

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions Concerning Findings of this Project

Church Demographics

The evangelical Guatemalan Church is a miracle and a blessing from God. The message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ now covers most areas and people groups in Guatemala. Today, 25.4% of Guatemalans are evangelical because virtually all denominations have focused ministries in evangelism and growth. There remain pockets of lostness in Guatemala due to geographic isolation and cultural differences. The most extreme example is an indigenous people group and the geographically related Ladino populations in southeastern Guatemala. The Chortí, a group of more than 30,000 people, is only 2% evangelical and the contiguous, highly Ladino population of Chiquimula is merely 11% evangelical. In the northern part of the Department of Huehuetenango, the people groups of the Akateco, Chuj, and portions of the Qanjobal Indian groups are approximately 11% evangelical. Nearly 150,000 people live in the surrounding areas of these low evangelized groups.¹

Reasons for Past Growth

The pattern of evangelism and church planting was established in the early years of the Evangelical Church in Guatemala. God used the Presbyterians to open the doors

¹The statistical confidence interval level for most data reported in this research is well with 0.05.

for evangelicals in Guatemala. The pioneer missionaries demonstrated an evangelistic fervor and determined work ethic that yielded strong, focused Guatemalan leaders. God's sovereignty determined the favorable political conditions in which the young evangelical church could be established. In addition to other favorable political conditions, the Catholic Church was weak and out of favor with the government for the largest part of the twentieth century. This minimized the Church's ability to interfere effectively with the fledgling Evangelical Church. Early in the 1920s, the Central American Mission and other groups began targeted ministries with Indian groups. These works laid profound foundations for later years. Evangelical presence resulted in less alcoholism, poverty, and illiteracy. Large numbers of evangelicals began to improve the social fabric of rural Indian towns. The positive results of evangelicals among the poor earned more favor from the government.

During the early 1960s, evangelicals established a national presence, a critical mass, and the beginnings of a cultural acceptance. They began massive evangelistic campaigns that yielded much fruit. The early radio ministry of the *Radio Cultural* by CAM served to broadcast the Gospel, train pastors, edify, and educate the masses of evangelicals. Pentecostals, such as the Assembly of God and Church of God, injected new life and new worship forms. Their presence helped to propel all evangelicals even further. Nationalism and anti-American sentiment fostered the establishment of new Guatemalan denominations in the middle part of the century. Some of these nationalistic Guatemalan churches became dominant denominations, such as Elim and Prince of Peace. Other nationalistic Guatemalan churches contributed to the plethora of

independent churches encountered in Guatemala. The evangelical churches of Guatemala were unusually cohesive and cooperative because many groups worked through the *Alianza Evangélica*.

From 1976 until 1993, evangelicals experienced an unprecedented growth, expanding from 10.1% to 26.4% of the population. This period of unprecedented growth was triggered by the national disaster of the devastating earthquake that killed 23,000 people. It opened the flood gates of evangelical aid and church planting from the United States. Further, the horrible civil war continued. The war created social instability and mass exodus from the countryside to the cities. Pentecostal doctrine and theology with apocalyptic preaching were simple. They offered immediate solutions to the harsh social problems. The mass media was exploited effectively by evangelicals. The Gospel was broadcast to many isolated areas of Guatemala in Spanish as well as in Mayan languages. Evangelicals had a sense of euphoria as the presidencies of two evangelicals extended the momentum.

The Current Plateau of the Growth Rate of the Evangelical Church

Currently, many of the denominations do not enjoy the same rapid growth that was common in the 1970s and 1980s. A continual loss and gains of members from one church to another created an illusion of expansion. In fact, the Evangelical Church was barely maintaining its fraction of the population in relation to the general population growth rate. In spite of the high coverage of the Evangelical Church, the growth rate of the Church in relation to the general population growth has plateaued since 1993. From 1990 to 2001 the general Guatemalan population grew by 30.1%, and the net numbers of

evangelicals increased by 25%. This signifies that church growth has not kept pace with the growing population by -5%. The continued high growth rate of the two largest denominations, the Assembly of God and the Church of God, as well as the high profiles of several neo-pentecostal mega-churches, mask the sluggish performance of the remainder of the Evangelical Church. For the first time in the history of the Evangelical Church in Guatemala, some large denominations have declined in the number of their adherents within a five-year period.

