

**THE HISTORY OF WELS EXPATRIATE
MISSION WORK IN COLOMBIA**

1974-1999

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Preface

The WELS mission in Colombia has always been something that is very near and dear to me. As the son of a former missionary to Colombia, I am proud to say that I was a part of the first WELS mission on the South American continent. I would also say that, apart from the work of the Holy Spirit in my heart, no other experience in my entire life has been as influential on me as my experience living as a little boy in Medellín, Colombia. I vividly remember the warm, loving Colombian people whom my father and the other missionaries served with God's Word. I vividly remember the excellent bi-lingual school that I attended. I vividly remember the Colombian friends that I made. I vividly remember so many experiences that shaped my worldview from a very young age. It was truly a blessing to be a part of the WELS mission in Colombia.

Since I spent five years of my childhood in Colombia, it has been absolutely fascinating to research the history of the WELS mission in Colombia. Since I lived there roughly between the ages of five and ten, I obviously didn't grasp many of the things that were going on while I was there. For this reason it has been a very fun experience learning all about the mission that my family (and especially my dad) gave years of our lives to.

Much of this history is based on the brief histories that were written by former Colombian Missionaries Philip Strackbein¹ and Chris Cordes.² Missionary Strackbein's history is a collection of primary source material – personal correspondence, updates to the Executive Committee, minutes from meetings, etc. Most of the information that was gathered for this paper was gleaned from these two histories, and so therefore I have refrained from quoting them extensively. There is obviously more that could have been included in this paper, however time constraints have allowed me only to hit the major highlights. I would encourage all those who are interested knowing more of the details to consult both of these historical works, which are available through the WELS Board for World Missions.

I also consulted a number of the men who served as missionaries in Colombia by means of email and occasional personal interviews. Their input was extremely valuable, as it clarified some of the things that I was having trouble understanding. I have indicated their contributions by means of footnotes.

May God continue to bless all the mission fields where the WELS is carrying out foreign mission work!

A Dios Sea Toda la Gloria

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Mequon, WI
December 7th, 2008
The Feast of St. Ambrose

¹ Philip Strackbein, *History of the Colombian Mission 1974-1995*

² Chris Cordes, *Focus on Colombia: 1996-2000*

I. The beginnings of the mission in Colombia 1963 – 1981

The story of the Colombian mission has its beginning in the 1963 Wisconsin Synod Convention. The delegates to this convention decided to make Latin America the next area of the world in which the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) would carry out foreign mission work. As a result of the decisions made at this convention, foreign missions were opened in Mexico and Puerto Rico in the mid 1960s. In the late 1960s, the WELS decided to explore the possibility of opening a mission on the continent of South America. In order to evaluate the feasibility of this new mission venture, two exploratory visits were made in 1968 and 1971. The first of these missionary visits was conducted by Theodore Sauer and the second by Rupert Eggert and Ernest Zimdars. Based on these exploratory visits, three cities were recommended as possible sites for WELS foreign mission work on the South American continent: Santa Cruz in Bolivia, Tucuman in Argentina, and Medellín in Colombia. Out of these three, Medellín was chosen for a number of reasons. First of all, there was very little protestant mission work being done there. Secondly, even though Medellín was plagued by extreme poverty like most South American cities, it was home to a relatively strong industrial economy and a relatively large working middle class. This was an important factor because the objective of WELS foreign mission work is to establish self-supporting churches, and therefore a working middle class that is able to financially support a church is crucial in carrying out this objective. Lastly, Medellín's three million inhabitants provided more than enough prospects for urban outreach, and Medellín's close proximity to the Chocó Indians even provided the possibility of future outreach to a tribe of Colombian Indians as well.

After hearing the report regarding the exploratory visits to South America, the 1971 WELS convention approved the proposal to start mission work in Medellín. However, there was

a problem; only \$7500 had been gathered through the special offering designated to fund the mission. This problem was settled in September of 1972 when an anonymous donor brought forth a gift of \$144,000 so that work could begin in Colombia.³ Once the funding was secured, a three man missionary team was assembled. The three men who were called to begin the mission work in Medellín were Pastor Ernest Zimdars, Teacher Francis Warner, and Pastor Roger Sprain. These three men were commissioned to start work in Colombia on August 14th, 1973 at the closing service of the 1973 WELS Convention in New Ulm, MN. However, because of problems obtaining their resident visas from the Colombian government, the missionary team did not leave for Colombia until January 20th, 1974.

From the very beginning of work in Colombia, the missionary team planned to operate under the *Christian Missioner Corps* strategy, which had been used previously by Pastor Sprain in Puerto Rico. Phil Strackbein, a former vicar in Puerto Rico and the longest tenured missionary in Colombia, recalls this mission strategy being explained to him in the following way: “[In the *Christian Missioner Corps* strategy] neither the missioner nor the vicar should ever do anything that a [native] is capable of doing. In other words, don’t do for the people, but rather help the people do for themselves.”⁴ This strategy was the practical way which the missionaries felt would best accomplish their ultimate goal: establishing a national church in Colombia that was self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating.

Within three weeks of arriving in Medellín, the missionaries began to conduct worship services. The first of these worship services was held on February 10th, 1974, with the missionary families and four Colombians in attendance. Within a month, there was an average of fifty Colombians attending services each week. Throughout the first year, the average

³ John Sprain, *The Early Years of our WELS Colombian Mission*, p. 5

⁴ Philip Strackbein, *History of the Colombian Mission 1974-1995*, p.2

attendance each Sunday continued to hang around the fifties and sixties, reaching an all time high of 79 people.⁵ One cannot help but to be amazed at these numbers! A large part of the credit for these large numbers must be given to two Colombian families: Don Reinaldo Gómez and his wife Maruja, and also Don Jesús Cuartas and his wife Doña Lola. Both of these families invited many of their personal friends and acquaintances to the worship services, and they in turn invited their friends and acquaintances as well. Don Reinaldo is a particularly interesting man. The missionaries came into contact with Don Reinaldo during one of the exploratory visits to Medellín. Don Reinaldo expressed interest in the missionaries and their work, and when the missionaries finally showed up in January of 1974, the missionaries invited him to the first worship service. In the months to come, Don Reinaldo expressed interest in confirmation classes. He took these classes with his wife Maruja, and was the first Colombian national to be confirmed by the missionaries.⁶

Thanks to the contacts which were made through the well-attended worship services, the missionaries were able to expand into many different *barrios* (areas) of Medellín. By 1979, the missionaries were working in 5 different areas of Medellín: *Castellana, Envigado, Versalles, Belén Las Playas, and Miramar*. By 1981, the missionaries had expanded into another area of Medellín known as *Robledo*. As the missionaries moved into more and more areas of Medellín, they would divide up the outreach responsibilities for these areas among themselves. In each area where mission work was being carried out, the missionaries used the houses of their acquaintances to begin localized outreach to others in each respective area of Medellín. One common way that the missionaries would do outreach in these areas was through the use of filmstrips. Missionaries would set up a projector in the street and show filmstrips (with audio, no

⁵ Roger Sprain, *History of the Mission in Colombia (1974-1976)* quoted in Phil Strackbein, *History of the Colombian Mission 1974-1995*, p. 2

⁶ Telephone interview with Roger Sprain, November 25th, 2008. 2:00pm

less!) of Bible stories on the front wall of the house of one of their acquaintances. This type of entertainment was certain to draw a crowd because so many people in Medellín were not wealthy enough to own a television. While these filmstrips were showing, the missionaries would evangelize the people as they walked up and down the streets.⁷ After making a number of contacts in the area, the missionaries would begin holding worship services, Sunday school and confirmation classes.

