

Why mobilize Colombian churches?

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TALKING MISSIONS – Southern Baptist missionary Fernando Larzabal (left) chats with pastor Eliecer Henao (striped tie) and other Colombian Christians following Sunday morning service at Iglesia Bautista Berea, a Baptist church in Pereira, Colombia. (IMB PHOTO)

“John and Lee Rojas” awoke with a start – someone was outside their tent. “We want to obey the Lord,” came a voice from the darkness. “We understand the story about baptism and want to be baptized.”

John rubbed the sleep from his eyes and looked into the moonlit faces of four “Nu” tribesmen waiting anxiously for his reply. It was well before dawn.

“Very good,” the Colombian missionary told them in a hushed voice, trying not to wake his two daughters. “We will make preparations to baptize you.”

“No,” one of the Nu answered. “We want to be baptized now.”

The urgency in their voices was unmistakable; John knew they would not wait. He led the four Nu believers to a river and baptized each one that night.

“Those are the kind of stories that give us goose

bumps because they’re so powerful,” says Southern Baptist missionary Brenda Larzabal, who serves in Colombia with her husband, Fernando.

Face-to-face contact rare

But such stories can be bittersweet. As mobilizers, the Larzabals do a very different kind of missionary work. They’re rarely able to interact with indigenous tribes face to face, much less share the Gospel.

“We get to know the indigenous vicariously through our national partners,” Brenda explains. “Their triumph stories are our triumph stories, but it’s hard not to be on the front line. When your heart is burdened with the Gospel, you want to share it firsthand.”

Instead, it’s the Larzabals’ job to inspire and equip Colombian churches to send their own missionaries to the indigenous. Fernando believes it’s an issue of ownership.



“Our problem is that the average Colombian Christian has the perception that missions belongs to foreigners,” he says. “But missions belongs to the local church. The Gospel has been in Colombia for more than 150 years. We believe it’s time that what has traditionally been considered a mission field turns into a missionary force.”

Some of the first fruits of that transformation are evident in the lives of the Colombian missionaries with whom the Larzabals partner. Unlike believers in the United States, Colombian Christians have few opportunities for formal missions training. That’s why the Larzabals invest time and energy nurturing and maturing couples like the Rojas. These one-on-one development opportunities are where Brenda shines, filling roles as both a missions coach and counselor.

Listening to struggles

“I walk alongside them, help teach them the tools they’ll need, listen to their heart and their struggles,” Brenda says. She also helps them work through their master plan.

As Brenda mentors new missionaries, Fernando criss-crosses the country visiting pastors and churches. Today he’s been invited to speak at Iglesia Bautista Berea, a Baptist church in the city of Pereira at the heart of Colombia’s coffee country. From atop the church’s wooden stage, Fernando preaches a missions-themed sermon to more than 60 people.

Elicer Henao has pastored this church for about five years. He says he’s always been drawn to missions and dreams about becoming a missionary to the indigenous one day. His congregation, however, is just catching on to their Great Commission calling.

“Our contact with Fernando has been a key factor in educating the church about missions,” Elicer says. “Their idea of missions was to give money so someone else would go. But now we’re talking about direct involvement.”



LAYING HANDS – Fernando Larzabal (striped shirt) leads a team of Colombian missionaries in prayer for “John and Lee Rojas” (kneeling) as they prepare to return to the jungle where they minister among the “Nu,” one of Colombia’s indigenous tribes. (IMB PHOTO)

As Fernando casts vision and calls churches to obedience, he highlights the need for the Gospel right in their own backyard.

Embracing the Great Commission

“One of the struggles we have is how to connect the need of the indigenous groups with folks that live in a world that is so different,” he says. Bridging that gap often means making personal connections, which is why Elicer has asked José Miguel López to lead the church in prayer.

José Miguel and his wife, Claudia, are Colombian missionaries who partner with the Larzabals. They work among the “Alhuata,” an indigenous tribe with villages just outside Pereira. Fernando connected the church with the Lópezes’ ministry. Iglesia Bautista Berea now provides the family with financial support and even sends volunteers when they visit Alhuata villages.

“My dream is to come to a point where one of our own families would be sent as a missionary and would be supported by us 100 percent,” Eliecer says. “We need prayers on our behalf so the church will wake up and understand that the missions responsibility is theirs.”

Open doors, empty thresholds

Walking along a red dirt path in “Camacho,” an Alhuatan village of about 500 near Pereira, Fernando talks with José Miguel about his progress here. It’s one of only four indigenous communities in the country the Larzabals can enter due to the threat posed by anti-government insurgents.

“It’s very meaningful for me to be able to come, to breathe, to smell, to see the people that we pray for,” he says.

José Miguel stops to introduce Valerio, who’s lived in this village for 50 years. Until recently, he had never heard the Gospel. Fernando and José Miguel were able to help Valerio repair his aging home. It’s little more than a wooden shack with a dirt floor, but it’s all he has. These kinds of gifts have built goodwill between José Miguel and the Alhuatas, earning him the right to share the Gospel here.

But it’s going to take a lot more work – and many more missionaries – if more than 15,000 Alhuata are to hear the Good News. Dozens of other Alhuata villages are scattered across the surrounding mountains. Who will tell them? And what about the more than 60 other indigenous tribes in Colombia with no Gospel witness?

Many remain unreached

“For the last 80 years folks have been working with indigenous groups in Colombia. But after all those tears and lives and efforts and sacrifices, we don’t have a lot to show for it,” Fernando says, his voice breaking with emotion.

“Out of 100 groups, at best we can say that nine

have been reached. ... I don’t think it would please God for us to take another 80 years. I think He’s given us everything we need to turn this around within the course of our generation.”

To illustrate, Fernando tells a story about an isolated tribe known as the “Ibanutes.” A pair of Colombian college students was sent to survey the tribe to learn what would be needed to bring them the Gospel.

“Do you have anything for us?” the Ibanute leaders asked the students.

Assuming the Ibanutes were talking about tangible things, the students apologized for failing to bring gifts.

“No, we were wondering if you have any advice for us, any words of wisdom,” the Ibanutes replied. “This is very important to us. In our tradition, we share words of wisdom.”

“I don’t have much of my own,” one of the students said, “but I happen to have a Book that has a chapter full of advice and words of wisdom.”

“They spent the next three days going through the Book of Proverbs,” Fernando says. “When they had finished, the Ibanutes’ request was, ‘Can you stay longer? Can someone else come?’

“The reality of missions is that we are lacking in laborers. The doors are open. But there are few at the threshold waiting to enter.”

Names in quotation marks were changed.

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