



Embrace the Spirit

The Caribbean Initiative

Pulling up the Nets: The Caribbean Initiative

By: Rev. Angel L. Rivera-Agosto

Introduction: Mission from the Deep Sea to Dry Land and Back

When Carlos Cardoza was invited to participate in the World Christianity Seminars in 2000, he proposed the title, “Re-discovering Caribbean Christian Identity: Biography and Missiology at the Borders.” A few days before the presentation, he shared with Justo González, one of his mentors and a close friend, the title and a brief synopsis of his presentation. Immediately Justo remarked, “Why ‘missiology at the borders’? Why not ‘missiology at the shore’? It is about the Caribbean after all.” So, a fashionable metaphor for scholars in the north was suddenly shot down with a new one that completely overwhelmed Carlos.



From a Caribbean point of view, reality goes beyond a missiology of borders or the encounter of frontiers when traveling across dry lands, and starts from a *dry land/deep sea* perspective. This means that traveling through borders from this perspective means taking the risks of drowning or remaining on the open sea, in addition to exploring dry lands of thought and experience. The words of Rubem Alves, one of the most distinguished Latin American theologians, are appropriate as we begin the Caribbean Initiative. Alves wrote, “Primitive cosmologies always talk about a primordial conflict between the dry land and the deep sea. Dry land is the place where human beings can walk with a sense of security. The waters of the sea symbolize the horrendous possibilities that menace human beings unceasingly. Chaos and the Void ever threaten to engulf the world of human beings.”

The Caribbean: from Paradise to Paradox

It is important for us to avoid triggering the wrong images about a Caribbean Initiative, even when we think that we know the Caribbean because it is very close to us. Different from the Congo or the Middle East, the image that comes to our mind from the very beginning when we think about the Caribbean is one of vacation or leisure. In our denominations, the proximity of the Caribbean makes it easy to plan a People-to-People

Pilgrimage there, or to send a mission co-worker, or just to follow-up on the work of partners there. In 2015, the People-to-People Pilgrimage program supported a total of 56 delegations; 50 of them were to Latin America, 32 of which were to the Caribbean. We may get the impression that we know the Caribbean, but it is still a challenge to see the Mission of God in the midst of the places of this portion of land and sea. The challenge is not based on a touristic exploration among the striking views of the beautiful shores of Montego Bay in Jamaica, Luquillo Beach in Puerto Rico, or Varadero Beach in Cuba. It is important to go beyond a sense of “paradise,” as it reinforces the common stereotype of the Caribbean as a place of eternal joy and pleasure. During the Caribbean Initiative we will change this image of “paradise” and substitute it with the one of “paradox.”

The Caribbean, as a region, is a context of extreme paradoxes where life is configured by a complex history, an ambivalent and fragile present, and an uncertain and risky future. Yet, life is colorful and melodic, hospitality is offered in goodwill, hope overwhelms our people, and faith – many faiths – sustain our hopes. The Caribbean embodies the despair of a marginalized and exploited region and the joy of a people of hope, placing lives between the assurance of dry land and the mystery of the sea. So, the beauty of the Caribbean encounters the paradox of the lives of its inhabitants, as our journey through mission in the Caribbean occurs in places where people drown in violence and injustice, provoking migration and human trafficking. 100,000 stateless people have been unlawfully expelled from the Dominican Republic to Haiti in the middle of a wave of returns and deportations. Structural sin and imperialism continue to be an impediment to peace with justice. Cuba lives in troubled times in a new and uncertain framework of relations with the U.S.; innocent people don't have access to adequate nutrition and medicines due to a four-decade-long embargo. People continue to struggle for socioeconomic justice in Venezuela. American and European-owned “maquilas” and “sweat shops” pay extremely low wages and regularly expose workers to unsafe and unhealthy conditions in the Dominican Republic. Colombia seeks the full implementation of its Peace Accords after decades of violence and internal displacement. And Puerto Rico still seeks self-determination in this time of a Fiscal Control Board ruled by the U.S. Congress to deal with a debt for which the U.S. is greatly responsible.

The Still of the Sea: Mystery and challenge

Sailors in the Caribbean can be great swimmers, but not necessarily the kind of swimmers that compete in an Olympic pool. They are considered good swimmers according to their own standards. That is, sailors need to have the ability to suspend their bodies for hours within the ocean. You may only see their forehead, eyes and nose barely above the water. They knew how to dwell in the ocean with the minimum consumption of energy in order to survive in the water. In one of the stories that professor Cardoza included in his 2000 seminar, he quoted his grandfather, a sailor himself, who would say, “People think that swimming is about speed and style on top of the water. Anybody can learn to do that. Real swimming is about becoming part of the sea without being the sea. You are here, you dwell in her, and yet you do not let her drown you. She keeps you afloat, as you keep the right balance within the ocean: That is the key to survive in the ocean! Oh yes, grandson, only by dwelling in the ocean will you discover the significance of the shore and the reason for the dry land.”

