

Latin America—A Changing Context

Gregory Rake

Introduction—Labels and generalizations

Can you name the major political ideologies in Latin America that affect elections? Have you seen a recent ad for Merrill Lynch that offers investment opportunities in Latin America and felt that economic progress had finally arrived? When you visited Quito, Mexico City or San José and saw a Pizza Hut or McDonalds did you have a sense that modernization had finally arrived via fast food? When you saw the statistics on economic growth for Chile, did you feel like maybe the dictatorship of Pinochet was worth it? Do you immediately associate Latin America with Liberation Theology? And as a result, think that Catholics and Protestants are and should continue together and wonder why missions continue to emphasize mission and evangelism in Latin America? Perhaps you read that Latin America was turning Protestant or Pentecostal and that there was tremendous revival, and so questioned the appeal for leadership training and development? If you have thought about these questions or have begun to form opinions and impressions of Latin America based on United States and European press, then I would invite you to a closer look at the context in Latin America.

When something is far away and our eyesight is not adjusted, it often appears blurry or fuzzy. We are unable to distinguish the details, the boundaries or differences. And if we do not take the time to move closer and adjust our vision, we will move on with an impression that may last for a long time.

Through the following article I would like to invite you to revisit the changing context of Latin America. There are changes occurring. Sometimes these changes are subtle, other times they offer sharp contrasts to the past, even the recent past. The following comments are not meant to be an exhaustive and in-depth analysis of the context in Latin America, rather I hope that I can re-engage the reader in further research and discussion into this exciting and dynamic region.

Briefly, the context will be examined from different perspectives where changes are happening that greatly affect the role of the church and mission today. Latin America provides an opportunity, like Africa and Asia, to observe a complex context

Gregory Rake is Director for the Americas for Mennonite Board of Missions and Secretary for Latin America for Commission on Overseas Mission, residing in Elkhart, Ind.

that involves the post-modern, modern, pre-modern. This requires much more in-depth analysis than can be provided here. Finally, examples are shown from different countries to illustrate how the Anabaptist movement through local churches responds to the challenges presented by this elaborate and complex context.

Economic shifts and trends

During the past ten to fifteen years, most of the economies of Latin American countries have and continue to move from state owned and controlled economies into the **neo-conservative** free market system or as translated in Spanish, the neo-liberal policy. In some countries, the state administered businesses and services for the past forty to fifty years. There have been mixed results, including inefficiencies, highly subsidized economies and corruption. Private initiative existed along side and also benefited. Today, as the government businesses and services are being privatized, there may be an improvement in services—telephone lines may be more readily available, roads may be paved, but what are the other results? In a recent survey of Latin American economists by the *Latin Trade* magazine, the conclusion was that “the key social challenges facing Latin America five years from now will likely be the same as today: ensuring that the benefits of economic growth accrue to the lower-income groups in the (region).”¹

There is remarkable economic growth in Latin America. There are short-term benefits. What needs to happen to sustain the economic growth? In marketing, image is everything. Latin American countries are concerned about attracting foreign investment. They must project an image of stability and cheap resources—both human and natural. They must be able to “guarantee” high returns on investment with few restrictions on where the profit goes. As stated, there are immediate improvements. The challenge, today and for the immediate future, in Latin America and throughout the world is how this new wealth is distributed.

There is also a remarkable increase in poverty as the gap between the rich and the poor continues to grow. If the population is to stay ahead of this situation and the unemployment and misery it represents, the economies of Latin America would need to grow at the phenomenal rate of eight per cent a year. Part of this tragedy is the fact that fewer and fewer children are able to study and are forced to work at very early ages. So despite the growth there is a “dark side” to that growth.²

Socio-political scene

The general political scene might be characterized by apathy and hopelessness. There are exceptions, such as the recent elections in Mexico. Continuing the dismantling of a one-party system, Cauheteñoc was elected governor of Mexico, the most important state in the country. However, in most countries, the political scene continues to be dominated by those who have always ruled. Ideology seems to have little impact. The labels from the past do not apply to the present: Hugo Banzer, former military dictator of Bolivia, and the political party MIR, formed a coalition to challenge the ruling party. Banzer and MIR were enemies throughout the dictatorship and will

now co-govern. Given, the overall economic trends and demands there seems to be little confidence in political solutions. As more and more government businesses and services are privatized, the resources available to governments decrease, thus changing the role of government and its influence.