Eventually, the converts in each respective neighborhood began looking for a more permanent worship space. In June of 1975, the original group in the *Castellana* neighborhood purchased a house which they converted into a permanent chapel, and named their congregation *Santa Trinidad* (“Holy Trinity”). Some of the other neighborhood groups eventually bought property as well. The *Versalles* group bought property in 1977, as did the group in *Belén Las Playas* in 1979. The *Robledo* group was the final group to buy property for a more permanent worship space in 1981. The work being done in Medellín had obviously been fruitful! After only seven years of mission work in Colombia, four nucleus groups had established themselves as congregations!

During their first years in Colombia, the missionaries had worked hard to establish a national church in Colombia. Their many hours of evangelism work bore much fruit in the establishment of four separate congregations and one preaching station in five different areas of Medellín. However, the establishment of congregations was only part of their work of establishing a national church. The missionaries also recognized the importance of raising up indigenous leaders for the Colombian church, and therefore the establishment of a worker training system was a priority right from the start. The Colombian missionaries decided to use the model for worker training which was developed by the WELS missionaries in Africa, which

⁷ Telephone interview with Lawrence Retberg, November 26th, 2008. 2:00pm

consisted of eight years of ministerial training. A ministry candidate would spend his first two years studying Biblical doctrine at the Bible Institute which was established and run by the missionaries. The candidate would then spend two years as an “evangelist” gaining practical experience in a local congregation. Finally, the candidate would spend his final four years of training at the Seminary, which was also established and run by the missionaries.

One might wonder why the missionaries would establish such a lengthy and intensive program of study for a church body that was in such desperate need of workers, but the missionaries were convinced that all three phases of this training were essential for a number of reasons. First of all, there is so much that a man needs to learn in order to serve as a pastor, so therefore the six years of coursework are absolutely essential to the pastoral training program. Secondly, the missionaries wanted to be sure that the men who would serve as spiritual leaders had proven themselves to be up for the challenge. Therefore, an eight year program gave the students an opportunity to prove themselves as capable of the task of serving as a pastoral shepherd. Lastly, the missionaries wanted to be able to use the students in carrying out mission work, since they (as native Colombians) understood the culture and language of Colombia much better than the missionaries. Therefore, the two year “evangelist” period would benefit both the missionaries and the students.⁸

Knowing the importance of raising up indigenous leaders for the Colombian mission field and intending to implement the worker training system described above, the missionaries opened the first segment of this system – the Bible Insitute – in the fall of 1975. At this time there were two men enrolled who were interested in becoming pastors – Omar Ortiz and Carlos Cueto. Omar would prove to be an important figure in the history of the Colombian national church, and his story is a particularly interesting one as well. At one time, Omar had been a monk studying

⁸ Telephone interview with Roger Sprain, November 25th, 2008. 2:00pm

for the Catholic priesthood. But after coming into contact with the writings of Luther, Omar left the monastery and began attending a Presbyterian church in Medellín. After the minister of this Presbyterian church learned of Omar's interest in Luther, he directed Omar to our missionaries.⁹ After showing interest in becoming a Lutheran Pastor, Omar then enrolled at the Bible Institute to begin his training. Omar would go on to become the first graduate of the Colombian seminary and the first national Pastor of the Colombian national church.

Unfortunately, however, Omar's story was the exception rather than the rule. The worker training system was plagued by students who for whatever reason did not complete their training. Of the ten men who enrolled at the Bible institute from 1975-1983, only 3 men completed the two years of coursework and the two years of practical training as an "evangelist," and only one man graduated from the seminary. Many of the problems with enrollment in the Colombian worker training system had to do with *becas*, or scholarships. Originally, the missionary staff agreed not to give out *becas* because, in a poverty-stricken country like Colombia, some people might enroll in the worker training system just to obtain money for themselves. However, as candidates began to drop out of the Bible Institute because they were unable to work a job and go to school at the same time, the missionaries reconsidered their stance on *becas*. Finally in 1979, the missionaries changed their policy on giving out *becas*. The missionaries felt that giving out *becas* would enable them to get two or three nationals trained for ministry, and this in turn would allow the missionary team to expand their outreach to other cities in Colombia.¹⁰ However, despite these good intentions, many of the missionaries agree that in hindsight the *becas* caused more trouble than good because they more often than not caused a conflict of interest between

⁹ Strackbein, *History of the Colombian Mission 1974-1995* p. 3, confirmed in a telephone interview with Roger Sprain, November 25th, 2008. 2:00pm

¹⁰ Telephone interview with Roger Sprain, November 25th, 2008. 2:00pm

the students and the missionary team.¹¹ By the end of the 1980s, the missionaries no longer offered *becas* to their students because of the problems that all too often accompanied them.

In 1979, another key event in the history of the mission in Colombia took place: the formal organization of a national church body. In June of 1979, the Confessional Lutheran Church of Colombia (*Iglesia Luterana Confesional de Colombia*) became incorporated. This type of corporation had been suggested as early as 1974 so that land and property could be purchased by means of the national church corporation. However, it was decided at that time that it was still too early to form this type of organization. This formation of the Confessional Lutheran Church of Colombia was another big step in plan to establish an indigenous church in Colombia.

A few comments on the missionary staff are in order at this point. By the end of the first seven years of the Colombian mission, all three original missionaries returned to the United States. Teacher Francis Warner, one of the original three missionaries commissioned for work in Colombia, was forced to leave the field only two years after arriving in Colombia because his wife was suffering from high blood pressure due to the altitude of Medellín. He was replaced in 1976 by Pastor Lawrence Retberg who had been serving in Ft. Collins, Colorado. Pastor Roger Sprain and Pastor Ernest Zimdars both returned to the United States in 1980 and 1981 respectively. Their work and dedication throughout the early years of the Colombian mission is still bearing fruit today. The two missionaries who replaced them were Philip Strackbein from Greenville, South Carolina in 1981, and James Connell, a graduate from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in 1982.

¹¹ Telephone interviews with Roger Sprain, November 25th, 2008, 2:00pm; Lawrence Retberg, November 26th, 2008, 2:00pm; James Connell, November 29th, 2008, 11:30am.

However, even before Sprain and Zimdars left the Colombian mission field, the missionary staff had grown from three missionaries to five. One missionary was added as a result of the decision not to send a vicar to Colombia after 1978. From 1975-1977, three vicars had served in the Colombian mission field: Lynn Wiedmann in '75, Herbert Huhnerkoch in '76, and Mark Jeske in '77. However, the vicar program in Colombia was discontinued for a number of reasons. First of all, it was becoming increasingly hard to secure resident visas for the vicars. In fact, this would become an increasing problem as a new wave of missionaries came into Colombia in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s. Because of the visa problem, vicars would oftentimes only serve for a period of six months or less. In light of this, it was felt that the vicar program was not very efficient or cost-effective considering the time it took for a vicar to acclimate to a foreign country as well as taking into account the cost of transporting a vicar to and from the United States each year.¹² However, since there was still a need for manpower in the Colombian mission field, it was decided that an additional expatriate missionary would be added to the three-man missionary staff. The man who was called to serve in this position in the fall of 1977 was Larry Schlomer. In 1978, the WELS Convention authorized the addition of ten new missionaries for its foreign mission fields, and Colombia was allotted one of these new missionary positions. This missionary position was added because the seminary program was taking a lot of time away from evangelism.¹³ Pastor Mark Goeglein was called to this position in June of 1978. Pastor Goeglein accepted the call, bringing the missionary count up to five members. After enduring the usual visa approval problems, Pastor Goeglein arrived in Medellín in May of 1979. In order to get Pastor Goeglein's visas approved, the missionaries were required to sign a document which stated that the WELS would never have more than five missionaries in

¹² Telephone interview with Lawrence Retberg, November 26th, 2008, 2:00pm

¹³ Personal email received from Mark Goeglein, November 20th, 2008.

the country at any given time. Pastor Roger Sprain commented on this in a letter to the Latin America Executive Committee in 1979: "Being allowed only five expatriate workers can be a blessing in disguise, since more emphasis and greater and more rapid development of the National Church will have to be an objective of the planning."¹⁴

It is obvious that the Lord richly blessed the work that was done in Colombia during the first seven years of the Colombian mission's existence. By the end of 1979, there were five missionaries serving five neighborhoods of Medellín. When the total memberships of these five neighborhoods were combined together, they numbered 208 baptized souls and 44 communicant members. God had also granted the Colombian church the blessing of having two Colombian natives being prepared for service in the Colombian national church. Humanly speaking, things were looking good for the Colombia mission.

