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Carmelo Alvarez

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The Stone-Campbell Movement in Latin America and the Caribbean

CARMELO ÁLVAREZ

The main purpose of this article is to offer a panoramic view of the missionary presence of the Stone-Campbell Movement in Latin America and the Caribbean and the challenge to share in God's mission today.

DISCIPLES OF CHRIST IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

Jamaica

The Disciples of Christ showed an increasing interest in Jamaica as a mission post as early as 1838. Julius Oliver Beardslee, an Oberlin Congregational missionary who preached in Jamaica and later on accepted the teaching of the Disciples of Christ on adult baptism by immersion, came back as a Disciples of Christ missionary, sponsored by American Christian Missionary Society (ACMS). Beardslee started the Oberlin Congregational Church in 1858, and later transferred the congregation to the Disciples of Christ in 1861. He left Jamaica in 1864 and the Christian Woman's Board of Mission (CWBM) continued to support the Disciples of Christ mission in Jamaica until 1922, when a United Christian Missionary Society (UCMS) became the only missionary society of the Disciples of Christ.

Arthur Charles Dayfoot, a church historian and for many years a missionary of the United Church of Canada in Trinidad and Grenada, emphasizes the Restoration roots in the Disciples of Christ as a movement born in the frontier and influenced by the Second Great Awakening in the Cane Ridge camp meeting, under the leadership of W. Barton Stone.¹ He stresses that the Disciples of Christ brought with them an emphasis on Christian unity more than a revivalist fervor.²

Robert G. Nelson, UCMS missionary (1948–1956) wrote an important book on the Disciples of Christ in Jamaica. He divides the history of Disciples of Christ mission boards in three phases. The American Christian Missionary Society as the initiator (1858–1876), the Christian Woman's Board of Mission as the inheritor of trials and achievements (1876–1920), and the United Christian Missionary Society as the promoter of an indigenous church (1920–1958).³ Nelson traces the different emphases in these phases, but sees continuity in a multifaceted process that included the search for identity of the Disciples of Christ as a national church in Jamaica, its ecumenical role in the country and in the Caribbean region, and the financial and administrative effort to become more self-sufficient and less dependent.

The first important step was the evolution from the Jamaica Mission to the formation of the Jamaica Association of Christian Churches in 1929. One of the key issues was self-support and administrative efficiency in order to develop a national denomination. The UCMS would continue its support, but would

1. Arthur Charles Dayfoot, *The Shaping of the West Indian Church 1492–1962* (Kingston: The Press University of the West Indies, 1999), 202–206.

2. *Ibid.*, 204.

3. Robert G. Nelson, *Disciples of Christ in Jamaica 1858–1958. A Centennial of Missions in the "Gem of the Caribbean"* (St. Louis: The Bethany Press, 1958), 21–37; 71–82; 83–116.

expect to see growth in these areas, hoping to achieve church growth as a missionary goal.⁴ Another big step in that process was the formation of the Jamaican Christian Council in 1941, an ecumenical body composed of Anglican, Baptist, Presbyterian, Congregational, Methodist, Moravian, Disciples of Christ, Church of God (Anderson, Indiana), Salvation and the Society of Friends.⁵ The Jamaican Christian Council offered many opportunities not only for reunions and retreats, but also to promote Christian unity as a much needed testimony in the country.

The Disciples of Christ in Jamaica have participated actively in the ecumenical movement in the Caribbean region and the international scenario, particularly the World Council of Churches. One of the most creative projects in the Caribbean, and certainly the most ecumenical, is the Caribbean Conference of Churches (CCC). The Disciples of Christ in Jamaica are founding members of this Conference. It started as an effort to respond to some of the emerging issues in the region.