Increasing personal comfort and security fostered by the resolution of the civil war, rising secularism, globalization, and importation of post-modern ideas that conflicted with Christianity, the resurgence of the Catholic Church, the promotion of the Neo-mayan religion, and a religiously neutral government were additional significant external sociological factors that contributed to the declining growth of the Evangelical Church. The churches have no direct control over these factors, but they must recognize their existence and significance within their context. Evangelical churches can influence other church growth factors that are directly within its control. Some of these are: general moral problems within churches, lack of adequate preparation by many rural pastors, syncretism with inadequate assimilation of the message of the Gospel, and a crippling legalism within many churches. Illiteracy is a problem in both the realm of public policy and the church's domain.

The plateaued growth rate is also due to an inability to contextualize fully the Gospel into another culture. There is a definite discrepancy between the percentage of evangelicals in the Ladino and Indigenous populations living in proximity to each other. The high level of syncretism in many parts of the country has further compromised the

growth rate of Christianity, as well as Her vitality. There is a rapid increase in the number of persons not affiliated with any religion. This is due in part to the secularization of society causing membership losses from evangelical churches and the Catholic Church.

Current Church Health

Looking strictly at the incidence of evangelicals in certain regions of the country, or within certain people groups, is misleading to a church planting strategist. This study determined that only between 25% to 42% of evangelicals are truly Christian. Although the Guatemalan Church is very evangelistic, it lacks in Bible knowledge and Christian practice. This is even more pronounced in the Indian sector. Generally, evangelical churches and the culture emphasize experiential theology, which aids in spreading the evangelical message, but hinders in internalizing the full life-changing Gospel.

Culture and Class Issues that Affect the Internalization of the Gospel

In upper classes, higher socio-economic standing negatively affects the rate of acceptance of the Gospel. On the other hand, in the lower classes, class negatively affects the internalization of the Gospel. Extreme poverty also adversely affects the level of the internalization of the Gospel with Ladinos and Indians. More secular education increases the ability to internalize the Gospel. Most Indian groups do not internalize the Gospel to the level of Ladinos (which is also low). There are several reasons for this. Most Indians are extremely poor and uneducated, and both of these factors work against them. Many

Indians function in a native tongue, but worship in Spanish or Creole Spanish. It is unknown if the differences in internalization stem more from language or culture barriers.

In spite of the general internal weakness of most churches, hope is on the horizon. All Guatemalans love their churches and their pastors. They want to know what the Bible says. Even though up to 75% of people attending church are not Christians, the pastors and leadership must look at this as an opportunity to help a listening, captive audience.

Although the Presbyterian Church has problems with numerical growth, it demonstrates the highest level of internalization of the Gospel. Their constituency is more educated and Ladino than others. Within the past few years they have consciously taught the basics of the Presbyterian Church to their children, youth, adults, and leaders. The Presbyterian Church demonstrates that a continual emphasis upon teaching basics of the faith raises the general level of assimilation of the Gospel.

Reasons for Current Church Growth in Some Sectors

The fastest growing churches are the Assembly of God, Church of God-Whole Gospel, and Bethany.² These churches emphasize consistent and systematic teaching, and leadership development. These churches demonstrate that church growth is directly tied to the type of leadership in front of the denomination and church. Effective leaders are focused, visionary, spiritual, encouraging, organized, and competent. The laity is mobilized and trained to do the task set before them. Generally, the fastest growing denominations demonstrate a higher than average level of internalization of the Gospel.

² Nazarenes are one of the fastest growing denominations in Guatemala, but data from the interview of their leadership is unavailable. The generalizations in this section may or may not apply to the Nazarenes.

General Recommendations to Mission Agencies Based Upon Research of the Project

- ◆ The Guatemalan Evangelical Church must finish the task to contextualize the Gospel to the unreached areas and people groups in Guatemala. Many of the largest denominations are in early phases of mission development and mobilization. North American missions agencies must focus the majority of their energies to assist, train, and accelerate this step of maturity in the Guatemalan Churches.
- ◆ The singularly most important job of missionary leaders is to assist Guatemalan leadership in producing strong, visionary Guatemalan leaders.
- ◆ Coverage of the Gospel can be accelerated with North American entry in Spanish areas where there is a low incidence of the Gospel such as El Progreso, Santa Rosa, Jutiapa, and Jalapa. Sustained work by Central Americans should be the end goal.
- ◆ Culturally and geographically isolated Indian groups can be targeted by North American missionaries in conjunction with the maturing Guatemalan Church. Missionaries must be cognizant that making converts is distinct from making contextualized Christians who internalize the Gospel and become growing disciples of Christ.
- ◆ Successful Indian leaders should be mobilized to reach other Mayan groups because the largest numbers of under-reached populations in Guatemala are Indian. Exporting their natural affinity of success of one Indian culture will address another Indian group's difficulty of internalizing the Gospel. Teamed with experienced cross-cultural missionaries, they will prove to be very effective.
- ◆ North American missionaries always have a special place with the poor and illiterate. The blessings and resources of the North American Church must be

