

LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN: CONNECTING THE LOCAL CHURCH WITH UNREACHED PEOPLE GROUPS

We try to connect the dots. That's our process. Connect the dots, then maybe after a while we'll have a whole movement."

It's how Richard Nicholson, regional director of the Latin America and Caribbean region, describes their approach to matching the right people with the right kind of missions work.

"People have individual passions in ministries, and we try to get those people together and see what emerges," he says.

But "connecting the dots" is more than a personal goal for Nicholson—in fact, it might as well be the motto for the whole AGWM ministry in Latin America and Caribbean, starting with their plans for connecting the existing local church with the often remote unreached people groups spread across the more than 20 countries in the region.

For Nicholson, that approach begins with the belief that every human being has value to God, no matter how remote or uneducated. While that may not be a new concept, it's a goal that, according to Nicholson, is sometimes met with indifference on the ground.

"Local churches sometimes think, 'They only have a second grade education and they live in the jungle. They're primitive, pagans—what's the point?'" he says.

This is where Assemblies of God missionaries serve an important function as motivators and role models for the national Church, particularly in those areas where local churches have not yet seen the value in pursuing the unreached. "What we do by our actions, by our lives and by our willingness to go reach these people is that we attribute to those individuals honor and dignity and respect. So when we reach them, we say, 'You are valuable to God, and thus you are valuable to me.' That's why we do what we do."

Connecting to the National Church

The ministry utilizes an approach to mission work taught by Assemblies of God missionary Melvin Hodges, who served as the regional director for the area of Latin America and the Caribbean from 1954-1973. He taught that the most successful way to work as missionaries in a foreign country is to share the life of the indigenous church and allow them to be self-supporting, self-sustaining and self-governing.

“Our ministry really took on muscle beginning in the ‘50s under the leadership of Melvin and his teachings on indigenous church principles,” says Nicholson, who has served alongside his wife, Cynthia, as regional directors since 1997. “We’re married to the national Church, and their success is our success.”

One of the ministry’s most fruitful strategies for connecting with unreached people groups in Latin America is church planting. Currently there are approximately 200,000 Assemblies of God churches in Latin American and Caribbean countries, due in part to the efforts of Assemblies of God missionaries.

“Some of the churches we have planted have celebrated their 25th and 26th anniversaries already, and they’re doing very well,” Nicholson says. “I’m very pleased at the results and outcome of our investment in those places.”

Joil Marbut is one of those missionaries. He lives with his family in Ecuador, serving under the Assemblies of God World Missions. His goal is to plant 100 churches among the Shuar people along the Amazon River basin, and he is already nearly halfway there.

Investing in People

In addition to church planting, Marbut has started a compassion ministry called Hope House, which provides a place for Shuar girls aged 11-20—particularly those who have been abused—to live, receive a high school education and learn a trade. He also organizes weeklong Bible schools for community leaders, who can then return home to teach their people what they’ve learned. Marbut’s ministry in Ecuador also provides health care for the Shuar people, including water purification, medical clinics and health education.

Like Marbut, Assemblies of God missionaries in the Latin America and Caribbean region serve many previously unreached people groups through a variety of compassion ministries, including feeding programs, clothing programs and health care programs, depending on each area’s specific needs.

The ministry’s Latin America Child Care (LACC) program, which provides education, training and in some cases at least one meal a day for each child, is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year and has served approximately 1 million children since its founding.

“We’ve got people today who are judges and missionaries and police and senators who

were part of our LACC program growing up,” Nicholson says. “So we’re very pleased at that strong ministry.”

Nicholson says he and his wife often receive letters from people who have been impacted by their ministry, even 25 years later. Like the woman who recently wrote, saying that 25 years ago she heard Nicholson preach in her village and he later prayed for her after she told him she could not have children. A year later, God responded, and her sons are now in their mid-20s.

“One of the best parts of what we do is feeling like we’ve invested in people, and now we’ve lived long enough and stayed at it long enough to hear how their lives have turned out,” Nicholson says. “It’s very satisfying.”

Ways to Get Involved

Though the Latin America and Caribbean region of Assemblies of God World Missions is going strong, the ministry is always in need of help.

The primary way to help support this ministry is to pray—both for missionaries and for the program as a whole.

“We always welcome people to intercede and pray, especially right now when we are launching new initiatives to reach the unreached. That’s vitally important,” Nicholson says.

Another way to help is to support the ministry financially. If you feel led to invest in this ministry, please contact the Latin America and Caribbean offices at (417) 862-2781. If there is a specific area of service you are passionate about investing in, simply specify which area you would like your support to go to—for example, church planting, reaching unreached people groups or Bible schools—and your funds will be designated specifically for that cause.

Finally, the ministry is always in need of Bible students and people who have a background in theology to help with education training for missionaries.

For more information on the Latin America and Caribbean region, visit worldmissions.ag.org/regions/latinamcab.