

# Mexico and its Ministry Challenges

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## The Nation of Mexico

### *Vital Statistics*

1. Population: 112,322,757 (2010 census)
2. Religion: 83% Catholic, 10% Protestant (5% Evangelical), 5% no religion, 3% unspecified (usually ancient Indian religions)
3. Average Yearly Income: \$9,489 (2011 estimate; 58<sup>th</sup> in the world)
4. 62 officially recognized languages

### *History*

#### **Brief Timeline of Mexican History**

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|-----------|---|
| 1325      | Founding of the Tenochtitlan (Mexico City) by the Mexicas (i.e., Aztecs)  |
| 1519      | Arrival of Hernán Cortés and the Spaniards  |
| 1521      | Fall of the city of Tenochtitlan to the Spaniards   |
| 1810      | On the eve of September 16 <sup>th</sup> , Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla begins the War for Independence.   |
| 1821      | Independence is finally gained from Spain   |
| 1836      | Texas declares its independence.  |
| 1846-1848 | War between Mexico and US.  |
| 1862-1867 | The War of French Intervention. The French crown Maximilian von Hapsburg emperor of Mexico. He is executed at the end of the war.   |
| 1876      | Porfirio Díaz becomes President. He “reelects” himself seven times.   |
| 1910-1911 | The Revolution overthrows Porfirio Díaz.  |
| 1910-1929 | The country engages in a cycle of violence. Presidents are elected only to be executed by their rivals.   |
| 1929-2000 | The seventy-year rule of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) ends the cycle of widespread violence (although widespread electoral fraud continues all the way through the 1994 elections). |
| 2000      | Vicente Fox, with the Partido de Acción Nacional (PAN), is elected president.   |
| 2006      | Felipe Calderón, of the PAN, wins a bitterly fought election and launches the war against the drug cartels, a war that has claimed over 45,000 lives.   |

#### **The Indians and the Tlatoani (?--1521)**

1. Ancient Indian tribes established cultures and empires that rivaled those of ancient Rome and Greece.
2. The ancient Indian empires were ruled by the *tlatoani* (“the serious man”), who was worshiped and revered. He was never to be questioned. He “was expected to take on the

responsibility for the course of the sun and the cosmos in general—storms and earthquakes and eclipses.” (p. 211)<sup>1</sup>

3. Ancient Indian religions were extremely brutal, with human sacrifice being the most obvious feature.
4. The Indian culture was very communal.
5. Significant portions of the population still speak Indian languages (287 live languages in Mexico today). In some places the people do not speak Spanish. There is a need for original language Scripture translations into Indian languages. The translations that are available are usually done from the Reina Valera.

### **The Crown and the Cross (1521-1810)**

1. Spanish treatment of the Indians

Unfounded rumors of massive treasuries of gold motivated Spanish involvement in America. Spaniards did not desire to establish colonies. They desired to find gold to take back to Spain. Their calloused disregard for the indigenous tribes resulted in some of the greatest atrocities in history.

The Spanish attempted to exploit the Indian reverence for the *tlatoani*. One of the royal decrees read:

“THE SUBJECTS OF THE GREAT MONARCH WHO OCCUPIES THE THRONE OF SPAIN SHOULD LEARN ONCE AND FOR ALL THAT THEY WERE BORN TO OBEY AND REMAIN SILENT AND NOT TO THINK OR GIVE THEIR OPINIONS ABOUT THE HIGH MATTERS OF GOVERNMENT.” (p. 66)

2. Spanish introduction of Catholicism

Catholics undertook massive missionary efforts which resulted in the mass conversion of the Indians. The conversions were partially motivated by the Spaniards’ offer of “*la cruz o la espada*” (the cross or the sword).

“In their mass conversions, the friars wanted to see the theological reversal of human sacrifices, the convincing light of Christian truth, the image of a new Israel in the Promised Land. But their conversions had been more a transference of religious rites than of dogmas and profound arguments. The widespread and rapid conversion that so amazes the friars owed as much to the receptive matrix of indigenous religion as it did to the devoted commitment of the *padrecitos*. The Indians were *religiosos* (‘very religious’), as the friars discovered, but the fathers did not fully understand the *inclusive* nature of the old religions. For the Indians, new gods presented no problem. They could be worshipped right alongside the older deities.” (pp. 70-71)

### **Upheaval and the Caudillo (1810-1910)**

1. In 1810, a Catholic priest, named Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, uttered the *Grito* (the Cry of Independence), launching the War for Independence.

Although Miguel Hidalgo wanted to rid Mexico of only the Spaniards who were exploiting Mexico, others were motivated by hatred for all things Spaniard.

Many began to realize that the Catholic Church was also exploiting the country. Anti-Catholic hatred soon was the second plank of the Revolutionary elite’s platform (though not of the general populace).

2. After the War for Independence, the country was controlled by *caudillos*.

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<sup>1</sup>All the quotes will come from *Mexico: Biography of Power (A History of Modern Mexico, 1810-1996)* by Enrique Krauze, an internationally renowned Mexican historian, and published by Harper Collins. This splendid work will give you a fine understanding of Mexican politics and insights into Mexican culture.

