

THE AUTHORITY DILEMMA

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Mark Danielson

Eileen Thompson, a North American missionary in the San Isabel Valley of Mexico, was committed to working within the structures of local church authority. It was important to her that the church be an indigenous expression of God's kingdom, so she was glad to submit to national leadership. The problem was that there were competing indigenous authorities who laid claim to her ministry. Eileen had just completed her furlough and was getting ready to return to Mexico. First, however, she and her mission board would have to decide where she would next be assigned to work.

Several different local groups had great plans for Eileen's life. She could not choose any of the options without offending people who wanted her to serve elsewhere, and her decision carried the potential for long-term consequences. Eileen had been put in the position of either defying the authority of the local Mexican church, to the possible detriment of its future growth, or dropping a fruitful ministry among some 15,000 migrant farm workers. To complicate things further, the hospital where she had worked during her first term as nurse-anesthetist and evangelist also had designs on Eileen. According to the doctor in charge, the zeal for evangelistic outreach at the hospital had diminished considerably while she was away on furlough.

During her first years of ministry, Eileen had been assigned to the hospital, but she also began to evangelize the valley's migrant farm workers, whose ethnic identity was Indian rather than Mexican. Just before her furlough, after ten years of work among the Indians, she had begun to reap the fruit of her ministry. Several small congregations sprang up in a number of the Indian villages.

Eileen had carried out this ministry to the farm workers under the authority of the local national Baptist church. At the time she left, the infant Indian congregations still depended entirely on the Mexican church for leadership, support and nurture. Eileen trusted that the relationship would continue in the same way without her.

Soon after Eileen went on furlough, something else happened that seriously affected the Indian work. The pastor of the Baptist church left, and his successor gave very low priority to the Indian work. Pastor Gonzalez believed that attention should be focused instead on the Mexicans.

A group of national nurses from the mission hospital had tried to preserve the ministry to the Indians by teaching classes at the various camps throughout the week and arranging transportation to the Mexican church on Sundays. Because of the hospital's isolated location, however, it was difficult to keep their staff. So, within four months of

Eileen's departure, two of the three nurses working with the Indians left the valley. The third nurse complained that her zeal for the Indian ministry had waned considerably for lack of support. She had tried to get incoming hospital staff interested in helping her, but it became harder and harder. The ministry to the Indians gradually slipped downhill.

When the Indian ministry went into decline, the leaders of the Indian villages took unprecedented action. They met together and drafted a letter to the mission board that sponsored Eileen, asking them to send her back to the valley to renew the ministry she had begun among them. Eileen was certainly willing to do that, because she had come to love the migrant Indian workers. Her mission board was also sympathetic to their appeal.

The problem was with the pastor of the local Baptist church. Pastor Gonzalez insisted that if a woman missionary were to be in the area, she would have to be under his authority. He would assign Eileen to playing the piano for church services and teaching a women's Sunday-school class in the Mexican church. He gave two reasons for not allowing her to work with the migrant Indians. First, he believed it was wrong for a woman to teach men; and second, he emphasized the fact that his own ministry was to the Mexicans and not to the Indians of the valley.

Members of the Mexican church expressed a desire for a missionary to come and work with them because they felt the church was dying and in need of rejuvenation. The pastor, on the other hand, was cold to the idea of *any* missionary coming to work with the church, citing some bad experiences with North American missionaries in the border town from where he had come. He complained that the missionaries "always came in and did things their way" without heeding his authority.

Some church members who were close to the pastor expressed the fear that if Eileen came to the valley and carried on her own ministry outside the authority of the pastor, it would reinforce his negative feelings about missionaries in general. This would further diminish their chances of ever getting a missionary to work with their church again.

Eileen now faced one final meeting with her mission board, during which they would have to make a decision regarding her assignment. She still could not see a way to resolve the conflict of other people's agendas for her ministry. It was still her deep desire to work within the national church structure. But now the Indian work also represented the "national church." Which national church had priority—Mexican or Indian? She hoped and prayed that her mission board would be able to help her make the right decision.