



# The UNCERTAIN Future of Missions?

Comparing Notes Between Ecuador and Guatemala

Ralph D. Winter

**T**wo days ago, as I write these comments, the January 20 premiere of a \$33-million movie and book rolled out with great fanfare. Both movie and book are titled *End of the Spear*. Both graphically reveal Steve Saint's discoveries after 39 years of separation from a tribal group in the jungles of Ecuador where he grew up. Both vividly portray the amazing moral and spiritual transformation of an incredibly violent tribe. But now: what is the future of these dear people and their children? The book takes you far in that direction. (See more details in my editorial on pages 4-5.)

## Last Week

Last week I, too, after 39 years, went back to a tribal group (the Mam, one of some 30 Mayan groups in Guatemala), in whose midst my family and I lived for ten years from 1956 to 1966. Only last night, quite late, did I return from that visit.

During the experience-filled days of my visit I also read *End of the Spear*, which carries far more

detail and inspired insight than could possibly be conveyed in the movie. It was electrifying to compare what Steve Saint describes with what I just saw in Guatemala. I am

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adding these comments on the parallels and discontinuities to his situation (mentioned in my editorial) because I am so impressed by the stirring contrasts and unanswered questions exploding from both his book and my trip.

Forty-nine years ago (in 1956) I took my family, including two small blond-haired daughters, to work among a tribal group in the mountains of Guatemala. Within ten years (at the end of which I then had four daughters) other

missionaries and I had developed a radically different approach to pastoral selection and training. That became the basis on which Fuller Seminary asked me in 1966 to join the faculty of its new School of World Mission.

Then, by 1976, after ten years in that exciting school, I had learned volumes from over 1,000 missionaries who had passed through my classes. There the novel new emphasis on Unreached Peoples was developed. That, in turn, took me into founding the Frontier Mission Fellowship (now with 95 families as members), which, with the help of tens of thousands of enthusiastic donors, produced two large projects, the U.S. Center for World Mission and the William Carey International University. All three entities are located on a former college campus in northwest Pasadena, California.

## Why No Previous Visits Since 1976?

During 1970 and 1975 I returned to Guatemala for brief visits. But my visits stopped after 1976, for two reasons. One: I was prevented by the very intensity of the cliff-hanging events in the founding and building of the entities in Pasadena. Two: I was cautioned by the fact that in the grim civil-war conditions in Guatemala during much of these years, Indians with known connections with the outside world were marked men. The son of my closest Mam associate lost his life in that struggle. Even sending a letter was inadvisable.

Now, however, the internal conflict is mainly over, and I can go back without jeopardizing our friends there. Murders continue daily, but the source of that violence now is Los Angeles-trained gangs who do not yet bother the mountain Mam peoples with whom we dealt, living as they do quite a distance from the capital city where these gangs do their deadly work.

## Finally, and What Changes!

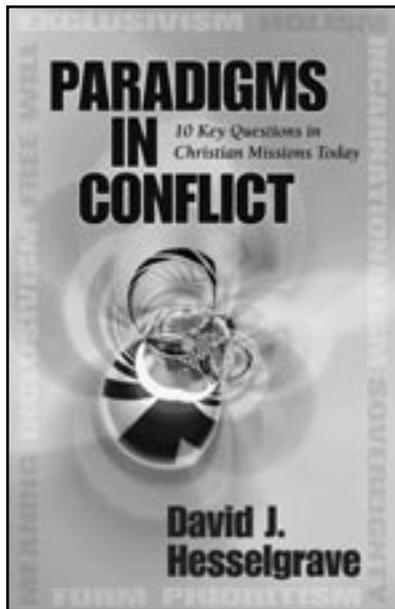
Thus, last night I returned from my first extended visit into the highlands of western Guatemala in 39 years. This time, my four daughters, eight of their 14 children, my new wife, one son-in-law, plus the wife of one grandson and I – 16 of us in all – spent ten days in that colorful country, mainly visiting friends.

Wow! Many changes can happen in 39 years! Co-workers then are now in their seventies or late eighties. Little children then are now pastors and even mayors, and their children may be university students. A sleepy agricultural valley then is now a bustling, vehicle-ridden, house-clobbered wasteland with a huge population increase. Three churches then are 35 or 40 now, etc.

Is this good? Is it prosperity? Is this mission success?

## Yes — Success

There have been no missionaries in the picture for many years. That is a type of success. The durability of the ecclesiastical structure (church/presbytery, i.e. local/regional) has proven very helpful, despite the fact that it probably would not have been invented by the local people themselves. (Their experience has been in subsistence farming, where every family is an autonomous economic unit.) There are now 13 presbyteries of indigenous peoples, one of them containing 35 churches. All of this tremendous growth in the last few years has been the initiative of local people themselves.



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Frontier Mission Fellowship

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## No — Not Success

You may have heard of the case where "the operation was (surgically) successful but the patient died." In this case we could say, "The mission effort was quite successful, but the people are losing out." That is, despite the reality and strength of the church, despite the apparent prosperity of the people, two extremely dire circumstances have emerged:

1. Today the vast proportion of all income in this region consists of U.S. dollars sent back by over 200,000 Mam illegals in the USA.
2. This means that those still in Guatemala (about a million) can now more easily buy imported grain than produce it by hand from their own rapidly-diminishing land (ever reduced by the proliferation of their houses).