What is happening? How is it that these strange political allegiances are formed? Or that military torturers are released from the responsibility of their past crimes with little protest from those who suffered? Eduardo Galeano, a Uruguayan writer, suggests that corruption is not just something that happens in the political and business scene. He feels that even history and memory have been corrupted in order to support the interests of a few.³

Violence unleashed

During the military dictatorships of the sixties and seventies, violence could often be personified and identified with specific institutions. Today violence has been generalized and is present in every aspect of society in the region. Colombia may be an extreme example of the violence that is present throughout the region. Armed conflict seems to be on the decline as peace accords are celebrated in Guatemala, elections held in Nicaragua and terrorists “legitimized” through political participation. The question that needs to be asked is—have the conditions that fostered and supported this violence been dealt with and how? Furthermore, one is keenly aware that there is unprecedented violence in every aspect of Latin American society today.

Everywhere people complain about the gangs and thieves. With one of every six youth unemployed, not able to attend school and their consumer appetites whetted by advertisements, how else can you pay for Reeboks or Nikes that cost \$80 - \$100 and the minimum wage for a month may equal that or be less? Other kinds of violence, sexual abuse, domestic violence, probably always present, are now named and openly discussed. One of the strong cultural traditions of the large, extended and supportive family is coming to an end due to economic considerations, urbanization, etc. Divorce rates soar and children are abandoned to fill the streets.

Religious mosaic

The religious scene is as complicated as ever. The five hundred year domination by the Catholic church is being challenged from every sector. The globalization of the economy indirectly foments reflection on the ethnic roots and religious expression of native peoples. Ecumenical Protestantism, long identified with the political aspirations for change, are seeking new expressions. Fundamentalists and evangelical churches who once frowned on political involvement, today promote political candidates and parties. Independent churches continue to appear and experience unusual growth that extends beyond the region. Old and new religious movements, including Spiritism, Buddhism and “moonies,” are also present in this complex mosaic. Religious expression runs the gamut from what one might describe as pre-modern to modern to post-modern, all within the same context. In other words the context of Latin America is pluralistic and relativistic.

The responses of organized religions vary greatly. The Catholic hierarchy appears to be retrenching. After decades of support for the political and economic agenda of the poor, today there is an increased move to court the same aristocracy that was criticized in the past. Religious movements such as *Opus Dei* enjoy favor from Rome and extend their influence through schools, political parties and social welfare service organizations. The Base Communities, which were often described as the future of religion in Latin America have been isolated in institutional importance, although a recent meeting of these groups provides some hope.

The Protestant or non-Catholic Christian church is also complicated. The influence of North America is still profoundly felt, however the parallels with North American and European experience require closer examination. For several years the ecumenical movement, represented by the Latin American Council of Churches, courted the Pentecostal churches and movements to the extreme of not inviting Catholic representatives to the continental meetings held in Chile in 1995. More recently, the agenda seems to be moving towards establishing new relations with the Catholic Church, reflecting the agenda of European Protestant churches. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that this group represents a minority of Protestants in the region.

David Martin and David Stoll wrote two influential books in the early nineties that described and analyzed what was happening in the broader Protestant church in Latin America. They documented and presented the making of a new Protestant movement that would be a key to the future in the region. What has happened in the past five years is somewhat different. Jean-Pierre Bastian, a French sociologist living in Mexico, challenges some of their assumptions and suggests that the social changes expected as a result of the growing Protestant church in Latin America have not happened nor are they likely to occur.

Bastian documents that, in the past, Protestants in Latin America have brought a certain sociological revolution by challenging existing institutions, improving access to education, land reform, etc. If Latin America is truly turning Protestant as statistics and observation may suggest, why is the region not experiencing more profound societal impact as people are “converted”?

