

Struggles of Latinos in Frontier Missions

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Overview: Serving the Lord in cross-cultural settings is filled with challenges and opportunities. Latinos over the last 30 years, have been going to many frontier areas, doing a variety of mission and humanitarian work, including planting culturally-sensitive churches. Three broad areas of challenge affect Latino workers: a) problems within the workers (e.g., relationship conflicts, cross-cultural adjustment); problems in the sending churches (e.g., few finances, doctrinal differences), and c) problems in the sending agencies (e.g., lack of planning, limited co-operation with others). These challenges also sound very familiar to those of us who are not Latinos!

I write this article from the perspective of a Latin-American missionary who has served in missions over the past 20 years. I have been able to work in a diversity of places--Mexico, the Middle East, North Africa, and Spain--and with a variety of organizations such as Operation Mobilization, Wycliffe, and Intervarsity. During the past 10 years I have been privileged to direct a Latino ministry, PM International. Our purpose in PM International is to place teams of Latin-American missionaries in the Muslim world for the purpose of church planting. More recently, I have been involved in interagency partnerships for North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Central Asia.

Co-Laborers with God

Serving the Lord in cross-cultural frontier settings is quite a complex enterprise, humanly speaking. It requires the formation of organizations, competent administrative support, personal and spiritual maturity, local church involvement, an enormous spirit of cooperation and service on the part of all those involved in the work, and a broad understanding of what the Lord is doing in the world. Fortunately for all of us, it is the Holy Spirit who carries the final responsibility of accomplishing this great task. The Lord of the harvest knows where to sow, where to reap, and what type of workers will have to be sent to each situation.

Nevertheless, we have been given the opportunity to work together with the Lord through the use of our own resources, thus leaving in our hands a large part of the responsibility of finishing the global evangelism task. When we consider the human dimension in missions, an often unpredictable and complicating factor occurs which is best referred to as "the problems of the missionary in the field".

In the remainder of this article I will address some of the common problems that I have observed within the ranks of Latino missionaries. Without wanting to sound too simplistic, I see three core areas that contribute to missionary ineffectiveness: personal problems within the worker, problems in the sending church, and problems in the mission agency.

- 1. Problems within the worker:* the deterioration of personal relationships with other workers, the inability to adapt to the new culture and learn the language, unresolved problems affecting one's emotional stability, and the lack of tools for spiritual survival.
- 2. Problems in the participating church:* lack of financial resources, doctrinal differences, and inability to help missionaries find meaningful work.
- 3. Problems in the mission agency:* lack of planning and strategy development, and lack of cooperation with other agencies.

Problems Within The Latino Worker

Working overseas requires hardy individuals who are aware of their strengths and weaknesses, who are able to endure hardship and work harmoniously with others, and who can maintain their spiritual vitality.

- 1. Deterioration of Personal Relationships.* It is often said that the greatest problem for missionaries is getting along well with one's team mates and colleagues. This is certainly true of Latino missionaries. Latinos are a heterogeneous group. Although they are often grouped together under the term "Latino", their cultures can be very different. Nor do language similarities, geographic proximity, and even a

common vision and creed necessarily guarantee interpersonal harmony.

As with any group of missionaries, relationship problems discourage the rest of the team and can sow roots of bitterness and division. The Apostle Paul understood the importance of our relationships, which is why in his letters he frequently admonishes the churches to care for, encourage, and speak the truth to each other; in short, love one another.

Taking a look at our own organization, the number of instances involving severe conflict among our personnel have been minimal. We are grateful to God that we have not seen one case of the inevitable interpersonal friction turn into a proverbial "blood bath". A key factor in preventing this has been the emphasis of developing our personal relationships with one another, and having team leaders actively involved in the pastoral care of those on their teams.

2. Inability to Adjust to the Host Culture and Learn the Language. Not everyone who receives a "call" to the mission field will automatically receive a gift to learn the new language or languages needed. Language study requires much discipline and perseverance, and some Latinos do not find language learning to be easy. They have to make up for such an inability by employing much effort and determination. It is almost axiomatic to say that if a worker does not make significant inroads into the language within the first two years on the field, then it will be extremely difficult for him/her to learn it later.

