

Christian Communities in Contemporary Contexts. A Latin American perspective – Carlos Ham 05.06.2010.

Introduction

First of all, I want to thank the Missionary God, who intends life in fullness for all creation through Jesus Christ, for the blessing of attending this historical gathering to commemorate the first centenary of the World Missionary Conference. I am particularly grateful for the opportunity to contribute to our theme “Christian Communities in Contemporary Contexts”, from a Latin American perspective. I would also like to greet at least three companions in our missionary journey in our region, who are here this day: Rev. Dr. Walter Altmann, Moderator of the WCC and President of Evangelical Lutheran Church in Brazil, currently serving as one of the chairpersons of our Theme; Bishop Julio Murray, from the Anglican Church in Panama and President of the Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI) and Rev. Nilton Giese, General Secretary of CLAI.

Historical Background

The World Missionary Conference in 1910, which met under the theme “the evangelization of the world in this generation”, marks the beginning of the contemporary ecumenical movement. Even though there were North American missionaries serving in Latin America among the delegates, the continent itself was excluded because it was considered to be already Christian or evangelized, due to the strong Roman-Catholic presence. Since these missionaries considered Latin America a pagan continent and therefore did not agree with this opinion, they organized a Conference of Foreign Missions in North America in March 1913 in New York. They founded the Committee of Latin American Cooperation (CLAC), which would take the responsibility to coordinate mission Congresses in Latin America.

The first such Congress was on Christian Work in Latin America and took place in Panama in February 1916. It was still considered as “foreign” since it was conceived and organized by missionaries and executives of the foreign mission boards. Afterwards the CLAC planned two other Congresses, one in South America and the other one for the Caribbean region. The former took place in Montevideo, Uruguay, in March 1925, but it did not really reflect an authentic Latin American identity since, again, it was sponsored by the North American mission boards. It was nevertheless a bridge between the Panama and the Havana Congresses.

The Havana Hispanic-American Evangelical Congress took place in June 1929, for the Caribbean churches as mentioned above. As the title suggests,

this Congress opened a new chapter in the search for a Protestant Latin American identity, since it was designed and organized by Latin American leaders. Therefore, the importance of the Havana Congress is that it gathered for the first time Latin Americans as protagonists of the Christian Mission in the continent, without the North American tutelage, which took place in the previous congresses. Just as it occurred with the Edinburgh conference globally, the Havana Congress marked the beginning of the Latin American unity in mission, and laid the foundations for the Latin American missionary work present today.

From 22-26 June 2009, a group of Latin American leaders met in the Matanzas Theological Seminary in Cuba to commemorate the 80th Anniversary of this Havana Congress. It was a gathering co-organized by the World Council of Churches (WCC), the Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI), the Cuban Council of Churches (CCC) and the Matanzas Theological Seminary (MTS), and it convened representatives of Protestant, Evangelical and Pentecostal churches, confessional families, ecumenical organizations and movements, centres for theological formation and research of the region, theological institutions, Protestant personalities and theologians. This event provided a space for reflection on the Latin American Protestant identity on mission, which is not limited to the past, but is also forward looking. It therefore took into consideration the current context of mission and evangelism in the Latin American continent in order to refocus this effort ecumenically.

In fact, this gathering was intended to be part of the Latin American contribution to the 2010 Edinburgh Centennial process. Although we are grateful for receiving the support of the Edinburgh 2010 Office and other churches and agencies, and are also appreciative of the opportunity for sharing these reflections with the churches globally, we would have hoped to have a bigger and more representative delegation from our continent in this commemoration.

In the meeting we accomplished the following objectives: performing an analysis of the Latin American context in which the Church fulfils its mission; continuing with the critical assessment of mission and evangelism in the Protestant tradition in Latin America, in the past 80 years; reflecting on the possibilities, the difficulties and the challenges of the Latin American churches in order to fulfil our evangelizing and transformative mission; and contributing to the process of the Edinburgh centennial celebration in the year 2010 from a Latin American perspective. The participants produced a final document, which can be found in the Edinburgh Centenary celebration website (<http://www.edinburgh2010.org>).

