

CHAPTER V:

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The preceding chapter presented data gathered from a survey of 431 pastors and interviews with thirty pastors. This chapter will bring together issues arising from the study including implications for pastors, denominations, educational institutions, mission agencies, and the Evangelical Alliance of Costa Rica (FAEC) . This chapter will be structured in three parts. First, recommendations will be made to pastors, denomination leaders, educational institutions, mission agencies, and the FAEC. Second, trends will be highlighted. Third, two avenues of future research will be suggested. Last, personal observations by the author will be offered.

Conclusions

This research demonstrated that the Costa Rican evangelical church has experienced a notable increase in growth that began in 1970 and lasted until 1984. During that time an average of 75.8 churches per year were planted. Currently, the Costa Rica evangelical church is growing at a rate of 65.2 church-plants a year and finds itself in a post-revival age where there are many first-generation believers and pastors. In order to consolidate the growth experienced thus far and to facilitate additional growth, it is an opportune time to study the pastors and make recommendations. This study reflects a time in Costa Rican history when the evangelical church represents an estimated 16% of

the population. This gives evangelical churches a new level of social respectability and a much higher profile in the future of the country. It also means that the evangelical church is required to be more responsible in running its affairs.

Recommendations to Pastors

Through the survey, as well as through the interviews with pastors, it became obvious that pastors possess great zeal for evangelism. Pastors are proactive in their desire to reach their communities for Christ. Pastors also are open to cooperate with one another in evangelistic events. These factors, coupled with the perception that their communities are open to the gospel and to participation of the church in community activities, indicates a healthy environment for the evangelical church in Costa Rica to continue to grow.

Along with classical methods of evangelism, there is a trend among pastors to use cell groups and family groups in their churches, with positive effect. The strategy, of having family cell groups at the core of church life, stimulates and facilitates evangelism and discipleship. It seems reasonable to expect this strategy to produce a stronger evangelical church (and pastors) in the very near future. One key factor that will determine the effectiveness this strategy in producing strong Christians is the curriculum chosen by pastors for use in these groups.

This study showed that the leadership of most Costa Rican evangelical churches is young. The average age of pastors is 41.6 years. Most pastors are between the ages of 36 and 40. This has both advantages and disadvantages. Young pastors are more open to change, have more energy and more access to the younger generation. On the negative

side, if a pastor does not know how to lead and disciple his leaders effectively, his lack of experience and maturity may result in decisions that hurt church growth. In view of these circumstances it seems critical to the future success of pastors that they become skillful in managing and resolving conflicts between estranged groups and between themselves and others.

This study showed that currently 40.6% of pastors have been or are in Bible Institutes and that 51.9% have been or are in seminary. It is encouraging to see that in the light of societal trends toward increased professionalism, pastors know they have a need to upgrade their level of education and are seeking ways to do so. As the pastors become better educated they will be able to lead their churches more effectively and minister better to the needs of people.

Data from the survey indicated that while 80.9% of pastors claim to have an evangelism plan, most were unable to articulate clearly their vision for evangelism and discipleship. If pastors cannot verbalize their vision in these key areas of church growth, one has to wonder if they know what the will of God is for them and their churches. If they do not know what the will of God is, how will the people know? Pastors should take more time to pray and think through these areas in order to clarify a vision of what God wants them to do. Similarly, when asked to identify the greatest need of people in their congregations, pastors responded that people need a greater commitment to Christ. One must ask, however, if the people's lack of commitment is influenced by the pastor's lack of ability to articulate his plan for evangelism and discipleship? People need to see and hear clearly from church leaders what commitment means and how they are supposed to demonstrate it. If pastors do not make serious efforts to disciple the people in the

churches, there will be an increasing danger of the rise of new pseudo-evangelical cults in Costa Rica.

Pastors focus many of their ministry efforts on children, teens, and women's ministries. These priorities are understandable because women and children make up 72% of their congregations. However, while all these efforts are going into meeting their needs, more should be done to attract and disciple men in a way that is culturally attractive to them. Businessmen's lunches, seminars with special topics that interest them, and other similar strategies will be important to attract men to the church and retain them. Also, it is important that pastors pay particular attention to men between the ages of 22 and 30 in their congregations. This is the age group where most of the next-generation pastors are found. Special activities are needed to motivate and disciple this special group of potential future leaders.

Regarding pastoral engagement in community life, 84.5% say they have some kind of formal involvement in the neighborhoods where they are working. It is encouraging to see that 72% of pastors feel they understand the problems of their communities. This study showed that pastors feel the principal problems relate to family, alcohol, and spiritual issues. Since pastors (and church associations) have identified these problems, they should be more intentional in developing ministries, people, and resources to resolve them. The community will be more open to the gospel when it sees that the Christ we preach is not confined within four walls, visiting his people only on Sunday.

