

# COMIBAM

## Takeoff Toward AD 2007

*The mission movement in Latin America has a rich history and a growing impact.  
This will give you an overview of that movement and its goals for the future*

by W. Douglas Smith

**W**hile many have no doubt written about the impact of the COMIBAM movement from the inside and out, this writer would like to compare and contrast the two continent wide meetings that are the best know activities, using them as a springboard for the future of the movement.

Two thousand cross-cultural mission enthusiasts met in Acapulco, Mexico, 27-31 October 1997 for the second Ibero- American Missions Congress, COMIBAM '97, in spite of the devastating hurricane Paulina three weeks before. The purpose was to evaluate the transformation from a mission field to a mission force. How have we progressed in cross-cultural training and motivating the Latin church in world mission since the three thousand of us met and made this commitment at COMIBAM '87 in Sao Paulo?

Plenary speaker Patrick Joshua of India likened the past decade to "taxiing into position towards a joint take-off into the twenty-first century," provided we have the luxury of thinking about finishing the unreached peoples task during the 21st century. Or is God bringing in this harvest faster than we realize?

Thank God for the progress to date made by the outgoing board, headed by Rudy Giron who was commended with his wife, Alma, and four children

to their new challenge of establishing a theological seminary in Moscow, Russia. The incoming Brazilian President, Bertil Ekstrom, promises to continue expanding COMIBAM's main focus of productive cooperation among those participating in this network. Not only did the delegates wish to learn from past mistakes and failures in order to maximize their God-given potential, but they valued getting together enough to sacrifice time and resources to attend. The Latin Church generated over one million eight hundred thousand dollars US, in spite of the 15% who canceled because of Hurricane Paulina.

### **The Past Decade**

Although many delegations were keenly aware of falling short of their '87 goals, the past decade of taxiing into position can be appreciated by the following programs now in place.

1. Intercession, one of the '97 priorities, is fostered by nearly 10,000 Spanish language Global Prayer Digests published monthly in the Caribbean, Central America and Argentina; Operation World, and the COMIBAM prayer cards issued in preparation for this Acapulco conference. Rigoberto Diguero, who leads this effort, reports that though we have a long way to go, Spanish-version GPDs outnumber the present

English publication. This demonstrates how difficult it is to secure committed, informed intercessors, whether in English, Spanish or Portuguese. More practical use of these intercessory resources would have enhanced this priority during this conference, as it did in '87.

1. As agreed upon at the 1992 Costa Rican Adopt-A-People Conference, 3,000 unreached peoples have been adopted by the region (each country with a national quota). To multiply this effort, Director Patricio Paredes has divided the continent into eight regions, each with its own coordinator. An interesting introductory video prepared by the Global AAPC, directed by Phil Bogosian of Manila, highlights Latin churches partnering with mission agencies, with challenging field footage of Latin missionaries in action. Also, greater partnering is being encouraged between the local church and mission agencies, whether denominational or interdenominational.

3. Equipping of the next generation of cross-cultural Ibero-American missionaries by the churches, cross-cultural training centers and emerging vital national mission agencies were helpfully listed in the Ibero-American Missions Handbook edited by Ted Limpic, SEPAL, Brazil. Jonathan Lewis, who directs this COMIBAM training department, exem-

plifies the numerous emerging centers of mission training. These have an ample interdenominational spirit with the best local resources available. Thus, the critical need for increased sharing of expertise, resources, curriculum and professors through the expanding Internet.

4. A flowering missiological literature base which shares failures, successes and practical suggestions for the future is directed by Federico Bertuzzi, including the sleek-covered quarterly mission's magazine, "*Ellos y nosotros*," edited by Miguel Angel DeMarco, now in its third year. COMIBAM coordinators' responsibilities include contributing to this periodical.

5. Biblical reflection is encouraged by a closer relationship with the Latin American Theological Fraternity, spearheaded by Brazilian Valdir Steuernagel.

Part three of the COMIBAM '97 Conference Handbook published 17 of the 25 reports of the national evaluations of local mission "gestation processes" to date. These highlight the desperate need to move beyond the present denominational isolationism and independence, as documented by Federico Bertuzzi in *El Despertar de las Misiones* (1997:98) prepared especially for this conference. Avery Willis, co-chair of the mission leaders' meeting at GCOWE '95 in South Korea, apologized on behalf of his denomination for being "too isolationist and too independent" in trying to reach the world. "Once we began to address the fact that it's going to take the whole body of Christ to get the Gospel to all peoples, . . . our involvement in the AD2000 movement naturally evolved" (*Mission Frontiers*, May-June, 1997:17-19). We now enter a new decade of mutual help and co-operation with one another, specifically with the AD 2000 movement, to avoid costly

duplication of effort, and to better speed the ingathering of this ripe harvest. Incoming Executive Director of COMIBAM International, David Ruiz, will perhaps find this lack of interdependence to be his greatest challenge over the next decade. In the words of the Colombian self-evaluation, "The world mission vision of our churches, pastors and leaders is incipient and not a priority." They declare their need "to work within a spirit of unity and cooperation among all existing mission efforts."