Caribbean countries have dwelled through a history of conquest, colonization, and imperialism. Lands were seized, taken into possession and named by the conquistadores from Spain, England, and France, among other colonial powers. People were baptized and renamed under a new religion they didn't fully recognize as their own. What occurred was that the power reigning in that era imposed their culture, their dominion, and their deities on the natives. The Caribbean ended up being a society run by the will of European powers “for their benefit.” Even after the liberation of some countries, we still find them “dwelling” in neocolonialism, socioeconomic dominion, and imposition of the will of corporate interests among the Caribbean nations. Also, *mestizaje* (mixing ancestries between Amerindian and European) as a phenomenon of cultural and religious resistance demonstrates how the nations of this beautiful but mysterious sea still dwell in the conditions imposed on them for centuries. There is no way to avoid the witness of intercultural and interreligious settings in a micro-world that is still looking for and building its own particular identity.

Here, it is important to mention a very useful assessment of the Caribbean sub-region, by Rev. Juan Marcos Rivera, whose travels gave him a broad perspective of what is at stake beyond beautiful beaches and *daiquiris* or *piñas coladas*:

We came from Africa, some of our ancestors mixed themselves with what was left from the indigenous races and with the white elements that came from Europe, whose past was not pure either because of the Muslim invasions of Spain. Our ancestors suffered the weight of the heat of the day until the black of night in the cane plantation. Their lives were ones of sacrifice and pain... In Haiti, they rebelled for freedom before any white person could attempt it, even in the cold countries in the south, that were predominantly European.

For centuries, we in the Caribbean, have resisted a vile colonialism that has forced us into submission. By means of indoctrination, we have accepted our captivity as a matter of destiny. Several colonial powers have sucked our blood and sweat like thirsty leeches. The Colossus from the North has influenced our countries in an unhealthy way, bringing a gospel of total submission. The unworthy of this is that, in their striving to save us; they have made us believe that their country is prosperous because it's a Christian country. Economic imperialism, with its multinational investments, its consumerist propaganda, and its cultural influence, distorts the image of our peoples. To our poor countries, they make them believe that without the support of the dominant countries, nobody can survive. That is why they maintain agencies to protect their national security while exploiting our lives. That is why they smash every local initiative and then justify themselves saying that poor countries are not energetic enough to develop themselves by their own effort. It is a disgrace to the suffering of the victims.

Religious life has been transplanted from the outside. Missionaries taught that our traditions were sinful vices and that our parents were leaving vices behind, but they didn't give the people any substitute. That is how they were finding new forms of consolation for their miserable lives... the racial mix, the stormy weather; the oppressive life and the uncompromising religions have been factors that have determined the formation of the peoples in the Caribbean. (Rivera, 1984, 106-107)

Doing mission in the Caribbean means building and practicing faith in a region with the most varied political and social models in the world. In the Caribbean, you can find independent nations, commonwealths that relate to a former colonial power, fully incorporated territories that function as "states" of the former metropolis, and non-incorporated territories, which are little more than colonies. I have lived almost all my life in Puerto Rico, a "non-incorporated" U.S. territory, defined as one of the oldest colonies in the world. Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens; yet, those who live on the island cannot vote for the U.S. President and have no representatives able to cast a vote in either chamber of Congress. Identities and experiences can be as varied as the context and history of the countries that we refer to in this sea of contradictions and riches.

The act of pulling up the nets: *Testimonios*

From the sea, fishermen get their fish and provide for their families at home. There is an abundance of good fish in the Caribbean. Hundreds of varieties of fish are available, including sea bass, swordfish, pompano, mullet, kingfish, yellowtail, tuna, wahoo, snapper, grouper, mackerel, and dolphin fish. They are grilled, baked, served in chowders and soups, offered in salads and stews, or served with scrambled eggs.

The experience of the church in the Caribbean context can be seen as the richness of the products of the sea, as it is pulled up in nets by the life experience in this part of the world. The Pentecostal churches in the Caribbean

display a marked emphasis in the worship service.¹ The life of the community is embodied in worship, which is a celebration of life in the midst of suffering and pain. That solemn moment is called testimony. In most instances, there is a designated part in the order of worship that is for testimonies, and people know that it will be the moment for them to share their personal experiences about the work of God in their lives. In testimonies, biography and theology find a medium of transmission. In testimonies, a community theologizes its biography and “bio-graphs” its theology, ultimately shaping its understanding of mission. As part of everyday life in churches across the Caribbean, both mainline and Pentecostal, testimony has a crucial role in defining the character of the faith of a believer and a community. Testimony is the activity that integrates the Gospel story with the believer’s and the community’s story. Moreover, testimony has levels of maturity. The testimony achieves higher levels of maturity as (1) the Gospel story moves from an individual story to a communal story and (2) it shifts or emphasizes the “act” dimension of testimony. It is this last principle that makes the connection with mission. Ultimately, mission is not only about telling the story of the Gospel, but also communicating publicly the story of the Gospel *in* the broader community and *to* the broader community. It is a cooperative journaling of God’s activity in the community! Therefore, mission is the sharing of our testimony, of our biography, of our struggle to see, hear, smell, touch, and taste God’s performance in the drama of our lives in creation’s common script.

