

**World Day of Prayer for Children focuses on children at risk;
Separation from family, poverty, abuse, violence are targets of prayer, service**

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

LAM News Service

Miami (LAMNS)—“People want to get involved in relieving the plight of children at risk,” says Katharine Miles, Latin American Director for Viva Network, a Christian organization that works to provide information and resources to child workers. “There is a growing emphasis on children in mission agencies,” she says.

Guillermo Novoa, a missionary with the Latin America Mission agrees, “Among older adults considering missionary service, the highest interest is in working with children at risk.”

Katharine says she is encouraged by the large number of people willing to pray, encourage and support child workers, share information in their communities and even give a portion of their lives to working with needy children.

Certainly the needs are there. Viva Network lists frightening statistics on its web site (www.viva.org):

- Homeless children in Brazil number around 12 million. (Action International Ministries)
- 5,000 to 9,000 children live on the streets of Bogotá, Colombia. (Action International Ministries)
- Mexico City has 1,900,000 underprivileged and street children. 240,000 of these are abandoned children. (Action International Ministries)
- Up to 10,000 street and underprivileged children die in Lima, Peru every year. (Kids Alive Ministry)

Viva Network is sponsoring a World Wide Day of Prayer for children at risk on June 3. “Prayer for children takes different forms,” Katharine reflects. “It may be a mother praying with her kids over breakfast or churches where hundreds have gathered. And, the prayers of the mother with her children are as valid as 20,000 gathered in a stadium.”

Free material about the World Wide Day of Prayer or about children at risk in general can be obtained from Viva Network, Box 52-7900, Miami, FL, 33152, by calling 1-800-275-8410, or by writing to kmmiles@lam.org.

In some countries, including Great Britain and Peru, organizers are combining the prayer day with the annual March for Jesus that takes place a week later, on June 10. Christians are encouraged to engage in various activities during the “Millennium Child Week” including sponsoring a needy child through a charitable agency, learning more about children at risk, helping out at a local child support agency as well as praying.

The Latin America Mission offers opportunities for child sponsorship at orphanages and children's homes in Costa Rica, Colombia and several projects in Mexico. "Child sponsorship helps a child and his family to receive regular assistance. The agency caring for the child knows that there will be regular support coming in that they can depend on," says LAM's VP for Administration Chuck Morton. Chuck and his wife Carol support a child at the LAM-related Robleato Children's Home in Costa Rica. "In addition, the sponsoring family receives information back on their child, so they are not donating to an unknown person," he says.

In Latin America there are three major concerns that Christian children's agencies address according to Katharine. "The root of most children's problems is that they are disconnected from their families," she says. "This may be due to abuse in the home, the death of a family member, or the child's own decision to live on the street after working there for some time. In almost every case, the lack of connection is due to violence in the home or the lack of a suitable father figure."

Katharine's second concern is exploitive child labor. "That children work is not a problem in itself," she explains. "The problem comes when work is done at the expense of what the child should be doing such as receiving an education."

The third area is the growing problem of sexual exploitation. "There are too many teenage mothers among troubled children," Katharine reports. "Often a girl working on the streets is exploited and becomes pregnant before too long."

Many girls who work on the streets selling candy or cigarettes soon become involved in prostitution. The Miami Herald reported last February that as many as 2,000 underage prostitutes walk the streets of San Jose, Costa Rica. The newspaper highlighted similar exploitation in Nicaragua, Honduras and Guatemala.

The Latin American office of Viva Network, which is housed in the Miami headquarters of the Latin America Mission, works to provide resources and encouragement to nearly one thousand child service agencies throughout the region.

"Millions of children live in spiritual darkness and are at a high risk due to problems related to the vicious cycle of poverty," says Bill Gibson, an LAM missionary serving as Resource Coordinator for Viva Network's Latin American office. Bill edits a quarterly magazine "Reaching Children at Risk," that provides information and resources to 39,000 pastors, leaders and children's workers throughout the Americas.

Latin churches need the type of training and encouragement that Viva Network is offering. "Sadly, the church in Mexico is not ready for this kind of ministry," says Guillermo Guadalajara, a Mexican social worker who has been ministering to street children for 14 years in Tijuana. "Three years ago I started to take the kids to the church, but the church wasn't ready. You cannot mix the street kids with the regular kids in the classroom. Their teacher said that it is hard to keep them in order. Talking with my pastor, we had to create a church for them."

With the help of groups like Viva Network, churches are developing more skills and an open attitude toward reaching out. "Little by little they are willing and cooperating, in a material way," says Guillermo Guadalajara who works along side LAM missionaries Charlie and Sandy Burt in Tijuana's red-light district.

The type of cooperation that Viva Network facilitates strengthens the efforts of child workers says Dan Young, an LAM missionary working as a Viva Network representative in northern Mexico. "We help them to encourage one another and to work for unity," he says. "We are trying to build up trust among the different work groups."

Encouragement is also important. "If you can imagine having not two or three children in your home, but having 25 kids, one can be overwhelmed and stay very, very busy. Our ministry is a way to put refreshment into their week and to care for them," Dan observes.

The 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 Springs, 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.

World Day of Prayer for Children focuses on children at risk, *LAM News Service*, May 1, 2000