

Report for LCJE Latin America 2007–2011
David Sedaca, LCJE Area Coordinator



This report will focus on the work done in Latin America by the LCJE. It will include three aspects of the ministry. First, what is the actual situation of the Jewish population in Latin America; then I will report on the work and dialogues between evangelical churches, Jewish missions and Messianic congregations in regards to Jewish evangelism. Finally, I will report on what is being done by LCJE to promote to Jewish evangelism in Latin America and the plans we have for the immediate future.

It is very difficult to find the exact figures for the number of Jewish people in Latin America. I obtain some information from the World Jewish Congress or similar agencies; sometimes I use national statistics, while in other instances I find facts from conversations I have regarding Jewish communities in certain areas. One thing that emanates from these findings is the fact that these figures, regardless of how we obtain them, are not totally reliable. One reason for this is the fact that those who immigrated to Latin America after the First and Second World Wars, chose to assimilate rather than maintain a high Jewish profile. A case in point is Montevideo, Uruguay, where the Jewish population had reached at its peak 70,000 but only has a handful of synagogues. In addition, most people will report in the government census “no religious affiliation.” We have seen over the past decade a thrust from the “*Chabad*” movement to raise the Jewish profile, yet these efforts haven’t yet brought out to the open the thousands of Jewish people who have chosen to downplay their Jewish identity.

There have been some demographic changes over the past decade and its difficult to find reliable statistics as to where the Jewish people are. In some countries the Jewish population is decreasing while in others it has shown some increment. One interesting fact is the number of Jews from Latin America that have moved to Florida, mainly Miami. In Southeast Florida, where the Jewish population is over 500,000, 20% of them come from Latin American countries. The same phenomenon is taking place in New York and Southern California; therefore, when considering Latin American Jews we must start considering the growing number that have moved to the USA. Being aware of this trend, in the last part of my report I will address how we can reach out to them as part our of LCJE Latin American endeavors.

In order of importance, we list Argentina as having the largest Jewish community. But even 50 years ago when the Jewish population in Argentina reached almost 800,000 they have never been a powerful voice for Judaism. According to AMIA, the Argentine Association of Israelite Organizations, there are 220,000 Jews in Greater Buenos Aires, and another 100,000 distributed among different provinces. The largest communities

outside Grater Buenos Aires are Rosario, Cordoba and Mendoza. In these cities Jonathan Bernis, of Jewish Voice Ministries, has carried out major evangelistic outreaches that have raised awareness among the evangelical churches of the need to reach the Jews for the Messiah.

Montevideo, Uruguay, just across the River Plate from Buenos Aires, had seen a decrease of its Jewish population, from 70,000 to 35,000, but in the last 5 years their numbers have increased again due to the number of Jewish people and business from Argentina that have taken advantage of the better economic situation in Uruguay and moved there. I am in contact with evangelical leaders in Montevideo and I'm presently in touch with a Messianic Jewish Pastor with whom I'm discussing the possibility of coordinating some activity in Montevideo.

Brazil, with enormous resources and economic attractiveness, has become a magnet for Jewish people, especially those from the former Soviet Union and Israel. Sao Paulo has 135,000 Jews and Rio de Janeiro 75,000 and there are important Jewish communities in Porto Alegre, Belo Horizonte, Salvador, Recife, and Manaus. I'm in touch with Jewish missions operating in Brazil and with Messianic Jewish congregations scattered throughout the country.

Mexico has a Jewish population of 70,000, most of whom live in Mexico City, but there are other important Jewish communities in Guadalajara and Monterrey. Venezuela had a large Jewish population, but changes in the economy and political situation caused most of them to move either to Argentina, Israel or Southeast Florida. Colombia has a small remnant of what it once was a vibrant Jewish community, now numbering less than 5,000. I'm constantly in touch not only with the remnant of former Jewish missions operating in Colombia, but I maintain good communication with Colombian pastors who have a sincere love for Israel and have a heart for the remaining Jewish individuals.

The Jewish population in Peru, Ecuador, and Chile is less than 10,000 each. And the remainder of Latin America has altogether another 10,000 Jewish People.

One remarkable event was my first trip ever to Cuba, where in 15 days I travel to every major city in the island. Before the Cuban Revolution the Jewish population was about 30,000, most of whom involved in the real estate, hotels and casinos business; but today there is only a small remnant. I visited the only functioning synagogue and I spent some time with the rabbi. I taught a course on Judaism and Jewish Evangelism to



dozens of Pastor, emphasizing on the need to pray for and reach out to the Jewish community that still remains in Cuba.

