

“Esperanza Eterna”
Special Mission Update
November 2012
By Bob Young

October 2012 was filled with challenges and increasing opportunities to serve. Jan and I spent two weeks in Peru and were able to visit with numerous Christians as we tried to understand the state of the church in Peru. Along the way, we took advantage of the customary teaching and preaching opportunities, spoke at a family retreat, and visited with numerous preachers and church leaders.

With that brief summary of recent activities, I want to answer two questions I am often asked. **What is it that you do? How is what you are doing different?**

In the New Testament, Paul went back to the churches he had established. After establishing the churches in Galatia on the first missionary journey, he returned to help establish elders (Acts 14:23). After a short time, he went back again (Acts 16:1ff). A study of Paul’s travels shows that he followed this pattern throughout his ministry. Paul was not only interested in establishing churches; he worked toward the goal of establishing healthy churches. A church existed on Crete but the church did not have established leaders. Paul sent Titus to correct that which was deficient and to name elders.

Our primary work is that of visiting churches, some older and some recently established, trying to help **mature the churches so that biblical teachers and leaders can be developed and appointed**. Sometimes we receive requests from churches that are working diligently toward maturity but need a little help. We receive requests from churches that are near the point of disappearing, wanting to know how new life and a new spirit can be infused into the church again. Sometimes we receive invitations from churches that are experiencing conflict as a result of lack of leadership.

Let me describe what occurs fairly often across Latin America. **When leaders are not established as a part of the initial church plant, the church often has problems**. For example, a church was begun and grew to about 150. It was recommended to preacher that he work on establishing leaders but he did not follow the advice. Later a group of about 40 left to establish another congregation. One a recent trip we spent time reconciling the two churches, but now there are two congregations where there was one. (Really there are three, because a similar thing happened several years ago.) After we worked through the meeting of the two groups and were able to preach in both churches, on Wednesday night we learned of another group within the older church wanting to leave. We met with both sides until midnight, not allowing any backbiting or accusations, demanding that they follow Matthew 18 if it was a personal matter of discord. For the present, that meeting seemed to smooth the problem and the group desiring to separate agreed to call off any immediate separation.

An effective way to deal with the kinds of problems that predictably arise is to present seminars focused on basic Bible teaching concerning the church, leadership, and the Christian life. These seminars are generally presented at times and places that allow numbers of congregations to participate. The work is a process of training and maturing Christians, training and developing leaders and teachers, and often of “un-training” the preachers. Preachers tend to like their role as it exists without an established leadership. They have to learn that their work will be easier with effective biblical leaders in the local church.

Only through **effective teaching and training** can we change the typical pattern in which churches grow to a certain point and then divide or stagnate as a result of lack of leadership. Without the development of biblical leaders, the result is numerous smaller churches functioning without a plurality of leaders, often suspicious of one another. In some places, the church has years and years of history with minimal results. Without biblical leadership the churches tend to grow and then decline. Some churches established after several years of missionary efforts have disappeared after the departure of the missionaries. Lack of leadership appears to be a contributing factor.

This does not have to be! In Pasto and Cali (Colombia) on a recent trip, we discussed with local leaders the need to establish a new work in Popayán. Both churches are eager to help with the establishment of the work. It appears this will occur without U.S. funding. In Tuluá, we learned of a new church beginning in Buga. In Pereira, I learned of a new preaching point in La Unión. (The Pereira church has also been instrumental in the establishment of two new churches in La Virginia and Cartago.) This is possible in part because of the development of effective leaders.

In Peru, the church has a history of about 50 years, but I am told there is no more than one church with elders. (On my recent trip, I often heard that there were no churches in Peru with biblical leadership established.) Thankfully, the Cusco church we visited and worked with on our recent trip is working toward appointing elders. A few other congregations are focused also on the biblical model and are seeking to establish elders.

Across Latin America, it is not unusual to find churches with a history of 20-30 years of existence, but with only 30-50 members. Why? Why is the church not growing? Is it enough to explain that it is a hard area? I am reminded of the story of two shoe salesmen who went to Africa. One reported the impossibility of success, observing that no one wore shoes. The other reported that success would be almost automatic since no one wore shoes. Jan and I spent almost 15 years working in the northern part of the U.S. Most would say it is a hard area; the churches are few in number and generally small. But we saw a church in that “hard area” almost triple in 11 years—to an attendance of near 400. It is not enough to explain that we are working in a hard area. Every area is a hard area until we discover how the gospel softens hearts.

Why are there not more growing churches? There are many answers, but one factor is lack of leadership. Here is a fundamental truth. Without biblical leadership, many preachers find themselves involved in pastoral work and not in doing the work of the evangelist. Preachers do

not spend the time necessary to convert and mature committed members. One preacher can make the difference. One study showed that the difference between growing and stagnated congregations is five net additions per year per 100 members. One committed evangelist can be the difference between a growing church and a plateaued church.

The church in many places has a history of growing and then declining, sometimes disappearing, because of the failure to establish effective biblical leadership. The work we are doing to develop leaders and teachers is an essential part of helping the church move forward in places where it has failed to grow and mature. We seek changed attitudes on the part of preachers. We encourage churches to develop plans of action. We encourage a renewed focus on evangelism and sharing the good news. As we help develop mature Christians and teachers and leaders, we seek changed attitudes regarding the calling and vocation of the Christian. Finally, although the major focus of our work is not evangelism, almost always in our work there are baptisms as a result of the teaching and preaching that is done.