

THE PAST: HERITAGE AND INDIGENOUS PROCESS IN PARAGUAY

By Carlos Fernández

Country of Origin: Argentina

Serving in: Argentina

INTRODUCTION

Paraguay is called “The Heart of South America” because of its geographical location and its small size. With its 406,750 km², the size of California, Paraguay has borders with Brazil, Bolivia and Argentina. Its mestizo (European-Indian) population in 2003 was estimated at 6,191,368. The official language is Spanish, but the people also speak Guaraní.

It has been dominated politically by dictators. This has generated a lot of corruption and has brought poverty with a current unemployment rate of 18.5%. Half of its population has been lost in wars with Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil; it had victory over Bolivia but ended exhausted. In spite of all this, Paraguay is a country with great possibilities and above all else, a country in need of Christ. Its Apostolic Roman Catholic religion (90%) is nominal.

This political, economic, social and religious overview is necessary to take into account to do a serious analysis of Paraguay and also the history of the Church of the Nazarene in this country.

HISTORICAL SUMMARY

The Church of the Nazarene began its first efforts in 1968 from the city of Formosa, located in the north of Argentina, through the ministry of Pastor Vicente Longo in the Ciudad de Alberdi, in the home of Apolonia de Villalba. In 1970, Juan García, a young Paraguayan that rowed an hour to attend the services, was converted. He later became one of the first Paraguayan pastors. In 1977, Juan and Rosalía García started the second work in Pilar, Argentina.

In 1980 the Pioneer District of North Argentina/Paraguay was created with its center in Rosario. Missionary Victor Edwards, of British origin, worked as the superintendent although he lived in Formosa. In 1981, Andrés and Margarita Avalos, a Paraguayan couple pastoring in Argentina, resolved to return to Paraguay to begin the work in Asunción, the country’s capital. In 1982, during a Luis Palau evangelistic campaign, Luis Bogado was converted and became one of the first national pastors in Uruguay. This same year, due to the conflict between Argentina and Great Britain, Victor Edwards moved from Formosa to Asunción to dedicate more time to the work there.

In 1983, the Church of the Nazarene obtained official recognition and was able to establish itself legally in the country. In 1984, with District Superintendent Kenneth Jones, the first official Paraguay District Assembly was held and reported five organized churches and 11 missions. Also this year, with great joy, the first property was bought in Barrio Obrero, in the capital city Asunción.

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In 1985 the new Field Director, Wesley Harris, arrived and established the Field office in Asunción. In 1989, Steve Baker came as Field Director and gave new motivation for the work in Paraguay. In 1990 missionaries David and Beverly Gruver were placed in charge of the educational work but unexpectedly in May, David passed away, causing a hard hit to the work there. Ramón and Blanca Sierra arrived to take the place of the Gruvers and continue with education in the entire country.

In 1991 the first national elders were ordained: Juan García, Luis Bogado and Félix Arce. This same year the Regional Office moved to Pilar, Argentina. At that time, Rev. Sierra was in charge of the three districts with the help of Rev. Oscar Pereda in the Central, Ignacio Pereira in the Northeast and Andrés Avalos in the South. During the district assembly held in 1991 (statistics from 1990), Rev. Sierra gave a report of 645 members throughout Paraguay, with 507 in the Central district of which 225 were active and 282 inactive. He also reported 37 students enrolled in CENETA in the three districts. During the following assembly, Rev. Pereda was elected District Superintendent of the Central District and also was put in charge of the other two districts, North and South. In 1992, the church reached its maximum point of growth with reports from the three districts that indicated 28 churches and 816 members: 20 churches in the Central, 4 in the Northeast and 4 in the South. From this point on the number of churches and members started to fall. Missionaries Sierra stayed in charge of the work and especially in the formation of new leaders. Bruno Radi was named as Regional Director.

In 1993 Rev. Daniel and Margarita Pesado came as the new Field Director. The Sierras were called to Argentina and Rev. Ramón Baúza replaced them as superintendent of the North and South districts. In 1994 Rev. Pereda, originally from Peru, and who had had ministerial formation in Argentina, continued in his position as the Central District Superintendent with 14 organized churches. Paraguay was left without missionaries. Towards the end of 1995, Rev. Carlos and Noemí Fernández arrived as the new Field Director.

