

**Waking up churches;
Missionaries work to energize churches for holistic ministry**

By Kenneth D. MacHarg
LAM News Service

Buenos Aires, Argentina (LAMNS)—For more than thirty-five years missionaries René and Catharine Padilla have been working diligently to help churches in Argentina and other Latin American countries develop a holistic style of ministry.

Now, with the country going through a political and economic crisis that has left half of the nation's 36 million people impoverished and over 20 percent jobless, they are discovering a long-awaited awakening of interest in social issues among Christians.



“I think that a lot of churches are waking up,” reflects René, who was born in Ecuador. “We did a study of the situation of churches in Argentina (before the current crisis) with regard to their concept of mission. Without doing the study we pretty much knew that many churches conceived only of sharing the Gospel in word as the mission of the church.”

“We also found a tremendous obsession for numbers,” René says. “But I think that in some ways that is changing because of the situation.”

Indeed, social work programs are a new idea for some of Argentina’s churches according to the survey taken by the Kairos Foundation in 1998. Fifty-eight percent of pastors responding said that teaching and preaching was their first priority. Twenty-two percent listed evangelism and just under two percent identified social ministries.

The Padillas, who have been missionaries with the Latin America Mission since 1982, established the Kairos Foundation to help motivate churches to a broader understanding of ministry. “We wanted to learn how to help people apply their faith to their own discipline of studying and their goals,” René remembers. “We started meeting on a regular basis back in 1976 while we were on the staff of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES). This was not just for reflection but for action.”

The purpose of the foundation, according to a Kairos brochure, is “the formation of disciples of Christ who live their faith in each area of life, particularly in their professional fields.”

Today, the Kairos Foundation offers a broad panorama of programs from community ministry to book publishing to continuing education programs, all designed to encourage and train Christians toward a ministry that addresses the total human situation.

“We are convinced that the church has plenty of resources,” says René. “They have human and often financial resources, they have a building and they have the infrastructure.”

René says that much could be accomplished if the churches can be motivated. “But it’s not that simple,” he reports. “Especially when you have leaders who are really very interested in numbers but not in becoming a servant church in the community.”

But, he is optimistic. “Thank God there are some who are really, really trying to find ways for the church to become relevant to the community.”

In the face of the country’s current crisis, the foundation is helping churches to establish microenterprise programs and barter clubs that will assist those who have lost their job or whose income has diminished. “The idea is to help the churches become aware of issues and use their own resources,” René explains.

In addition to the community ministries department, the Kairos Foundation provides a distance study program designed for lay people who feel the need for further preparation to serve the Lord. Directed by Catharine Padilla, the Center for Interdisciplinary Theological Studies (CETI) offers courses in the areas of work, family, society and church.

“It’s designed to integrate and build a bridge between the academic and professional world,” explains Catharine who was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and met her husband at Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois.

“We strongly feel that education has no purpose if it isn’t to change people in their values and their views and their lives,” René says. “There are people who have decided to change their life career because of the courses.”

While most of the students are in Argentina and throughout South America, Catharine says that others are now studying via the Internet. “There’s a Colombian missionary who was in Uzbekistan and now is in Spain who is studying with us.”

The Kairos Foundation provides educational opportunities through other endeavors, including publishing two quarterly magazines—*Iglesia y Misión* and *Kairós*-- and operating its own book publishing division. Topics include social ethics and missiology.

The publishing house’s most ambitious project has been the *Iberoamerican Biblical Commentary* based on the New International Version of the Bible in Spanish.

Another ministry that functions within the Kairos Foundation is EIRENE—Argentina, geared to strengthening family relations through retreats, workshops and a program for training family counselors.

While he never planned on becoming an international figure, René is in great demand as a lecturer and speaker at Christian venues around the world. “I always liked writing and as the General Secretary for the IFES I did a lot of writing and got invitations from all over,” he explains.

“I guess what really did it was my participation in the Lausanne Congress in 1974,” he says. From there, René has become one of Latin America’s most prominent evangelical theologians.

His teaching in U.S. seminaries and colleges has taught him that Americans are generally ignorant about events in the rest of the world. “If people were more informed, they would be less

inclined to say that Latin America has problems only because the people here are corrupt and lazy.”

“The United States is a powerful country and can exercise a tremendous influence for good or evil,” he added. “Often the ones who can influence for evil are very active but the ones who could exercise their influence for good are not.”

The Padillas want to continue introducing students and church people from outside of the region to the church and problems of Latin America. To do that, they are encouraging college and seminary groups as well as individual students to take advantage of educational programs at the Kairos Center, an attractive conference and retreat facility near Buenos Aires.

“We had a group from Wheaton College who stayed here for two months last year,” René explains. “They participated in an immersion program, could see the problems and what is being done. It was an opportunity to be integrated with the culture, to live with families, to study and learn the language. It was a very profitable time for them.”

Latin America Mission works in partnership with churches and Christian agencies throughout Latin America and supports missionaries and projects in many Latin countries as well as in Spain. LAM is seeking to place new missionaries throughout the region. The U.S. headquarters can be reached at Latin America Mission, Box 52-7900, Miami, FL 33152, by e-mail at info@lam.org, or by calling 1-800-275-8410. The mission’s web site may be found at <http://www.lam.org>. LAM’s Canadian office is at 3075 Ridgeway Drive, Unit 14, Mississauga, ON L5L 5M6.

Related web site: www.kairos.org.ar

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