

Missiological Factors in the Growth of the Church in Chiapas

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As we celebrate eighty years of the work of the Reformed Church in America in Chiapas, Mexico, one fact leaps out: the growth of the church has been extraordinary! God has so blessed the work of missionaries and Chiapas evangelists and pastors that the number of believers in the National Presbyterian Church in Chiapas has surpassed the total membership of the Reformed Church in America. The growth of the church in Chiapas is even more astounding when we hear official statistics that show that the combined number of all Protestant/evangelical denominations in the state constitutes more than one-third of the total population, or more than a million people. In this article I would like to highlight a number of missiological factors that have contributed to that impressive church growth.

The Anthropological Approach

Before we attribute the incredible expansion of the kingdom of God to any human factors, we must acknowledge God's power and sovereign plan in all that has taken place in Chiapas. However, God has chosen to use missionaries and missiological approaches in carrying out that plan. Eugene Nida declared that good missionaries have always been good anthropologists.¹ From the very early days of the work of John and Mabel Kempers, and especially in the principles of the Chiapas Mission of the Reformed Church in America (R.C.A.), the accepted approach for any new missionary has been to live with the people and learn the indigenous language. The clear expectation was that missionaries would respect and study the culture. When my wife Carla and I arrived for our first term of evangelistic mission work in Chiapas, my first impression was that our approach was to be much like that of a cultural anthropologist. Since we had been called to do pioneer evangelism in an unreached tribe, our first task was to find a tribal village where we could live with and learn from the Zinacanteco indigenous people.

My training in theology at Western Theological Seminary had prepared us for many things, but not the resistant and strange world in which we found ourselves immersed. Our first day living with an Indian family was filled with the chanting of a shaman who sacrificed black chickens and poured out liquor libations in a ceremonial ritual that overwhelmed us. As evangelistic missionaries, our task was to share the good news of Jesus Christ, but the language and worldview barriers seemed insurmountable. We had little choice but to use an anthropological approach:

Effective missionaries have always sought to immerse themselves in a profound knowledge of the ways of life of the people to whom they have sought to minister, since only by such an understanding of the indigenous culture could they possibly communicate a new way of life. ²

Prior to our intrusion into the Zinacanteco tribe as white foreigners, the indigenous people had known a few Harvard University anthropologists. So when asked what we had come to do in that tribal area, our answer was that we had come to study their language and culture. We were immediately identified as cultural anthropologists, a category that was acceptable and understandable in their cultural context. To have identified ourselves as evangelistic missionaries would have meant to the Zinacantecos that we would threaten and destroy their Mayan culture and religion.

An Incarnational Approach

To communicate the gospel in resistant or hostile societies much more is required than knowledge of the language and understanding of a culture. One of my first guidelines came from a joint meeting of the Chiapas missionaries in 1969. We had just arrived on the field following linguistic training and missionary orientation. "Your first task will be to find a Zinacanteco village where you can live and learn the Tzotzil Indian language," was the counsel that we were given. Village living was one of the clear principles for initiating work among the resistant indigenous people in Chiapas. In order to avoid immediate rejection, it was necessary for us to not only live *with* the indigenous people, but to attempt to do everything humanly possible to live *like* them. For us this meant sharing a one-roomed dirt-floored Indian house with an Indian family in a Zinacanteco village in which there was no evangelical Christian witness. It meant learning to dress like, carry water like, and eat like the people of the host culture. Since there existed no running water or electric energy systems in the villages at that time, life-style adjustments were harsh and demanding. This incarnational approach has been the bridge for Chiapas missionaries to cross the difficult cultural boundaries and make identification and acceptance possible.

In order to gain a culture's permission to communicate the message of the gospel, this incarnational approach is foundational, especially in resistant and hostile situations. Charles Kraft has pointed out that God is our ultimate example of incarnation. When God revealed himself in Jesus Christ, "God not only came, he became. [God], in Christ, identified himself with his receptors. God in Jesus became so much a part of a specific human context that many never recognized that he had come from somewhere else."³ We have witnessed missionaries from other mission agencies who have attempted to minister to indigenous people while living at a distance in one of the cities, and who have insisted that it is not

necessary to communicate in the indigenous languages. Their lack of effectiveness has been marked by the fact that within a few short years most of them have been "called by God to move on to another ministry." The clear fact is that the incarnational approach, an intentional and personal involvement in the life style, felt needs, and worldview of the people to whom we minister, has been a crucial growth factor in Chiapas.

