

Church Planting Kek ' chi

Guatemala – location on the border of Belize and Guatemala, Kek' chi is rural and isolated small villages. Little family groups, farmers and isolated homes. The Kek 'chi population is possibly 400,000 people and the people are monolingual. In larger villages they do speak Spanish, however in homes they speak Kek ' chi. The people are largely illiterate. Very few graduated from high school as a matter of fact most leave at the end of third grade.

Kek 'chi Baptist began in 1964. Ted Linwall went in and spoke only Spanish. A little later Dick Greenwood went, learned Kek' chi, and established one congregation in 1964. By 1997 we had 20,000 believers with 245 congregations. Obviously a church growth movement took place for that to have happened. The foundation years were from 1964 through 1972 and the growth was phenomenal. A lot of years it was doubling or tripling. From 1972-1982 there was also rapid expansion. In 1977 they began forming institutions, started with literature work, leadership training in a specific place, and in 1979 an association was established. The growth rate slowed. Are you saying that the beginning of institutional work decreased the rate of church growth? It looks like that. The institutions were locally organized not by missionaries. They said 'we need literature, we need training. Let's do it in one place.'

With the Kek 'chi, if you are a Christian you are winning others to Christ, and if you are a church you are starting other churches. If you are not starting churches then you are a dead church. The association approached a church that had not started a new church in two years, gave them three villages and said, "go start churches". The overall growth is 28% annual average growth. From 1979 we saw a doubling in the number of congregation every 9 years and doubling membership numbers in 7 years. By 1988 we had 25% of the total region of 400,000 people were evangelical. There are three major groups working there. The Nazarenes started in 1925 with 1 or 2 congregations; Baptists came in 1964, Mennonites in 1971. Baptists outstripped the others in terms of growth because we started with the indigenous concept and the concept of missions.

Annual growth rates of Baptist were 37% in early years. I am not sure why the drop off in 1987. It might have to do with reporting and the revolution during this time.

Kek 'chi growth was during a period when Guatemala was becoming evangelical. Kek' chi just happened to surpass the others and the whole Guatemalan growth.

Critical Factors

Critical factors that we think make a difference:

Two primary factors in making the Kek 'chi growth possible.

1. Homogeneous unit methodology

Homogeneous unit methodology deals with the heart language. We recognized they were a group distinct to themselves and needed to be treated individually as their own group in their own setting. Leadership has always been with them. Missionaries have never been the leaders. Financial support, the local church has always supported itself

from the beginning. There has been help come from the outside, but it is normally for a specific project, such as training and helping set up a school.

2. Missionary responsibility of the local church

From day one the individual has been told that if you are a Christian then you will lead your neighbors to Christ. If you are not leading your neighbors to Christ then your Christianity will be questioned.

The corporate responsibility specifically deals with the local church. The local church has been defined as a church because it is starting other churches. In 1977 four churches sent out 14 missionaries. In 1979 the association formed and sent out 5. There has always been the idea of corporate responsibility for missions.

Implications of church growth – what we think we learned

1. Importance of recognizing the homogeneous, indigenous units. The missionaries focused on one specific group of people. We didn't work in the Spanish language. The Spanish speakers that lived among the Kek' chi have been left out and there has been very little growth among them. We capitalized on cultural and physical isolation. This is something that is usually left out when talking about church growth. Because it was hard to find these people, to get there to them, it was left up to them to do the work. That is one of the reasons it grew so much. It was up to the 'natives' to do it. Missionary presence has been minimal. The missionary has not been pastoring churches or out church planting. The natives have done it. As soon as the heart language was used things began to happen.

Internal Leadership

They have always been the leaders and have always been the pastors. They decided to form the association. They felt it important to work together. They didn't send anyone to the national Baptist Convention for many years after they formed the association. They have never asked for help.

Financial self- support is critical. Brings the question of where do volunteers fit in in this type situation? We just don't know how to deal with that.

Local Church Missionary responsibilities

From day one they were taught that as individuals they are responsible and as a local church they were responsible for their people. They took it seriously.

Kek 'chi Baptist Church Growth

We'd like to say that the missionaries to the Kek' chi didn't do a lot of things right, they just didn't do much wrong either. God did this thing despite us. We were there to put lay the groundwork, but the Kek' Chi did most of the work. God created the response, he sustained it and directed it. We need to say that He gets the glory for all of this.

Are there other groups near that don't use their language? Yes. Have they been challenged to learn another language? The Kek 'chi are being encouraged to move into Belize to work with the Kek 'chi people there.

Most pastors have learned their sermons from storying. Leadership training has been on storying. They identify from among their church people those they want to use as

missionaries. These are used as church starters. Those people in the past have been trained in their local church or little group of local churches. The Kek' Chi have built a building in Coban and are trying to have an institute. I'm afraid this is one of the things that will be strangling the spontaneous growth of the work. Now you have people who appear to be 'better than' when there is an institute. Missionaries do not do the training; the church leaders do it. Concern is that things are sliding into an institutional rather than spontaneous church growth.

For the most part the leaders are lay-leaders not seminary trained leaders. Formal training takes them out of their village. Each place designed its own curriculum, around a conference type setting. They select their topics and train.

Wycliffe has done the translating of Scriptures in Kek 'chi.

How do you transport this to a city? Can it be urban, can it be in a Catholic environment? Wagner says it can't happen where there is already Christian influence. Can it occur in an area where there is already an established association? Kek 'chi had a minimal Catholic background. Indigenous groups target family units that come to Christ and the low literacy levels give us a greater ability to get in and share the gospel.