II. The Church Consolidates in Medellín...and Expands into Bogotá 1981-1983

As the Colombian mission entered the new decade, the missionaries were faced with a number of long-term strategy issues. From the very beginning of the Colombian mission, the missionaries' goal was to establish an indigenous church that was self-governing, self-sufficient, and self-propagating. During the first seven years, the missionary staff had naturally taken the lead in evangelism and outreach and had been so successful in their endeavors that five neighborhood churches had been formed in different areas of Medellín. During these initial years, the missionaries had hoped that a sufficient number of national pastors would be trained who, upon graduation, would be able to continue the work in each of the five areas of Medellín. However, it was now 1981 and only one solid candidate for ministry (Omar Ortiz) was anywhere near graduation. Because of this, the missionaries were concerned that their present methods of

¹⁴ Letter dated March of 1979, quoted in Strackbein, *History of the Colombian Mission 1974-1995*, p.11

church expansion were creating a church body which the national church would not be able to support on its own in the near future. In other words, they were creating a church body which was dependent on missionary involvement. This was exactly what the missionaries wanted to avoid from the start. The missionaries did not want to create a dependent national church, but an independent national church which could eventually function apart from the missionaries' involvement.

In order to discuss and deal with this issue, Missionaries Retberg, Schlomer, Goeglein, and Strackbein planned a missionary retreat from September 11-13, 1981. During the meetings which were held at this retreat, the missionaries agreed that their present policy concerning subsidy and church expansion was leading them farther and farther away from their original *Christian Missioner Corps* strategy and their ultimate goal of establishing an indigenous church in Colombia.¹⁵ With only one national pastor graduating in the near future, there was no way that he could properly serve all six congregations simultaneously. There was also little chance that each neighborhood congregation would eventually be able to pay the bills for each of their respective worship facilities without subsidy from the missionaries.

In order to deal with these practical issues, the missionaries proposed a plan which was actually suggested by the national church in 1979 but was not given serious consideration by the missionary team until this time. This plan called for the amalgamation of all the neighborhood churches into one central church, thereby enabling the national pastor to serve one congregation and the neighborhood churches to pool their resources to support the work of the church together. These were the two main advantages to this plan, but there were other advantages to this plan as well. The central church plan would also allow the Colombian converts to enjoy

¹⁵ Conclusion recorded in the minutes from the retreat, quoted in Strackbein, *History of the Colombian Mission 1974-1995*, p.17.

each other's fellowship on a larger scale. In a country where Catholicism dominated the religious scene and confessional Lutherans were few and far between, Christian fellowship was cherished all the more. Also, from an evangelism standpoint, a central church in the business district of Medellín would be easier to promote than a number of churches in the outlying neighborhoods because it would be more easily accessible to the majority of Medellín's citizens who relied heavily on the public transportation system.

Another major advantage to this plan involved a change in workload for the missionaries. With a national pastor serving the day-to-day needs of a unified Medellín church, the missionaries could better take on the "missioner" role as described in the *Christian Missioner Corps* strategy. Along with the plan to form one centrally located church, the missionary team planned to keep three missionaries in Medellín to do three things: to oversee the affairs of the national church, to provide training for leaders in the church, and to help out with evangelism and outreach. The missionaries then planned to use the two remaining missionaries to serve as exploratory missionaries who would begin reaching out with the gospel to other major cities in Colombia, and by doing so develop more groups of believers who could be served by future graduates from the Colombian seminary.

This plan seemed to solve the majority of the problems which the Colombian mission was confronted with at the time. In order to test out the feasibility and the interest in the central church plan, a joint Reformation service was held in the conference room of the Hotel Ambassador in downtown Medellín. 86 people came to this special service to celebrate the anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation. Then in December a joint children's Christmas service was held, and 103 people attended. Both times that a joint service was held, the attendance surpassed the combined average Sunday attendance in the five neighborhoods where work was being done.

After testing out the feasibility of the central church plan, the missionaries presented this plan to the Latin America Executive Committee and it was approved in November of 1982. The national church had already met earlier that year and agreed that the plan was a feasible one. On November 7th, 1982, the plan reached fruition when a central church was organized under the name *La Santísima Trinidad* (“Most Holy Trinity”).

The following months were exciting months in the Colombia mission. On November 28th, 1982, eighty-six people attended the graduation service of Omar Ortiz, who became the first Colombian native to graduate from the Colombian church’s worker training system. Subsequently, Omar was ordained and installed as pastor of *La Santísima Trinidad* on January 23rd, 1983.

Now that the central church plan had been adopted and the first Colombian national pastor had been installed, the missionaries turned their attention to the second major objective of the plan adopted in November of 1982: expansion into another city. From January 29th to February 6th, 1983, a three-man team consisting of Missionary Retberg, Missionary Goeglein, and Don Reinaldo Gómez explored options for mission expansion in the Colombian cities of Bogotá and Cali. After completing their trip, they recommended expansion into Bogotá, the capital city of Colombia. By June of 1983, Missionaries Goeglein and Strackbein had moved from Medellín to Bogotá.

For the first two months that the missionaries were in Bogotá, they held worship services in their own homes. While these services were being held in the missionaries’ homes, preparations were being made to hold a public worship service in a downtown location. Since 1983 was the 400th anniversary of the birth of Martin Luther, the missionaries decided to invite

the community to a free showing of the famous black-and-white Martin Luther movie¹⁶ at the *Hotel Dann* in downtown Bogotá. Sunday, August 23, 1983 was designated as the day that this would happen. On this day, the Martin Luther movie was shown once in the morning and once in the afternoon to a combined crowd of 235 people! Even though the missionaries had advertised this event for months beforehand, they were amazed at the number of people that came to see it. All who attended that day were invited to the first public worship service to be held the next week, and 109 people attended. Out of these 109 people, over 40 people indicated a desire to attend Bible classes and worship services on a regular basis.

With the successful formation of a central church in Medellín and the successful expansion of outreach into Bogotá, it is obvious that the Lord was continuing to bless the work being done in Colombia.

III. Problems in Medellín 1983-1988

The young Colombian mission had achieved many significant milestones between the years of 1981 and 1983. There was so much to be excited about: a new central church in downtown Medellín, the graduation and ordination of the first national pastor, and mission expansion into another city. And these are only the external results! Of course, there were also innumerable spiritual results as well. However, in the years following this exciting period in the history of the Colombian mission, God allowed the Colombian mission to experience some challenges. Two particular issues during these challenging times eventually led to a partial split at *La Santísima Trinidad*, the newly-formed central church in Medellín.

Before getting into these challenging issues, it is important to note that during this period in the Colombian mission's history there was a great amount of turnover in the missionary staff.

¹⁶ Produced in 1953 by Louis de Rochemont and directed by Irving Pichel.

