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“If Only They Knew”: Preparing Cross-Cultural
Missionaries for Service in Latin America

Abstract

Drawing on the perspective of Latin American church leaders, “If Only They Knew” details common cultural, linguistic and ministry errors made by U.S. missionaries in Latin America, offers preparation strategies for new missionaries to the region, and proposes action and reflection questions for mission-sending agencies and missionary candidates.

Key Words: Latin America, missionary, culture, language learning, humility

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Introduction

We live in perhaps the most exciting missionary age in church history—the age of sending missionaries “from everywhere to everyone” (Escobar 2003). That “everyone” still includes Latin America, but a Latin America with mature national churches, energetic theologians and a burgeoning missionary vision of its own. So what do potential missionaries from the United States need to know, do and be in preparation for service in Latin America, with Latin American partners?

In preparation for answering that interrogative, an informal survey was sent to Latin American Christian leaders (pastors, seminary administrators, and denominational leaders) in five countries. Thirteen leaders from four countries responded to the survey.¹ The ten male and three female respondents represent an average of 14 years in ministry. Participants were asked to respond to two open questions: (1) In your experience, what is the biggest error (cultural, ministerial, attitudinal, etc.) made by U.S. missionaries who come to serve in Latin America?² (2) If you could participate in the training of missionaries for Latin America, what would be the most important advice you would give the missionary candidates, and why?³

In what follows, the survey questions and responses will give shape to the text, as we allow the voices and perceptions of Latin American ministry partners to guide this important conversation. Interaction with the secondary literature will follow rather than lead the discussion. Action and reflection questions will be posed for mission sending agencies and missionary candidates as they prepare for 21st century ministry in Latin America and with Latin American partners.⁴ Lord, give us ears to hear and the will to respond!

What We Wish They Knew: The Biggest Errors and the Best Advice

Survey participants were invited to identify common errors made by missionaries from the United States and to offer advice to a new generation of missionaries-in-training.

Biggest errors

Cultural errors. Over and over again, with a gracious blend of tact and frankness, survey respondents highlighted a perceived arrogance and insensitivity towards the host culture as the most glaring error made by missionaries from the United States.⁵ A Latin American leader described this cultural attitude with penetrating insight: “One of the biggest mistakes missionaries make is thinking that their culture of origin is better than all the rest and presenting it in their ministry as the ideal toward which all other cultures should aspire.” Another leader spoke of the negative results when missionaries demonstrate lack of appreciation and respect for the culture of

the country in which they are serving: “This leads to lack of understanding of the culture and to the failure to dedicate themselves to correct language learning. This lack of appreciation for the new culture is reflected in constant cultural comparisons, with the missionary’s culture of origin presented always as the model of excellence in contrast to negative evaluations of the culture in the country of service.”

A variety of causal factors could be at work in this tendency toward cultural hauteur and insensitivity among U.S. missionaries. Three in particular are worth mentioning here. First, as Eugene Nida pointed out in his classic work, *Understanding Latin Americans*, there is a failure to realize how deep are the cultural and historical differences between the northern and southern regions of the Americas; this can cause missionaries from North America to make incorrect assumptions about “how things work” in Latin America and about how Latin Americans think and perceive the world:

Too often people in the Americas rather blindly assume that they are all alike. Do they not share a common cultural background in Europe? Are they not bound by links of a common Christendom? Are they not similarly new nations in the New World? But these apparent similarities only tend to mask certain basic differences which, if unrecognized, contribute to continued mutual suspicion and even hostility. . . . Most North Americans expect similarities, when in reality there are radical diversities; and they assume understanding, when in actuality people are often talking on quite different wavelengths (Nida 1974:3).

The second factor related to cultural arrogance is the flip side of the first: a limited understanding of one’s own culture of origin, in this case, the missionary’s U.S. context. Andrew Atkins argues that this lack of cultural self-awareness is a “blank spot” in missionary preparation, one which urgently needs to be filled with a practical analysis and understanding of the cultural norms which shape the missionary:

Our parent culture helps to create our inner being, spiritually, emotionally, mentally. It spills over to our physical life as well. What we are taught, learn, and apply about our faith is in the North American context. We take that cultural gospel overseas. . . . Our expectations, dreams, aspirations, value system, body language, communication, fears, and joys are all culturally determined. If missionaries ignore the depth of their cultural formation, they are bound to be frustrated overseas (Atkins 1990:267).

