

## 'Genesis' initiative in Mesoamerica takes church to the cities

By Gina Grate Pottenger on May 28, 2014, courtesy of [Engage Magazine](#)



Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic --

Given just 200 pesos, which in the Dominican Republic is equivalent to about \$5 USD, Daniela González Guerrero and six other missionary trainees purchased the bare cleaning necessities that money would buy, and began visiting homes in an impoverished area of Santo Domingo to clean residents' bathrooms.

For González, entering the neighborhood was her first experience with culture shock. Growing up in Mexico, the 26-year-old said everyone complained about poverty, but nothing she'd seen in Mexico compared with the conditions in this area of Santo Domingo.

As she cleaned up dead leaves and debris on one family's patio where their children were playing, she found herself stepping in human waste, which dirtied her clean shoes. She had no idea the family was using their patio as an outdoor bathroom.

"The people were just amazed that we were there to help them clean, so that provoked me to continue serving and it

didn't matter what was wrong with my shoes," González said.

The cleaning activity was part of several weeks of missionary training prior to González's group being sent 2 May to their two-year ministry assignment in Veracruz, Mexico.

González (photo above) is in the first cohort of as many as 112 planned missionaries who will be deployed to 28 selected sites across the Mesoamerica Region between now and 2020 in a region-wide church planting initiative called Genesis. The objective of Genesis is to push the Church of the Nazarene into metropolitan areas where the denomination – which mostly flourishes in rural areas on the region – has little or no presence.



## Going to the cities

The strategy for Genesis is based on the premise that the Church of the Nazarene denomination has a lower-than-desired presence into major metropolitan areas of Mesoamerica. Eleven percent of all members of the Nazarene denomination in Mesoamerica reside in major metropolitan areas,

while 24 percent of the overall population lives in major metro areas, according to statistics provided by Nazarene Research Center.

Missionary Emily Armstrong, who, with her husband Scott (photo right), is coordinating Genesis, cites information from the World Health Organization (WHO) that by 2050 more than 70 percent of the world's population will live in cities ([http://www.who.int/topics/urban\\_health/en/](http://www.who.int/topics/urban_health/en/)). This phenomenon of people moving en masse from rural areas into metropolitan areas is called urbanization, and is widely considered a global trend in the 21st century.

Through Genesis, regional leaders hope to establish the denomination's presence in 24 carefully selected cities, along with four islands in the Caribbean where the work of the Church of the Nazarene has not yet been started. The sites have been selected through collaboration and planning between regional, field and district leaders.

Nine of the 28 sites will be in major Mexican cities. Mexico has an edge with Genesis, having spent 10 years developing its own missionaries in short-term mission projects such as Project Paul, 4 by 4 and Maximum Mission, as well as consistently hosting cross-cultural orientation events for training short-term missionaries.

"Over 90 percent of the (Mexican) population lives in cities of over 200,000 inhabitants," said María Eugenia "Maru" Rodríguez, the coordinator for Global Mission in the North Field of Mexico. She says the largest percentage of population in the Mesoamerica Region is located in the North Field of Mexico.

"And in the majority of urban cities in Mexico considered in the Genesis project, the church has not been very effective."

In the urban areas of the North Field of Mexico, the Nazarene church has a number of house fellowships that Rodríguez believes could be officially organized into official churches with the support of Genesis missionaries.



The North Field's objectives with Genesis include developing local churches to become mother churches that plant daughter churches; providing opportunities for those who are called to missions to receive theological education; helping local churches to become sending churches; uniting urban churches in working together missionally; developing leaders; discipling every

believer to be missional.

Mexico and the Dominican Republic have received the first two teams of missionaries, with the other sites to follow between now and 2020.



**Led by the young**

Leadership plans to carry out the initiative by harnessing the enthusiasm and availability of the many young people on the region who have caught a vision for the Great Commission – a new generation of young people growing up learning that God is calling them to go as missionaries themselves, not just to receive missionaries from North America, as previous generations

have often believed.