Caudillos were generals that ruled certain areas of Mexico like kings. Many of these men were eventually “elected” president of Mexico or seized power by overthrowing the elected presidents. They considered their time in power as the opportunity for the Revolution to “pay them back” for everything they had done, thus continuing Mexico’s robust tradition of government corruption begun by the Spaniards.

During this time the caudillo was revered and worshipped as much as the Indian *tlatoni*. The ruling caudillo was considered the “savior of the revolution.” General Santa Ana best characterizes this era. He was in power, as president or dictator, eleven different times.

### 3. Religious Civil Wars

The anti-Catholic sentiment was incorporated into Mexican life with the Laws of the Reform, which virtually denied the Catholic Church (and any church) any legal standing.

“These laws nationalized all ecclesiastical property without compensation; closed monasteries and convents; suppressed religious confraternities and monastic orders; made cemeteries national property; prohibited civil servants from partaking in religious rites; set up civil courts to deal with births, marriages and deaths; and permitted freedom of worship.” (p. 170)

While these sentiments were popular among the elite, the populace reacted violently, leading to several wars (including the bloody *Cristiadas* occurring as late as 1927).

Eventually, the nation would settle into an uneasy compromise in which the Church was allowed to exist although it had no legal standing. This situation existed until 1992.

## Revolution and the PRI (1910-2000)

1. Porfirio Díaz, the last of the *caudillos*, who ruled for 34 years (having been “reelected” seven times) was overthrown by yet another Revolution in 1910.
  - Porfirio also “had (for the good of the country) denied Mexicans the right to ‘think or give their opinions about the high matters of government.’” (p. 218)
2. Political chaos followed until 1929, when the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) was founded. The PRI held power for 70 years until the Presidential elections in 2000. Many times the PRI candidate won brutal and corrupt elections.
  - Many believe that an oligarchy replaced the “monarchy” of the caudillos.
3. In 2000 the PRI lost the presidential elections for the first time.

## Monterrey

1. Population: ca. 5,000,000.
2. The industrial capital of Mexico.
  - After NAFTA, many American companies placed factories in Monterrey.
  - These jobs attract Mexicans from all over the republic and South America.
3. The University capital of Mexico.
  - There are over 60 colleges and Universities in Monterrey, including the most prestigious higher-education organism in all of Latin-America, the Instituto Tecnológico or *Tec*.
4. Churches
  - There are many “Protestant” churches in Monterrey. Although many of them are small, over 500 Baptist churches exist in Monterrey alone. This makes Monterrey an ideal place for a Christian college.

## **The Challenges of Ministering in Mexico**

### ***The Challenge of the Culture***

1. Extremely relational and non-confrontational culture  
 Mexicans value relationships, or at least the appearance of relationships, more than just about anything. Because of their extremely friendly and communal culture, Mexicans avoid confrontation and hate to displease. This results in a lack of transparency when trying to get to know people. They will usually tell you what they think you want to hear. They may commit to doing something, though they have no intention of actually doing, because it is better to lie than create an uncomfortable personal confrontation. When being evangelized, Mexicans often “accept Christ” just to get you off their doorstep.
2. Religious environment  
 Because of the Catholic influence, the religious jargon of sin, forgiveness, peace with God, etc. are well known and commonly accepted. Many people will agree with everything you say while having no understanding of what you are really saying.
3. Religious syncretism  
 Just as the Indians simply assimilated the Catholic religion into their Indian practices, many Mexicans see no problem with adding another religion, experience or denomination to their already varied religious background. (After all, Catholicism itself is a religious chameleon.)

### ***The Challenge of Charismaticism***

1. The emotional nature of Mexicans makes them very susceptible to the influence of the Charismatics. There are many Charismatic churches in Mexico.
2. The theological errors of the charismatics (misunderstanding of soteriology, sanctification and spiritual gifts) have infiltrated the mindsets of many Baptists.

### ***The Challenge of Mexican Baptist Churches***

1. Easy-believism  
 Soul-winning is the all in all of Mexican churches, which are extremely numbers-oriented. Many churches read off the weekly tallies each Sunday. Most Mexicans will respond to an energetic and confrontational Gospel presentation (but the response may be out of politeness.)
2. Anti-doctrine prejudice  
 The unbalanced emphasis on soul-winning occurs at the expense of doctrine. Theology is downplayed as unnecessary and dangerous.
3. *Tlatoani*-ism  
 The Mexican tradition of unquestioned reverence for their leader carries over into Mexican churches. Few Mexican churches have deacons or elders that contribute to the leadership of the church. The pastor decides everything. Believers are taught not to think for themselves, but to believe and to learn by rote. Any questioning or difference of opinion is heresy.
4. Legalism

The soul-winning only-ism, absence of doctrinal instruction, the *tlatoani*-ism results in legalism. Activity is carried out in order to gain the approval of God and the *tlatoani*. Also, the concern for appearance is fertile ground for the seed of legalism.