Although it can be difficult to achieve full cultural self-awareness while still within one's own context, without the mirror of another cultural paradigm to reveal the unconscious biases, patterns and blind spots of one's culture of origin, missionaries-in-training can benefit from studying analyses of their own culture, both from insiders and from the Latin American perspective. Atkins, for example, identifies eight cultural characteristics that both shape the U.S. missionary and also create points of friction when he or she engages with persons of other cultures. People from the cultural majority in the U.S., he says, are highly educated, rich, jealous of personal rights, full of hope, insulated (from pain and inconvenience), free, individualistic and performance-focused (1990:268–269). Missionary sending agencies and missionary candidates should grapple with the behavioral, attitudinal, social and even ecclesial implications of these culturally ingrained patterns. For instance, how will it feel for an individualistic, performance-oriented missionary to serve alongside (and perhaps under the authority of) a social, relationship-oriented Latin American ministry partner? How will the missionaries prepare themselves to respond in a Christ-like way to the clash of cultures? What patterns and practices will prepare missionaries to be humble learners from the host culture and what obstacles could prevent them from adopting a learner's posture?

The third factor that contributes to cultural arrogance and insensitivity is a particularization of the second: a failure to recognize how deeply engrained "Americanism" is in the American psyche and how tightly it has become interwoven with religion in the U.S. context. "Americanism" is the "confidence that we [the U.S.] are God's new Israel, the political harbinger for all future ages, the redeemer nation that performs periodic regenerating sacrifices for the world" (Leithart 2012:151). This strange intermingling of faith and nationalism is often a major blind spot for U.S. missionaries, and leads to the assumption that the world is eagerly longing not only for the gospel but also for its American accouterments.

What specific steps can mission-sending agencies and missionary candidates take in order to elevate their cultural awareness, both of the host culture in Latin America and of their own culture of origin? What practices and preparation will break the stranglehold of Americanism on the worldview of missionary candidates? And what spiritual and organizational patterns must be cultivated in order to produce missionaries who will be humble learners of all that God would teach them through the local culture?

Linguistic errors. As was seen above, inextricably related to perceived cultural arrogance and insensitivity is the perception that often missionaries do not invest sufficient time, energy and prayer into mastering the local language. Respondents were universally sympathetic to the difficulties of

learning a second language (particularly those who had experienced that challenge for themselves); nonetheless, they were firm in their conviction that failure to make a sustained effort at language learning conveys a particularly negative message to the missionary's national partners. One respondent said, "Some missionaries do not demonstrate any interest in perfecting their language skills, but a devotion to 'deep' language learning, more than anything else, conveys love for the country and the people."

As Thomas and Elizabeth Brewster have repeatedly affirmed, the language learning process is not a mere prelude to communication or ministry, but is itself effective communication and ministry. The Brewsters relate an anecdote from missionary anthropologist Charles H. Kraft, who was once asked how much time should be spent in language learning by a short-term missionary who would only be on the field for two months. Kraft's answer was, "Two months." The questioner pressed him: "What about one who stays six months?" Kraft answered, "Then spend six months in language learning." The same question was posed about a missionary who would stay on the field for two years. "There is nothing he could do that would communicate more effectively than spending those two years in language learning." Kraft continued, "Indeed, if we do no more than engage in the process of language learning we will have communicated more of the essentials of the Gospel than if we devote ourselves to any other task I can think of" (Brewster and Brewster 1982:160). This attitude is quite distinct from the usual pragmatic approach to language study taken by most North Americans:

Typically, missionaries complete many years of schooling and are conditioned to think of themselves as 'prepared' to carry on a ministry. Learning the language is viewed as the major barrier that stands between these 'prepared' people and a fruitful ministry in the new country. So, of course, they must learn the language in order to get on with the job. Language study is thus viewed as a hurdle to be quickly passed so that they can then get on with doing what they are 'trained' to do (Brewster and Brewster 1982:161).