In 1996, the SAM Regional Office moved from Quito, Ecuador to Buenos Aires, Argentina. During that time of transition, the McKellips missionary family moved to Paraguay for seven months, until the Heils arrival. Bryan Heil was named superintendent of the three districts and was in charge of pastoral training. In 1998, missionaries Willie and Ada Canales, both from Peru, arrived to help the Heils by assuming the superintendency of the Central District and the church in Luque, while Bryan Heil continued in his responsibility of training pastors and leading the other two districts. His main responsibility was to motivate the pastors on the Central District and construct a healthy church that could serve as a model for the rest of the district. In 1999, the Heils were reassigned to the Caribbean Region and the Canales accepted the challenge of pastoral preparation for a new generation, developing the profile of the pastor and healthy churches for the country. In the South District, Rev. Orlando Muñoz, originally from Chile and naturalized Paraguayan, was named district superintendent. He was a great help to the church in the country as he reopened several works and planted new ones. Finally, in 2000, missionaries Gary and Kathy Hughes were named superintendent of the Northeast District.

HERITAGE

In the inventory of the inheritance we find very valuable capital:

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- Evangelistic passion of the Argentinians and British, North American, Puerto Rican and Peruvian missionaries that had great vision for Paraguay. As missionary Kenneth Jones expressed in his first report as District Superintendent, “The Church is not a mission, but has a mission.”
- The importance in forming Leader-Servant pastors that our church places emphasis on in every area that is evangelized.
- The motivation that World Mission gave through the sending of missionaries and Work and Witness teams who have shown great interest in us.
- Help and support from the Regional and Field offices and the educational institutions that helped the work grow and multiply.
- The infrastructure of church buildings and parsonages throughout this wonderful country.
- A Biblical doctrine centered on Christian values, missional and Holiness that our Church of the Nazarene proclaims.
- The Jesus Film, a great tool with the message in the Guaraní language.

On the negative side of this inheritance we find:

- Continual changes in the Field Office.
- Continual changes in the sending and assigning of missionaries.
- Lack of continuity in the mission strategy of the church after the initial push.
- Lack of good selection of national leadership.
- Lack of a project for the formation of leaders taking into account their culture.
- Wrong motivation in the national pastors.

INDIGENOUS PROCESS

In this sense I believe the Church of the Nazarene in Paraguay has produced:

- A good group of responsible lay leaders.
- A District Superintendent that has captured the vision, Rev. Orlando Muñoz.
- Sending of a Paraguayan missionary to open the work in Equatorial Guinea in Africa, the last Spanish-speaking country that the Church of the Nazarene had not yet entered; with singular success, Rev. Mario Martínez and his wife Irma (originally from Argentina).
- Sending of an Argentinian couple that was working on Paraguayan soil, sent to Mozambique, Africa. Carlos and Silvia Bauzá are currently doing a much praised job there.

OUR GREAT CHALLENGE

- That the national and zone strategy elaborated by the Region and Field bear fruit.
- That the South District that is growing can be an inspiration to the other districts.
- That the healthy church in Luque can be imitated by many other churches in the country.
- That the new generation of leaders in Paraguay can be reoriented so that they themselves can be the leaders in the near future.
- That the districts can advance to the next phase.

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- That churches that are currently closed can be reopened.
- That the new evangelistic emphasis can allow us to plant new churches using all the available tools.
- The theological education can be a strong force in Paraguay.
- That new believers will be disciplined for the strengthening of the work in our beautiful country.
- That we can reach the indigenous areas that make up a great part of the population of Paraguay.

SOURCES:

Presentation of Rev. Wilfredo Canales to ASIT entitled, “History of the Church of the Nazarene in Paraguay: History, Presence and Characteristics”, July 2004.

Testimony of Ramon Sierra, missionary to Paraguay (1990-1993).

Information on the Internet WEB page about Paraguay.

My own information as Field Director of the South Cone, 1995-2004.