### **Towards 2007**

Preparing "25 squadrons of participating countries" for take-off, from '97 to 2007 was the challenge. A new COMIBAM paradigm was presented to the participants, with the goal to glorify God through strengthening national mission movements which can thereby complement and enable the local church in its commitment to the Great Commission. The four departments—Information, Publication, Investigation and Development—are committed to mission training, adopting the remaining unreached peoples, and intercession. More specific future projects include: mobilizing the local church in mission, stimulating national mission agencies and associations, mentoring and pastoral care, and educating missionary children. What steps can facilitate this grass roots process?

1. Mobilize local churches through more informed intercession by the local country-publications, distribution of denominational publications, and local church use of the Spanish language Global Prayer Digest to help fund their own missionaries to the unreached. Jesus has set Himself apart to intercede for us. We can do no less (John 17:9,19).

2. Select a specific unreached people for adoption in coordination with

the 1,739 people profiles of the 10/40 Window. Now available in English from the Adopt-A-People Clearinghouse in Colorado Springs, they need to be translated into Spanish and Portuguese for a wider and urgent response from the awakening Ibero-American church.

3. Pursue serious mentoring relationships to enhance mission growth and accountability. Although Christian social responsibility was not a focus of COMIBAM '97, this priority is reflected in the agendas of a significant number of mission agencies listed in Ted Limpic's Catalogue of Ibero-American Mission Organizations.

4. Expand case studies, both positive and negative, for better evaluation of so many emerging models.

5. Increased biblical reflection on key texts, as Acts 13:1 - 4: "*apolo*," which means to be released for missionary service from the local congregation. For example, both the books *Una Iglesia Apasionada por las Misiones* and chapter three of *La Iglesia Latina en Mision Mundial* by Antonio Carlos Nasser seem to confuse good pastoring with the supervisory responsibilities that belong to the field team. The missionaries need to maintain close communication with the sending church because intercession should not be confused with the role of field team supervision.

We need to take a hard look at the church-sending models which do not consider the complementary, biblical balance between the inclusive local church modality and the exclusive mission sodality. How to maintain this creative tension between Church and Mission is described by this author in *Toward Continuous Mission* (1978:75-93).

"*Apoluo*" means that the local church releases the missionary from local responsibility and supervision in

order to empower the team model used by the Apostle Paul in his eleven apostolic teams. These provide the field infrastructure, which is lacking in the first model. See a fuller explanation in *Bendecidos para bendecir* (Smith 1992:250-253).

A Flight Plan into the next Century requires the new COMIBAM paradigm to reflect the emerging, predominant eastern 3/4 Church, soon to be unrecognizable to the shrinking 1/4 western Church. Dr. Ralph Winter, in *Mission Frontiers*, May-June, '97:3,4, disturbingly describes a "massive, unexpected, and astonishingly different 'Second Front' to the non-Christian world. Are we prepared to experience in missions today the same anguish Peter had when he found God dragging him to the door of Cornelius? Or was that simply a strange, curious event?"

The present groundswell of worldwide intercession needs to be fed by the production, promotion and use of factual, imaginative and motivating cross-cultural materials within each denomination. This will capture the believers' hearts and minds (AD2000 *Prayer Initiative*, GPD, *Operation World*, prayer cards, national Frontier Fellowships—denominational and interdenominational).

The rapidly shrinking number of unreached, adoptable peoples requires seriously working together in a more coordinated, orderly way to overcome denominational selfishness and prejudice (FAB 1997:97-103). After Pretoria, S. Africa, only 127 of the 1,739 Joshua Project unreached peoples numbering over 10,000, remain. Unfortunately, this amazing jump in adoptions was not considered at the conference.

The proliferating centers for mission training and discipleship reflect the Church's desire to provide home-grown equipping. Not only the mission

agency but the local church is stepping into this gap. The catalog lists 400 churches actively involved in sending out the present 4,000 missionaries. This should grow 6 times to 24,000, or 1/10th of the 240,000 projected from the 3/4 eastern Church by 2,007. Internet will play a significant role in providing the courses, study materials and professors.

The growing body of mission models and case studies need careful evaluation to better reflect biblical truth. Although Christian social responsibility was not a conference focus, many of the mission agencies listed in the Ibero-American mission catalogue demonstrate wide social concerns.

The continued emphasis on the need to better contextualize the Gospel needs stronger application to each people group's reality, using appropriate redemptive analogies, suggested by Fernando Quicana in his plenary address. Bryant Meyers in the *MARC Newsletter*, Sept., 1997:4, concurs that "what we need to know is where we are in terms of how the people we serve are changing and experiencing our ministry." On page 6 of the same *MARC Newsletter*, editor John Kenyon describes the recent meeting of 52 evangelical missiologists, theologians and mission practitioners who reviewed 19 years of trying to apply the Willowbank, Bermuda principles of contextualization. "They noted with disappointment and penitence that contextualization had not been as widely known and used as had been hoped. The gathering issued a call to the church and mission community to move from contextualization as a method toward it as a way of life and learning . . ."

Many at COMIBAM '97 are willing to pay the price to bring in the harvest and speed our Lord's return. Let's pray for each other, hope in the Lord, renew our strength, and soar on

wings like eagles into the next century (Isaiah 40:31).

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