Between the fall of 1983 and the fall of 1986, three out of the five veteran missionaries left the Colombian mission field – Schlomer in the fall of 1983, Goeglein in the summer of 1984, and Retberg in the fall of 1986. Schlomer and Goeglein were replaced by Pastors Thomas Heyn and James Kuehl in 1984. Pastor Heyn was able to arrive in Colombia only one month after Missionary Goeglein left the field in June of 1984, so the field was not left with only three missionaries for very much time. However, Pastor Kuehl and his family had a difficult time getting their resident visas approved by the Colombian government, and therefore the missionary staff had to operate at four-fifths power for about fifteen months until February of 1986. After Missionary Retberg left the field in the October of 1986, missionary Heyn left as well in December of 1986, and there were once again two vacancies in the Colombian mission field. One of these positions was filled in the May of 1987 by Stuart Freese, a graduate from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in Mequon, WI. After toying with the idea of only having a four-man missionary team in Colombia, the Executive Committee for Latin American mission resolved that a fifth man was needed, and eventually called Pastor Carl Leyrer to this position in March of 1988. However, in September of 1989 Missionary Connell took a call out of the Colombian mission field, and after his departure there ^{were} was never more than four missionaries in Colombia at the same time.

Now on to the challenging issues that developed in Medellín: The first of these challenging issues had to do with the new pastor of the downtown congregation, Pastor Omar Ortiz. After Omar was ordained and installed, things at the new amalgamated church were going well under Omar's leadership. In the estimation of Missionary Retberg, Omar was doing well in his pastoral duties and was displaying "a real pastor's heart." The only thing that Omar seemed

to be struggling with was his administrative duties.¹⁷ However, already within the first six months of his ministry, Omar began to suffer once again from marriage problems – something that had occurred earlier while he was enrolled in the seminary. In the early summer of 1983, Omar and his wife separated temporarily. They resolved their differences for a time, but later on Omar’s wife left him to live with a man who used to be her high school sweetheart. In the end, the circumstances surrounding Omar’s separation, divorce, and re-marriage resulted in Omar resigning his call – somewhat against his will – in December of 1987. As a result of Omar’s resignation, Missionary James Kuehl was called to serve the congregation as interim Pastor for the time being.

The second challenging issue had to do with the only student who was currently enrolled in the seminary, Gabriel Alvarez. Gabriel had enrolled in the Bible Institute in September of 1977 and did not complete his Bible Institute training until March of 1981, mostly due to personal marriage problems of his own. At this point in Gabriel’s training, Missionary Schlomer had the following to say about him:

“Gabriel Alvarez, our second most experienced student has now finished his training at the BI [Bible Institute] level. He seems to be a very gifted young man, as far as his studies are concerned, although he is somewhat headstrong and doesn’t always follow the lead of his supervising pastor. Hopefully this can be rectified during his 2-year period as evangelist.”¹⁸

In November of 1983, Gabriel decided to quit the seminary. Missionary Retberg explained the situation in a letter to the Executive Committee dated December 5, 1983:

Our spirits are low right now because of other changes in the field. Gabriel has quit the seminary. On November 22 we put Gabriel on probation because of problems in his attitude toward the work and toward his studies. Our attempt to admonish him provoked negative results and he walked out. He has since made application to return (on Dec. 2), however, he puts the blame on us and our methods and procedure as the motive for quitting. This has complicated things.¹⁹

¹⁷ Letter from Lawrence Retberg to the Executive Committee, dated July 6th, 1983. Quoted in Strackbein, *History of the Colombian Mission 1974-1995*, p.23.

¹⁸ From a report quoted in Strackbein, *History of the Colombian Mission 1974-1995*, p.13

¹⁹ Quoted in Strackbein, *History of the Colombian Mission, 1974-1995*, p.25.

Gabriel was allowed to return to the seminary, but at the October 1986 meeting of the missionary staff the missionaries expressed some doubt “with regard to the qualifications of [Gabriel], his problems being his lack of ability to handle Greek and Hebrew, lack of leadership abilities, and lack of sociability.”²⁰ Finally, in June of 1987 Gabriel was suspended indefinitely from the seminary for insubordination. In December of 1987 – at exactly the same time that Omar Ortiz submitted his resignation as pastor of *La Santísima Trinidad* – the Board for Theological Education decided to continue Gabriel’s indefinite suspension from the seminary, and also asked Gabriel to vacate his apartment which was attached to the church. When Gabriel expressed concern about being out on the street with no money, he was offered three months of rent. However, Gabriel still would not commit himself to leave. Gabriel did eventually leave the apartment in January of 1988 and also stopped attending worship services at the downtown church.

Then on February 28th 1988 – a little under three months after Omar had resigned his call and Gabriel’s indefinite suspension from the seminary had been finalized – seven members of *La Santísima Trinidad* held a meeting in which they formed a new congregation called *La Iglesia Luterana Buen Pastor* (Good Shepherd Lutheran Church) and called Omar Ortiz and Gabriel Alvarez to serve them as their pastors. Despite Missionary Kuehl’s admonitions to the people of *La Santísima Trinidad* to beware of following men instead of the Savior and his Word, attendance at the central church was cut in half and continued to decrease even more in the months to come. Quite obviously, these were challenging times for the people of *La Santísima Trinidad* and for the missionaries as well.

²⁰ Minutes of October 1986 Missionary Council Meeting, quoted in Strackbein, *History of the Colombia Mission, 1974-1995*, p.29.

The circumstances described above were certainly enough to challenge the most optimistic and resilient team of missionaries. However, on top of all of the circumstances described above, at this time the missionaries also had to deal with concerns related to the escalation of the drug wars in Colombia, which was oftentimes headline news in the rest of the world. As early as 1984, the Colombian drug cartels had threatened to kill five Americans for every Colombian drug trafficker who was extradited to the United States on drug related charges. In the late 1980s the Medellín drug cartel, headed by the infamous Pablo Escobar, began using terrorist methods (such as bombings, kidnappings, and shootings) more regularly in order to try to persuade the Colombian government to do away with its extradition treaty with the United States. On top of this, the situation was made even worse because the Medellín cartel was often caught up in public shootings with its chief rival, the Cali cartel. These dangerous circumstances posed a serious threat to all residents of Medellín. Because of these dangerous circumstances, the Executive Committee resolved to pull out all the Colombian missionaries in September of 1989. However, the missionary team contested the resolution saying that the political situation was not as bad as it may have seemed from the news. The missionaries also showed genuine concern for their people, saying that it would be very difficult to retain the respect of the Colombians upon their return if they would flee the country now. In the end, the Executive Committee allowed the missionaries to stay in Colombia provided that the situation was closely monitored.

Despite the challenging issues that dominated this period in the history of the Colombian mission, there were also things that took place which gave everyone reason to rejoice. In 1985, *La Santísima Trinidad* purchased a building which had formerly served as a funeral parlor to be their permanent home. This fine new facility was dedicated on February 3rd, 1985.

Another reason for rejoicing during these years was the progress that was being made in Bogotá. The missionaries continued to follow up on leads generated by the showings of the Martin Luther movie. On May 20th, 1984 the Bogotá congregation celebrated their first confirmation Sunday, with three people being confirmed as communicant members of the congregation. In the fall of 1986, the Bogotá congregation discontinued meeting at the *Hotel Dann* in downtown Bogotá and began to hold services in a rented building which was near the business district of Bogotá. During these early years, the missionaries also established a Bible Institute just as had been done in Medellín. Two men, Héber Vargas and Oscar Henao, proved to be promising candidates for the pastoral ministry, so much so that the missionaries proposed moving the seminary program to Bogotá in the very near future so that they could study for the ministry. This proposal to move the seminary to Bogotá did eventually come to fruition in May of 1987 when Missionary Connell, the Director of Theological Education, moved from Medellín to Bogotá for this specific purpose of training Héber Vargas and Oscar Henao for ministry.