shared with the unfortunate. Special ministries should be directed toward the poor with the goal of witnessing the transformation of the whole man by Christ and His Church. They must become independent of charity but dependent upon the Lord.

- ◆ North American missionaries have a special place for episodic projects as advisors and assessors. Specialists can help to train new leaders as the Church addresses the issues of syncretism, lack of Bible knowledge, and widespread illiteracy.
- ◆ Guatemalan mega-churches have a unique place in evangelical life. They can teach many lessons of leadership, vision, and projecting the Gospel. Mega-churches have a strong leadership base and are emulated by many churches and denominations. Although most mega-churches are Ladino and centered in the Capital, there are some notable exceptions in Indian areas.

Considering the data of these reports, North American mission agencies need to consider revisiting some missiological issues in several areas:

1. What criteria to be used to justify the deployment and function of North American missionaries in low evangelized areas or within certain people groups?
 - How do strategists determine if specific groups need new works?
 - Do strategists determine entry of missionaries only by the percentage of professed evangelicals? In the case of Guatemala, the explosion of the Church occurred with a high level of missionaries an incidence of evangelicals from 15% to 25% in these special years. Some mission agencies have determined that if a people group has more than 10% evangelicals they will not enter into the group and if the people group has more than 15% evangelicals they will withdraw forces. These limits do not square with the Guatemalan experience.

- Is it relevant that there is an absence or presence in a population group of a certain evangelical group, such as the Baptists?
 - Does it affect plans if most of a given evangelical community is highly syncretistic? If that is the case, do missionaries enter, and if so, as pioneer missionaries or as teachers?
2. Does it matter if specific national leadership is not producing sufficient Guatemalan leaders or instilling vision and opening new works at the rate of other denominations? In the case of weak denominational leadership, how does American leadership assure that North American missionaries do not eclipse the essential Great Commission ministries of the national leadership?
 3. When should North American missionary intervention be made?
 - Does North American presence rob the Guatemalan Church of her mission privilege and responsibility to other cultures in Guatemala?
 - Does the context in Guatemala demand a singular pioneer missions style?
 - Does it demand that strategists look into a multi-prong strategy of building leaders who will make a difference?
 - Do North American missionaries have an essential role in the context of the national organization?
 4. Who should go into determined areas of new work?
 - North American missionaries?
 - Guatemalan missionaries?
 - Ladino or Indian missionaries?

5. What lessons can be learned from growing denominations?
 - Can networking with them in certain ministries help all denominations benefit from their strengths and experiences?
6. What role does the government or the social climate have in relation to the propagation of the Gospel?
 - Does the church or mission need to pay their "dues" in social ministries to gain subtle approval and non-interference by the government on more evangelistic ministries?
 - In light of the direct link between literacy and the internalization of the Gospel, should mission entities focus upon facilitating literacy programs with national organizations?
7. What strategies and methodologies from the past can be beneficial to the present?
What are the methodologies and strategies of the cutting edge Neo-pentecostal groups?
8. In missions, where is the balance between marketing, contextualization, manipulation, and the power of God? Should missions be strategy driven by an agency or Spirit-driven from the field?

Conclusions Concerning Execution of the Joshua Project

Data gathering for such a large amount of information required a sizable force of workers. The SEPAL staff was extremely prepared and competent in recruiting, training, and managing such a work force. This author stated from the beginning of the project that it would be a tragedy to go through such an effort to gather and interpret the data for

the Joshua Project, write a report, and leave it on a bookshelf to gather dust. Thankfully, this has not been the case. Disseminating the information to the Regional Office at the IMB has put valuable information in the hands of Baptist leadership. SEPAL has done a superb job in getting this information into the hands of Guatemalan leaders and other mission agencies. In November of 2001, the leader of the Verbo Church stated that based upon early reports, they have already begun a mission in Jocotán. Another denomination is starting works in underevangelized areas of Zacapa. CAM is rethinking internal church growth goals and strategies. The Assembly of God Church has stated they are using this material in their long range planning. SEPAL will continue to aid in educating and challenging the leadership of all denominations with findings from this study. Partial findings from the data from the research are reported in this document. Ongoing analysis and dissemination of the information will continue by the IMB and SEPAL for two more years.