The Brewsters argue that the posture of language learner communicates a "total life message" to members of the new community where the missionary is serving (1982:161), a message of one's willingness to be taught by the members of the host culture. Roman Catholic missionary Jon Kirby agrees with the Brewsters and goes even further, speaking of the language learning process in terms of "conversion":

Language learning is, indeed, ministry but not just because it communicates the missionary's words or Christ's words, or even the missionary's whole 'life-message'—though this

is partially true. It is ministry primarily because it witnesses to a conversion process: the conversion of the missionaries themselves. Missioners are really responsible for only one conversion, their own! But the witness of this conversion will influence the lives of those around us. Language and culture learning stretches and deepens our faith, demands the humble posture of one who has much to learn from a new font of knowledge in open dialogue, and by the discovery of a new reality through our new culturally attuned preceptors, the missioner both experiences a genuine conversion and sows the seeds for future conversions (Kirby 1995:137).

John Carpenter, an itinerant missionary professor, is a dissenting voice in the discussion of missionary language learning; he questions the importance that the Brewsters and Kirby assign to learning the local language and argues that not all missionaries are "gifted" with language skills and therefore should be excused from focusing so much time and energy on the acquisition of the new tongue: "Those who simply do not have the gifts to master another language should not be made to try to master it and should not be placed in ministries that require fluency in the language. . . . Prospective missionaries should be tested for their language learning ability and assigned (or even rejected) based, in part, on that" (Carpenter 1996:348).

Carpenter's arguments are made exclusively from the perspective of the missionary and do not take into account the perceptions of the receiving culture, like those expressed in our survey, but he is probably correct that assessment of language learning skills should have a higher priority in the preparation of missionaries.⁶ Mission-sending agencies and missionary candidates must explore not only missionaries' aptitudes but also their attitudes toward and practices of language learning. What adjustments need to be made to facilitate and encourage the kind of life-long language learning that will not only communicate to our Latin American partners our willingness to learn from them, but will also result in deeper understanding of and appreciation for their culture?

Two practical issues about language mastery surfaced in several survey responses. First, national leaders perceived a persistent discrepancy between the language skills of married, male missionaries and their wives. One respondent said, "Many times the wife does not speak the local language because she has no contact with the church or with people outside her home and children." This is an important point for mission organizations and national partners to address- what practical steps can be taken to ensure that missionary wives and mothers have equal access to relational language learning? What new patterns of ministry will be necessary? What reordering of values and praxis, within the missionary family, within the mission sending

organization and within the expectations of national partners, will contribute to changing this paradigm?

The second practical language issue that was highlighted in the survey is something that goes far beyond “knowing the right words to say.” This is the issue of direct versus indirect speech, which is as much a cultural pattern as a linguistic one. As one respondent puts it: “In my culture, people are less direct than in the American culture. Missionaries should learn to speak the truth with more politeness.”⁷ That is, they should strive to speak with politeness defined in the terms of that cultural context, which might mean circling around the point, approaching it with what might seem to Americans like excessive finesse and even flattery, rather than *ir directamente al grano* (getting straight to the point). This is especially true in confrontational, speaking-the-truth-in-love situations, but also in normal, everyday conversation. This writer learned, for example, after a decade in Latin America, that the long, drawn-out “preliminaries” of phone conversations (e.g., “Did you rest well? How about the rest of the family? How’s your mother’s health?”) were not dispensable elements but were essential relational components of the communicative interchange, without which one might never arrive at “the point” for which the conversation was headed.⁸

Ministerial errors. The ministerial errors noted by survey respondents were all variations on a single theme, which is really a counterpoint to the melody of cultural arrogance and insensitivity noted above: missionaries’ unwillingness (or inability) to adapt their understanding of ministry to the local context. One participant commented: “Missionaries often come with a ‘package’ or model of how things should be done, and many times this model doesn’t bear fruit, because it is not contextually appropriate to the place where they are ministering.” Another observed that missionaries sometimes are so closely wedded to their vision of “the plan,” that they seem rigid and unyielding to those who propose other ideas. One respondent acknowledged that some missionaries grow to recognize the need for contextualization, but struggle with the flexibility necessary to accomplish it: “Having observed missionaries since I was a child, I realize that some of them bring and subtly impose their own ministerial culture. When things do not go according to that imposed pattern, they get frustrated. Some realize that the culture is not going to change, so they attempt to shift their own paradigms, but always within the limits of their own imposed conditions.”

