

Indigenization of Puerto Rico

Church History 3031

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When you start out in life, whether it be with a new job, a new family, a new land it can be very challenging and difficult. When a new church body goes out on its own there will definitely be struggles for the pastors and members of those churches. But those struggles aren't always a bad thing. With this paper I intend to show the different and similar opinions that missionaries and people with decision-making abilities had when it came to making the church of Puerto Rico indigenous. Since the WELS no longer has missionaries in Puerto Rico I will look at some of the strategies that were used to make the national church independent from WELS.

Before the present condition of the Puerto Rican church can be surveyed it will be useful to see what was done in the past. By looking into the past it will be possible to see if the indigenization plans of the national church and the missionaries prior to the departure from PR were a blessing and why. Pastor Tim Satorius who is the current contact person between the IELC de PR (The Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Church of Puerto Rico) and our synod's CICR (Commission on Inter-Church Relations) had this to say in an email interview.

As you know, WELS began mission work in Puerto Rico the 1960's. I believe that indigenization was in the picture from the start, but eventually the emphasis on indigenization throughout World Missions worked its way more formally and concretely into our plans as a mission council and national church shortly before I arrived and while I served in PR (1991-1998). The original plan called for a withdrawal of missionaries in 2004, based on hoped-for and anticipated growth in terms of membership, stewardship and leadership. Naturally it was understood that the plans would always be subject to review on a regular basis. Indeed these plans were later adjusted to account for slower growth: the adjusted plans had the missionaries leaving gradually, one of the three in 2004, another in 2008 and the last in 2012. There was always an assumption that upon reaching maturity, the national church would be able to ask WELS and WELS missionaries to assume some sort of role (for instance, worker training) as partners with the national church, in a way that could be mutually agreed upon.

After I left to serve in Antigua (1998-2006), several budget crunches and the creation of the LATTE team (Latin American Traveling Theological Educators: several missionaries were relieved of their responsibility to a mission field and were assigned to work in worker training throughout Latin America) accelerated

the process of indigenization in Puerto Rico “a la fuerza» (by force). The number of missionaries was reduced from three to two, then to one. Later the last missionary assigned to PR was removed and one of the members of LATTE resided in Puerto Rico in order to continue to mentor and advise the national church, and indeed help with the congregational work. This ended in 2009 when the LATTE professor who had lived in PR (Ralph Martens) was called to serve as missionary in Mexico, leaving LATTE with one less member and leaving Puerto Rico without a resident counselor.

I guess you would have to say that if there had been no plans for indigenization, the eventual reassigning and de-funding of missionaries would have been disastrous. Yet even with the emphasis on indigenization, the process has been difficult for PR.¹

For forty years missionaries have been going out to Puerto Rico with the great commission to baptize all nations and to teach them about Jesus as their savior. The great commission is also the reason why these missionaries wanted to make the church in Puerto Rico indigenous. The faster the Puerto Rican people were instructed with God’s word and made proficient to take care of themselves the faster those missionaries would be able to continue the call of the great commission in another country. Pastor Dan Koelpin, the administrator of the Board for World Missions, said in an email “It is always a blessing when the national church takes ownership of its own direction and work.”² Pastor John Strackbein, who was a missionary in Puerto Rico from 1987-09, agrees that the indigenization plans of Puerto Rico were a blessing for two reasons.

A. If they had not been strongly emphasized few leaders would have stepped forward to be trained as pastors. The church would have been content to let WELS pay for their pastoral care and never would have had the capability of being independent when WELS ran out of money and had to leave. B. Stewardship, the ability to teach pure doctrine, a can do spirit, a correct understanding of the “Priesthood of all believers”, blossomed as the Puerto Ricans were enabled through the Word to be self sufficient in every respect.³

¹ Tim Satorius, e-mail interview: Indigenization of Puerto Rico, December 15, 2010.

² Dan Koelpin, e-mail interview: Indigenization of Puerto Rico, December 10, 2010.

³ John Strackbein, e-mail interview: Indigenization of Puerto Rico, December 11, 2010.

The missionaries didn't know what was going to happen in the future. For the longest time WELS had no financial concerns that would make the missionaries change the way that they were dealing with the people in Puerto Rico. Since finances were not at a critical point it could have been easy for the missionaries to make long term plans that would rely more on finances. Pastor Strackbein made a good point that stewardship was an important process in Puerto Rico's indigenization process as it should be for anything that is done that involves an individual, or church's time, talents, and treasures. These plans that were made served the WELS and the IELC well in the past and will be useful when they are compared to different mission fields.

Since the WELS had been in Puerto Rico for over forty years a lot of knowledge was gained and many opinions were formed. From the experiences in Puerto Rico there were lessons that could be learned about indigenization. Pastor Jon Buchholz, the President of the Arizona-California District, gave this comment in an email.