Indigenous Languages

Another important guideline that we received from the Chiapas Mission was: *For effective communication, it is essential to learn the indigenous language and do mission work in that language.* I can remember missionary J. Samuel Hofman suggesting that our first five years would be dedicated to language learning. It was never an option to evangelize tribal areas using the Spanish language. So learning the Tzotzil language was our first major assignment. The Zinacanteco village in which we were allowed to live was highly monolingual; therefore, we were not allowed the Spanish crutch for our early communication. We were forced to learn the Tzotzil language to survive, and since "necessity is the mother of language learning," we were blessed to have to learn language in real situations from real people. Tzotzil became our new language, Zinacanteco our new culture, and we began to build relationships with a new people. These would prove to be the keys that opened the doors of communication to a resistant tribal people. The ability to be an active participant in the heart-language of a people is essential to effective communication, especially when the goal is to reach the hearts of people with the gospel message.

The Missionary as Evangelist

A third major emphasis in Chiapas is that the *missionary is first and foremost an evangelist.* Even before our arrival in Chiapas, my concept had always been that the goal of a missionary is to share the good news of Jesus Christ with those who had never heard. John Kempers, who retired from his work in Chiapas just before we began our first term, shared with us that same emphasis. His courageous pioneer venture of covering the entire State of Chiapas on horseback exemplified his aspiration: *Chiapas para Cristo* ("Chiapas for Christ"). His passion for reaching the unreached tribal groups in Chiapas caught fire in my wife and me as a young, adventurous missionary couple.

The Zinacanteco tribe was one of those unevangelized tribes, and while we could have begun our work as teachers in a Bible school in the Ch'ol tribe where R.C.A missionaries had already established a growing church, we felt God's call to be evangelists. Ken Jacobs, a Wycliffe Bible translator in the neighboring Chamula tribe, encouraged us to "give birth to a church" in an area with no Protestant/evangelical presence. We were warned that it would probably take

more than twenty years before we would see any converts in that resistant tribe, yet our calling as missionaries compelled us to be evangelists (2 Cor. 5:14). As missionaries we must first consider that God "has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us" (2 Cor. 5:19b-20a, NIV).

The missionary thus sets an example for the new believers, and eventually for pastors and leaders of the new church. If the missionary has given priority to personal evangelism, the first believers of the new church will follow that example. As a tree can only bear fruit of its own species, so the missionary/evangelist will reproduce what he or she has modeled. The early missionaries in Chiapas (not only R.C.A. missionaries) lived out this principle, and the result was that the first believers in each tribal group became fearless evangelists, even in the face of threats of violence and persecution. As a result, the church multiplies. This very basic missiological principle rings true for pastors and church leaders in any context or culture.

Healing Ministry and the Power of God

The new Protestant/evangelical believers in Chiapas emerged from an animistic worldview; their indigenous spirituality was not dominated by a Western scientific worldview. In other words, they believed that health and wholeness are determined by spiritual power and not by medical science. In the pre-Christian religious practices, the indigenous shamans served as both seers and curers. Their function was to call upon the spirits and deities, and by means of blood sacrifices and appeasement to bring healing. So when indigenous Christians began to read and interpret the Bible, they readily understood that it was God's power that brought healing and freedom from fear. Evil spirits that caused disease and adversity were overcome by the power of Jesus Christ.

The good news of God's power and of forgiveness without animal sacrifices became the central themes of evangelization in the animistic tribal areas. Stories of God's miraculous healing of disease and of power over the evil spirits spread through families and villages. In the Tzotzil tribes, the most compelling factor in the spread of the gospel has been this witness to the healing power of God. In informal surveys that my wife and I have done, we have found that approximately 90 percent of the Tzotzil Protestant/evangelicals originally responded to the gospel after witnessing a miraculous healing. New Christians defend their decision to follow Christ by telling that one of their family members has been healed of a serious disease through the power of God. This witness to the healing power of Christ ripples through kinship groups and produces rapid growth because it fits readily into the indigenous worldview concept that healing comes through spiritual power.

In Chiapas it is often the indigenous Christians who have led Western missionaries into a healing ministry. Our Reformed background can limit our view of the spiritual power that God has made available to us for evangelization. However, when we witness the power of God actually to cast out evil spirits and miraculously heal the sick, and then we reread the biblical account, our Western scientific worldviews are challenged. We see that Christ can give freedom from curses and illness, from alcoholism and drug addiction. What has been understood as scientific medical work is thus converted into a healing ministry in which Christ is glorified as the healer. This is probably the most overwhelming factor in the multiplication of Protestant/evangelical Christians in Chiapas!