The Caribbean Conference of Churches was founded in Kingston, Jamaica, in 1973, under the theme “The Right Hand of God,” with the participation of eighteen denominations, including the Antilles Episcopal Conference of the Roman Catholic Church. The Conference decided that human liberation, social justice and dignity would be among the priorities of its programmatic and cooperative actions.⁶

By the early 1990s the Disciples of Christ in Jamaica made a crucial decision; they joined the United Church of Jamaica and Grand Cayman. This new church was formed by the Presbyterian Church in Jamaica and the Congregational Union of Jamaica in 1965. The Disciples of Christ in Jamaica joined on December 1992, and a new name was adopted: The United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands.⁷ The process has been, like any new formation, difficult at times, encouraging at other times and always hopeful.⁸

Mexico

The Disciples of Christ mission in Mexico was initiated by the Christian Woman’s Board of Mission (CWBM) in 1895. Mr. M. L. Hoblit was assigned to explore and establish missionary work there. He went initially to Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua and later to Monterrey. Hoblit was able to open a school and a print shop, emphasizing education during his tenure as a missionary. Mr. and Mrs. A. G. Alderman replaced Mr. Hoblit in Monterrey and founded the Christian Church in 1901. Sadly, Mr. Alderman passed away in 1903, and Mr. Tomás Westrup, who was fluent in Spanish, took over that missionary post. Westrup continued to follow a strategy in which music, publication of educational materials and preaching were the main task. He was a talented musician, well known to this day in Latin America and the Caribbean as “The Father of Mexican Hymnody.” Many English hymns were translated into Spanish by Westrup over the years. His son, Enrique T. Westrup, followed in his father’s footsteps. In 1905 Samuel G. Inman joined Westrup in Monterrey and became a leading voice and an influential mind because of his knowledge of Mexican and Latin American history and politics. He founded the People’s Institute at Piedras Negras and the Mexican Christian Institute (Inman Christian Center) in San Antonio. This institution was instrumental in assisting Mexican immigrants during the turbulent years of the Mexican Revolution (1910–1917).⁹

The Mexican territory was divided, assigning the Disciples of Christ to Central Mexico (Aguas Calientes and San Luis Potosí). In Aguas Calientes the Disciples of Christ continued the social work started by the Methodists. A crucial decision had to be made; the Methodists had established schools and the Disciples of Christ continued their work. But the Mexican Revolution promoted new reforms, including a profound

4. Ibid., 108–111.

5. Ibid., 166.

6. Carmelo Álvarez, “Theology from the Margins: A Caribbean Response, A People of God in the Caribbean,” in *Theology: Expanding the Borders*, ed. María Pilar Aquino and Roberto S. Goizueta (Mystic, CT: Thirty-Third Publications, 1998), 272.

7. <http://www.unitedchurch.org.ky/>, accessed August 17, 2009.

8. Conversations with Rev. Richmond Nelson, Kingston, Jamaica, October 4–8, 2004.

9. Sydney Rooy, “Inman, Samuel Guy (1877–1965),” in *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions*, ed. Gerald H. Anderson (Grand Rapids: Wm.B. Eerdmans, 1999), 319.

educational reform: no religious instruction was allowed in public institutions, particularly the churches. Maintaining schools that would compete with public education and complying with a curriculum that prohibited religious instruction was a serious challenge.¹⁰ The critical financial situation of those schools was another pressing issue which prompted the closing of many Protestant schools at the time. Disciples of Christ missionaries continued developing new strategies and making adjustments to the new situation. They transformed the schools into social centers to serve the poor in the 1930s. Juarez Social Center in San Luis Potosí opened in March, 1937.¹¹

An area of concern and preoccupation for decades has been theological education. The Methodists started a seminary in Mexico City in 1880; by 1917 this institution was transformed and renamed Union Seminary, with the participation of the Congregationalists and the Disciples of Christ. Union Seminary provided theological education to many pastors and leaders of the three denominations for many decades.

The Disciples of Christ in Mexico confronted their most serious conflict in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The main focus of dissension seemed to be doctrinal and liturgical, but issues related to administration, leadership style, evangelistic efforts and mission strategy were at stake. For one sector the charismatic experience meant a renewal of the church and a new vision for Disciples in Mexico. For others it reflected a lack of a solid Disciples ecclesiology, faith and practice. The conflict resulted in a schism, with two new Disciples of Christ churches: Alianza de Iglesias Cristianas Evangélicas (Discípulos de Cristo) and Confraternidad de Iglesias Cristianas Evangélicas de México (Discípulos de Cristo). They continue to work primarily in Aguas Calientes and San Luis Potosí. In recent times some initial dialogues have taken place between the two denominations, primarily in the area of theological education.¹²

