

REACHING OUT FOR CHRIST IN CHIAPAS, MEXICO



HOW IT ALL BEGAN

The story of the Reformed Church's work in Chiapas, Mexico, began in 1925 with an invitation extended to the Reformed Church Women's Board of Foreign Missions by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The women's board was given responsibility for evangelizing the people of Chiapas, "the most remote, primitive, and forsaken state in Mexico."

Two men and two women representing the board made a trip to Tapachula on the southernmost tip of Chiapas. There a group of Mexican Christians met regularly, having been originally evangelized by Guatemalan coffee pickers who came into Mexico each year. One account tells us that "the delegation was impressed everywhere with the sight of the multitudes—living in their bamboo villages, waiting for whatever a new day might bring them."

Having accepted the formidable challenge of evangelizing these largely unreached peoples, the board called John and Mabel Kempers, a young Reformed Church couple who had just completed their studies at Princeton Theological Seminary. They arrived as newlyweds in Mexico in December of 1925 and soon thereafter set up their residence in Tapachula.

The first task of the young Kempers was to learn about missionary work from Joseph Coffin, the local Mexican pastor who had been assigned oversight of the work in Chiapas. For two months they traveled together across the state, visiting isolated groups of Christians who needed to be encouraged, discipled, and organized.

WORKING PRINCIPLES ADOPTED

Careful study of the Chiapas field led Dr. Kempers to establish a set of working principles for the mission task. Certain political, geographical, and economic aspects of the area colored these principles.

The radical separation of church and state mandated by the Mexican constitution of 1910 allowed no foreigner to administer the sacraments or pastor a church. This led to the immediate and rapid use of national evangelists and pastors, both lay and ordained.

During the 1920s and 1930s there was extremely strong anti-religious sentiment among the educated, urban people of Mexico. At the same time, the gospel was taking root in the rural areas. The Reformed Church was directed to work where the receptivity was greatest: in the rural areas, coffee ranches, little towns, and jungle villages.

The state of Chiapas is crisscrossed by great mountain ranges. This inaccessibility contributed to the use of many laypersons who dedicated their time to visiting the various Christian groups, taking Bibles to them, and helping to encourage and disciple them.

John and Mabel Kempers served alone in Chiapas for 18 years. In 1943 Gerald and Ruth Van Engen joined them. The limited presence of only two missionary couples for the entire state contributed to conscious shaping of missionary decentralization. The Kempers believed that when given the necessary training and tools, national believers and national pastors are much more effective evangelists than foreign missionaries. Therefore, when the Van Engens arrived in 1943 as the second missionary couple, they were stationed in another area of the state. Their assignment was to train lay evangelists and preachers for new churches. As other missionaries were added to the force with specific assignments, they located in strategic areas where they could form important partnerships with national Christians, learning and teaching at the same time.

All institutions, services, buildings, or organizations were planned in such a way that the national Christians could support and operate them. Although not always successful, the plan allowed for a nationalization process on a much greater and faster scale than has normally been the case in other parts of the world.

RCA WORK EXPANDS TO INCLUDE MAYAN INDIAN TRIBES

The state of Chiapas includes people who speak eight different languages. The early Christian groups spoke Spanish, as did about 80 percent of the population. The Kempers and Van Engens were therefore assigned to work with the Spanish-speaking churches.

In the early 1950s, after the first translation work had been done by Wycliffe Bible Translators, the Reformed Church branched out in evangelism, leadership training, and church planting among the Ch'ol and Tzeltal, two of the monolingual Mayan tribes of the state. The primary strategy in this pioneer evangelization was responding to the felt needs of the people. For the Mayan language groups, this involved assisting them with medical attention, demonstrating new agricultural methods, writing and distributing literature in their own language, and training indigenous leaders as evangelists, preachers, and teachers. These early attempts met with great success. Much of what was learned in those first encounters has been used to advantage in evangelizing the Tojolabals and the Tzotzils, two other monolingual tribal groups in the state of Chiapas. In these pioneer tribal ventures, the same general principles were followed. Each new missionary family was expected to learn a particular Mayan dialect and to learn from, work alongside, and teach the people among whom they lived.

RESULTS OF EARLY MISSION WORK

The result of this joint effort between national and missionary has been outstanding. After more than 80 years of Reformed Church participation in mission in Chiapas, the picture is an astounding one.