Gregory Klotz, professor of modern languages at Taylor University and a Lutheran missionary with 20 years of experience in Latin America, reflects on how missionaries fall unconsciously into this trap of arriving in Latin America with a single culturally conditioned and tradition-shaped pattern of “church” in their conceptual toolbox:

As a missionary, I go overseas with this view of the church in my head. Although I go as a product of seminary education and understand the doctrines of the historical church as well as denominational differences, I have not been taught the semiotics of culture- the skill of communication or the artful use of symbol and meaning in communicating the gospel. Yes, I have been taught to 'preach,' but this too is a communicative form which is codified in structure and social context- an acceptable way of speaking in my social context, which historically developed into the present form. So, I enter Latin America with this idea of church and theology. I set up an organizational structure that depicts denomination, I begin having Bible studies in homes, I begin to form a group with a church president, an offering deposited in a bank, preaching, etc. My downfall is not that the church takes this shape; my downfall is my ignorance in assuming that these 'shapes' or 'social forms' have the same meaning in that social context of which I am not a part (Klotz 2012:248).

Klotz asks the kinds of questions each mission-sending agency and missionary candidate needs to consider if new missionaries to Latin America are to avoid falling into the trap of what this writer calls the "Sinatra Syndrome"—"I'll do it my way!" These questions need to be explored together with Latin American ministry partners in each local context: "How would they [i.e., the local population] envision the church organization in their social setting? What about the ministerial offices, the way education takes place, and the substance of that education?" (2012:249). As Klotz notes, even the expectations of pastors are culturally conditioned, having more to do "with the expectation of leadership according to the leadership models within the social structure than theological reasons for that office" (2012:249).

Best advice

Survey respondents continued to offer their insights with gentleness, *cortesía*, and grace, expressing over and over their gratitude for the service of missionaries past, present, and future, and providing words of wise counsel for those preparing to serve in Latin America and with Latin Americans.

Spiritual preparation. Given the cultural, linguistic, and ministerial errors noted above, it may surprise readers that in response to the question about "your best advice for missionary candidates," survey participants did not immediately shine a laser light on those particular areas. Their most urgent concern was the spiritual preparation of the missionary. The words of counsel that occurred over and over were dependence, patience, humility, prayer, love, and a teachable spirit. Latin American leaders see these qualities as the basis

for a missionary posture that will effectively avoid the errors mentioned in the previous section. As one leader put it: “The most indispensable things for a cross-cultural missionary are dependence on God and a teachable spirit, because in the experiences of missionary life, it is the missionary who often learns the most, since God has the capacity to teach us through the most unexpected things and persons.” In similar fashion, another leader encourages missionaries: “Be ready to learn! It is impossible to be significant in the life of someone without the exchange of life.” This portrait of a spiritually prepared missionary- teachable, humble, and dependent on God, in imitation of Christ himself- emerges particularly clearly in these insightful words of another leader from the region:

Missionaries need to know and remember that ‘the work’ in which they are going to serve is God’s work. Now, this has many implications, from the ‘furlough’ that can provide a simple affirmation of this truth [i.e., the work can go on without you], to dying to our own interests, our own ego. We can find all this in the example of the Master. The work of God cannot be understood apart from the cross of Christ himself and how he himself went through it. Why is this so important in the context of our question? I believe this continual discovery of the work of God (which cannot be taught in a missiology class) not only prepares us to act faithfully in the divine commission which has been entrusted to us; it also prevents us from ‘dying’ early in our career and, better yet, it revives us and encourages us to hold to the hand of the One who ‘did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us.’

