

COMIBAM as a process leading to a Congress

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“Results and Challenges among the un-reached” was the theme of the Third Ibero American Mission Congress that took place in Granada, Spain on November 13-17, 2006. The congress was summoned and organized by COMIBAM International.

An attendance of approximately 2000 participants from 37 countries represented in national delegations, alongside 288 Latin missionaries brought from their fields of service, interacted for four days, analyzing and evaluating the last two decades of the work that Ibero American churches have been carrying out among people groups of the world that have not had a clear opportunity to hear the gospel message.

For those who were at an Ibero American Mission Congress for the first time, this was an historic occasion. Representatives of the Ibero American mission movement were gathered with a select group of missionaries in order to evaluate the development and to plan the necessary adjustments for the immediate future. However, that was not the beginning, nor the end of the history of missions from our context, but an important new step in the development process of the Ibero American missions movement..

The history of this III Ibero American Mission Congress began in 1916 when a group of mission agencies and missionaries, mostly North Americans, met in Panama City to reflect together about the process and the method for the evangelization of the continent that has been forgotten in the Edinburgh plans in 1910. Jean-Pierre Bastian wrote about this congress: *Beyond a shadow of a doubt, the congress was the start of a continent wide evangelical movement that gave the work a clearly protestant vision of what they needed to accomplish.*¹ There began a process that brought the impulse to invest economic and human resources towards the evangelization of the world. It seemed that this part of the world could be reached alongside the efforts that were

¹ Bastian, Jean-Pierre, *Historia del Protestantismo en América Latina*, (México: CUPSA, 1990) 159

being put into Africa and some parts of Asia, and to complete the goal of evangelization in the current generation,² as was the motto of John R. Mott.³

The continent responded to a well-learned lesson: proclamation as a task of local evangelization. It seems that there were honorable exceptions, such as Brazil and Puerto Rico that awoke to their responsibility to share the gospel in other nations – closer for Puerto Rico, and farther for Brazil⁴. Evangelistic movements emerged in the 60's and 70's, with footprints still evident.

Missiological developments in Latin America followed Edinburgh in a very uniform way from 1916 to late 50's until the emergence of the Liberation Theology in the period between CELA I and CELA II. Liberation Theology provoked strong divisions between the more traditional and progressive wings of the Evangelical Church. Because of their connection with global realities, shaped especially by the cold war, the divisions were more difficult to solve. From 1961 to 1971, ISAL (Church and Society committee in Latin America) led the reflection on missiological issues for the conciliar churches, when it was disbanded for political and internal reasons. The other wing held the first CLADE (Latin American Congress of Evangelicals) in 1969 and has been leading the process of missiological reflection for the more traditional Evangelicals.

The lack of a clear leadership for the Church moved on the one side to UNELAM (Movement Pro Unity of Evangelicals in Latin America) to convene to a Continental Assembly of Evangelicals with the purpose of establishing a Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI). “For first time in the history of the Ecumenical Evangelical Conferences, 110 churches were represented in that assembly”⁵ and the creation of CLAI was approved later 1982 it was founded.

On the other side, as a result of the Consultation of Evangelicals in Latin America (Panama 1982), the Luis Palau Evangelistic Association, an organization linked with Billy Graham Association and with World Evangelical Fellowship (WEF—now

² WEF books, *The evangelicals The story of a Great Christian Movement*. (New York: Paternóster) 144

³ Ruiz, David “Cambios paradigmáticos en el liderazgo global de las misiones” *Manual de la II Asamblea Internacional de COMIBAM*, (El Salvador: COMIBAM) 2003

⁴ Ekstrom, Bertil. *El Espíritu de COMIBAM*. (Miami, Patmos) 2006

⁵ Bastian, 1990: 222

WEA), worked together to convoke a Confraternity of Evangelicals in Latin America (CONELA) in 1982

With the valuable work of the Mission Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), inviting key pastors for international mission conferences in the US, a burning desire was produced among some key leaders of the Latin American Evangelistic movements and CONELA to plan for an Ibero American Missions Congress: COMIBAM 87, as it was called. . Their goal was to bring together in Sao



Paulo, Brazil, a significant group of leaders that could hear the Macedonian call for the first time. This was how the passion to see the Ibero American Church involved in world missions began.

They achieved their objective. The adopted commitment at the end of the congress was: *United by the fervent desire to be light to the nations, we, the participants in COMIBAM 87, declare, trusting in the help of the Lord, in the direction and the power of the Word and of the Spirit, and we invite all of our brothers and sisters in Ibero America to get involved with us in the faithful completion of the mission that He has given us: "I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth"* (Acts 13:47).⁶

COMIBAM 87 has a place in history as the date when the Ibero American Church began to turn from being a mission field to becoming a mission force. Missions from Latin America to the rest of the world were born. Two phrases were coined at that congress. The first is "from mission field to mission force,"⁷ illustrating the paradigm shift that began at this event in Latin America: to see the church in Latin America as responsible for taking the message of Jesus Christ to all those who have not yet heard

⁶ COMIBAM 87, *Declaration, Results of the Iberoamerican Missionary Congress*, São Paulo, Brazil, November 1987.

⁷ This phrase was coined by Luis Bush, the first president of COMIBAM during the opening ceremony of COMIBAM 1987.