#### 5. KJV Only-ism

Transplanted by American missionaries, the KJV Only trend is starting to sprout up in Mexico. In Mexico it shows up as Reina Valera Only-ism.

## The Blessings of Ministering in Mexico

### 1. Openness

While Mexican culture can lead to many false conversions, there is a genuine hunger and thirst for the Gospel.

### 2. Humility

Many Mexican believers have an inner hunger for more than what they are getting. When they are exposed to thoughtful Bible teaching, they are humble and willing to learn

### 3. Fervor:

The believers' dedication and passion for souls is worthy of emulation. With a little bit of direction and doctrinal basis the potential is enormous.

### 4. Missions

Mexico may be the next major base for missionary mobilization. The Gospel has advanced sufficiently to provide a large pool of possible candidates. Mexico is also more prosperous than many other countries, creating the financial base to sustain a serious missionary effort.

## Ministering to Mexicans on your Doorstep

Almost everywhere we go in the United States, people tell us that many Mexican or Hispanics live in their area. Many believers have a desire to reach out to these people but are not sure exactly how to do this. Let me offer a few suggestions.

### 1. Take advantage of the relational culture.

If you want to effectively minister to Latin Americans, you must develop relationships with them. They will respond very well to an Anglo that shows interest in them, especially since many of them are far from home and the extended family network that is such a part of their social and cultural structure.

Be careful that you are not rude to them or shame them in anyway, especially in front of others. If they feel they have been slighted, they will distance themselves from you, though they will never acknowledge it to your face.

### 2. Guard against pressuring them to "accept Christ" or "make a decision."

Remember that they will respond to pressure, but those responses may not be the result of God's Spirit working in their hearts.

As you develop relationships, you will have multiple opportunities to share and clarify the Gospel, ensuring that they truly understand. Remember that their Catholic religion uses much of the same "jargon" that we use when sharing the Gospel.

### 3. If you want to plant a church, look for a place where families have put down roots.

Many cities in the United States have a large contingent of Hispanics living there, yet the Hispanic population is primarily made up of migrant workers. Migrant workers move often, following the jobs. They also take off if they hear that Immigration is coming through. This demographic group needs to hear the Gospel but is not conducive to planting a church.

4. Don't get discouraged, when...

...people promise and don't follow through. They will often say "yes" to an invitation to church because they know that is what you want to hear and prefer to avoid the "mini-confrontation" that saying "no" requires. In their culture, it is more appropriate to lie than to say "no".

...Mexicans drift off, never to be seen again. Remember that, without the mooring of family, they can be unstable, especially if they are involved in migrant work.

...Hispanics find it difficult to integrate into an Anglo church. Typical American culture is so different that Hispanics naturally gravitate back to a church with a culture more similar to their own. This is true even when they speak English well.

### ***Additional comments from Lorenzo Martinez<sup>2</sup>***

1. Family – remember that Hispanics are very family oriented. Develop close relationships between your family and theirs. Remember that the importance of family relationships might affect their willingness to receive Christ but especially getting baptized [which is viewed as betraying their family religion].
2. Hispanics are very hospitable, but don't mistake hospitality and kindness for trust. It takes a long time develop trust; a long time of accepting invitations to birthday parties and being in their homes [so get in their homes and get them in yours].
3. Work hard to get past the stigma that church is for women and children by offering good male leaders and strong positive role models. [Hispanic men are culturally chauvinistic and view religion as beneath them.]
4. Remember that the law does not prohibit a church to minister to anyone regardless of legal standing - e.g. witnessing, baptizing, Lord's supper. [You don't have to report or check on their immigration status.]
5. Remember the differences between 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> generation Hispanics. The primary Spanish ministry will be to the first generation rather than 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Hispanics like myself. [Often, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> generation Hispanics do not speak Spanish as well as they speak English and will prefer to attend Sunday School classes in English. 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Hispanics face many of the challenges faced by other Third Culture Kids (TCK's).]
6. Consider learning Spanish. Anglos find it easier to learn Spanish than Hispanics find it to learn English because of how we culturally attack/approach obstacles [and because of the relative difficulties of the language].

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<sup>2</sup> Lorenzo Martinez is a second generation Mexican who has lived and ministered in the United States. He has been a youth pastor, worked with OREMUNDO Ministries leading mission teams into Mexico, taught Spanish at NIU, and is currently planting a Hispanic church with Community Baptist Church in South Bend, IN.

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*Born in Spain to missionary parents, **Matthew** spent most of his growing up years on the mission field. While attending college in the United States, Matthew developed a burden for training nationals at a high theological and practical level. In 2002, Matthew and Susan moved to Monterrey, Mexico, to minister at the Christian University of the Americas, where Matthew serves as executive vice-president and the chair of the theology department. Matthew and Susan and their three children are also involved in planting a church in Santa Mónica, a neighborhood on the outskirts of Monterrey.*