

Healthy Mission Work: A Case Study in Church Planting

By Bob Young

This case study presents a real situation I encountered. It analyzes the situation as it was described to me. The setting is eastern Guatemala. It is my custom on a first visit to a mission work to learn as much as possible about the history and setting so I can be of maximum help during the visit and in future contacts or visits. I ask a lot of questions to understand the needs of the church.

The first congregation was established 9 years ago in a major city (municipality) of the department. The department has 10 municipalities or primary cities. (In Guatemala, the departments are like our states and a municipality is like our county. Thus the first church was established in a county seat.) The region is economically depressed; coffee is the primary source of income. As a result income is meager and seasonal. In the past 9 years, the church has gone through two major natural disasters. First, an earth slide threatened the town and many of the residents moved away. The evangelists moved to a neighboring town for a time and traveled back and forth to the city regularly to maintain the infant ministry. As the city began to rebuild after it was declared safe, a disease hit the coffee plants and almost all of the coffee plants had to be torn out and burned and the crop replanted. That meant three years of no harvest so many residents moved away. At about the same time (about 5 years ago), one of the two couples who formed the original team left.

Despite these setbacks, the church has survived and has 30-40 in attendance. Even more impressive is the fact that five new congregations have been planted in the area encompassed by the municipality (county). The six churches together have an attendance of near 200. Recently, another evangelist joined the work so there is again a team of two couples working in the original church plant. The church leaders in the surrounding churches are unpaid volunteers.

The primary missionary in the initial plant has been supported by a US church for nine years. Some members of the mission committee from the church visited recently. The primary question they had for the missionary was whether he could establish elders in the next year so that they could begin withdrawing their financial support.

This suggests several lessons. First, it is important to establish healthy lines of communication and a clear understanding concerning the expected progress of the work. Second, a supporting church often focuses on starting the work and withdrawing as soon as possible. Supporting churches will be better served with a focus on establishing a healthy work that will become self-sustaining and provide a springboard for planting and establishing more churches in the mission area. Third, because churches want indicators of success, initial efforts in many mission works are focused on the number of baptisms. This focus at times leads to harvesting the easy fruit and fails to address the conversion of families and those who can provide a long-term base and stability for the church. The missionary presence is often withdrawn before the church becomes a healthy body of Christ capable of functioning on its own. Fourth, the establishment of leaders is only one part of the need, and establishing leaders before the church is naturally maturing and ready to function on its own often leads to more problems.