Bible Translation

Another important aspect that has contributed to the work of the Lord in Chiapas is Bible translation. During our internship in Chiapas from Western Theological Seminary in 1966, Paul and Dorothy Meyerink introduced us to this essential facet of the task in Chiapas. We witnessed these missionaries dedicating their time and their lives to the translation of the Word of God in the Tzeltal language. In the Tzotzil area we worked alongside Wycliffe Bible translators who not only became our coworkers but also impressed on us the importance of making the Word of God available in the heart language of each tribal group. They finished the translation of the New Testament into several of the Tzotzil dialects, laying the foundation for the work that would follow.

Respect for indigenous culture and language can find no higher expression than in Bible translation. When people are enabled to translate the Word of God into their own mother tongue, they are empowered to develop their own church, to form their own biblical theology, and to construct their unique cultural forms of worship and music. Thus, R.C.A. missionaries in Chiapas have emphasized the translation of all biblical materials into the indigenous languages. My wife and I were invited by the Tzotzil believers to coordinate the translation project of the first full Bible in the Tzotzil language in 1987. Working in consultation with the Mexican Bible Society, and combining efforts of Presbyterian pastors and elders with the labors of Roman Catholic catechists, the ten-year interconfessional project proved to have multiple positive effects. It provided a real impetus in breaking down the walls of resistance and intolerance, thus becoming an important factor in the growth of the church and in promoting reconciliation in the religious and political conflicts that have traumatized the indigenous regions of Chiapas. The Bible translated into the indigenous languages has been an essential factor in the growth of the church in Chiapas.

Support for Persecuted Christians

In Chiapas the growth of the church has caused persecution, not the other way around. As the increasing number of believers in Christ became a threat to the power of tribal leaders and shamans, persecution exploded in our faces. In spite of all of our efforts to show respect for indigenous cultures and to avoid causing resistance to the gospel message by projecting a Western worldview, the threat to traditional power structures resulted in persecution, as it almost always does. From the 1950s until the late 1990s persecution endangered the lives of believers and slowed the growth of the church.⁴ When persecution becomes violent and persistent it can completely halt that growth.

The R.C.A. has supported the persecuted church in Chiapas faithfully. Missionary work to prepare indigenous leaders for the impending onslaught, as well as relief and relocation efforts during times of expulsions from tribal homes, helped the church survive. Severe persecution can result in a weakened and divided church, but the support and involvement of the R.C.A., through its missionaries, sustained suffering groups of Christians effectively. During the more than twenty years of violent expulsions of Tzotzil Christians in which approximately twenty-five thousand people were displaced from their tribal homelands, Reformed Church World Service backed the formation of Protestant relocation communities where expelled Christians could reconstruct their lives, homes, and churches. As anthropologist Jan Rus stated it:

You provided a culturally acceptable alternative for indigenous people to escape the cruel oppression of tribal mafia leaders. You offered land and communities where persecuted Tzotziles could maintain their tribal identity and indigenous language, and at the same time find freedom from repression. No wonder so many indigenous people were attracted to the evangelical movement.⁵

The establishment of Christian human rights and legal defense organizations was another important contribution in enabling the suffering church in Chiapas both to survive and to thrive. During times of aggressive persecution, the lack of legal guarantees in Mexico made it urgent to establish the Christian Legal Defense Committee. Since its conception in 1985, thousands of persecuted Christians have endured the pain and pressure of persecution because of the legal protection and encouragement offered to them. Even more significant are the long-term achievements that have brought about a time of relative tolerance and religious freedom in Chiapas. In tribal villages where believers received death threats just a few short years ago, new house churches are springing up. In tribal villages where terrorization had effectively discouraged any new believers, the Protestant/evangelical church is flourishing as never before. Through the combined labors of many Christians, the ugly face of persecution has nearly been obliterated. The church is growing in numbers and influence in Chiapas.

Recently I was told of several tribal councils and municipal presidencies where Protestant/evangelical pastors and leaders are being invited to participate in tribal authority positions. This is a sign of major victory for the church.

Empowering Indigenous Leadership

One of the principal strengths of the Chiapas Mission of the RCA has been its emphasis on the training and empowering of local leadership in the church. We do not establish R.C.A. churches in Chiapas, but rather we have chosen to work as partners with the National Presbyterian Church of Mexico. This partnership concept is another of the innovative principles of R.C.A. It allows the indigenous church to create its own identity within a particular national and cultural context. The goal is to train indigenous leadership so that the pastors, elders, deacons, and other church leaders are enabled to govern themselves and to feel that they are freed from missionary domination.