As has been stated before, this was a very challenging period for the Colombian mission. A letter that Missionary Kuehl wrote to the Executive Committee following the tumultuous events of 1987 seems to describe this bitter-sweet period in the history of the Colombian mission quite well:

I believe that history will show that 1987 was a bitter-sweet year for our Colombian Church for obvious reasons. A cursory reading of my last year's correspondence will relate most of the bitter details. But amidst the bitter we have also tasted and will continue to taste the sweetness of the Savior's presence, blessings, and love. We will trust that we are and will be the richer for the experience and that we have been strengthened for the challenges and tasks that lie ahead.²¹

²¹ Letter to the Executive Committee dated January 14th, 1988, quoted in Strackbein, *History of the Colombian Mission 1974-1995*, p.32.

IV. Changes in Philosophy and Strategy 1988-1990

In October of 1988, the Missionaries held a meeting in Bogotá which was a turning point in the history of the Colombian mission. In this meeting, the missionaries spent a lot of time studying and evaluating three major areas of their work: the training of pastors, methods for doing ministry among the laity, and planting new missions. The conclusions that were arrived at in this meeting laid the groundwork for a new philosophy of outreach which was set in motion in January of 1989: a “store-front” approach to ministry. This approach to doing outreach had been researched by the Bogotá missionaries in 1985 but had never been implemented. This change in strategy was fueled by the thinking that Colombians would be much more likely to respond positively when invited to come to an office building than they would when invited to come to a church. With this strategy in mind, the Bogotá congregation moved out of their rented facility in the business district of Bogotá, and the missionaries would now work from an office building more to the north of the city. The name that was chosen for the new store-front outreach centers was *Centro de Información Cristiana*, (“Christian Information Center”). This new approach to outreach was also accompanied by plans to produce a brand new set of instructional materials which would be in audio/visual format.

While the Bogotá congregation was going through the transition from church-based outreach to storefront-based outreach, the Medellín congregation appeared to be at a standstill. The missionaries in Medellín felt that the members of *La Santísima Trinidad* were becoming too dependent on their presence in the congregation. The missionaries felt that the members of *La Santísima Trinidad* were failing to take ownership of their own congregation, and that the missionaries’ presence was enabling them to continue to fail to take ownership. Because of this, the missionaries proposed a change in strategy in Medellín at the September 1989 meeting with

the Executive Council. They proposed that two things happen: First of all, that the Medellín missionaries discontinue their direct involvement at *La Santísima Trinidad* in an effort to make the congregation members take ownership of their congregation. Secondly, they proposed that a *Centro de Información Cristiana* (CIC) be opened on the west side of Medellín, just like the one that had been opened in Bogotá. In order to carry out this strategy, it was proposed that Missionary Strackbein be moved to Medellín because neither of the Medellín missionaries were trained in the CIC program. It also proposed that Missionary Kuehl take his place in Bogotá, but when all was said and done Missionary Freese moved to Bogotá instead. The Executive Committee approved this plan, and by January of 1990 the missionaries were moved and the missionaries' proposal was implemented.

In February of 1990, Missionary Kuehl resigned his call as pastor of *La Santísima Trinidad*, in accordance with the proposal approved by the Executive Committee. At that time, the missionaries encouraged the members of the downtown congregation to call the person they felt was most capable of serving as their spiritual leader until a pastor could be trained to serve them. The man they called was Don Reinaldo Gómez, who back in 1974 had been the first confirmand of the Colombian mission. All things considered, he was a good choice. In April of 1989, Don Reinaldo had expressed interest in becoming a pastor and had begun taking classes at the Bible Institute on a part time basis. At this point, the missionaries discontinued their direct involvement at the central church for a period of time, including even attending services. However, they did not leave the congregation entirely on its own; they continued to train and equip Don Reinaldo to be the spiritual leader of the congregation, and also made frequent visits to see how the congregation was doing.

The work in the months to come could be described as "slow but sure." At the October meeting of the missionary staff, it was reported that the average attendance at *La Santísima*

Trinidad was hovering around twenty people, and that Don Reinaldo was working on reaching out to the straying members. Although attendance had been dropping significantly, a substantial part of the Medellín congregation had taken ownership in their congregation, and this was encouraging news for the missionaries. Progress at the new CICs was also discussed. At the Medellín CIC, there were nine Colombians taking Bible information classes. At the Bogotá CIC, there were presently 4 Colombians ~~were~~ attending worship services.

These two years were definitely a period of transition in the Colombian mission. As is often the case with new strategies, the new strategy for outreach in Colombia took some time to bear visible, tangible fruit. The missionaries moved on into the rest of the new decade with courage and trust that the Lord would bless their efforts.

V. Expansion and Growth through the CIC Program 1991-1995

1991-1995 were good years for the mission in Colombia. One interesting thing to note about this period in the history of the Colombian mission is that much of the work was done by a shorthanded missionary staff. During this time period, the missionary staff usually consisted of three missionaries but for two whole years consisted of only two. In March of 1991, Missionary Kuehl took a call out of the field. Exactly one year later – in March of 1992 – Missionary Freese took a call out of the field as well, leaving only two expatriate missionaries in Colombia. Freese's position was left vacant until May of 1993 when seminary graduate Geoffrey Kieta was assigned to the Colombia mission field.

However, before Missionary Freese left the field, the Lord used him to expand WELS outreach to the Colombian city of Cali. There were a number of reasons for this expansion. First of all, Missionary Freese was suffering from heart problems which were caused by the

altitude of the city of Bogotá. Because the missionary staff did not want to hinder their efforts in encouraging the Medellín congregation to take ownership of their church, the missionaries agreed that Missionary Freese should not be sent back to Medellín. Instead, they proposed that he be used to expand WELS outreach into a new city. This would also give them the opportunity to see how the new store-front outreach approach works in a city where no church-based outreach had been done previously. The missionaries proposed this plan to the Executive Committee, and after it was approved, Missionary Freese moved to Cali in April of 1991. By the end of the year, two families were gathering around the Word of God, and five members of one of these families were confirmed in the Lutheran faith. Unfortunately, after Missionary Freese left the field in March of 1992, the missionaries lost touch with these people in Cali. After Missionary Freese's departure, Missionary Strackbein planned to serve the people in Cali by sending them tapes of the services held in Medellín and by making one visit to Cali every six months. However, after a while the family moved and did not give Missionary Strackbein their new address. Because of this, Missionary Strackbein lost touch with the people whom Missionary Freese had served in Cali.

During this time period, the missionaries improved and adjusted their strategy for outreach through the CIC branches. The missionaries' strategy had the basic goal of establishing a number of home-based worship groups. The missionaries would go about accomplishing this goal in the following manner: they would first instruct interested Colombians in basic biblical doctrine by means of an audio-visual Bible information course. The missionaries would then encourage these Colombians to share what they had learned with their friends and acquaintances in the hope of forming an informal worship group which would meet in one of the Colombian's homes. At this point, the missionaries would oversee the different groups and provide them with materials for study and worship. Eventually, the missionaries hoped to gather smaller groups

together for corporate worship, having the most qualified person serve as the spiritual leader for the group. In this way, the missionaries hoped to reach out with the gospel to the Colombian people and enable them to carry out ministry among themselves, thereby establishing indigenous churches.

During this time period, outreach through the new CIC branches took off significantly, especially in Medellín. Missionary Strackbein was quite successful finding people interested in taking a “spiritual healing” course by advertising the course in a local periodical called *El Flash*. The success that the CIC enjoyed during these years can be seen from the following statistics: when the CIC opened in 1990, the missionaries came into contact with 22 people, 9 of which began taking classes. In 1993, Missionary Strackbein came into contact with 204 people, 70 of which began taking classes. In those four years combined, over 400 came into contact with the gospel message through the classes offered at the CIC. An added blessing was that five men expressed interest in becoming pastors and began taking seminary level classes from Missionary Strackbein. Among these men was a middle-aged man by the name of Luis Fernando Arteaga, a man who would serve the downtown congregation as a pastoral assistant beginning in April of 1994.