It would have been helpful to lay out goals for a "critical mass" of congregations, national workers, and church membership, to afford a better chance of long-term stability for the national church. Instead, considerations were largely driven by time and money. ("We've been here 40 years, and we've spent almost \$20 million dollars, it's high time we move on." That was largely the driving mindset.)

We learned that the Puerto Ricans are very capable of governing themselves in a self-disciplining confessional Lutheran church body. They are not able to realistically sustain the church financially, nor are they able to provide theological education, at this point. In the other areas, however, the Puerto Ricans have proved themselves consistently.⁴

The idea given about critical mass is important when it comes to the IELC because at the present time the membership of the entire church body is very low compared to what it has been

⁴ Jon Buchholz, e-mail interview: Indigenization of Puerto Rico, November 30, 2010.

in the past and now the national church has two pastors serving them. Having two pastors is a blessing but even when the national church was in its peak of membership, they would not have been able to support a full time pastor, much less two. Since this problem exists the goal would be to focus on evangelism until the church grew to a number that it could sustain a pastor. The goal would then be to focus on training the members to be pastors. The down side to this is that it would be hard to make future plans. Just because more effort is made to evangelize people does not mean that they will respond by becoming generous members. That is the work of the Holy Spirit. Another lesson learned from the indigenization of Puerto Rico will give some possible reasons as to why results seemed to be lacking.

A strong U.S. pastoral presence was always there until national Pastors Sergio Cortijo and Manuel Monroig were ordained. Strong Outreach programs were instituted by WELS missionaries, including Sprain, Martens, Flunker, Zimdars, Satorius, Baerbock, Strackbein, Wagenknecht and Rydecki. I have a box full of the programs that I and various missionaries used. So, why didn't it grow that rapidly. For one, there was growth. Some of the reasons may be: 1 Furloughs. They interrupted the ongoing visits needed. 2. Long vacancies where missionaries had to cover the field of another leaving less time for outreach 3. In spite of all the emphasis about indigenization, many missionaries had strong personalities and wanted things done their way and often did the work, made the decisions without involving the nationals and other missionaries in a team effort. 4. Unfortunately there were times when there was internal conflict between missionaries over strategy and other personal issues that boiled over into conflicts within the leadership of the national church. That affected outreach efforts.⁵

Like any plan that looks good on paper there will always be problems trying to implement it. From the sound of it the missionaries from the start to the end were determined to do outreach. They put in a lot of time and had the materials to facilitate their canvassing but the results just didn't come in. In part it was due to the procedures that missionaries used for their spare time. Furloughs were usually two months long for every two years that passed. On the year

⁵ John Strackbein

that a missionary went on vacation the plans for the entire summer were lost. It is also sad but inevitable that the selfish sinful nature would make its way into the picture and hinder the plans of the church by bringing its own agenda. Despite these negative side effects of sin there were other valuable learning experiences.

Puerto Rico was the first WELS mission in Latin America. As such it served as a stepping stone into Latin America: many missionaries first served in Latin America as vicars in PR, and other missionaries who served in PR later moved to other countries. Therefore their orientation toward missions and philosophy of ministry began to be formulated as they worked in PR and continued to develop as they served in world missions. Also those with administrative roles experimented with and tested indigenous principles in Puerto Rico⁶

Even though being the guinea pig has its down sides the blessings that come with it are also great. Having the opportunity to influence how God's word was going to be spread around this part of the world would benefit missionaries ^{and} the members of IELC. The principles being tested would be well known by the nationals and will enable them to do their own mission work in different parts of the island and on different islands in the Caribbean. Having all these experiences with mission work it will be important that the national church not focus on one aspect of ministry "Outreach and nurture must be balanced."⁷

Another lesson that can be learned is how to deal with the shortcomings of the IELC and the shortcomings of the WELS. Since the missionaries in Puerto Rico had to leave before they and the national church ^{were} was comfortable, there were certain things that just did not get finished. Because of this strategies may have to change and new ideas may have to be pioneered. Pastor Philip Strackbein, a LATTE professor from 2003-07, had this to say in an email.

⁶ Tim Satorius

⁷ Dan Koelbin

In my opinion, what was lacking was to emphasize more a way of helping the Puerto Rico national church develop its own system of training members for ministry, a system that they would have been able to run using their own manpower, time and resources. It probably would have had to be a different kind of system than what we are used to in the WELS. The reason I say this is because once the last missionary left Puerto Rico, the national leaders have not seemed to be able to train their own members for the pastoral ministry.⁸

For the average WELS person their ears would probably perk up to such an opinion.