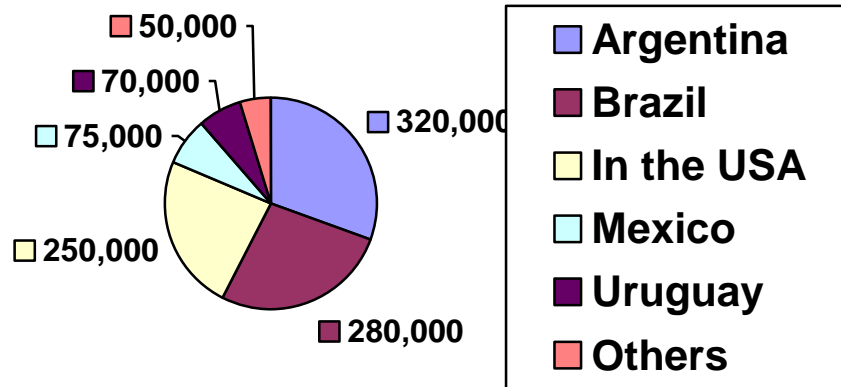
I had the opportunity to spend several hours with a Dr. Dolores, Deputy of the National Congress, one of eight evangelicals in Cuba’s legislative body.

She is also Vice President of the World Council of Churches and I was able to share with her my desire to see the Jewish population of Cuba cared for through witnessing and relief. She invited me to lecture at the Baptist Theological Seminary on Judaism and Jewish Evangelism, and if the Lord allows me, I will do.



David Sedaca in Cuba with Dr. Dolores, Vice President of the World Council of Churches and Deputy to the National Assembly

Regrettably, most Latin American, countries, which were once supporters of Israel, have now shown their adherence to the Palestinian cause. Last year, Venezuela, Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay have established full diplomatic relations with the Palestinian State (sic). It is remarkable that the announcement recognizing the Palestinian State by Argentina was made by its Foreign Minister, Daniel Timmerman, and a practicing Jew.



The ministry of promoting Jewish evangelism being carried out in behalf of the LCJE is done by interacting with three groups: (a) evangelical churches, (b) existing Jewish mission in Latin America and (c) through networking with messianic Jewish congregations.

Promoting Jewish Evangelism in Evangelical Churches.

Evangelical churches are growing rapidly in Latin America; they are part of what has been termed in modern day Christianity as the "emerging church." Some of the characteristics of the ideology behind "emerging churches" have been influenced by social issues. In Latin America this expression of social justice became known in the 70's as Liberation Theology. Now, with most Latin American countries trying to find their own social and political identity, the idea of social justice being championed by the governments is also at the core of most evangelical churches' belief and practice. None of us can deny the value and power of the church speaking in favor of the oppressed, which is at the heart of the Bible message; but in Latin America social justice has been identified with support to the oppressed, which to their understanding is best represented by the Palestinian cause. Regrettably, this phenomenon is not unique to Latin American churches. The lines are drawn between evangelical churches that support Israel and the "supersessionist" movement. I continue to speak in behalf of the LCJE to evangelical leaders throughout Latin America, and in all cases I make a distinction between support for the State of Israel and the need to reach the Jews with the saving message of the Gospel. I have been in touch with evangelical leaders throughout Latin America and continue to do so trying to keep aflame the torch for Jewish evangelism. In my dialogue with all evangelical churches and their leaders I underscore that the fact that evangelism is the role of the church, and if God hasn't rejected Israel neither should we. I am now involved with COMIBAM and COMHINA. Two fellowships of missionary organizations bonded to discuss evangelism in Latin America and Spanish speaking people.

The rapid rise of Messianic congregations throughout Latin America has produced benefits and setbacks. The setback is that, because some Messianic Jewish congregations are seen as being neither genuinely Jewish nor Christian, some mainline evangelical churches fear Jewish evangelism or Jewish missions as been "judiazers." This has been said to me in no uncertain terms and I had to explain what true messianic Judaism is and that there is nothing to fear from genuinely expressing one's faith in Jesus within a Jewish context. On the other hand, the rise of messianic congregations has brought to the churches an awareness of God's plan for Israel and the Jewish people. Latin America reflects the trends we are witnessing in the Christian world at large. In behalf of the LCJE I seek to make our voice heard whenever and wherever I'm given the opportunity to state our case for Jewish evangelism.