There may be several reasons. Bastian suggests that one reason may be the kind of leadership and organizational models that have accompanied the development of the independent, charismatic and Pentecostal churches in the region. He documents that the new Protestant growth continues and relies heavily on the rejection of Catholic authority and power. The asceticism of the new religious groups is not a response to Biblical teachings, but rather a rejection of Catholic pomp and excesses. The Bible is not a tool for education, it is a symbol used to replace the fetishes and icons of the Catholic church. What is most remarkable about the new indigenous movement is the reliance on strong and authoritative leadership. This replaces past models, but supports the self-analysis of most Latin Americans, that they need someone to tell them what to do and how to do it. However, not only is this submission applied to religious teachings, it is also used in brokering political favors for the interests of the

group and its leaders, thereby replacing priest and patron with one person, the pastor. It breaks from previous Protestant practice in that most often it aligns itself with those who are intent on preserving the *status quo*.⁴

Responses and challenges for mission

How does the existing Mennonite presence in Latin America respond to this complex context? How does previous and present mission activity from North America support and/or work with this situation? What other groups have identified with Anabaptist theology to present models for response? What are some of the challenges? A few examples from various specific contexts in different countries follow.

The Colombian Mennonite Church is celebrating fifty years of life. Its short history is rich in examples of how a church can respond to the changing context. A school that was established for children of leper patients many years ago has developed leadership from people who were forgotten by society. Today these leaders have developed programs like *Justapaz* that work at eliminating some of the causes of the endemic violence in the country. The staff works at mediation and the prevention of violence through training and many other activities. The church offers an alternative to the kinds of leadership models presented by society and other religious groups. This requires an enormous investment in discipling as a counter-culture effort taken from the Anabaptist tradition and scripture.

In the Chaco of Argentina, the Mennonite missionaries have walked alongside the independent Indian churches for over forty years, encouraging and resourcing leaders of the indigenous Christian movement. During most of this process, translation was an important component of the work. This was a very significant factor for the Indian people in the recovery of their self-determination. At the same time, the pressures of “progress” have created difficulties for these people and their very identity and peoplehood are threatened. In the midst of this globalizing context, continued missionary presence is a sign of support and recognition of the Indians’ worth as a unique people with tremendous spiritual gifts that could be shared with the larger church.

Another example of how the church responds is the work in Chile, through a program entitled, “5 + 2—Multiplying for all.” The title itself is a challenge to the prevailing economic practice in Chile. Recognizing that there is tremendous economic growth, the project suggests that the fruits of this progress need to be shared with all and not concentrated in the hands of only a few. The project, however, is much, much more than just a protest. The project provides a hands-on model of how work and economic resources can be used for more than just a few. Through a bakery and other activities a small group of committed believers work at providing opportunities for others, support for projects that work against domestic violence, and providing a practical way that people can live out their faith on a day to day basis.

In Brazil, a country where the gap between the rich and the poor is most noticeable, there is another kind of response. It is involved with bringing people into a new faith and preparing them for living that out in their daily lives. It also serves as a

reminder that “mission” is both local and far away. The new congregation of Samambaia continues to reach out to their neighbors with the good news of the gospel. However, despite their own obvious material needs, the small congregation recently sent a significant donation to the struggling church in Zaire. At the same time, Mennonites in nearby Brasilia, the capital of Brazil, seek ways of addressing the constant violence present everywhere.

These brief examples offer glimpses of how the church is responding in the complex context of Latin America. They are different ways of responding. What they have in common is their commitment to living out their faith in Jesus Christ. What they provide are practical ways, that are often “counter-culture” to the context in which they develop.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this article, I suggested that we need to change some of the labels or generalizations that we may use in describing Latin America. Change, everywhere, is happening at an incredible pace. The context for mission is changing. What is also needed is a change in strategies for mission. As can be seen from the examples, this is sometimes difficult as the Mennonite churches propose a different kind of response. Rather than always “riding” with the context and submitting to it, they are struggling with how to respond with an authentic witness that is based on scripture and that also reflects an Anabaptist response to the world around them. Can we do less?

Endnotes

- ¹ “Latin America 2000, Bridging the Future,” *Latin Trade*, March 1997, pp. 42—51.
- ² “Brasil—La pobreza aumenta en America Latina,” *Agencia Latinoamericana y Caribena de Comunicacion* (ALC), 15 April 1997.
- ³ Galeano, Eduardo, “Language, Lies and Latin Democracy,” tr. Ed McCaughan, *Harper’s* (Fall 1990) 280:19-22.
- ⁴ Bastian, Jean-Pierre, *Protestantismo y Modernidad Latinoamericana—Historia de unas minorias religiosas activas en America Latina*, Fondo de Cultura Economico, Mexico, 1994.