Puerto Rico

Puerto Rico is the home of a distinctive Stone-Campbell community. At the end of the nineteenth century Puerto Rico was experiencing a significant transition. Having become a United States colony as a result of the Spanish-American War, it received many Protestant missions from the United States beginning in 1898. The Disciples of Christ came to the island on April 23, 1899. J. A. Erwin and his family were assigned to the northern part of Puerto Rico, in the city of Bayamón, as part of the comity agreement among Protestant denominations that established missions. The first Disciples congregation was founded in 1901 in Bayamón. From Bayamón the Disciples moved to the countryside, starting the first Protestant rural congregation in Puerto Rico. Dajaos became, and still is, the Mecca of Puerto Rican Disciples.

The first missionaries experienced the misery and desperate needs of the Puerto Rican population and decided to respond by establishing two orphanages in Bayamón to educate and protect orphan children of the vicinity. By 1914 the missionaries had decided to change their strategy for mission in Puerto Rico. They closed the orphanages and concentrated on evangelism and planting new congregations. Many children were transferred to the Polytechnic Institute of the Presbyterian Church in San Germán. The process of establishing new congregations resulted in Disciples expanding their influence, particularly in the northwestern part of Puerto Rico.¹³

By 1905 the first council of churches in Latin America and the Caribbean was founded in Puerto Rico. The Federation of Evangelical Churches was its first name, in the 1940s it was known as the Association of Evangelical Churches, in the 1950s it was named the Evangelical Council of Churches, and in 2000 the

10. Elma C. Irelan, *Fifty Years with Our Mexican Neighbors* (St. Louis: The Bethany Press, 1944), 83–88.

11. *Ibid.*, 116–117.

12. A joint commission on theological education, called “la mesa conjunta,” has been established by the Congregationalists and the two Disciples of Christ denominations. Under the leadership of Justino Pérez and his wife Zaida Rivera Pérez (Common Global Board Ministries missionaries and Pastoral counselors by training), intensive courses are designed and offered to theological students looking for alternatives for their theological formation. The writer is a resource person in this project.

13. Joaquín Vargas, *Los Discípulos de Cristo en Puerto Rico. Albores, crecimiento y madurez de un peregrinar de fe, constancia y esperanza 1899–1987* (Bayamón: Iglesia Cristiana (Discípulos de Cristo) en Puerto Rico, 1988), 1–50.

Council of Churches of Puerto Rico. The Disciples of Christ in Puerto Rico enthusiastically joined this new ecumenical venture. In 1912 the first Protestant journal, *Puerto Rico Evangélico (Puerto Rican Evangelical)*, began publication. It was the most popular religious journal in Puerto Rico until 1960.

In 1919 the Disciples of Christ in Puerto Rico decided to close a biblical institute in Bayamón, and joined the Methodists, Presbyterians, American Baptists, Church of the Brethren and Congregationalists in founding the Evangelical Seminary of Puerto Rico. The Seminary is the official theological institution for the formation of pastors. In the late 1960s, a Disciples of Christ Institute was founded and began offering basic theological education for lay pastors.¹⁴

The first major crisis among Disciples of Christ in Puerto Rico erupted in 1933 when a group of laypersons started prayer circles at noon in Calle Comerío Christian Church. A charismatic movement spread like fire in all of the churches, creating what is known in Puerto Rico as *El Avivamiento del '33*.¹⁵ The revival included glossolalia, dancing in the Spirit, fasting, aggressive evangelism and a contagious enthusiasm that affected even other denominations. But the missionaries decided that the revival was not according to the “Disciples way” and tried to suppress and even stop the movement. A serious confrontation that lasted ten years provided the opportunity for Puerto Rican Disciples congregations to declare self-support and to rely on the tithing and offerings of the poor members of local congregations.

By 1943 the United Christian Missionary Society and the Puerto Rican Disciples agreed to maintain their partnership but continued working toward the autonomy of the church in Puerto Rico. In 1954 a constitution was approved creating an administrative board—a governing body composed of the ordained pastors with representatives of the different sectors of the church, including the seminarians.

