

INTERPRETING THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE EVANGELICAL CHURCH IN
GUATEMALA: YEAR 2002

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GUATEMALA: YEAR 2002

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DEDICATION

This paper is dedicated to my Christian brothers of the Guatemalan Church. My prayer is that the results of this research will help all Christian denominations to rejoice in what God has done in His Church and to shore up weak areas.

My family rejoices in what the results of this project can do for the evangelical Church of Guatemala. I am thankful for my encouraging wife, Vicki, who always sees a brighter tomorrow and who helped in project execution. She has been my faithful companion, encourager, sounding board and friend. My children have been patient through this project as their Dad spent days away on the field or days away in the home in a distracted state as I wrote this project. A special thanks to Joshua, my eldest, who proofed Spanish transcripts and major sections of the paper. Melanie and Nathanael have demonstrated helpful and understanding spirits during this project.

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There are many more people who have had a part in this project and they are too numerous to mention. Too numerous to mention by name are the lost sheep in Guatemala, Ladino, Indian, the rich, and the poor. Their names are unknown to me, but they are the reason for this project. May the Guatemalan Church show each one the way to the Savior.

ABSTRACT

Guatemala has experienced a phenomenal growth of evangelicals in the past and is a showcase of evangelical work throughout Latin America. God's hand can be seen in overarching sociopolitical events that were used to open the doors and create favorable conditions for evangelicals. This paper sets the context for the primary research as it examines key figures, pivotal events, strategies, and denominations that have played a central role in the explosive growth in Guatemala from the entry of evangelicals until present day.

Primary research measures the current incidence of evangelicals in Guatemala based upon 18,962 randomly stratified personal interviews and finds that overall, Guatemala is 25.4% evangelical. The Interior of the country has a slightly higher proportion of evangelicals than the Capital, with 27.8% and 25.1% evangelicals, respectively. The least evangelized people groups of Guatemala are the Chortí (11% evangelical) in eastern Guatemala, along with several Indian groups in northern Huehuetenango (10% to 14% evangelical). Using geographical criteria, the eastern Departments of Chiquimula, El Progreso and parts of Zacapa have the lowest incidence of evangelicals in the country. Guatemala City is surprisingly homogenous with respect to the incidence of evangelicals, with the exception of the upper classes. The largest denominations in Guatemala in descending order are: Assembly of God, Church of God-Whole Gospel, Prince of Peace, the Central American Mission (CAM) and Elim. Within these leading denominations, all churches but CAM are Pentecostal or Neo-pentecostal.

This study uncovers disturbing information about the quality of the evangelical church at large demonstrating that between 25% to 44% of evangelicals are true Christians. The average evangelical has not internalized the Gospel reflected by the high degree of syncretism with Catholic doctrines, including a strong works theology. The average evangelical lacks in Christian lifestyle, but abounds in love for his pastor and church. Several factors have a direct bearing upon the lack of internalization of the Gospel such as: illiteracy, extreme poverty, secular education, denominational affiliation, and culture. Generally, as a denomination has a higher proportion of Indian constituency, the overall scores for the Christian life decrease. Although the Presbyterian and Elim churches have suffered in growth in recent years, these two groups are more effective in making Christian disciples. Both denominations have a high proportion of educated and Ladino constituents. The Church of God has a significantly better overall success with the Indian population as compared to other highly indigenous denominations.

By examining the characteristics of the largest or most influential denominations of Guatemala through the eyes of their leaders, a contrast can be seen between the more effective and the struggling denominations. The effectiveness of a denomination is directly tied to leadership and vision. Other issues closely tied to leadership are issues of God's intervention, personal dedication and sacrifice of leaders, competency, training, strategies, and methodologies.

This document includes procedures of the research project from the initial project proposal through data reporting to various agencies. It concludes with general recommendations made to mission agencies in order to deploy effective mission personnel in the Guatemalan context.