The CIC work in Bogotá also continued to go well during this period. In December of 1993, Missionary Leyrer reported that there were currently 32 people enrolled in courses at the CIC, and that attendance at the weekly worship services continued to hover around 20 to 30 adults.²² Perhaps the most historically important event that took place in Bogotá during this time period was that Missionary Leyrer came into contact with a Colombian man by the name of Fernando Delgadillo. This Colombian gentleman learned of the CIC because he was part of the

²² Minutes of December Missionary Council meeting, quoted in Strackbein, *History of the Colombia Mission 1974-1995*, p.45-46.

ELCA church *El Redentor* (“Redeemer”) which purchased a set of “Communicating Christ” videos from the CIC. After setting up a meeting with Missionary Leyrer, Fernando expressed that he had not attended the Lord’s Supper at *El Redentor* because of doctrinal concerns that he had with the ELCA mission. After studying the WELS doctrinal statement entitled “This We Believe,” Fernando declared that he was in full agreement with what the WELS teaches, and expressed a desire to join the Bogotá congregation. From the very beginning, Missionary Leyrer thought that Fernando was the type of person who could serve as the spiritual leader of the Bogotá congregation. Within a year, Fernando was leading two home-based worship groups, and Missionary Geoff Kieta was working on a new non-institutional seminary curriculum which could be used to train Colombian laymen – but specifically Fernando Delgadillo – for the pastoral ministry. However, this curriculum was to be structured in such a way that the students would not have to go to school full-time, but rather could still work a full-time job and support themselves.

Another interesting development during this period in the history of the Colombian mission was the return of the group which had separated from *La Santísima Trinidad* and formed a separate congregation called *Buen Pastor* in 1988. In March of 1991, the members of *Buen Pastor* expressed interest in returning to *La Santísima Trinidad*. After a number of meetings were held, it was decided that the congregations should remain separate at this time. However, in late 1993 the members of *Buen Pastor* once again expressed interest in becoming assimilated with *La Santísima Trinidad*. Missionary Strackbein conducted the meeting with caution and frankness, given what had been the original cause of the formation of *Buen Pastor* in the first place. After discussing all the necessary doctrines and issues, and after the members of *Buen Pastor* expressed that they had been wrong to leave *La Santísima Trinidad* in the first place, the missionaries recommended that the Executive Committee approve the assimilation of the two

church bodies. Once the assimilation was approved by the Executive Committee, a reaffirmation of faith ceremony was held on March 20th, 1994 in which the members of *Buen Pastor* were publicly welcomed back into the membership of *La Santísima Trinidad*. While this was a joyous occasion for all involved, the assimilation did not occur without casualties. Don Reinaldo Gómez, the man who had been serving the downtown congregation faithfully since 1990, ended up resigning his call as the spiritual leader of *La Santísima Trinidad* about a month after the assimilation. According to an update given at the April 1994 meeting with the Executive Committee, Reinaldo was not against the union of the two churches, but rather felt that it would be hard to continue as spiritual leader of the congregation now that Gabriel Alvarez was part of the congregation again. It would also be hard for him to continue as leader of the congregation because his wife, Maruja, was very much opposed to the assimilation – so much so that she informed Don Reinaldo that she was officially withdrawing her membership.²³

In the light of Don Reinaldo's resignation, the members of *La Santísima Trinidad* extended temporary six month calls to Gabriel Alvarez to serve them as their pastor, and to Luis Fernando Arteaga to serve as his pastoral assistant. In November of 1994, Gabriel's call was renewed indefinitely, but Luis Fernando's call was terminated because he had stopped attending the seminary and his church attendance had become sporadic. In his place, two seminary students named Tony Quintero and Jorge Bastidas were given temporary six month calls to serve as pastoral assistants at *La Santísima Trinidad*. These men had been involved with the Colombian mission since the first years of the central church in Medellín. In fact, Tony Quintero was Omar Ortiz's first confirmand.²⁴

²³ Quoted in Strackbein, *History of the Colombian Mission 1974-1995*, p. 47.

²⁴ Personal email received from Philip Strackbein, December 7th, 2008.

In 1995, there were a few significant events that occurred in Bogotá. First of all, after serving in Colombia for eight years, Missionary Leyrer took a call back the United States in July of 1995. He was replaced by Pastor Chris Cordes, who arrived in Colombia before Missionary Leyrer left the field (in April of 1995) in order that Missionary Leyrer could train him for his work. This change in the normal calling procedure fostered a much-needed sense of continuity as the work was passed from one missionary to another.

The second significant event that took place in Bogotá was that the Bogotá congregation began to worship at a new facility. This new facility was a K-12 school called *Colegio de Los Ángeles* which was owned by the Delgadillo family. The Delgadillo family offered to let the Bogotá congregation worship in this facility until they could build or buy its own worship facility. On August 20, 1995 the first worship service was held at the school, and the attendance at this service was 106 – the second highest attendance ever at a worship service in Bogotá.

God certainly showered his blessings on the mission in Colombia during this time in its history! The change in mission strategy which was implemented in the late 1980s was bringing the gospel to many people in Colombia, and it was being done in such a way that the Colombian converts were not overly reliant on the missionaries, but rather were taking ownership in their congregations right from the start. This was absolutely crucial, because in less than five years the Confessional Lutheran Church of Colombia would be left without the physical presence of expatriate missionaries due to the increasing dangers which American citizens faced in Colombia. One can certainly see that God used these years to prepare his believers in Colombia for the challenges that they would face on their own in the years to come.

VI. The Final Years of Expatriate Missionary Presence in Colombia 1996-1999

In these final years of expatriate missionary work in Colombia – as well as the years immediately preceding them – one cannot help but notice how God prepared the Colombian church to survive on its own, and how God opened new doors for outreach which would keep the light of the gospel shining in Colombia for years to come.

This time period brought with it some changes in leadership at the downtown congregation in Medellín. Early on in 1996, Pastor Gabriel Alvarez resigned his call as pastor at *La Santísima Trinidad* because of personal reasons. Sadly, Gabriel even terminated his fellowship ties with the Medellín church as well. Because of this, Jorge Bastidas and Tony Quintero (Gabriel's two pastoral assistants) became the men whom the Medellín congregation looked to for spiritual leadership. Since both men were still technically seminary students at this time, Missionary Strackbein continued to oversee their work and conduct classes with them.

At the CIC branches in both Medellín and Bogotá, classes continued to be taught as in years past. At the time of the evacuation of the expatriate missionaries in 1999, both CICs were collectively conducting about 23 Bible classes each week. It is also important to note that in 1997 both CICs relocated; the CIC in Medellín moved out of its location on the west side of town and into a remodeled area of *La Santísima Trinidad*, and the Bogotá CIC moved to a new location on the north side of the city. The reason for the move in Medellín was twofold; first of all, their lease on the CIC building had expired. Secondly, the missionaries felt that it would no longer be detrimental to their goals to fuse the ministry of the CIC with the ministry of the downtown congregation. With the CIC operating out of the church facility, the missionaries felt that more congregation members would participate in its ministries and that prospects would find it much easier to visit the church.

The CIC and the congregation were fused together in Bogotá as well, although for different reasons. The Bogotá congregation, strained by the long distances they were traveling to attend worship services at the Delgadillo's school, began to worship at the new CIC facility which was located on the north side of the city. This was meant to be a temporary arrangement, however the congregation continued to worship here into the next decade.