“In Mesoamerica we have a rich history in many of our countries that the church was started by missionary presence,” Armstrong said. “Our people, especially young people, are now responding and obeying God and His call to us all to practice the Great Commission.”

The young people will be deployed to the 28 sites in teams of four to six over the next six years.

The volunteer missionaries are raising their own support through giving from their local churches and districts, as well as creative fundraising efforts of their own. González used seed money given by one district to make T-shirts which she has been selling to raise funds. The youth group in the home church of Freya Galindo’s, another missionary from Mexico, is organizing a series of 5K runs to raise money for her.

As local churches and districts are rallying behind their home-grown missionaries, the vision for Genesis is spreading through the grassroots.

### **Changing ways of evangelism**

And Genesis may gradually change Mesoamericans’ understanding of evangelism. For instance, González and her fellow missionary trainees were challenged that evangelism should be more than simply walking around cities and parks talking to strangers with the [EvangeCube](#) or bracelets with the salvation colors. Evangelism needs to be more than going door-to-door with tracts, asking if they can share the gospel, Armstrong said.

These methods are popular tools of evangelism in Mesoamerica, where Nazarenes are accustomed to confronting strangers with the message of salvation and seeing conversions as a result. In metropolitan contexts, the gospel must be lived out, addressing issues of justice, socio-economic challenges or the desperate needs created by poverty, unemployment, alcohol and drug addiction or broken families.

Cleaning someone’s home is an act of service that can touch a stranger with God’s love just as effectively as walking up and showing the person an EvangeCube, González learned.

Armstrong said the training they are providing to their new missionaries will attempt to consciously shift them toward more relational and service-oriented ways of doing evangelism and church planting.

“The ultimate goal is for our missionaries and churches to be change agents in a culture that is known many times for extreme poverty, broken families, gang violence and addictions,” Armstrong said. “All strategies will be unique to each site, but each will include evangelism through various methods, intentional discipleship of new converts, and leadership training in order to develop new Nazarene congregations that are making a difference in their community.”

Genesis will integrate into its strategy every denominational ministry on the region, from [Nazarene Youth International](#)(NYI) and [Nazarene Compassionate Ministries](#) (NCM) to [Nazarene Missions International](#) (NMI).

For instance, it is mostly members of NYI who are going out as missionaries to the selected sites, while NMI will be working to promote Genesis in local churches and help to identify other potential missionaries, as well as mobilize local churches to support the initiative. Theological education will also be integrated into the work, as new pastors are raised up in the new church plants, and will need to be trained.



## Challenges

Genesis faces a few challenges in becoming effectively adopted and integrated across the region, said Erika Chavez, a Genesis planner from Costa Rica who herself is a product of missionary development, having served in the region's [12:7 Serve](#) six-month youth missionary program in 2012.

First, some churches in Mesoamerica may have a very traditional mindset that was shaped by trends in the church 40 years ago, she said. They may see church as what happens inside the church building, and expect nonbelievers to take the initiative come to them, or to come to an event held in the building. They may need to grow in a more outward focus, rather than inward.

Language differences are also a challenge, as French, Spanish, English, Dutch and Creole are all spoken in the Mesoamerica Region.

Third, the local churches in Mesoamerica will need to reorient themselves as sending, not only receiving, missionaries.

“We also are facing the big challenge in the support, financially especially. Our region for years has been receiving ... from other regions or the U.S.. and we are trying to change that mindset – that we can give and we can support someone and we can keep them for two years on the field,” Chavez said.

So far, the young missionaries have managed to excite their congregations, who have committed regular prayer support as well as financial help to get them to the field and keep them there for two years.

The third and fourth teams will go through training and be ready to deploy in October this year. The Genesis team is recruiting more missionaries for 2015 and 2016. Candidates don't have to come only from the Mesoamerica Region – the invitation is to people with a missionary call hailing from anywhere in the world.

Chavez knows from her own missionary experience that these teams are in for big changes through their two-year experience.

“They will change deeply. They will change their hearts. When they will come back, they won’t be able to be the same people. They will want to change the town or community where they are from.”