Recommendations to Denomination Leaders

Almost all denominational leaders in Costa Rica are pastors. Thus, what has been shared in the previous section would apply at denominational levels as well. What could denominations do that would help them better serve their pastors?

There is need for more financial help to pastors, especially those serving in rural and small churches. There is a saying among the Costa Rican evangelicals, “Lord you keep him humble, we’ll keep him poor.” This reflects an attitude which is very damaging to the pastor and his family. It is a surprise to see that in Costa Rica, which is one of the more prosperous Central American countries, 35% of rural and small church pastors are living below the minimum wage of \$198.37 (48,620.00 colones) a month. Church denominations could do more to require that member churches adequately support their pastors and give them appropriate wages for their work. Supervisors and other denominational leaders could campaign to educate congregations in the management of church finances, making an adequate salary for their pastor a high priority in the minds of parishioners. Pastors feel awkward about talking to their congregations about their own financial needs. Having association leaders recommend policies and guidelines for churches would relieve pastors of this task. Pastors would appreciate seeing their denominations care for them. Also, some associations need to reconsider policies that do not allow pastors to seek outside employment if the church is unable to pay them a minimum salary.

Another area of financial concern that came out of the survey was that 68% of the pastors have no pension plan. Denominations need to address this issue with their

churches. This would be another way that denominations could show support for their pastors.

Denominations can help pastors in the area of education as well. They can establish policies for pastors in terms of gaining and continuing formal education. There are many educational institutions available at reasonable costs. Establishing policies to assure that pastors are well-educated for their ministry is a good first step in strengthening the churches. In addition, pastors would benefit from leadership development courses such as those offered by Haggai Institute.

Not only do pastors need to be encouraged to study; so do persons involved in church leadership. This study showed that about 20% of congregational members are involved in leadership responsibilities in the church. Denominations (and the FAEC) could do more to disciple and train this group, offering in-house short courses on such subjects as leadership and ministry development. Education in models of discipleship and evangelism is an additional area of interest to pastors and church leaders. Since there are so many problems among the people in congregations, denominations could help churches by offering courses on counseling and methods of conflict resolution.

Denominational and church discipline is a must. Pastors themselves say that most people deserting evangelical churches do so because of the bad testimony of church leaders and other believers. Biblical discipline, which involves *restoration*, is important. In some denominations it would be helpful to have an “Ethics Manual” that includes personal pastoral ethics, church/ministry ethics, financial accounting standards, and church discipline. When there is a moral or ethical failure on the part of a pastor there should be a proactive response on the part of the denomination. Especially if the failure of

a pastor becomes public news, the denomination needs to respond quickly and publicly. Remaining silent to avoid conflict has earned the Costa Rican evangelical church a bad reputation for the way it deals with fallen leaders.

In the interviews with the pastors it was found that division and polarization for denominational reasons still continues to be a barrier to the unity of the evangelical church. There continue to be denominational leaders who prohibit pastors from interacting with other groups for fear of doctrinal contamination, or for fear that pastors may leave their group to join another. Leaders of denominations need to deal with these fears and to do more to encourage pastors to join united evangelistic efforts in their communities. Denominational leaders also could give more encouragement to churches to reach out to their communities by helping them address problems the community feels are important, thus building a stronger bond between the church and its community.

Recommendations to Educational Institutions

The fact that many pastors currently study in a Bible Institute or seminary and that they feel there is inexpensive theological education easily available to them shows that theological institutions in Costa Rica are sensitive to the needs of the pastors. Academic training, especially at advanced levels, will be more in demand in the future. As churches are planted and a new generation of pastors enter the pastorate, whose educational background is higher than their forefathers, they will expect a higher level of pastoral training. Formal institutions should do more to include in their curricula courses that are more applicable to the congregations of their students. Pastors feel accountable to their congregations to preach and teach things which are relevant to needs they see among their

people. Bible school and seminary curricula should be designed to provide pastors and leaders with the information and skills they need to feed their congregations. The courses also need to be packaged into intense moduals and offered in locations easily accessible to pastors and leaders. Especially needed are courses concerning character and spiritual formation since these would counteract the causes of pastoral failure. Reading books over the Christian radio stations could also be used to educate the listeners. This would be especially useful in countries where people do not have access to books, are not accustomed to reading, or where do not know how to read. In all of these areas educators should continue to seek feedback from students as to how lessons learned are meeting the needs of people in the churches. With this feedback, courses can be re-designed to better meet the needs of congregations.

Another evident trend is for large churches to start Bible Institutes to educate their people, regardless of denominational training institutes. Church denominations and educational institutions could help these churches by establishing basic educational requirements (or goals) for training. These same requirements also could include stipulations to encourage pastors who have completed basic requirements to be involved in programs of continuing education.