Disciples continued to grow during the next three decades; in 1965 they announced that no more full-time missionaries were needed, and they promulgated a new constitution. This was drafted and approved in 1967. A major revision was made in 1984, creating the office of the general pastor. This constitution has been further amended to clarify operational and administrative mechanisms, particularly related to property ownership and finances. The local congregations maintain their autonomy, while the representative board has been strengthened as the governing board for the whole denomination.

The Churches of Christ also sent missionaries to Puerto Rico. By the 1930s several congregations were established on the island. The first congregation was founded in San Juan, and from there new congregations were organized in Dorado and Vega Alta, two small towns in the northwestern part of Puerto Rico.

Manuel Jordán, Modesto Rivera and Gregorio Rodríguez are recognized as prominent Puerto Rican church developers. Rev. Manuel Jordán was a pastor in Vega Alta for many years. His brother, Rev. Edmundo Jordán, a Pentecostal missionary for many years in Venezuela, joined the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in 1955.

The Disciples of Christ in Puerto Rico developed a unique model of mission. It is a strongly charismatic denomination, but it expresses a creative diversity in worship. Puerto Rican Disciples have a deep appreciation for solid intellectual and theological education of their pastors.

Puerto Rican Disciples are responding to the challenges of the twenty-first century by continuing with the same evangelistic fervor of the last hundred years. They are reclaiming an educational vocation at all levels. Puerto Rican Disciples speak of themselves as “*una Iglesia de frontera*” (a church of the frontier) in Puerto Rican society. They are also seeking to form missionary partnerships in Latin American and Caribbean countries, including the Dominican Republic, Colombia, Costa Rica, Nicaragua and Venezuela.

14. Samuel Silva Gotay, *Protestantismo y Política en Puerto Rico 1898–1930* (San Juan: Editorial Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1997), 179–182; 215–223.

15. Vargas, *Los Discípulos de Cristo en Puerto Rico*, 69–102. See also Daisy Machado, “El gran avivamiento del '33: The Protestant Missionary Enterprise, Revival, Identity, and Tradition in Orlando” in *Futuring Our Past. Exploration in the Theology of Tradition*, ed. O. Espín and Gary Macy (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 249–275.

Cuba/Argentina

The first Disciples of Christ missionaries arrived in Cuba in 1899. In 1919 the congregations founded in the province of Matanzas by these missionaries were transferred to the Presbyterians in Cuba in exchange for three congregations in Puerto Rico, as part of the comity agreement signed by the boards of mission that same year.¹⁶

The first missionaries to arrive in Argentina, Mr. and Mrs. Burner, came under the auspices of the Christian Woman's Board of Missions (CWBM) in 1905. They experienced many obstacles in their attempt to open missionary work in the country. Buenos Aires was an expanding city, probably the most secularized in the region, except for Montevideo. They opened a place for worship in 1906, and slowly but surely the Disciples of Christ mission started in Argentina.¹⁷

The second phase of missionary work in Argentina was influenced by the Congress on Christian Work in Panama, 1916. This Congress tried to discern the main focus and strategy for Protestant missions in Latin America and the Caribbean. It stressed more cooperation among the various mission boards from the United States, and promoted evangelistic fervor that would be closely connected with a civilizing effort through education and Christian formation.¹⁸

According to J. Dexter Montgomery, a sense of pessimism—in spite of all the enthusiasm generated by the Panama Congress on Christian Work—was evident. The financial situation and the process to promote self-support were not very promising.¹⁹ The next decade proved to be more positive; the country was also experiencing radical changes when General Juan Domingo Perón became president of Argentina (1946–1955). It was a decade of both turmoil and hope, as labor unions and the masses received benefits and much needed social assistance. Perón and his wife Evita provided that kind of enthusiasm in the population. Some growth was experienced by the Disciples of Christ in Argentina as the work expanded to El Chaco province in the north.²⁰