R.C.A missionaries have concentrated most of their efforts in preparing written Bible study materials and in training indigenous leaders, and then turning the authority and control of the church over to them. Missionaries have often taken the initiative in establishing Bible schools and being the main teachers. This has been one of the major contributions of R.C.A missionaries from the early 1940s to the present. Bible schools have been launched and important leadership training provided with the support of the RCA in almost every language group in Chiapas. However, after several years of training in such schools, indigenous Christian students must be allowed to become the teachers of the succeeding generations. Missionaries who are not willing to step out of the way and permit the indigenous local leaders and teachers to have the authority and control eventually hinder the maturity of the church. This principle of allowing indigenous leadership and ownership is especially important in the areas of administration and finances.

The strength of the church in Chiapas has been lay leadership. From the very beginning the new Christians have grabbed the baton from the missionary and have done the main evangelism and outreach. These lay evangelists did not wait for ordained clergy to share the good news of Jesus Christ. Thousands of stories could be retold of courageous new believers who, with a minimal amount of biblical training, went out into their tribal areas regardless of persecution threats, to pray for the sick and communicate the gospel message in places where missionaries could not or dared not go. As the church grew, the ordained pastors and missionaries who were wise enough to mobilize and empower the lay leadership in the churches continued to see the church grow rapidly. It may have been a blessing that the church grew so rapidly that the number of ordained ministers could not keep up with the growth. The result was that a few ordained ministers had to function like circuit riding bishops, each supervising fifteen to

twenty congregations. The elders and deacons became the true pastors of the flock on the local level. These lay pastors became the core and strength of the church, and for many years the leadership training was aimed primarily at these indigenous elders and deacons. These lay leaders spearheaded an evangelistic movement that was mainly responsible for the incredible growth of the church.

A Missionary Vision

Chiapas Christians have always demonstrated a missionary vision, expressed first in personal evangelism, and now in a vision that is being expanded to the whole world. When indigenous church leaders heard that I had been teaching missiology one semester a year at Western Theological Seminary, they asked me why I was doing that in the U.S.A. when I had not yet taught them any of those courses. So, a few years ago, a small group of Chiapas church leaders and pastors asked us to teach missiology courses in Chiapas. Charles Van Engen, professor of missiology at Fuller Theological Seminary and a former R.C.A. missionary in Chiapas, joined me in organizing a missiology course with a curriculum of study. Dr. Van Engen and I taught several of the courses, but we also invited many well-known missiologists to teach in their areas of specialization. After five years of intensive courses in mission outreach and the formation of the first Chiapas Missionary Agency, AMICH, the church in Chiapas is considering sending out its first missionaries to an unreached tribal group in the neighboring state of Oaxaca. Their future goal is to send Chiapas missionaries to one of the Arabic countries of the world. Prior to the recent death of Mabel Kempers, I shared with her the vision of the Chiapas Mission Agency. Her words were: "Oh, if only John could have been here to hear that. That will bring the mission in Chiapas to full circle."

The work of the RCA has been blessed by God in marvelous ways. Not only has the goal *Chiapas para Cristo* nearly been attained, the ultimate goal of all mission efforts is almost in place. When those who received missionaries catch the vision to send out missionaries to other parts of the world, the circle of mission is completed. Thus, the circle of world mission will continue, and we are privileged to play a key role in God's plan.

Conclusion

Since the inception of the Chiapas Mission of the RCA eighty years ago, a variety of missiological factors has contributed to a vibrant and growing church. May the story of Chiapas inspire others to cross ethnic and cultural boundaries with a gospel message that is communicated through sound missiological principles and approaches. As we celebrate God's work in Chiapas, may the RCA be challenged by God to continue to use its unique mission principles and witness to reach the many ethnic groups within the borders of the USA and Canada and

also in resistant areas of our multicultural world. Thus, the RCA will continue to be an essential part of the full circle of world evangelization and mission.

ENDNOTES

¹ Eugene Nida, *Customs and Cultures* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954), p. xi .

² *Ibid.*, p. xi.

³ Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979), p. 175.

⁴ Arthur Bonner, *We Will Not Be Stopped: Evangelical Persecution, Catholicism and Zapatismo in Chiapas, Mexico* (Universal Publishers/UPUBLISH.COM, 1999). This book provides a popular, relatively objective view of persistence in the face of persecution and of Christian transformation instead of armed revolution.

⁵ Jan Rus, veteran anthropologist who has worked among the Tzotzil tribes of Chiapas. Conversations in the 1990s.