Testimonios, especially in the Pentecostal context, express gratitude and tell of a testing of faith. The responsibility to testify begins at the moment of conversion² and continues throughout life through witness, first to one’s own pre-conversion circumstances and then proceeding to the miracle of salvation.³

Pentecostal churches believe that their most fundamental task is to evangelize. They must announce, proclaim, and call people to newness of life in the Spirit. For Pentecostals, church is mission – the Mission of God.⁴ This missiological dimension exists in creative tension with the eschatological dimension – a tension between the old and new, between present joy and the expectation of joy to come.⁵ The believer lives in the expectation of the miraculous.

It is in the midst of those lived experiences, or *testimonies*, our partners in the region respond to the call to “act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly before God” (Micah 6:8). Partners bring to us *testimonios* of how they accompany families and defend the rights of immigrants in the midst of economic injustice. They bring their *testimonios* affirming peace with justice in the context of military, social, economic, or cultural warfare. They offer their *testimonios* about sustainable development, defense of land rights, and indigenous cultures to our table in ways we often overlook or take for granted because of a photo we took on a vacation.

Conclusion: A Question to Our Shadows and their Answer

As we enter into the Caribbean Initiative, we will recognize a long history of conquest, colonization, and intervention from the **metropolis** along with practice of a colonial style and policy in our ways of doing mission, the consequences of which are still alive in the Caribbean. We will also have the opportunity to acknowledge

¹ Cecilia Castillo, “Pentecostal Worship: A Healing Community,” in *Seeds of Living Hope: Reflections and Challenges in the Churches in the Road to Concepción*, ed. Manuel Quintero (Quito, Ecuador: CLAI, 1994), 83-94.

² Carmelo E. Álvarez, “*Lo popular: Clave hermenéutica del movimiento pentecostal*,” in *Pentecostalismo y liberación: Una experiencia latinoamericana*, ed. Carmelo E. Álvarez (. San José, Costa Rica: DEI-CEPLA, 1992), 95-98.

³ Manuel Canales, Samuel Palma, and Hugo Villela, *En tierra extraña II* (Santiago, Chile: AMERINDIA SEPADE, 1991) as cited in Álvarez, Carmelo. “Ecumenism of the Spirit” in Álvarez, Miguel, ed. **The Reshaping of Mission in Latin America**. Regnum Edinburgh Centenary Series, Volume 30. Oxford, UK: Regnum Books International, 2015

⁴ Murray A. Dempster, Byron D. Klaus, and Douglas Petersen, ed., *Called and Empowered: Global Mission In Pentecostal Perspective* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 44-58, 67-97, 203-224, 242-258, 285-298., in Álvarez, ob.cit.

⁵ Samuel Soliván, “Hispanic Pentecostal Worship,” in *¡Alabadle! Hispanic Christian Worship*, ed. Justo L. González (Nashville, KY: Abingdon Press, 1996), 43-56 in Álvarez, ob. Cit.

that this era is giving birth to a new heart. It is a heart that is dying from pain and can't take any more. The Caribbean is a place of invention, creativity, and resistance. These traits can be found in partners in the Caribbean. The joy, laughter, love, and resistance in the midst of troubled times should teach us how to overcome our own crises in the U.S. Let's *Embrace the Spirit* of hope in this moment of history through the Caribbean Initiative.

Questions for Reflection

1. Where have you experienced God in your life this past week or month? What *testimonio* would you like to lift up at this moment in your life?
2. Of the metaphors for the Caribbean discussed today, which challenges your vision of the Caribbean the most?
3. What might be the "dry land" in our community? Where do we feel threatened by the "deep sea"?
4. Can you think of a time in your life where you felt as though you were struggling in the sea? What feelings do you associate with that experience?
5. In what other ways might the Caribbean be considered more a "paradox" than "paradise"?

About the Author

Angel L. Rivera-Agosto is an ordained minister of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Puerto Rico. Rivera-Agosto holds a bachelor's degree in Social Sciences with a concentration on Labor Relations from the University of Puerto Rico (UPR). He also holds a Juris Doctor from the Interamerican University of Puerto Rico and a Master in Divinity from the Evangelical Seminary of Puerto Rico. He has been the Latin American Council of Churches Faith, Economy and Society Programme Coordinator and the Executive Secretary of the Puerto Rico Council of Churches, among other ecumenical and missional experiences in Puerto Rico, Latin America and the Caribbean. Currently, he serves as the Global Ministries Area Executive for Latin America and the Caribbean.