Recommendations for Future Research of this Nature

- ◆ The magnitude of the project makes it difficult, if not impossible, for denominational leaders to assimilate most of the information. Future projects should focus one at a time upon only the primary elements of this research.
- ◆ Due to unwillingness to be interviewed by some denominations, some of the main evangelical denominations interviews were not obtained, such as Elim, Prince of Peace, and Calvary.³ This will always be the case in any research, even in spite of networking with all denominations. This underscores the necessity of the arduous,

³The taped interview from the Nazarene leadership was such poor sound quality that it could not be used and much of the information was lost.

background work of operating through several inter-denominational national entities in order to establish as many contacts as possible.

- ◆ Data entry was performed much slower than anticipated. This made it difficult to make timely mid-course corrections with certain survey teams. In spite of instructions to survey equally the genders, a small portion of the sampled areas were highly skewed with women. Mathematical corrections were employed, but consistent field work is more reliable than statistics.
- ◆ Guatemala is heterogeneous in the population with regard to culture and religion. Because of unknowns created by the heterogeneous population, an enormous sampling was necessary to establish a high degree of confidence in the study. For countries with more homogenous populations, valid data can be obtained with less sample areas.
- ◆ The Guatemalan Department of National Statistics was most helpful in making practical suggestions for data gathering. Although they had not gathered religious data in the past national census of 1992, they were anxious to assist in any practical way for this project. National Census Bureaus should always be consulted in any future studies.
- ◆ The data gathered can be subjected to additional statistical studies such as: additional demographic, sociological and religious details of specific denominations, studies on the internalization of the Gospel according to professions, specific doctrinal issues as it relates to literacy, denomination, race, age, sex. Studies of the same can be made by comparing rural populations to urban populations.

- ♦ With more adequate resources, a more in-depth statistical study of the data could reveal important information on more relationships between illiteracy and the effects it has on Christianity.
- ♦ With more adequate resources, data could be further refined to determine more in-depth characteristics of specific people groups.
- ♦ The Gospel has made its home well among the K'ekchí and around the Indian groups of Lake Atitlan. Further cultural studies could be made as to determine why these groups have embraced the Gospel and other Indian groups have not.
- ♦ Studies should be made on the relationship of church growth and an effective Sunday School or its equivalent. The fastest growing denomination emphasizes teaching and training in the Sunday School. Other fast growing denominations emphasize the Bible Institute. Are they functionally equivalent? How much of this growth is attributable to effective Sunday School or its functional equivalent?

General Conclusion

Guatemala is undeniably one of the most successful accounts of evangelical church growth in all Latin America. The Joshua Research Project has been the most profound and detailed analysis of the Evangelical Church performed in meso-america. It serves as an accurate gauge for future church growth. It also contains many lessons and experiences that can be applied to similar mission settings in other countries. The procedures of the Joshua Project can also serve as a template for future studies of this nature in other countries and people groups.

The Joshua Project has served as a vehicle to improve lines of communication between some denominations. It has helped to cross-pollinate denominations with effective methodologies and basics of church growth. One of the most gratifying experiences was to observe actions taken by certain denominations as a result of understanding the information presented in this research. Missions have been started in under-reached areas and people groups. Some leaders have expressed their plans to refine their process of discipleship and others have set new goals for church growth. Several denominations are beginning to refocus upon fundamental elements of the Church. This was voiced by the *Alianza Evangélica*, "We need to focus upon the information that is common to all of the denominations. First of all, the Evangelical Church must address the issue of holiness and sanctification of its members. Secondly, we must address the issues related to illiteracy within the Church so that people will be able to know the Word of God and through it, raise their lives. Thirdly, as a Guatemalan Church, we must become a world missions church. We must now focus on sending out missionaries from Guatemala to lost peoples throughout the world."⁴

⁴Mynor Giron at the *Alianza Evangélica* and SEPAL meeting in Guatemala, Guatemala, 23 April 2002.