The Disciples of Christ in Argentina wanted to recruit and train qualified candidates for pastoral ministry. The Methodists and Waldensians joined in that effort as early as 1884. The Disciples of Christ in Argentina enrolled students and shared Disciples missionaries as faculty members between 1916 and 1923. For two years Disciples of Christ tried to run their own program, but decided to go back to Union Seminary in Buenos Aires. In 1925 Disciples of Christ in Argentina were again actively participating, sending students and appointing faculty members to the institution.²¹

For the next five decades (1956–2006), the Evangelical Church Disciples of Christ in Argentina struggled to grow and achieve some sense of consistency in what can be called a holistic approach; a “mission and evangelism” paradigm (church life and social action, ecclesiology and ethics) provided that consistency and balance. The political crisis of the 1970s in Argentina and Chile challenged the liberal Protestant churches in Argentina to play a more prophetic role. The violation of human rights, the massive disappearance of young people, and the use of torture and repression against innocent people were practiced by the military dictatorship. The Disciples of Christ in Argentina responded to this situation, joining other denominations in the founding of two important institutions: Relief Commission for Refugees (CAREF) and Ecumenical Movement for Human Rights (MEDH). These two institutions were prophetic voices in Argentina during a time of harsh and brutal repression in the country.

16. Vargas, *Los Discípulos de Cristo en Puerto Rico*, 63.

17. J. Dexter Montgomery, *Disciples of Christ in Argentina 1906–1956: A History of the First Fifty Years of Mission Work* (St. Louis: The Bethany Press, 1956), 46–59.

18. *Ibid.*, 60–87.

19. *Ibid.*, 89–113.

20. *Ibid.*, 131.

21. *Ibid.*, 75–76.

Disciples of Christ mission in Paraguay was closely related to Argentina. C. Manly Morton and his wife Selah had a successful ministry in Argentina. C. Manly Morton was theologically trained and a good preacher. He was able to combine a theological mind with gifted skills as a teacher and administrator. These skills proved to be relevant in his missionary role in Paraguay. Later on Mr. Morton (as he is known in Puerto Rico) made a lasting influence in Puerto Rico.²²

In Paraguay Mr. Morton was instrumental in the founding of *Colegio Internacional* (International College), one of the most prestigious schools in South America to this day. The *Colegio* was criticized at times because it was training the elite and those closely related with the military and Alfredo Strossner's dictatorship in Paraguay. The *Colegio Internacional* at times was the source of tension with the Disciples of Christ congregations in Paraguay because it had financial and institutional autonomy beyond the national church.

The Disciples of Christ in Paraguay have had a small impact on society at large, except for three public and well-known institutions: *Colegio Internacional*; *Comité de Iglesias para Ayudas de Emergencias* (CIPAE)—a human rights committee founded in 1976 by the Disciples of Christ, The River Plate Evangelical Church and the Roman Catholic Church; and Friendship Mission. The third institution, Friendship Mission, was established in 1953 by Beth and Ray Mills, Disciples missionaries from the United States. Friendship Mission developed programs in several areas: health education, human rights and community services, among others. Friendship Mission is an ecumenical project that survived one of the longest dictatorships in Latin America.

Christian Churches and Churches of Christ in Latin America and the Caribbean

The Christian Churches/Churches of Christ developed "independent" and "direct support" models of mission at the beginning of the twentieth century. Individual families were supported by local congregations in the United States. A major emphasis was given to schools and Bible institutes, publications (particularly tracts for evangelistic purposes), and ministries of benevolent action in Latin America and the Caribbean. From Mexico to Brazil, from Central America to the Caribbean, these mission efforts emphasized evangelism and church growth, local autonomy of congregations, and training indigenous leaders as key elements in their strategy of mission. An important shift in the mission strategy was the formation of the Christian Missionary Fellowship, an agency that strategically is a cross between the cooperation model of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the voluntary model of Christian Churches/Churches of Christ and the Churches of Christ. The Christian Missionary Fellowship also made great strides among Hispanics, with significant developments in missionary work in California and Texas, including the translations of historical documents of the Stone-Campbell tradition.²³