Why are these circumstances so dire? (See the February 6 cover story of *TIME*.) The lack of local income in many towns is the result of *half or more* of the men and older youth risking their lives to get themselves smuggled into the USA. One town of 30,000 has another 18,000 in the USA. In such towns adult women out-number men four to one.

To make it into the USA years ago they could pay \$5,000 to a "coyote" (smuggler) who would try to get them in (not promise, much less guarantee their lives). Today that price is as high as \$20,000.

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## Worse Still!

But there is a much higher price the Mam pay. The family breakdown is severe. When young people have no father present, they go wrong – get into drugs, sex, violence, gangs.

Both the men in the USA and the women left behind in Guatemala are tempted to informal liaisons. And illegal workers don't have a bright future even if they are in the fabled USA.

## The Uncertain Future

*In this case, it would seem, the missionaries left before they could adequately analyze the problems inherent in an expanding population which has no income-generating potential in the place they live.*

This is not something an individual family, or even an individual congregation, can think through and resolve on its own.

The Mam numbered about 250,000 during my decade of service among them. Now they num-



ber four times that many. They are intelligent, patient workers. There are enough truly transformed Evangelicals among them to provide an all-important backbone of honesty as well. What a labor market!

Note in comparison: the Japanese can't live off their limited, hilly land either. Yet they don't send workers one-by-one to foreign countries; they bring the work to the workers in Japan. Unlike the Mam, those Japanese workers band together. As management expert Peter Drucker said, "In Japan the company is the family."

## Wal-Mart to the Rescue?

The Waltons of Wal-Mart fame (Presbyterians) gave \$1 million to the seminary in Guatemala, which did not need more buildings, being a distance-education operation. It could possibly have been more helpful if they

# Pursuing "Church Cultivation"

Commentary by Steve Saint

**W**e have largely treated the Great Commission as a spectator sport – where the highly-trained and lavishly-equipped players from afar take the field, while local believers sit in the stands to watch. It was supposed to be more like a military engagement, where everyone must join the fight.

The single most common failing I see in fledgling churches in frontier areas is the lack of an economy which will allow fathers to stay with their families, mothers to stay in the home to nurture their children to be God-followers, and the community of believers to support their own efforts to reach out to the community of "not coming after ones" (non-Christians) around them.

My son Jesse and his family are down in Shell Mera, Ecuador, where my parents were living when my father was killed 50 years ago. Jesse is working with a young man from Shell in starting a business to build modern airplanes for the North American market. (The first apprentices are two Waodani young men, one of whom is the grandson of Mincaye, our dear friend and one of those who killed my father.) We don't even dare call this a ministry, much less ask people to contribute to it. Why? Because it doesn't fall under the category of "church planting." No, it is "church cultivation" – the natural follow-on to church planting. 🌐

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*Steve Saint is the founder of I-TEC (Indigenous People's Technology & Education Center). Learn more at [www.itecusa.org](http://www.itecusa.org).*

had invested in a major factory that would provide ongoing income and would slow further damage to the social structure.

The one million Mam may not be sufficiently numerous to attract such factories easily, not when South China has 100 million workers to offer. However, Guatemala has a number of other peoples – Quiché, Cachiuel, Kekchi – among whom there are thousands of earnest, honest, unemployed believers fighting a losing battle utilizing their home - and family-based activities to make all kinds of things, notably beautiful woven textiles. But most of what they produce by hand is increasingly produced in large factories around the world by more efficient and less costly methods.

### Money from the USA?

A huge amount of money is sent down to Guatemala from illegals in the USA. Almost all of it goes into vehicles and especially earthquake-proof cement-block houses – good things in themselves, but not things which increase local income. You can't eat cars or houses. Some families send their kids each day to the regional site of the government's Universidad de San Carlos – but you can't eat a university degree, and most university graduates need to go elsewhere to find work, since such education, like the skills of illegals in the USA, does not provide income *in the place these people live*.

In American history self-sufficient farmers relocated to the cities and to other jobs, giving up their former way of life and *taking their families with them*. Americans left on the farm dropped from, say, 80% of the population to less than 5%. (Western Kansas today is almost entirely depopulated as a result; you can buy an abandoned, fairly new five-bedroom house



there for next to nothing.) The great virtues of the farm-family life, which so enriched us historically, have been traded for the “shattered family” structure in which the kids spend most of their time in age-stratified schools (and churches) and the parents go off to work in different directions, contributing to some of the world's highest divorce and imprisonment rates.

**What is the future of the Mam and comparable peoples in other regions of the world?**

This all happened gradually, with no “coyotes” in the picture. So what is the future of the Mam? How can the existence of a strong church tradition contribute to that future? Is that now (or

should that have been) a concern of the mission agencies? What about comparable peoples in the Americas and other regions of the world? 🌐

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