Recommendations to Mission Agencies

Costa Rica missionary participation will increase as more churches catch the vision that they too are responsible to send out missionaries. This study showed that 81.7% of pastors had helped to send a missionary outside of Costa Rica for more than one year and that 47.7% currently are involved in supporting a missionary. It is good that

most have donated money. However, as missionaries return from their fields, pastors are beginning to question to whom, how, and where they should send their missionary resources. For the future well-being of the missionary movement in and from Costa Rica, denominations and mission agencies need to do more to educate pastors about missions.

It is understandable that most pastors who define their missionary vision as reaching Costa Rica for Christ, considering the recent rapid growth of evangelical churches in this nation. Notable, too, is the large number (83%) of pastors who come from Catholic backgrounds. Since many pastors are themselves first-generation believers, more will have to be done by mission agencies to educate pastors, denominations, and educational institutions about missions, especially about how faith mission agencies operate. The Costa Rica evangelical church is just beginning to experience commitment to world missions and it has much to learn about how to recruit, train, send, and care for its own missionaries. Traditional mission agencies (especially those from North America) need to identify themselves with Costa Rican churches and to demonstrate openness to receiving Latin missionaries by being responsive to their needs.

Recommendations to The Evangelical Alliance of Costa Rica (FAEC)

Currently the Evangelical Alliance of Costa Rica (FAEC) is taking positive steps in restructuring itself to respond more effectively to the desires and needs of its members. How can FAEC project an image that shows it cares for its members? Certainly by listening to pastors from each region and investigating the needs of each area before launching any strategy that presumes to have the support of a majority of evangelical pastors. The current plan, to take teams to the regions for the purpose of researching the

local needs and conducting seminars to benefit pastors on-site, will help to show pastors that the Alliance cares for them. Though this work does not have as high a profile as some would like, in the long run it can build solid relationships between the Alliance and the pastors, as well as among pastors themselves. Public events and other programs also are a must. The FAEC should continue to sponsor public events and make public proclamations, although perhaps it should dedicate even more time and resources to helping local pastors train their flocks.

This study showed that 20% of people in the congregations are involved in leadership responsibilities. These people, including elders and deacons, form the core support group for the pastor. The Alliance could provide printed materials, programs, or intensive courses that pastors and denominational leaders can offer to strengthen church leaders who in turn will be more of a help to pastors. Providing the churches with training resources is another area of need that the Alliance could easily provide.

There are many more pastors and leaders who are willing to support the Alliance with personnel and other resources if they were asked to do so. Recruiting these resources and people to carry out programs should continue to be a strong part of what the Alliance does. These resources then can be offered to local church pastors on a continuing basis. Resources take time to develop and deliver effectively. The Alliance should continue to work with its members to develop long-range strategies to which future administrations will commit. Developing this kind of strategy will help to combat tendencies toward division and polarization among denominations and churches. Also, it will show that evangelical churches are united in the work of evangelism, thus enhancing their stature with the Costa Rican populace.

The future relationship of the Alliance and its relationship with pastors has exciting possibilities. The Alliance needs to work on servicing its members and on developing strategies that will build the evangelical church as a whole. Then the Alliance then needs to market these services and strategies to the general public and to evangelical churches in ways that communicate the caring nature of the Alliance.

Future Avenues of Research

This paper has developed a profile of the Costa Rican pastors, their lives and ministry environments, so that church leaders and mission agencies can be more aware of pastors' opinions, needs, and worldviews. It is hoped that through presenting this research, programs and strategies can be constructed to help the pastor in his work.

In the course of this study two avenues of future research have emerged. The first avenue of research would be a *study of the families of evangelical pastors*. This study showed pastoral failures to be related to personal and financial problems, both of which greatly impact the pastor's family. Further research into the family of the pastor would pinpoint some of the problems so that solutions could be sought.

The second avenue of study would be an *examination of the impact of Christian radio and television upon the education of the pastors*. Because of the proliferation in Costa Rica of Christian radio and television in the last fifty years, it is necessary to learn more about how programs offered by these powerful media sources are perceived and used by pastors.

Final Words

Costa Rican pastors truly want to see their churches continue to grow and prosper. The desire of the author has been to gather information about the dedicated work of the many pastors, supervisors, and missionaries who are giving their lives for the advancement of the Kingdom of God in Costa Rica.

The Costa Rican evangelical church finds itself in a unique time period. There is little or no outside persecution and the Costa Rican people have an open attitude toward the evangelical community. Also, it is important to note that there is openness on the part of pastors to work together in cooperative efforts to evangelize. This gives leaders of the evangelical church, and especially the FAEC, an opportunity to construct powerful and meaningful methods and programs of partnership in order to see more people involved in the task of taking the Gospel to the nations. May God bless the pastors as they seek to do His will.