We Latinos have some Evangelical jokes about foreign missionaries that come to our country and are not able to speak Spanish well. Now it is our turn to take on the role of the "village idiot" as we stumble through Arabic and other languages in our attempt to relate to the people in the host culture. How ironic this is, and my, what a sense of humor the Lord must have in permitting us to go through such situations.

Learning a language well and adapting to a new culture will determine whether a worker will either be effective or else produce "antibodies" that work against an understanding and acceptance of the gospel. It is really more a question of one's attitude than it is merely of one's actual ability to learn to interact with the new environment. If one comes to the host country with an attitude of superiority, as some Latinos have done, it will be difficult to fit into the culture and master the language.

3. Unresolved Problems and Emotional Instability. It is entirely possible for people who are basically intact in their Latino culture to struggle significantly on the field. Frequently people's past problems do not come to light while they are in their home country. But during a period of intensive stress that one often experiences during the first two years following arrival to the field, it can be surprising to see the things that come to the surface. Any deep emotional problem that has not previously been worked through, and often with the help of a qualified counselor, could make it very difficult to endure the work and tensions one encounters on the field. Some of the key areas to be addressed include one's family and individual background, spiritual growth, resolution of conflicts from previous team situations, honesty in one's relationship with others and the Lord, faithfulness, money management, flexibility, and the ability to forgive and ask forgiveness.

4. Lack of Tools for Spiritual Survival. In situations where there is isolation from spiritual resources, as is the case in the majority of Islamic countries, it is necessary to be self-disciplined in Bible study, seek out spiritual support from members of one's team or other workers in the area, have regular times of prayer, and exercise faith under difficult circumstances. Workers must be able to see as opportunities the variety of obstacles that they will experience on the field. Latino missionaries are no different.

It amazes me to realize that on the field there are a number of Bible "illiterates"--those who do not know their Bible! And although I am not advocating that Latino workers need to be theologians or graduates from Bible schools, the minimum requirement for a candidate is that they have read through

the Bible at least once and that they know how to study it for themselves.

Let us remember that by and large we are ministering to people that know very little, if anything, about the Bible, yet who have some very profound questions about our faith. "What is the Trinity?" "Is Jesus Christ the son of God?" "Are the Scriptures corrupt?" Not all Latinos come prepared being able to give a defense of their faith with wisdom and meekness.

Problems In The Participating Latino Church

The sending church plays a key role in determining the effectiveness of the Latino worker. The relationship between the church, the worker, and the mission agency is vital for the work to be successful.

1. Limited Financial Resources. This is a major problem that we have faced in the development of our mission. Churches, unfortunately, can "forget" about their commitments-- "out of sight, out of mind" as the saying goes. Or at times the economic situation of Latin-American countries does not permit funds to be transferred outside the country. Or else the funds designated for missions are diverted to other projects back home.

Living in many Islamic countries is more expensive than living in a Latin-American country. The concern and possible negative reaction of some church leaders is understandable when they realize that the cost of supporting one worker overseas is two to three times the salary of the pastor back home. The sending church's lack of experience in cross-cultural work on the one hand, and the lack of mission vision on the other are usually the reasons why Latino workers suffer from economic privations.

What helps to connect the church more with the workers? Field visits from church leaders really help, so that they can learn more about the work on the field directly. Another strategy is to get more people involved back home by setting up a church committee comprised of people who will diligently coordinate fund raising efforts for the worker.

2. Doctrinal Differences. This is a touchy subject, no doubt. Although not the norm, sometimes the local church can get caught up in the teaching that it is to take on the primary or exclusive role in missions. When carried to an extreme, this can lead to a break in the relationship between a worker and an agency, with the disastrous consequences that the worker ends up laboring alone. Another problem is that the local church can inappropriately view the agency as just a stepping stone in order to accomplish the programs developed by the church and denomination, or vice versa!

The only way out of these potential pitfalls that I have seen has been to engage in an honest and direct dialogue between the church, workers, and the agency. The place of each party must be respected, and flexibility and freedom must be allowed on matters of secondary importance.

