

Ministry bridges Spain to Northern Africa

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Granada, Spain--Spain is a needy mission field, but it is also a bridge and even a staging ground for missions to other areas.

Take the opportunities for ministry in North Africa right across the Mediterranean from Spain for example.

Once highly Christian, the vast stretch of land from the Suez Canal to the Atlantic Ocean is now not only dominated by Islam, but openly hostile to overt Christian ministry.

“The original local people, the Berbers, were Christians,” reports Pablo Carrillo, an LAM missionary working with his wife Jane through PM Internacional (Muslim People International) based in Granada, Spain.

“During the first four centuries in that region there were many well-known Berber Christians, including Saint Augustine as well as Cyprian and Tertulian,” Pablo says. “The influence of Christianity was very strong at that time.”

However, Pablo says, with the arrival of Arabic populations carrying Islam, the people soon left their Christian faith, largely because of the failure of the church. “They were involved in false doctrines, many endless discussions about those doctrines and they never translated the Bible from Latin into the local languages,” he explains. “When the Arabs came, they just needed to blow and the church fell down.”

Reaching these people has been difficult for many traditional European and North American missionaries. Their blond, Caucasian looks, their cultural differences and their mission style have often been more of an impediment than a help.

Enter a new wave of modern missionaries, dark-skinned, soccer-loving Latin Americans who can more easily move among North-African people and share an affinity with them and their culture.

“For historic and cultural reasons there are many similarities between Arab and Latin American cultures,” Pablo reports. “For example, the way we use time and the concept of friendship. In addition, we have been colonized just like the Arabs. They also don’t feel threatened by a Latin, they don’t think that he is a spy.”

Pablo said that the vision with which he began PMI was to involve Latin Americans in a ministry in northern Africa. But, the going was not always easy. “One North American missionary laughed at us,” Jane remembers. “He said that there were no Latins in North Africa and that they could not work in the Muslim world.”

“He had a point,” Pablo, who was born and raised in Mexico, admits. “Could you imagine a big sombrero and a siesta?”

Pablo remembers also that some Mexican pastors were slow to catch the vision. “They said, we are the mission field, we can’t be missionaries. Leave that job to the Americans, they have the money.”

But Pablo and Jane were not dissuaded by the lack of enthusiasm. “We took the steps to go into North Africa. After three years in North Africa, the first Latins began to come.”

Today, PMI boasts 88 Latin missionaries serving in Senegal and Mali, in North Africa and in central Asia. And, there are plans to send other Latin missionaries to work among Muslim populations in other Asian countries.

Pablo has developed a seminar for Latin American pastors and church members in order to help them understand what it takes to do missions in the Muslim world. “We have used it in many locations, including Chile, Argentina, Mexico and the United States with good feedback,” he reports.

“Among the Latin people it is necessary to give a rough idea of the missionary process,” Pablo explains. “We are still new in missions in Latin America and the pastors need to understand what their role is.”

Pablo says that while interest is growing, some Latin churches have struggled with bad experiences in sending missionaries. “For some, there has been bad preparation and there have been churches that didn’t know what logistic support means. That’s why we are trying to help at this stage in the movement. There is a lot of interest in missions overseas,” he explained.

Latin missionaries in North Africa are reporting results. “Our workers have reported a doubling of the number of converts. They used to report around 2,000 believers in North Africa, but now they are talking about 4,000 believers in the last five years.”

The North African church is also learning to be self-propagating. “In an informal and spontaneous way, they have started to share with their neighbors,” he said.

Just as many citizens of countries gain erroneous stereotypes of U.S. and Canadian culture through movies and TV programs, some carry wrong perceptions of Latins who come to work with them. But, those ideas are changing.

“The people say that they had a concept of Latins as all being drug lords, like in the soap operas and movies,” says Jane who was born and raised in California. “Now, they see that Latin Christians pray before the meals, they see the care of Christian husbands for their wives and they say, ‘you are spiritual people, not like the concept we had.’”

Pablo has given up his position as President of PMI to focus on giving orientation to Latin Americans in the Muslim world. “We just want to make it a Latin American ministry, giving an opportunity to the Latin American church to channel its resources in the best possible way to the Muslim world,” he says.

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