that have cultural, historical, religious, and language commonalties that bind them together. People groups often transcend political boundaries.

Protestants- a term that is not used much in Guatemala by evangelicals as historically it has a denigrating connotation from the Catholic Church. The implication is that the Protestants are a protesting, errant faction, cult or schism that came out of the True Catholic Church. Some of the Reform churches, such as the Presbyterians, refer to themselves as Protestants in order to distinguish themselves from the evangelical Pentecostals.

Syncretism- a mixture and compromise of distinct religious systems.

The General Survey- the research tool used to gather data on the general population related to religious affiliation, general demographics, religious practices and attitudes.

The Pastoral Survey- the research tool used to gather data from evangelical pastors. The information relates to the general church profile, pastoral education, ethnic issues, pastoral effectiveness and perceived pastoral needs.

Abbreviations of Terms

IMB- The International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention.

SEPAL- *Servicio Evangelizadora para Latino America* (Evangelical Service for Latin America) is the Spanish name for the ministries of the missions agency, "Overseas Ministries."

CAM- Central American Mission. The second oldest mission in Guatemala which entered in 1899. They are a conservative mission organization based out of Dallas Theological Seminary in Dallas, Texas.

IDEC- *Iglesia de Dios Evangelio Completo*, Church of God-Whole Gospel.

INE- *Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas*, the Guatemalan Census Bureau.

INGUAT- *Instituto Guatemalteco de Turismo*, or the Tourism Bureau of Guatemala.

SIL- Summer Institute of Linguistics, commonly known in the United States as the Wycliffe Bible Translators.

Assumptions

- ◆ The results of the study will be more readily accepted by the evangelical community and research groups if they come from the interdenominational research group, SEPAL.
- ◆ The percentage of evangelicals in Guatemala is measurable from projections derived from population samples.
- ◆ Because Guatemala has twenty-three distinct language groups and fifty plus dialects, the country is incredibly varied in culture and non-uniform in belief systems, and Christianity does not cover the country uniformly.
- ◆ Morals and ethics among Guatemalan Christians are measurable.
- ◆ Using biblical criteria of basic doctrine and practice, one can determine whether or not a person is a Christian.
- ◆ General trends of church growth and health in Guatemala can be identified from key denominational leaders and literature.
- ◆ Surveys of Indian groups at ethnocenters are valid representations for general projections.

- ♦ In order for the results of the project to be accepted and adopted by the large denominations, they must be participants in the research project from the beginning. Most likely some of the results of this research will contradict perceptions within the evangelical leadership.

The Need for This Study

Due to the exaggerated claims of the size of the Evangelical Church in Guatemala, mission agencies and denominational leadership are acting on faulty information about the type of work that should be emphasized in Guatemala. Since there is no comprehensive understanding of the Church in Guatemala, many mission strategies are based upon what is prudent and stereotypical because these satisfy the supporters in the United States. Should pioneer mission strategies be implemented in a country where there is a large percentage of evangelicals? Should mission agencies be withdrawing missionaries due to a reported high level of evangelicals? Good church growth and mission strategies must be based upon good information. Purposeful strategies affect deployment of personnel, the type and quantity of personnel needed for specific areas or people groups. On a denominational level, many denominations are emphasizing evangelism to the exclusion of practical Christian ethics and living. The poor testimonies among evangelicals seem to be adversely affecting the growth of the Church at large.

Specifically in the realm of Hispanic Baptist work (as opposed to the Guatemalan K'ekchí Baptist work), the Baptist mission over the past fifteen years has emphasized evangelism nearly exclusively. In reality, this has left the overall work unbalanced.

Basic Christian growth, discipleship, and leadership have been ignored in practice. Within the Hispanic Baptist churches in Guatemala, only 9 percent have full-time pastors. This is a clear a sign of a major leadership problem within Guatemalan Baptist work. Other denominations such as the Assembly of God, Central American Mission, Elim, and many others maintain a supply of developing leaders at all stages. For Baptists, there are many lessons to learn from other groups who work and live in the same culture and circumstances. As a Baptist, this author recognizes that a personal perspective is biased. This also affects other leaders and denominations. There are many lessons to be learned from all members of the Family of God and for that reason, the results of this study will be shared with key organizations outside of Baptist circles in order to help the entire Body of Christ in Guatemala. This research will provide valid information to mission agencies and national denominations on which to build effective strategies.

Timeline

General demographic data collection and analysis will be completed by February 7, 2002.

General denominational interviews will be completed and analyzed by March 1, 2002.

Historical research will be completed and written by March 13, 2002.

Presentation of data to Agencies:

IMB Middle America Regional Team and SEPAL,

Phase I. Final demographic data, February 10, 2002.

Phase II. Denominational data and people group data, February 20, 2002.

Phase III. Final data from Denominational interviews, March 5, 2002.

Phase IV. Recommendations and conclusions, April 15, 2002.

Phase V. Evaluation in Guatemala by the IMB Regional Team and
SEPAL, May 20, 2002.

Presentation of methodology to IMB Office of Research by June 30, 2002.

The completion of the writing the Project in Ministry by July 1, 2002.

Data Needed

In order to have a clear understanding of the incidence of evangelicals in Guatemala, primary demographic research of the Evangelical Church is done in order to obtain the relevant data. This data will be gathered by trained census takers.

Most of the denominations within Guatemala do not have accurate membership roles, written histories or strategies. This information will be gleaned, in part, from the general survey as well as personal structured interviews from leaders from selected denominations. Other general information that is needed is:

- ◆ Historical data for key denominations.
- ◆ Historical data for Guatemala.
- ◆ Population data are derived from the Guatemalan Bureau of Statistics.
- ◆ Ethnic group data are derived from the Guatemalan statistics bureau and from other sources.
- ◆ A measure of internalization of the Gospel among evangelicals will be key in understanding the depth of the Church. This is primary research that is extracted out of the generated databases.