

“We can change Colombia:”

Conference address Christian ministries among children in a country at war

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

LAM News Service

Miami (LAMNS)—Ana Maria Montoya is eleven years old, but has seen things in her short life that many adults never experience.

For example, she says that she is surprised by the number of girls who are pregnant in her hometown of Rionegro, Colombian. And, she is shocked by the number of girls her own age who are working as prostitutes.

That reality has moved her to work in her church as a Sunday school teacher. “If I give love, caring, kindness and respect to a child, he will be changed into a child that does good things in his home and in the streets,” she explained. “With many people like that we can change Colombia.”

Ana Maria was speaking to the “First Colombian Consultation on Children, Adolescents and the Church,” held in Rionegro in April. The event drew together 150 Christian leaders from across Colombia to explore the ministry of the church to children in a country in crisis.

Bible conference speaker Jorge Atiencia, an LAM missionary, challenged the audience to become “indignant at the abuse that Colombian children suffer.”

More than 200,000 Colombian children are classified among the poor, two and a half million do not attend school, seven thousand serve as soldiers among Colombia’s warring factions and four and a half million suffer some form of mistreatment according to statistics presented at the consultation.

In addition, 64 percent of the population lives in poverty with unemployment reaching 22 percent. Over three million people have been displaced by nearly 50 years of internal conflict.

Colombian Christians are working to address the needs of children. Pedro Fernández works with the Corporation for Christian Social Development to assist children in an area where 15 churches have been displaced by the violence.

“The displaced children cry a lot,” he explained. “They should be able to run and play but they are frightened to leave their homes.”

Fernández said that at the convocation, his conviction was renewed that these children “ought to be able to fish in their own land.”

“The conference did a good job helping churches and leaders to know of their responsibility to provide ministry and services to children,” reported Bill Gibson, an

LAM missionary who works with the Latin American branch of Viva Network, an evangelical umbrella organization that helps coordinate work with children at risk worldwide.

“It was good to see the response of pastors who were crying because they realized that they had under-invested in children in their churches,” Gibson said.

Church pastors and leaders were challenged to encourage their churches and Christian social service organizations to assume new ministries for children.

“The proof of the pudding will be in what happens in the next year,” Gibson said. But, he expressed confidence that participants had been motivated and had developed new ideas for ministry.

The congress was sponsored by Red Viva (the Latin arm of Viva Network), The Evangelical Council of Colombia, Compassion International, Christ for the City, Youth with a Mission, Tear Fund and World Vision.

Viva Network is again sponsoring a worldwide day of prayer for children at risk on June 7. On that day, Christians around the world will gather for times of education and prayer concerning children’s needs.

Information about children at risk and the day of prayer may be obtained at www.viva.org or in Spanish at www.redviva.org. Information may also be obtained by writing to Viva Network, Latin America Mission, Box 52-7900, Miami, FL 33152 USA or by calling 1-800-275-8410.

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.

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