The Churches of Christ also developed a missionary strategy based on a strong congregational approach. Very early in their missionary effort they tried to reach the Hispanic population in Texas with Bible translations and door-to-door evangelism. In Latin America the initial effort included planting congregations, radio ministries, print ministry, relief efforts, and the development of indigenous leadership through theological training. Today, the Churches of Christ are present with active ministries in local congregations in Central America, South America and the Caribbean, including Cuba.²⁴

The current Latin American crisis must be analyzed and understood in the context of a globalizing process, in which the market economy is the dominant factor. This market economy is closely connected

22. Carmelo Álvarez Santos and Carlos Cardoza Orlandi, *Llamados a construir el Reino. Teología y estrategia misionera de los Discípulos de Cristo 1899–1999* (Bayamón, PR: Iglesia Cristiana (Discípulos de Cristo), 2000), 85–100.

23. William J. Morgan and Paul M. Blowers, "Christian Churches/Churches of Christ," in *The Encyclopedia of the Stone Campbell Movement*, ed. Douglas A. Foster, Anthony L. Dunnivant, et. al. (Grand Rapids, MI / Cambridge, U.K.: W. B. Eerdmans, 2004), 459–460.

24. Mac Lynn, *Churches of Christ around the World* (Nashville: 21st Century Christian, 2003).

with a technological revolution, a computerized world, and centralized systems of communications controlled by larger consortia of TV networks and the cable industry. Latin America has been slowly integrated into that international system, but only the elite really benefit in this international integration; the majority of the population is excluded.

Discerning God's calling anew is the crucial challenge for the Stone-Campbell Movement in all its diversity, in order to share in God's mission in Latin America and the Caribbean.

CARMELO ÁLVAREZ WAS BORN IN PUERTO RICO AND IS FOURTH GENERATION DISCIPLES OF CHRIST. HE IS AN ORDAINED MINISTER IN THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH (DISCIPLES OF CHRIST) IN THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA. HE RECEIVED A BA FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF PUERTO RICO, AN MDIV FROM THE EVANGELICAL SEMINARY OF PUERTO RICO, AND A PHD FROM FREE UNIVERSITY IN HOLLAND.

FOR EIGHTEEN YEARS CARMELO AND HIS WIFE, REV. RAQUEL RODRIGUEZ, WERE MISSIONARIES IN MEXICO, CHILE AND COSTA RICA FOR THE DIVISION OF OVERSEAS MINISTRIES, CHRISTIAN CHURCH (DISCIPLES OF CHRIST). CARMELO WAS PROFESSOR OF CHURCH HISTORY AT THE LATIN AMERICAN BIBLICAL SEMINARY (1975–1992) AND PRESIDENT OF THAT THEOLOGICAL INSTITUTION (1978–1982).

CARMELO WORKED AS SECRETARY FOR THE PASTORAL MINISTRY OF CONSOLATION AND SOLIDARITY, LATIN AMERICAN COUNCIL OF CHURCHES, AND AS REGIONAL SECRETARY FOR THE CARIBBEAN FOR THAT COUNCIL (1984–1986). HE WAS DIRECTOR OF THE ECUMENICAL RESEARCH DEPARTMENT IN SAN JOSE, COSTA RICA (1987–1992).

CARMELO SERVED AS DEAN OF STUDENTS AND DIRECTOR OF CROSS-CULTURAL STUDIES AT CHRISTIAN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY (CTS) IN INDIANAPOLIS UNTIL JULY 2002, WHEN HE WAS APPOINTED OVERSEAS STAFF BY THE COMMON GLOBAL BOARD MINISTRIES (CGBM). HE CONTINUES TO TEACH CHURCH HISTORY AND THEOLOGY AT CTS.

CARMELO HAS PUBLISHED MANY BOOKS AND ARTICLES ON CHRISTIANITY IN LATIN AMERICA INCLUDING *PEOPLE OF HOPE: THE PROTESTANT MOVEMENT IN CENTRAL AMERICA* (NEW YORK: FRIENDSHIP PRESS, 1990). HE IS A DEVOTED ECUMENIST AND HAS REPRESENTED THE DISCIPLES OF CHRIST ON MANY LEVELS IN THE ECUMENICAL SPHERE.

CARMELO, HIS WIFE, AND TWO DAUGHTERS LIVE IN CHICAGO.

