



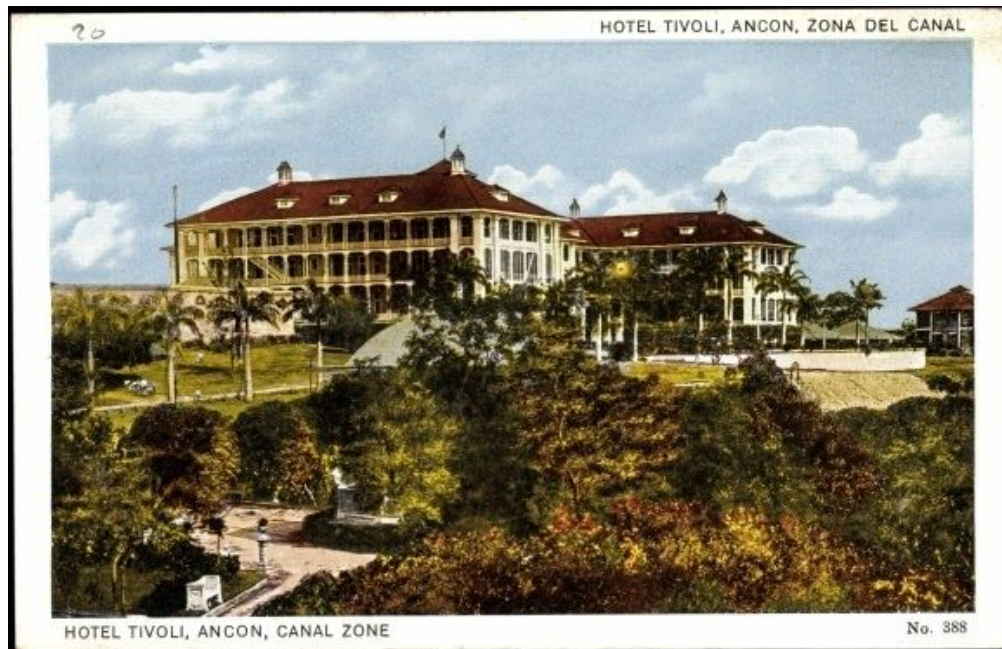
WORLD EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE

MISSION COMMISSION

In preparation for the Global Consultation in Panama, October 3-7, 2017.

Postcards from the Hotel Tivoli

Background on the Panama 1916 Congress on Christian Work in Latin America



The [2016 Global Consultation](#) of the WEA Mission Commission will take place in Panama City October 3-7, 2016, around the theme of "Polycentric Mission". The place chosen for this major missions consultation invokes the memory of an earlier event in modern mission history: the *Congress on Christian Work in Latin America* (CCWLA), held in February 1916 at the Tivoli Hotel, pictured above.

The purpose of this article is to help participants in the 2016 WEAMC Global Consultation discover the context and themes of 1916 Congress, and relate them to the challenges of global

mission after 2016. We have included, below, links to some of the literature from the 1916 Congress, including the actual compendia in three volumes.

It is appropriate that the Hotel Tivoli is now defunct. Panama 1916 was held in a hotel owned by the US Government located in the "Panama Canal Zone"--Panamanian territory under US control at that time. Today, it is the location of a Tropical Research Center, the canal and the canal zone belong to Panama, and new Panamanian initiatives are transforming global commerce in ways that go way beyond what the American builders and owners originally conceived for the canal.



In the same way, the context and the sources of global mission have changed dramatically since 1916. And the gospel has transformed Panama itself into one of the centres from which the Spirit of God moves Jesus' disciples into mission.

The 2016 consultation will not take place in the same hotel, and it will not attempt to return to old geographies and approaches to mission from one hundred years ago. Nevertheless CCWLA is relevant to our conversation about "Polycentric Mission" after 2016 because it shaped the world from which God's people join Christ in his mission today and tomorrow. The language first deployed at CCWLA continues to shape how we narrate the emergence of "new centres."

Interestingly, the Congress on Christian Work in Latin America included only a handful of Latin Americans. Evaluations of subsequent Congresses paid close attention to how many Latin Americans were included as delegates to each Latin American ecumenical congress (CCLA/CELA¹, CLAI², CLADE³).

This 2016 Consultation includes participants from Asia, Africa, Latin America, USA and Europe who will stand in Latin America, with Latin American evangelicals, and discuss mission to all the world. Multiple (and sometimes conflicting) narratives find, in the Panama 1916 story, diverging bases for their own participation in God's global mission to all of humanity.

As you peruse the documents, you may be filled with criticism, pride, anger, hope, or any other sense of connection of your life and calling with that of those who met here 100 years ago. Take some time with these documents to look back. What did they think they were doing?