For many Latinos, the waiting to see the mission force active became too long and others expected a miracle. The former ones left prematurely, or better said, expectantly, because even when some of them returned hurt, others of those “Quixotes” continued on the field and are there until today!. But those that are still there reminding us of the second saying that came out of that congress: “neither with dollars nor computers, but with my Spirit said the Lord.”⁸ This is a Latin American paraphrase of Zechariah 4:6, reminding us that Latin missions are not about resources but about the urgency of the task and obedience to the command of the Master.

The following 10 years were of hard work and many emotions, seeing how that “small spark that can get a fire going”, as a famous chorus that we sang at that time in many Latin American countries, continued. During these years we tried both things: that the Ibero American churches would produce the force that would be able to complete its part in the evangelization of the world, and that it was not an issue of resources. Many small and poor churches began to teach lessons to the big and rich churches about how to fulfill the great commission.

COMIBAM 97, the II Ibero American Missions Congress, grew out of the felt need in the movement to evaluate what the movement had achieved since 1987, and to project a new vision for the future of the movement. The II Congress, COMIBAM 97, came in midst of accomplishments and many emotions. The meeting between agencies and mission-minded churches in Panamá on 1994, showed that the movement had matured to a level of being able to do its own self-evaluation of development and to suggest adjustments and necessary changes in the course of action in order to be the most effective.

This was the calling of the II Ibero American Missions Congress, COMIBAM 97: “An evaluation and projection of the Ibero American



⁸ This phrase was coined by Rudy Giron who became the second president of COMIBAM late in 1990.

mission movement.” The focus of the evaluation was based, principally, on the missionary process. Missionary screening, training, sending and pastoral care and supervision on the field were under scrutiny in Acapulco, Mexico.⁹

One theme that was not included in the evaluation in COMIBAM ‘97 was social action as missions’ work. At that time, it was more an element of division than it was of unity. This theme was not covered officially in the congress, but it was in God’s agenda, and a few weeks prior, Hurricane Pauline seriously affected the port of Acapulco, leaving many people in great need. The arrival of the participants in the congress was a ray of hope for many of them.

Almost 50 percent of the congress participants went out to the streets to help those affected, serving with the hands of Christ instead of enjoying the beauties of Acapulco during their free time. Obviously, none of those helped understood what COMIBAM or missiology meant, or even less, “unreached people,” but all knew the meaning of the love in the hands of those who went to them.

The II Ibero American Mission Congress transformed the movement. On the day it ended, plans for an “Ibero-Americanization” began aiming that the Ibero American peninsula would take a more significant role in COMIBAM. At the same time, the regionalization of Ibero America came into being and allowed for a potential development of national missions movements. The new administrative model of the movement was also created, and above all, a system of relief in leadership that would avoid an authoritarian leadership and maintain the direction of the movement connecting it with the Ibero American missions movements. *Bertil Ekstrom, The new President of COMIBAM International, outlined the vision for the future. COMIBAM seeks to be a facilitator and a catalyst, working to strengthen existing mission efforts in Latin America and to start new ones*¹⁰

Now, this III Ibero American Mission Congress, COMIBAM 2006 is the confirmation that we have achieved the objectives planted in COMIBAM 97. The congress was celebrated on the Iberian Peninsula, with the Spanish Church playing a significant

⁹ COMIBAM 97 Declaration, Results of the Iberoamerican Missionary Congress, Acapulco, México. November 1997.

¹⁰ Bush, Luis, COMIBAM 97: “An assessment of the Latin American Missions Movement”, *AD2000 and Beyond* [website] <<http://www.Ad2000.org/re71216.htm> (12 Diciembre 1997)

role. Also, the process of the selection and organization of the delegations, as well as the definition of which missionaries would come to the congress, was in the hands of regional directors in open communication with their participating countries. This demonstrates that the Ibero American mission movement is bigger than what we saw gathered in COMIBAM 2006.

But this congress also had its own purposes, and one of them very concrete: to see



missions from the perspective of the field. During this time we made a self-evaluation about our fruit among the un-reached. More than 280 active missionaries, working in more than 60 countries helped us to understand the reality of our missionaries on

the field, and we humbly recognized that our churches must grow in their support and care for them. We also recognized the spirit of sacrifice that moves our mission force to the field and keep them there in the mist of all struggles.

The second purpose was to ask about the effectiveness of COMIBAM as a catalytic element in the movement, and valuable consultations were celebrated. The desire is to collaborate in working plans, becoming more effective and responding to the needs of the field and of the mission community. A more relevant working plan for the future was put in the hands of the new leadership of COMIBAM.

The third purpose was to present a fresh proposal for the future. For the first time in our history, the leadership set together with the active missionaries in order to define the future of the Ibero American Mission Force. This was done through dialogue, reflection and prayer together. The 24 National Mission Movements met every day to reflect and to plan processes to respond to the daily information and to dialogue about the serious responsibility for the future of the Mission Force.

There is no doubt that COMIBAM III were part of the history of missions from Ibero America. Today, a new page has been written, and we are sure that, as in the other

two congresses, this page is also a beginning of a new and glorious chapter in the history of missions from the Ibero American Church.