Despite the fact that worship services were not being held at the Delgadillo's school (*Colegio de los Angeles*), this institution continued to play a huge part in WELS outreach to the city of Bogotá. This was the case because the Delgadillo family decided to revise their entire religion curriculum in order to make sure that it is in accord with the Scriptures. In order to facilitate this change, the Delgadillo family chose to use the WELS "ChristLight" curriculum as a template for their religion curriculum. Through the religion classes that are still being taught at *Colegio de los Angeles*, many students and members of their families have been brought into contact with the gospel message – so much so that a daughter congregation was formed in April of 2000, with a membership consisting mostly of families that came into contact with the gospel through *Colegio de los Angeles*.

The WELS Kingdom Workers also played a big part in the Colombian mission between the years of 1996 and 2000. According to Missionary Chris Cordes, as many as ten men and women came to help out with the mission work being done in Colombia.²⁵ These Kingdom Workers served in many different roles; some served as administrative helpers, others helped out with translating course materials into Spanish, and still others helped out with religion at *Colegio de los Angeles* and with general evangelism. Perhaps one of the most outwardly successful areas of ministry in which the Kingdom Workers played a huge role was through offering EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classes. Through these classes, over 500 individuals came into

²⁵ Chris Cordes, *Focus on Colombia 1996-2000*, Appendix II.

contact with the gospel message through the simple Bible stories that were used to teach them English.

In 1998, Missionary Kieta took a call out of the field and was replaced in May of 1998 by seminary graduate Stephen Mueller. However, Missionary Mueller and his wife did not arrive in Colombia until the end of October because of the birth of their daughter, Elena. Missionary Mueller would be the last expatriate missionary to be called to Colombia, and his ministry in Colombia would last only one year.

As things turned out, the year 1999 was both the 25th anniversary of expatriate missionary work in Colombia as well as the last year of expatriate missionary work in Colombia. In August of 1999, the Administrative Committee for Latin American missions decided to remove all WELS missionaries who were working in Colombia. They made this decision out of concern for the well-being and safety of the missionaries and their families. In the late 1990s, kidnapping had become a very serious threat to all American citizens living in Colombia. While it is true that kidnapping had always been a serious risk for American citizens living in Colombia because of the commonly held belief that all Americans are wealthy, in these last years of the 20th century kidnapping became much more commonplace and therefore much more of a threat to the missionaries and their families. Instead of kidnapping people in a more secretive manner, the rebel Marxist guerilla groups and drug cartels were now setting up surprise roadblocks and kidnapping wealthy citizens on roads that were very close to the cities in which the missionaries and their families lived and worked. Because of the threat which these guerilla groups and drug cartels posed, the missionaries had already stopped traveling by car to other cities in Colombia. By 1999, normal every-day activities such as walking to nearby stores and playing in neighborhood parks became risky. At this time, traveling to the Medellín airport became dangerous as well. With these things in mind, the Administrative Committee for Latin American

missions made their decision to remove the expatriate missionaries from Colombia. After this decision was made in late August of 1999, the missionaries' families left in early September, and the missionaries themselves left later that month after taking care of many practical matters associated with their departure. Within a month after the decision was made, Colombia was without WELS missionaries for the first time in twenty five years.

As this history of the expatriate mission work in Colombia comes to a close, it is fitting to end with Missionary Chris Cordes' reflections on the evacuation of WELS missionaries from Colombia:

Was it a tragedy to lose the expatriate presence in Colombia? Many tears were shed when those good-bye's were said, knowing how close we had become and how strong the bonds of the heart can be with the believing people of that culture. And how could we look at it as anything but a severe setback to be stopped mid-tracks when an EFL program was reaching more than 500 people a year with the gospel, and when the three missionaries were conducting collectively up to 23 Bible classes each week? At first it was only with faith that one could say "The Lord's will be done," and give thanks. But if you consider the details above, and the way the Lord timed his decision, faith can even give way to sight...it wasn't as though we had not discussed leaving Colombia some day. Ironically, in November of 1988 we had established a long-range plan that included scheduling the gradual decrease of expatriate presence in the next seven years. Just when we saw it could be a reality some day, the Lord of the Church told us today was the day. And just when the missionary in Medellín had gotten the congregation to start looking to their pastors instead of him, and just when the congregation had begun to give at least a little support to their pastors, our God said they were ready to do it without the missionary. And having brought the two pastors and the three Bogotá elders through, in some cases, a lifetime of sweat and frustration to experience what is needed for a healthy church of the Living God, having them in place, he said it was time for a change.²⁶

The Wisconsin Synod has many reasons to rejoice for the many blessings that God granted to the Colombian mission throughout the twenty-five years of expatriate missionary presence there. Despite the many hard times and frustrations, the Lord used the little Wisconsin Synod to establish an indigenous group of believers who have tasted the sweetness of the gospel and continue to proclaim it to their countrymen to this very day. May God continue to bless the efforts of WELS missionaries across the globe, so that all the elect may be gathered from the four corners of the earth and join with all Christians of all time in the blissful glories of heaven.

²⁶ Chris Cordes, *Focus on Colombia: 1996-2000*, p. 9.

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TELEPHONE INTERVIEWS

James Connell November 29th, 2008, 11:30am

James Kuehl December 5th, 2008, 9:00pm

Lawrence Retberg November 26th, 2008. 2:00pm

Roger Sprain November 25th, 2008. 2:00pm

EMAIL CORRESPONDENCE

James Connell

Chris Cordes

Geoffrey Kieta

Mark Goeglein

Lawrence Retberg

Larry Schlomer

Philip Strackbein

APPENDIX ONE ²⁷

Significant Dates in the History of WELS Work in Colombia

- | | | | |
|-----|--------------|------|---|
| 1. | August 7, | 1971 | WELS authorizes 3-man missionary team for South America |
| 2. | August 14, | 1973 | WELS commissions 3-man missionary team to Colombia |
| 3. | January 20, | 1974 | Synod-wide Prayer Sunday for Colombian missionary team |
| 4. | January | 1974 | Missionary team arrives in Medellín |
| 5. | February 3, | 1974 | First worship service conducted in Medellín |
| 6. | August 25, | 1974 | First Colombian adult, Señor Reinaldo Gómez, confirmed |
| 7. | August 29, | 1974 | Radio work begins in Medellín |
| 8. | July 6, | 1975 | Dedication of Holy Trinity Church in Medellín |
| 9. | August | 1975 | WELS authorizes fourth missionary for Colombia |
| 10. | September | 1975 | Bible Institute program begins |
| 11. | August | 1977 | WELS authorizes fifth missionary for Colombia |
| 12. | November 19, | 1978 | Dedication of The Great Redeemer Church in Versailles |
| 13. | June | 1979 | Incorporation of the Confessional Lutheran Church of Colombia |
| 14. | September | 1979 | Provisional seminary opens in Medellín |
| 15. | September | 1981 | Central church plan initiated in Medellín |
| 16. | November 28, | 1982 | First Colombian student graduates from Lutheran seminary |
| 17. | January 23, | 1983 | Ordination/ Installation of first Colombian pastor |
| 18. | June | 1983 | Work begins in Bogotá with two missionaries |
| 19. | February 3, | 1985 | Dedication in downtown Medellín of the worship facility of Most Holy Trinity Church, purchased with 95,000 of REACHING OUT monies |
| 20. | July | 1987 | Seminary program transferred to Bogotá |
| 21. | December 2, | 1987 | Resignation of 1 st Colombian pastor from The Confessional Lutheran Church of Colombia |
| 22. | October | 1988 | New structure/strategy/methodology for Gospel outreach adopted by Colombian Mission Council |
| 23. | April 27, | 1989 | Inauguration of first Christian Information Center in Bogotá |
| 24. | March | 1990 | Reinaldo Gómez installed as first lay minister in Medellín |

²⁷ Taken from Chris Cordes, *Focus on Colombia 1996-2000*.