Cultural preparation. And what about those cultural errors that the survey revealed? What practical advice do these Latin American leaders give to potential missionaries that will help them avoid repeating those blunders? Operating out of the spiritual foundation just described, missionaries are encouraged to study the culture (before and after they arrive on the field), with the goal of learning the history, the economy, the mentality and even the literature of the country where they will be working. They need to study the culture from a position of respect, recognizing and renouncing any tendency to measure all other cultures by their own:

Give up cultural comparisons! It is demeaning and disheartening to have someone come into your country from another culture and begin comparing everything unfavorably with his or her context. “Renunciation” in this context means accepting another culture, different from my own, even if I don’t like all its norms and practices. True identification with the people

I'm serving means accepting and trying to enjoy their culture, even if sometimes it's not truly enjoyable. That is the price the missionary pays.

Ministerial preparation and praxis. The leaders who responded to the survey had a great deal to say about the ministerial preparation and praxis of missionaries. Participants were consistent in encouraging missionaries to come with the express ministerial purpose of multiplying themselves (2 Timothy 2:2) in local leadership. "Multiply yourselves in others," counsels one national leader. "Develop your leadership in others, so that when you must return to your country, you won't have to worry about whether the ministry will carry on and continue developing in your absence. I've seen many successful, missionary-led ministries that never recovered from the missionary's absence."

Conclusion

This article has highlighted common cultural, linguistic, and ministerial errors made by U.S. missionaries serving in Latin America, it has offered wise counsel to missionary candidates from Latin American church leaders, and has raised reflection questions for both missionary-sending agencies and missionary candidates. Although the focus of the article has been on oft-observed errors, those who contributed to the survey are far from pessimistic. Survey respondents value the missionary call and welcome this new day of missions, this era of "sending missionaries from everywhere to everyone." They welcome those who come to work in their context, because, as one participant put it, "There are groups of people right in our midst who are invisible to our eyes, but a foreigner can see them because God has laid them on his or her heart." They also rejoice that we live in a time when Christians of all ethnic and cultural backgrounds are called to do mission together, working side by side as teammates in carrying out the Great Commission. In the hope-filled and courage-producing words of one respondent: "The missionary God whom we serve will give us understanding, little by little, as we seek his face. He changes hearts in a supernatural way, he gives a heart of flesh to feel what others feel, to act according to the mind of Christ, to see what God sees.

End Notes

¹ The respondents include 8 pastors, 3 seminary leaders (rector or dean) and 2 denominational leaders. The countries represented are Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador and Mexico. This author deeply appreciates the participants' willingness to speak frankly and honestly with the goal of helping the next generation of cross-cultural missionaries who will serve in Latin America and with Latin American partners across the globe. Some survey comments have been edited for grammatical smoothness and, in some cases, to preserve the confidentiality of the responses. The author guarantees that all quoted material accurately reflects the words and intent of the respondents. Any quoted material within the text that does not have source information in parentheses is from the confidential survey responses.

² Respondents were asked to limit their observations to their interaction with missionaries from the United States.

³ A third open question was included in the survey: "What other observation(s) would you like to make about the work of cross-cultural missionaries in your context?" Responses were generally expressions of gratitude or reiterations of things said in answer to the first two questions.

⁴ The questions are posed for both the sending agencies and for the missionary candidates themselves. Not all missionaries serve with organizations which provide extensive pre-field training for candidates, and even those who do pass through such training must be pro-active and intentional, "second-mile learners" in regards to the cultural context of the place where they will serve. The questions are intentionally left open and unanswered, requiring agencies and missionaries alike to grapple for themselves with the implications.

⁵ It is important that we as U.S. missionaries take seriously this perception, even if the perceived attitude is far from our intent. We must be open to learning from our Latin American ministry partners what actions or omissions communicate this attitude that is perceived by them, in their context, as cultural arrogance or insensitivity.

⁶ Carpenter's caveats are tinged with more than a hint of defensiveness, perhaps reacting out of his own admitted struggles with language learning.

⁷ This respondent's observation about direct versus indirect approaches to "speaking the truth" holds true for most countries in the region.

⁸ This author's conversational style is very direct, even for a North American. Adapting to the more indirect, meandering style of conversation was a small but very difficult change that paid rich dividends in new depths of communication and cultural understanding.

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