After all, the WELS has a quality worker-training program that has been tested and founded on God's word. Of course God's word should always be the foundation of a church no matter what country it is in, but the way in which the WELS carries out its work may not and in this case does not seem to be practical. Just the size of WELS and the stability that size gives it will make it hard to relate to the cultural, geographical, and financial situation that is unique to Puerto Rico. Suggestions to facilitate these problems might be to rely on technology to get future pastors and workers trained from afar. Forms of communication are becoming easier, faster, and cheaper to use from year to year. Even though ⁱⁿ Missionaries are no longer present in Puerto Rico the day may come that WELS pastors may be able to give all the support that the IELC asks for over long distance by means of computers, internet, live transmissions like Skype, educational recourses through electronic books, and much more.

So far the past plans and what WELS workers have learned from them is rather clear. But what is the condition of the IELC now that WELS missionaries have left and made the national church of Puerto Rico its own identity?

The church comprises three or four struggling congregations, with one full-time older pastor and one part-time middle-aged pastor. Numbers have declined since a peak in 1988. Overall, the church is struggling from lack of support, manpower, finances, and other resources. The sad condition is the result of an overemphasis

⁸ Philip Strackbein, e-mail interview: Indigenization of Puerto Rico, December 6, 2010.

on indigenization at the expense of pastoral care and raw evangelism, as well as the hasty and premature withdrawal of all expatriate WELS missionaries.⁹

The numbers, emphasis, and timeframe seem to be the issue here. Pastor Satorius gives further detail as to the condition of the church.

I go back to the impression that the church is in a “survival mode.” I should probably say that it is a good thing and a fruit of faith that the church has this mode and is willing to continue to fight to survive. I believe that attendance is somewhat down at each of the congregations/preaching stations. Of course local and personal circumstances are always varied, but it is not uncommon for members to move to the US. I know that the church in Guayama has had a struggle with some leaders who weren’t on the same page as their pastor, leading to disagreements and unhappiness with the church. Outreach is often difficult in Latin America due to many factors, like for instance the influence of the Catholic Church, but it is especially difficult in Puerto Rico with the growing prevalence of Pentecostal churches (they can “offer more” of what the “unchurched” might be looking for and their thinking (especially legalism) tends to be accepted even by who would be considered our prospects). While I know the church wants to reach out with the Gospel, I don’t know if they have had the persistence or found their niche in the difficult task of sharing the Gospel with Puerto Ricans in their communities. With regard to finances, I believe the church is in a sense living off of what is in the bank. All the congregations pay their pastors a stipend, but some of them have this stipend subsidized by the national church. All congregations are set up to contribute into the national church fund, but some of them are unable to do so, due to lack of funds. In addition, churches contribute to the national church fund by repaying internal loans they have received for purchase, construction and remodeling of church facilities, but some have fallen behind schedule, again due to lack of funds. This hasn’t necessarily caused any problems among them, as I believe they are all in agreement, but this won’t be sustainable for the future.¹⁰

Once again the financial issues seem to be getting at the church because the attendance is lower. Part of the problem is the culture of Puerto Rico. “Everybody” considers themselves Catholic in some way or another. Many of the Puerto Ricans will only go into a church three times in their lives, to be baptized, to be married, and to die. It has become culturally acceptable to remain Catholic in name only and not be associated with it in any way other than through the family

⁹ Jon Buchholz

¹⁰ Tim Satorius

which will more than likely be Catholic. The problem comes when Puerto Ricans try to leave the Catholic Church. The family will all be firmly opposed and in Puerto Rico family is the most important thing on a social level. The only thing that can change this unfortunate part of the culture is the preaching of God's word. The Holy Spirit will work faith into these people as he wills but their families may be the thorns that choke out the seed. These are all issues that affect the IELC and they continually need to be addressed like they have been in the past. When looking at the national church could the things that look like the biggest problems actually be their greatest blessings?

Their statistics are lower than they were several years ago, but that doesn't always mean that the condition is bad. Is the church truly confessional? I pray that it is. If it is then it's condition is good. Is it doing outreach and does it have a strong mission spirit? If so, it is in good condition. Does it faithfully preach the Gospel at its various churches and administer the sacraments? If so, then God is with them and having God's blessing, they are in good hands.¹¹

What church body has ever been 100% when it is on its own? The IELC has only been on its own for two years and it is bound to have big and small bumps along the road. Many in the national church have a "can do attitude" which is fueled by the Holy Spirit. "I believe that God has blessed the church, its leaders and its members with a strong faith, which will allow them to persevere and with the desire to share the gospel with their neighbors."¹² This "sad situation" might be the test that God is giving the IELC so that ~~that~~ this young church body will put their faith in Him and stay true to his word. God's word had survived in situations that are far worse and if the day comes that the IELC becomes a thriving church that is able to sustain itself in every possible way, to God be the glory.

¹¹ John Strackbein

¹² Tim Satorius

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