3. Inability to Find Adequate Work. One of the problems that can jeopardize a person's call to work in Muslim countries is not finding a valid job in the country of service. I understand a "valid job" as being the type of employment one would obtain in his or her home country. It is a job based on one's abilities, according to one's academic preparation and life experience. I also believe that seeking out a work position for which one does not have the qualifications should usually not be used as a pretext for securing a visa. As finding a job to match one's skills is not always easy, getting training in another area--which might mean forgoing a sense of work-related fulfillment--is often needed.

Problems In The Latino Mission Agency

Latino mission agencies have much to offer and much to learn from each other as they help to facilitate the work of their missionaries.

1. Lack of Planning and Strategy Development. Our experience over the years has taught us time and time again that improvisation is not the way to work. "Point and go" approaches seldom amount to

anything, no matter how zealous one is. Personnel who are spiritually and academically qualified are required if we desire to do our mission task well.

Further, too often the planning process is overlooked through inexperience or else downplayed as not being spiritual enough. The mission agency itself must set the example in this area, given the fact that it likely has more cumulative field experience than the local church or the new missionary. Here are some core questions that all the agency, in conjunction with the potential workers and their local church, must answer to everyone's mutual satisfaction.

Who is going? Are the workers convinced of their call, competent in terms of their character and ministry ability, and experienced in Christian ministry?

Where will they go? Is there agreement and a sense of conviction concerning the location to work and the people group on which to focus?

With whom will they work? Will there be a team? How will the team relate together? Will they be sent primarily by a mission agency, local church, or a denomination?

When will they be ready to go? What preparation is needed and what logistical arrangements must be made prior to departure?

What will they do? What are their short and long-term goals? What methods have they agreed upon? How long is their commitment?

How will they be maintained and by whom? Who will provide the administrative help, work evaluations, and pastoral care to support the workers?

2. *Lack of Interagency Cooperation.* Although we Latinos are known to be more people and event-oriented than task-oriented, we do not always find it easy to work together and submit ourselves to one another. Distrust can lie just beneath the surface. This is true in the case of Latin-American churches that launch out into missions on their own. I have seen such churches not take advantage of experienced mission agencies that can act as intermediaries, thus bypassing some important resources necessary to work effectively overseas.

The Latino, generally speaking, is a born individualist. Surprised to hear this? We have reached this conclusion as a mission agency, after having observed this trait or at least tendency within various Latino mission organizations. Some Latinos that have passed through North Africa, for example, mistakenly think they now have the right to initiate a new organization--and one which likely is doing what another dozen Latino organizations are already doing! Western models do not necessarily help here either, where competition and the desire to be preeminent can be two of the main unwritten rules. We must understand that God is calling us to join together to advance the cause of missions by means of global cooperation.

How refreshing it is to sense the cooperative attitude between mission agencies that permeates some of the newly established regional partnerships. It feels something like, "Hey, here I am with a vision and some resources. Is there a place for us with you all? Can we be of help or help complement some of what you are all doing?" What agency would not respond favorably to such an attitude of servanthood, and offer a helping hand in return?

Conclusions

The above struggles of Latino missionaries seem to have a familiar ring to them. In other words, both Western and Latino workers have similar challenges: personal growth, cross-cultural adjustment, conflict resolution, agency cooperation. What affects Paul also affects Pablo.

As a Latino mission organization that has just begun to take its first steps in the Islamic world, we are understanding how difficult it is to live in Muslim cultures, especially when entire families come abroad. Our work requires a great deal of effort from all those involved: sending church, workers themselves, and the agency that facilitates the ministry. The upshot of such a cooperative effort will be a ministry that models unity and promotes excellence as we fulfill the Lord's charge to us.

Questions for Discussion

1. Conventional wisdom often says that it is easier for Latinos than Westerners to work in certain Muslim cultures, primarily because their cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds are more similar. Would you agree with this idea?
2. What are some of the strengths of Latino missionaries and administrative personnel?
3. What are some possible obstacles to overcome in seeking to put together an effective church planting team of Latin-Americans?
4. Are there any generalizations in the article that you disagreed with? If so which ones and why?
5. What about Latinos serving in a Western mission agency? In what ways might their struggles be similar or different from those serving in Latino agencies?

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