Working together with existing Jewish missions.

Years ago the task of reaching the Jews for Christ was carried out mainly by foreign Jewish missions working in Latin America. Now the process has changed as most foreign Jewish missions have been nationalized or they have given way to national missions. With few exceptions in Argentina and Brazil, most Jewish missions are now national and indigenous to the country where they function. Argentina has 13 Jewish missions of different sizes, and only two of them are local branches of a foreign based Jewish mission agency. Brazil has eight Jewish missions that I am aware of and only three of them are foreign.

In the present day Messianic Jewish movement, most of the work and energy is focused in establishing congregations. This has been beneficial for Jewish evangelism and good results have come as corollary of their endeavors. My job as LCJE coordinator is to maintain good relationships with Jewish missions in Latin America and be of

support and encouragement to them, and to remind them that planting congregations doesn't have to replace Jewish evangelism. Again, my association with COMIBA and COHIMA gives me the opportunity to interact with evangelical missions reminding them that the gospel is "...to the Jew first."

Networking with Messianic Jewish congregations

The rise of the messianic Jewish congregations has certainly given a new impetus to understanding the unique relationship between God and Israel. There is hardly a major city in Latin America that doesn't have a messianic congregation. Most of them came into existence as a result of a local evangelical pastor having been in contact with a messianic congregation or messianic Jewish organization in America. Yet, regrettably, this hasn't necessarily resulted in a new impetus for Jewish evangelism. Some years ago I presented a paper at the 2003 North American Conference of the Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism, "*Outreach Through Messianic Jewish Congregations - A History and Insight For Today.*" What I said in 2003 in this paper is still valid today, when I pointed out to the fact that messianic Jewish congregations should be the natural place for Jewish evangelism to take place. Yet, although many of today's messianic Jewish congregations in Latin America are remnants of the former Jewish missions, it seems that their zeal for reaching the Jews with the Gospel is no longer there. My role as LCJE coordinator has been to keep in touch with these congregations and encourage them to spend more time and effort in evangelism.

There may be reasons why Jewish evangelism is not their priority, and this is not the forum to point out their shortcomings, nevertheless I feel that part of my job is to remind the messianic congregations that without Jewish people being saved there will be no credibility as to the reason for their existence.

Over the past few years I maintained contact with the main messianic congregations throughout Latin America, mostly in Argentina, Brazil, Mexico and Uruguay, and it's my intention to foster this interaction as they are the logical conduit for Jewish evangelism.

Looking ahead

The work in every region of the world is different as it responds to different social, geographical and economic circumstances. The work of LCJE in Latin America is different from what is being done in other regions. While in other parts of the world the best way to carry out the vision of LCJE is by having national or regional conferences, this is almost impossible in Latin America. In first place, there is hardly a pastor or leader who can afford to travel to another country at his or her own expense. Distances between countries are huge and the cost involved is beyond what most people involved in Jewish evangelism can afford. Secondly, there is no central place that is easily accessible—Buenos Aires is 2,000 miles away from Sao Paulo! In Latin America I bring the LCJE to them instead of having them come to a LCJE event.

Having said this, we are now ready to plan a LCJE Latin American conference for the coming year. This is now possible because several things are in place. First, we are in the process of obtaining a grant that will enable us to invite several people we want to attend. Secondly, we found that the best place to have such a conference is Miami,

Florida. Miami is the easiest point to reach from any Latin American country, and though hard to believe, sometimes is cheaper to travel to Miami from a mayor Latin American city than travelling to a neighboring country. Thirdly, at a recent conference I organized through Chosen People Ministries with Spanish and Portuguese speaking pastors in Miami, they offered to support such a conference by providing a place to hold the meeting, and in some cases, even promising to provide hospitality. In the past, the LCJE Latin America had one meeting in conjunction with the LCJE North America Conference when this meeting took place in Florida. Since then I have tried to organize a regional meeting in Argentina or Brazil, but for different circumstances beyond our control, it wasn't possible. Now it seems that having such a conference, albeit small, will be possible.

In the meantime, I continue promoting the vision of the LCJE through Latin America. I pray that our efforts to promote Jewish evangelism among the large Body of Messiah, Jewish Missions and Messianic congregation will be result in the salvation of our Jewish people.

Respectfully submitted,

David Sedaca
dsedaca@chosenpeople.com
