

Costa Rican Evangelicals Poised for Mission Advance

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In 1989, 20 national and regional consultations have been held around the world focusing in on what can be done in world evangelization by the year 2000 and beyond. Luis Bush gives his first-hand experience of Alcance 2000 held in Costa Rica.

Costa Rican evangelicals drew up strategic plans to develop the growing missions' momentum in this tiny Central American nation at "Alcance 2000," a mission's congress held in San Jose, Costa Rica, in August 1989.

By Luis Bush

Freedom and Stability

Costa Rican missionary effort has benefited from the country's peaceful democracy and one of the most stable economies in Latin America. Dr. Oscar Arias, President of Costa Rica, recently received the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts for peace in an otherwise turbulent Central America. As agents of peace and freedom, Costa Ricans are welcome in most places. With no standing army, the nation maintains a neutral posture in an otherwise turbulent region. Thus, ambassadors for Christ from Costa Rica not only present no threat but are usually well-received in other parts of the world.

Fullness of Blessing

The growth of the evangelical church in Costa Rica is another reason for its missionary initiative. As a result of the fullness of God's blessing in the evangelical church in Costa Rica, many talks of the unusual work of God in the nation in recent years.

For some from the Catholic tradition or others who maintain a secular humanist perspective, the growth of the evangelical church constitutes a cause for alarm. The press has featured the church in recent reports. For example, on July 25, 1989, the weekly magazine, *Rumbo*, used a tambourine, a typical instrument of worship in evangelical churches, on the front cover, touting the article reports that the Protestant community in Costa Rica exceeds one-half million or 18 percent out of a total population of 2.8 million people. This compares to one percent in 1949 and 10 percent in 1980, according to CECODERS, a Catholic center in Costa Rica. The writer of the article observed, "On Sunday mornings, it is normal to see groups of men, women, and children with Bibles under their arms going to church or house to house." This article was preceded by a six-page article in the previous week's edition of *Rumbo* on the same subject, as well as a major newspaper article in the July 19 daily *Prensa* under the heading "Democracy and Message Augments Protestantism."

While non-evangelicals may be un-easy about the rapid growth of the evangelical church, Costa Rican Christians rejoice in what God is doing. But they also recognized the danger of complacency and prayerlessness. Thus, the first day of Alcance 2000 was dedicated to seeking God for a national movement of united prayer for spiritual awakening and a new mission thrust. Reminding themselves of the history, principles, and models of great prayer movements of the

past, participants met by geographic regions to strategize and to pray for a united movement of prayer in their region, for a renewed vision of Christ, for restored unity and resolve, and an expanded ministry to the unreached by the year 2000.

Fulfillment of Plans

The Alcance 2000 conference in Costa Rica is part of a process that draws from the spirit of two previous movements. The first is COMIBAM (Cooperation in Missions in Ibero-American outgrowth of the COMIBAM conference in Sao Paulo, Brazil, 1987) a co-sponsor of the Alcance 2000 event. Alcance 2000 also unites with the spirit and conviction of the AD 2000 movement, born out of the Global Consultation on World Evangelization by the Year 2000 and Beyond (GCOWE) held in January 1989 in Singapore. The Great Commission Manifesto, one of the results from the GCOWE Consultation, which commits Christians to the goal of world evangelization by the year 2000 and beyond, was prominent in the front pages of the congress document, Alcance 2000.

The declaration of Alcance 2000 in Costa Rica affirmed the commitment to consider the year 2000 as a strategic date for the evangelization of Costa Rica and the world. In the first section of the document, entitled "Our 2000 Agenda," pastors and denominational leaders committed themselves to the goal of sending between 200 and 500 missionaries to start a church-planting movement among 30 to 50 unreached people groups by the year 2000. The participants considered this the Costa Rican church's proportional part of the challenge of reaching the 12,000 remaining unreached people groups in the world. This goal was based on the percentage of evangelicals in Costa Rica in relation to the total number of evangelicals in Latin America and the world.

Short-term Efforts

The Costa Rican church has already begun to work towards this goal. Missions efforts from Costa Rica have increased dramatically in the last five years. Since 1985, when the first missionary conference in Costa Rica was held and the first interdenominational mission agency was established, churches have sent over 60 short-termers to the city of Medellin in Columbia and to Mexico City as part of the "Christ for the City" program. Another 40 have traveled to the Amazonian provinces of Peru to establish a missionary and evangelist training school, and for church planting.

The Amazonian Mission of Costa Rica was organized in 1985, and the target of this mission is the 1,000-kilometer square, inhospitable Amazonian jungle area, including the four provinces of Peru: Loreto, Ucayali, San Martin, and Amazonas. A training school has been established in Iquitos, which today trains 112 local evangelists in a six-month program.

The three launches of the Costa Rican Amazonian Mission carry evangelists to share the Gospel with nineteen tribes who live along the banks of various rivers. Nineteen churches have been established among the tribes, particularly the Urartians, Chivas, and Comillas.