- Over 200,000 evangelical Christians speaking six languages.
- Over fourteen hundred chapels and places of worship.
- Over 126 ordained pastors speaking six languages and about 50 unordained lay pastoral church workers.
- Four language groups (Spanish, Tzeltal, Ch'ol, and Tzotzil) organized in 13 presbyteries and three synods.
- Over one hundred village health care clinics under the jurisdiction of the local churches.
- Four Bible schools and leadership training programs in four languages and a theological seminary.
- A conference grounds for youth camping and special retreats.
- A statewide organization of women's societies and an equivalent statewide union of young people's societies.
- Around 60 major publication pieces of biblical instruction material for the churches, prepared in five languages.

The results are nothing short of miraculous when it is realized that during the first 18 years of RCA work in Chiapas there was only one couple. For the next 10 years there were two couples, and never has the RCA had more than 10 couples working in Chiapas at one time.

The accomplishments must very definitely be seen as a product of the work of the Holy Spirit and a result of a very careful and fruitful cooperation between national and missionary personnel.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PARTNERSHIP

From its very inception, the RCA's work in Chiapas has been related to the concern, vision, and invitation of the National Presbyterian Church of Mexico. In recent years, the Mexican church, in partnership with the Reformed Church, has formed a special joint Commission for Mission in Chiapas. Each year this commission reviews the

plans and projects of the various presbyteries and the missionaries related to them. The commission then helps to determine the priorities and strategies for mission work in Chiapas.

A given project will receive contributions in time, energy, resources, and money from the national Christians of Chiapas, the National Presbyterian Church of Mexico on a nationwide scale, and the Reformed Church. This partnership has been the crucial element enabling the RCA to continue its mission endeavor in Chiapas while many other mission organizations have been forced to leave. In this approach, the RCA is committed to listen to national and indigenous leadership and does not arbitrarily move into any mission endeavor unless it is in national planning and has their approval.

GOALS AND STRATEGIES FOR THE FUTURE

The Reformed Church, in partnership with the National Presbyterian Church of Mexico, has developed the following long-range goals:

1. Leadership training in all the fields, leading to the eventual departure of missionaries.
2. Literature production in the various languages.
3. The training of medical personnel for the rural medical clinics.
4. Development of a fully accredited theological seminary.

The membership of the National Presbyterian Church of Mexico in Chiapas exceeded the membership of the Reformed Church in America in the year 2000. Given the 10 to 12 percent annual growth rate of the church in Chiapas, the training of pastors will continue to be one of the top priorities. That percentage means approximately eighteen thousand new Christians per year. Most of the new converts have never read the Bible and must be disciplined in the Christian life. A handful of missionary couples could not possibly disciple that many new converts, so conducting rural evangelism, training national pastors, developing lay leaders, decentralizing missionaries, and encouraging the development of indigenous-run institutions will continue to characterize the work of the RCA in Chiapas. This strategy means that as the National Presbyterian Church of Mexico in Chiapas has grown and matured, it has become more self-sufficient. Only a few RCA missionaries remain in Chiapas to support the work of the church in leadership training, healthcare, and education.

CHIAPAS PARA CRISTO—CHIAPAS FOR CHRIST

The Reformed Church's ministry in Chiapas, Mexico, has been a strong and successful one. Early in their mission endeavors, the missionaries and the national church adopted "Chiapas Para Cristo" as their motto. The Reformed Church is challenged by the motto as it faces future opportunities in Chiapas and other states in Mexico which open joint mission work with the national church. These new opportunities can begin when the RCA catches the vision to reach these unreached areas.

YOU CAN BE A MISSION PARTNER IN CHIAPAS

There are many ways you can become a partner in the worldwide mission of the Reformed Church in America:

- Commit to a Partnership-in-Mission share.
- Include the RCA mission program in your will.
- Make designated or undesignated gifts.
- Serve as an RCA mission volunteer.
- Assist your classis in forming a partnership with an RCA global church partner.
- Commit to pray for RCA missionaries and church partners.

For more information about any of these ways to support RCA mission, please contact Mary Hondorp at mhondorp@rca.org or (800) 968-3943.

To donate to support a missionary or mission project, mail your check—made out to "Reformed Church in America" and with the memo line clearly designating the project or missionary you would like to support—to

Reformed Church in America; P.O. Box 19381; Newark, NJ 07195-1938 or, in Canada, to Regional Synod of Canada; 201 Paradise Road N., Hamilton, ON L8S 3T3.

Donations for many mission projects can be made online. Visit the RCA website, www.rca.org, and click on the "Contributions & Offerings" button on the main page to link to a list of projects that need support.

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