¹ Council on Co-operation in Latin America / Conferencia Evangélica Latinoamericana
<http://www.overcomingviolence.org/en/about-dov/annual-focus/2006-latin-america/ecumenical-history-of-latin-america.html>

² <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/member-churches/latin-america/clai>

³ <http://ftl-al.org/recursos-ftl/clade/>

What kind of world did they help create? In what way did their efforts contribute to the particular starting point from which people in your part of the world to engage in global mission today?

The geopolitical context: The **Panama Canal** officially opened on August 15, 1914. The US Government built the Hotel Tivoli in territory that it controlled. There it received its honored

guests. [Theodore Roosevelt](#), the first President of the United States to travel outside the country during his presidency, was one of the first guests of the hotel just 10 years prior.



The ecclesiastical/missional context: "The CCWLA was intentionally modeled on the **Edinburgh Conference of 1910** and was held in Panama City from February 10-20, 1916." Not only was it patterned after Edinburgh 1910, it was "an unanticipated outcome of World

Missionary Conference, Edinburgh, 1910." CCWLA was organized by the New York based Committee on Cooperation in Latin America (CCLA) because [the Edinburgh Conference excluded consideration of Latin America](#) from its proceedings, due to controversy over the appropriateness of Protestant evangelism in the ostensibly Roman Catholic region⁴.

A crudely geographical division between Christendom and heathendom was the only basis on which the fragile ecumenical consensus at Edinburgh could be maintained. For most delegates at Edinburgh such a territorial understanding of Christendom was a deeply ingrained feature of their understanding of the world. For others it may have been no more than a rough, even regrettable, working assumption. In the former category were a group of American mission secretaries, led by Robert E. Speer, who assembled for two unofficial sessions at Edinburgh to consider the Latin American missions which had been excluded from the agenda. Speer, though believing that 'there certainly is such a thing as Christendom which is different from paganism', held that 'nevertheless, there is a great deal of paganism in what we call Christendom.' The unofficial Latin American sessions led eventually to a conference on missions in Latin America, held in New York in March 1913 under the auspices of the Foreign Missions Conference of North America, which established a permanent body to co-ordinate American Protestant work on the continent, the Committee on Co-operation in Latin

⁴ Miguel Escobar, in notes to [records in the Burke Library Archives of Union Theological Seminary, New York](#).

America. The committee convened a major Congress on Christian Work in Latin America, organized along similar lines to the Edinburgh conference, which took place in Panama in February 1916.

The World Missionary Conference's division of the world into two sharply delineated geographical sectors -- Christian and non-Christian -- is the aspect of the conference that became outdated more quickly than any other, and which strikes the twenty-first-century observer as obviously unacceptable. The first insistent question

marks to be placed over the conceptual juxtaposition of Christian West and non-Christian east appeared within a few years of the conference, with the outbreak of war in Europe.⁵

In the middle of that war, the Panama 1916 Congress was held at the Hotel Tivoli.

Like a post-card from that exotic time and place, much of the literature from CCWLA and surrounding events is available for free on the internet.



Books published before Panama 1916

[Protestant Missions in South America](#). Student Volunteer Movement (SVM) 1908

The [Young People's Missionary Movement](#) of the United States and Canada published several [volumes about evangelistic needs of various parts of the world](#) in preparation for the Edinburgh 1910 World Missionary Conference.

The entire text is available on Google Books.

[South American Problems](#) SVM 1912

Four years prior to the Panama Congress, [Robert E. Speer](#) the Presbyterian missionary statesman, who led the rebellion over the exclusion of Latin America from Edinburgh 1910, wrote this volume, apparently to explain why he thought the Americas were worthy of missionary involvement. The entire text is available on Google Books.

⁵ Brian Stanley, from [The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910](#)

Books published as a result of Panama 1916

[*Reinaissant Latin America: An Outline and Interpretation of the Congress on Christian Work in Latin America, Held at Panama, February 10-19, 1916*](#) Missionary Education Movement, 1916

Written by [Harlan A. Beach](#), Professor of Missions at Yale, the first chapter is worth reading. It is an excellent summary that highlights why the Congress seemed important at that time.

The entire text is available on Google Books.

Christian Work in Latin America. The Congress Compendium Missionary Education Movement 1917

These three books contain the papers and addresses from the Congress and identify participants by name, country of service, and mission agency.

[Volume one](#): Survey and Occupation. Message and Method. Education.

[Volume two](#): Women's work. The Church in the Field. The home base.

[Volume three](#): Cooperation and the Promotion of Unity. The Training and Efficiency of Missionaries. The devotional Addresses. The Popular Addresses.

[*Panamericanismo: aspecto religioso: una relación e interpretación del Congreso de Acción Christiana en la América Latina celebrado en Panamá los 10 a 19 de febrero de 1916*](#)

Sociedad para la Educación Misionera 1917

Profesor [Erasmu Braga](#), of Brazil wrote this "telling and interpretation" of the Congress, in Spanish.

The entire text is available on Google Books.

Timothy Halls
September 19, 2016