Juan Javier, an Indian from the area, received Christ. Not knowing how to read or write, he memorized John 3:16, and has established a small church in his village using only that one verse. Although the location is only accessible by a one-and-a-half-hour flight from Lima, 40 short-termers have gone to serve from Costa Rica in a mission financed entirely by Costa Ricans.

But missions' leaders in Costa Rica believe the major emphasis should be to send missionaries to long-term missions' assignments which they believe will bear more fruit in completing the unfinished task.

Long-term Efforts

A Spanish-speaking team was sent to Spain two years ago, including a gifted denominational leader and a musician. They founded the Spanish Institute for Evangelism in Depth to train pastors and church leaders. They also planted a growing church of more than 40 members in a short period of time. Another major initiative by the Costa Rican church is to care for Nicaraguan refugees in Costa Rica, and to encourage the church in Nicaragua. Costa Rican missionaries have been working in evangelism and discipleship and will be assisting in the organization of the first Nicaraguan missionary conference of Alcance 2000 in December of this year.

Dr. Julio Becas, an orthodontist, has been sent to an unreached people group among the Muslims in North Africa. Another medical missionary is studying Arabic in preparation to working with Muslims in North Africa. A training school in the jungle in Costa Rica, led by Peter Jones, a Costa Rican missionary, provides preparation for long-term missions work to minister to animistic tribal groups.

A Small Country Sets the Pace for Other AD 2000 Initiatives

It was in July 1985 that the first missionary conference in Costa Rica was held, in which 44 denominational and Christian organizations participated. The consultations in 1985 became a model and a prototype for other consultations throughout Latin America and the Iberian section of Europe. This was the first of a series of 30 other national consultations which were part of the COMIBAM process leading up to the conference in November 1987.

In the same way, the Alcance 2000 consultation seems likely to become a prototype for other initiatives through-out Latin America, as plans are now underway for similar congresses in Chile in October 1989; in Argentina in November 1989 for the six countries of the Southern Cone; in Paraguay, Uruguay, Nicaragua, Colombia for the Andean countries; and Puerto Rico for the Caribbean countries. The materials from this conference will be shared with the other organizers, and there will be a cross-fertilization of ideas.

In other regions of the world, plans for national and regional AD 2000 consultations are already underway: in West Asia, with the representation of 11 countries in the Middle East; in Africa, with Zaire, Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and other countries. Among the Chinese, a network of 6,000 outside of mainland China will be having their GCOWE in North America and an international conference in the next two years. Other consultations will be held in the South Pacific in December 1989; in South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Europe, including Belgium, Italy, and France. National network leaders representing affinity groups in their countries of the AD 2000 movement will be asked to participate in the GCOWE II conference planned for July 1-15, 1994, and for an evaluation of the progress of world evangelization, particularly in terms of the adoption and initial penetration of the 12,000 unreached people groups as well as their efforts within their own countries and the cities of the world.

The church in Costa Rica may also be setting a model for targeting a number of unreached people groups in proportion to their percentage of the total evangelical population.

A Modern Day Jonah

But while God is using cooperative efforts and strategic planning in this accelerating program of world evangelization, the Costa Rican conference also highlighted the importance of individual obedience.

At the first missionary conference held in Costa Rica in 1985, Rafael Baltodano was over 65 years old. As one of the leaders of the “Evangelism-in-Depth” program, he had served effectively to encourage the mobilization of the church for evangelism in many countries in Latin America. As a respected leader in Costa Rica, he was one of the speakers at the first missions consultation. Out of that meeting came the proposal to establish the first Costa Rican interdenominational mission agency.

By the second day of the constitution, Rafael began feeling ill. He recognized that the momentum of the consultation was growing and a definite interest in supporting the establishment of this mission agency was escalating. But his physical weakness reinforced his conviction that he had done his share in the work of the Lord.

He decided to slip quietly out of the conference before he was asked to do anything. He went to his room and collected his belongings. With his bags in the car, he turned on the ignition, but nothing happened. He asked several people standing nearby to give him a push, but to no avail. Rafael had no other choice but to go back to his room, unpack his things and return to the conference. Sure enough, when it came time to choose a committee to lead in the finalizing of plans that lead to the formation of the new mission agency, his was the first name suggested. Rather sheepishly he lifted his hand and agreed, “I’m available; I’m ready.”

When the conference was over, he got in his car to leave. This time when he turned the ignition, the car started immediately. Rafael later told his friends that, like Jonah, he was thankful to be called a second time. So, today, at almost 72 years of age, Rafael Baltodano continues to actively serve the Lord and to encourage the missionary thrust out of his country.

God is using many like Rafael in Costa Rica to move the growing evangelical church forward in its role in world evangelization. Alcance 2000 is a positive commitment to the race to complete the goal by the year 2000 and a celebration of its ultimate victor, Jesus Christ, whether we make the goal or not!

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