

# Latin America's great mission starts to take shape

LIMA, Peru – The idea of a “great continental mission,” which proved elusive when the bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean met in Aparecida, Brazil, last year, is slowly taking shape, said the prelate responsible for its implementation.

Archbishop Hector Cabrejos Vidarte of Trujillo, who heads the Peruvian bishops' conference and serves as coordinator of mission and spirituality for the Latin American bishops' council, or CELAM, sees the mission as an ongoing effort that signifies a shift in the way parishes reach out to the faithful.

“The idea is that the mission not have a beginning and an end, but that it involve preparation and intensive action over time, along with evaluation,” he said.

The archbishop foresees a long-term effort spanning at least 10 or 15 years.

“The idea is that it be a permanent mission. All of CELAM's pastoral programs are oriented toward the continental mission,” he said.

At the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean last May, leaders expressed concern that Catholics were drifting away from the church. In a 2005 survey by the Chilean polling firm Latinobarometro, while three-quarters of the people surveyed in the region said they considered themselves Catholic, only 40 percent said they practiced their faith.

What did not emerge from Aparecida, however, was a clear plan for addressing the problem, although the final document mentions the need for renewal of church structures and a greater emphasis on community.

Archbishop Cabrejos said a greater sense of community is one of the attractions of evangelical churches.

“Evangelical churches are small communities. The Catholic Church operates on a universal principle. It has grown so much that many people are anonymous,” he told

Catholic News Service. “The evangelicals haven’t discovered anything new. They have gone back to the early Christian community – that’s how the church grew.”

At Aparecida, the bishops called for a greater emphasis on small communities, mentioning a variety of forms, from the base Christian communities that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s to newer lay and religious movements.

The growth of those groups in recent years is a response to “people’s needs and longings,” Archbishop Cabrejos told CNS. “People are looking for relationships; they don’t want to be anonymous. These movements give people the sense of belonging.”

Nevertheless, he said, the parish must remain the cornerstone of the church.

“There is no substitute for the parish,” he said. “The parish is the heart of the church. But it needs to be a missionary parish. Instead of waiting for people to come, church workers must go seek them out. That’s the difference.”

This does not necessarily mean trying to lure back Catholics who have switched to other Christian churches, he said. Pastoral workers must first reinforce the faith of those who still consider themselves Catholic and try to reach the increasing number who have simply become unchurched.

Evangelical groups have made inroads “because there is a lack of formation. Evangelization was done, but there has not been ongoing formation as part of that evangelization,” Archbishop Cabrejos said. “The first mission is to our own faithful, to reinforce formation and evangelization. Then the church can move outward.”

Each country and diocese will be responsible for local mission efforts. CELAM’s role is to provide encouragement and materials that can be shared, and to set dates for region-wide activities, Archbishop Cabrejos said. While evaluation will be part of the ongoing mission, no criteria have yet been set, he said.

The official launch of the continental mission is planned to coincide with the next Latin American Missionary Conference, to be held in August in Quito, Ecuador.