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|-----|-------------|------|--|
| 25. | March | 1990 | Inauguration of Christian Information Center in Medellín |
| 26. | May | 1991 | New mission opens in Cali |
| 27. | April | 1992 | Work in Cali put on hold |
| 28. | March 20, | 1994 | Breakaway group rejoins the Most Holy Trinity congregation |
| 29. | April | 1994 | Lay minister Gómez resigns, church calls Gabriel Álvarez as pastor |
| 30. | August 20, | 1995 | Bogotá congregation moves from the CIC to the School of the Angels (<i>Colegio de los Angeles</i>) |
| 31. | April | 1996 | Pastor Álvarez resigns in Medellín, pastoral assistants Bastidas and Quintero are given full pastoral duties |
| 32. | June | 1996 | Bogotá CIC closes temporarily, offices located north side of city |
| 33. | February 2, | 1997 | Medellín CIC moves to downtown church building |
| 34. | April 6, | 1997 | New CIC in Bogotá is dedicated to God's glory and service |
| 35. | May 11, | 1997 | Bogotá congregation moves to new CIC temporarily |
| 36. | February | 1998 | <i>Colegio de los Angeles</i> becomes first Spanish-speaking school in fellowship with WELS |
| 37. | September | 1999 | All three missionary families recalled from Colombia for security reasons, two go to Dominican Republic, one serves Colombia from distance |
| 38. | February | 2000 | First meeting with Colombian leaders and missionary/friendly counselor since evacuation. |
| 39. | April 23, | 2000 | Bogotá congregation daughters new group this Easter Sunday. |

WELS Missionary Families Who Served The Savior in Colombia

- | | | |
|---------------|-------------|--|
| 1. 1974-1980 | SPRAIN: | ROGER, RUTH, John, Rebecca, Deborah |
| 2. 1974-1975 | WARNER: | FRANCES, JANE |
| 3. 1974-1981 | ZIMDARS: | ERNEST, CRISTINA, Thomas, David, Elizabeth, Paul |
| 4. 1976-1986 | RETBERG: | LAWRENCE, KAY, Ronda, John, Jennifer, Philip, Daniel, Andrew |
| 5. 1977-1983 | SCHLOMER: | LARRY, MARLENE, Walter, Larry, Naomi |
| 6. 1978-1984 | GOEGLEIN: | MARK, KAREN, Deborah, Michael |
| 7. 1981-1999 | STRACKBEIN: | PHILIP, KATHY, Cherith, Jeremiah, Jessica, Nicole, David |
| 8. 1982-1989 | CONNELL: | JAMES, LETTY, Jocelyn, Brian |
| 9. 1984-1987 | HEYN: | THOMAS, LaRUE, Peter, Joel, Katie, David, Mark |
| 10. 1984-1990 | KUEHL: | JAMES, CAROL, Jennifer, Jessica, Andrew, Stephen, Matthew |
| 11. 1987-1991 | FREESE: | STUART, DEBRA, Alicia, Caleb |
| 12. 1988-1995 | LEYRER: | CARL, CONNIE, Synia, Synara, Carlos |
| 13. 1993-1998 | KIETA: | GEOFFREY, BECKY, Hannah |
| 14. 1995- | CORDES: | CHRIS, RACHEL, Tony, Rose, Jesse, Madelaine, Jemimah |
| 15. 1998-1999 | MUELLER: | STEPHEN, BECKY, Elena |

WELS Vicars Who Served the Savior in Colombia

- | | |
|---------|---------------------|
| 1. 1975 | WIEDMANN, LYNN |
| 3. 1976 | HUHNERKoch, HERBERT |
| 3. 1977 | JESKE, MARK |

Others from WELS who served in short, supportive roles
(complete data is still being gathered)

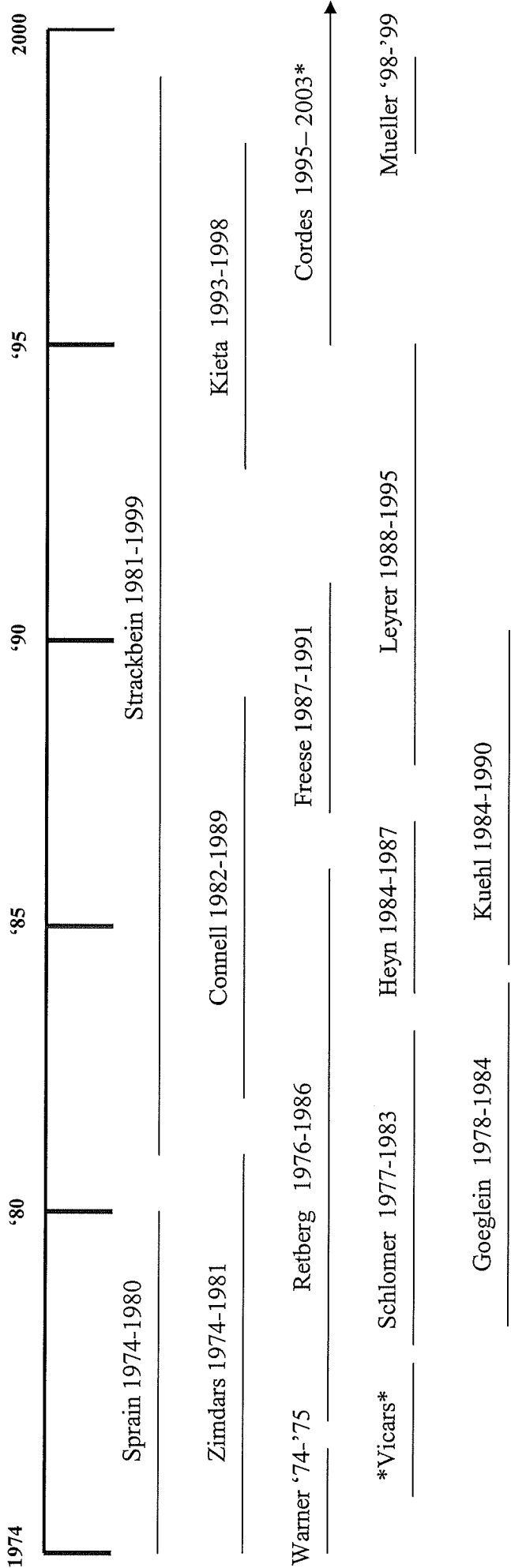
- | | |
|-----------|------------------------------|
| ? | Wollenbeck, Mary |
| ? | Ellenberger, (Miss) |
| 1996 | Lawrenz, Dr. John and Phoebe |
| 1997 | Grzanna, Mark |
| 1997 | Krug, Bill and Faith |
| 1998-1999 | Kuykendall, Michelle |
| 1998-1999 | Melon, Jenni |
| 1999 | Buschkopf, Rachel |

Those Who Served The Savior on The Executive Committee for Latin America

*Pr. Harold A. Essmann
*Mr. Robert Grebe
*Pr. Wayne A. Laitinen
*Pr. Richard E. Lauersdorf
Pr. Gregory Y. Lenz
*Pr. Carl W. Leyrer
*Pr. Lawrence A. Retberg
Mr. Allen Stueck
*Pr. Jerome Spaude
*Mr. Joe Vanderwerff
Dr. Ray Dusseau
Dr. Carl Toepel
Pr. Jon Buchholz

* Indicates former member

WELS Expatriate Missionaries in Colombia



Vicars :
 Wiedmann 1975
 Huhnorkoch 1976
 Jeske 1977

From 2000-2003, Missionary Cordes served as friendly counselor from his residence in the United States