

**Barter, micro-enterprise and prayer;  
Churches in Argentina respond to economic and political crisis**  
By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Buenos Aires, Argentina—Honey may just be the sweetener that helps some cash-strapped Argentines through their current political and economic crisis.

“We have brought three or four churches together into a micro-enterprise group,” explained Eduardo Mariani, Director of Community Ministries for the Buenos Aires-based Kairos Foundation. “They purchase honey from farmers outside of the city and then package it in containers that they obtain at a wholesale price.”

Mariani said that the participants then sell the honey to members of the churches, door to door in their community, through small stores and at a “feria” (community market) that the churches organize.

“The feria helps us to multiply the affect of the system of micro-enterprise groups that we have set up,” Mariani explained. “People bring what they have; food, clothing, services and handcrafts and sell them to others who have also brought their own products.”

The micro-enterprise projects are one of many new approaches being developed by Argentinean churches to respond to the country’s economic collapse.

Once a prosperous nation with a strong middle class, Argentina has seen a four-year-long recession erode buying power as the government, which had pegged the weakened peso to the dollar, allowed the money to float. Now, the peso is trading at around 3.22 to the dollar, bank accounts are frozen and customers can withdraw only a small percentage of their accounts each month, some times not even enough to pay their rent. Unemployment is pushing 30 percent while at least three million citizens, 38 percent of the population, are experiencing some level of hunger.

“We are developing a class of the ‘new poor,’” Mariani said. “These are not the structural or chronic poor, but people with a good education who had property, a car and a comfortable life style. First they sold their stereos, then their autos, then their clothing. Now they are using lower quality products and eating poorer quality food. They have had to withdraw their children from private schools and they have either lost their jobs or are working for a lower salary.”

Mariani said that the economic blows have created psychological and emotional crises, leading to marriage problems, self-image issues and higher crime rates. “Many have left the country for Spain, Italy and the United States,” he said.

In the midst of spreading social problems, the churches of Argentina have found themselves gearing up to provide services and retrain community residents.

Nearly a hundred residents meet every Thursday at the Faith and Life Baptist Church in the low-income community of San Fernando on the northern outskirts of Buenos Aires to participate in a barter program.

“People bring whatever they have—food and clothing, skills such as auto repair and sewing, and professional, medical, dental and legal services to trade with each other,” explained José Cano, the church’s Minister of Evangelism.

The barter system’s coordinators value each good or service and then participants exchange what they have for what they need. “It’s a natural form of evangelism,” Cano said. “It’s a testimony of faith without words.”

The church also offers educational and retraining programs, after-school tutoring, English language classes and folkloric music. “We want to recuperate the traditions of the region and renew the feelings of self-

identity for the people,” explained Cano who works 12 hours a day for a private security firm in addition to his ministry at the church.

Meanwhile, across town in another struggling community, Mariani spoke to 70 members of a Church of God who gathered for a weekday afternoon meeting to learn how they can help themselves.

“We are living in a crisis,” he told them. “The needs of our neighbors involve spiritual questions.”

“For years we have lived in a culture where we expected the government to help us, but that system has fallen apart. We are the actors in this situation for we can hope for little from the state.”

Citing reduced economic resources, Mariani listed God’s gifts of knowledge, experience and abilities as the most important capital that a person has that cannot be lost or spent. “We need to have confidence in ourselves and restore ourselves to God’s image in which he created us,” he said.

Participants identified themselves as housewives, businessmen, factory workers, bakers and seamstresses, all of whom said they had either lost their job or were living on a reduced salary.

While churches are striving to provide opportunities, such efforts are often difficult according to the church’s pastor, Florencio Varela. “Attendance is not increasing and offerings are down,” he said. “So, even though they want to help, many churches do not have the money to start up programs.”

Other churches said that they were using spiritual means to address the country’s problems. “Our pastors at San Martin Evangelical Church went to the national palace and prayed with leading members of the government,” said Viviana Chomorro who works at a Christian bookstore in Buenos Aires. “They reminded our leaders that unless we repent as a country and turn to the Lord, we will not overcome these problems.”

Many Argentines are pessimistic about the country’s future. “Our social systems such as social security, insurance and the banking system have been destroyed,” said René Padilla, one of the continent’s leading theologians and president of the Kairos Foundation. “It will take at least fifteen years for the country to recover.”

Social work programs are a new idea for some of Argentina’s churches. In a survey taken by the Kairos Foundation in 1998, 58% 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.

“We are trying to help train and motivate churches and to help them modify their concept of ministry,” said Karina Mato, a social worker with the Kairos Foundation. “We have developed a training manual and have used it several times with churches who want to learn what they can do to help people.”

“We are working to help local churches develop a holistic ministry,” explained Mariani. “Many churches are becoming aware of the needs of their people. They are developing a new understanding of the reality of the situation. This crisis offers a great opportunity for churches and ministries to help out.”

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