Regarding our theme: “Christian Communities in Contemporary Contexts”, from a Latin American perspective, and based on this event mentioned above and other experiences, I would like to highlight the following points, which reflect the Latin American *ethos*:

1. **Sharing the good news in a context of “bad” news.** There are increasing social, political and economic challenges in our Continent resulting from neo-liberal globalization, among other factors. Just to mention some: migrations (both internally and abroad); poverty, which has increased in the last two years in the region (36.5 % of the population); unjust distribution of wealth; drug trafficking; human trafficking; insecurity in the region and the increase of US military bases; the exploitation of natural resources by foreign companies, at a high human and ecological cost; climate change and natural disasters, and domestic violence, among others. Some progressive governments are emerging in the region, but with little possibilities of success, due to corruption and structural deficiencies. This is the scenario of “bad” news, where the Latin American churches share the good news of the gospel.

The Latin American churches proclaim the Good News of the gospel comforting the poor and at the same time, confronting the power structures, which generate injustice and poverty. Dom Elder Camara (Brasil) has said: “when I feed the poor, they call me saint, when I ask why they are poor, they call me communist”. We are urged to recover the values of God’s kingdom and rebuild hope, through prophetic witness in the social and political arena. The Latin American churches say: “a different world is needed and, by the grace of the Holy Spirit of God, it is possible”.

2. **Proclaiming a holistic mission.** The *missio Dei* starts with God, and therefore, it is not that the Church has God’s mission in the world, but rather, God’s mission in the world has the Church, in order to proclaim life in fullness for all. The efforts to accomplish the mission and evangelism separated from diakonia, development, emergency aid and advocacy for justice, peace and integrity of Creation are an offense against the integrity of the *missio Dei* as it was practised by Jesus in his proclamation of the Kingdom to come. Therefore, we emphasize the need to acknowledge the unity and complementarity between diakonia and the proclamation of the Good News as a concrete manifestation of the holistic mission as it is conceived and practiced in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Reflecting on false dichotomies in the Churches’ work, our WCC Moderator, Rev. Dr. Walter Altmann in his Address to the Central Committee meeting held in Geneva, 26 August to 2 September 2009

expressed: “I would like to reflect a little more on the importance of the diaconal ministry in the life of the church, because another false dichotomy which exists considers *diakonia* of lower value than mission, rather than seeing mission in a holistic way and *diakonia* as an essential dimension of mission itself. Mission without *diakonia* would easily turn into an arrogant and violent enterprise, not respectful of the culture, values and identity of the addressees of the Christian message. It would try to impose one’s own faith upon others, instead of giving reasons for the hope that is within us (1 Peter 3:15) and respecting the others’ own faith decision”.

3. **Celebrating the gospel in unity.** Our Theologian of the Liberation Gustavo Gutiérrez has said: “The Latin American people are poor and believer”; and as a result of this we celebrate life joyfully and in community. Not that we have accomplished it, but we are committed to sharing the gospel in collaboration, rather than in competition against each other, so that the world may believe (John 17:21). We have a long way to go, but we aim to be inclusive communities, embracing women, children, youth, indigenous people and of African origin, disabled brothers and sisters, diverse minorities, sharing our spiritualities, cultures and traditions.

The charismatic and Pentecostal movement represents a creative challenge for the so-called *historical churches*, which have not always continued to be reformed and which are rather stagnating in time by sacralising their ways and formula and losing the capacity to adapt and give an effective response to the needs of the population. In this sense, it is important that, without renouncing biblical and theological precepts in the name of reaching to new people, the spiritual needs of our peoples, which are related to symbols, emotions and feelings rather than to extremely elaborate rational processes, should be taken into account.

Conclusion

One of our main challenges today in Latin America is, as former WCC general secretary Philip Potter said in a different context, at the VI Assembly held in Vancouver, Canada (24 July to 10 August, 1983): "to cooperate with God in making the 'oikoumene' an 'oikos', a home, a family of men and women, through the crucified and risen Christ, by the living power of the Spirit". Amen.

Edinburgh, 5 June, 2010 – Carlos E. Ham (Rev. Dr.)
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