

Evangelicals speak out against proposed regulation of churches in Chile

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Quito, Ecuador--Evangelical pastors and leaders in Chile have spoken out strongly against a proposed law regulating churches and evangelical organizations in that country.

Church leaders charged that the proposed law does not provide for equality between Roman Catholic and Evangelical (Protestant) churches as promised by former president Patricio Aylwin.

Protestant leaders say that the previous government had promised to change Chile's legal recognition of the Roman Catholic church, allowing evangelical churches to obtain a position of official status similar to that of the Catholic Church.

However, they say, the current government of Eduardo Frei has submitted a law for consideration by the congress which goes back on that promise.

Leaders say the original proposal would have affirmed a secular government, freedom of worship, and equality between different religious groups.

Church representatives said that the new law continues the privileged status of the Roman Catholic church, and would allow the state to intervene in the internal affairs of the non-catholic churches.

Officials of Protestant churches have protested the new law, and asked for modification to allow them equal religious status in the country.

"The new law is definitely a step backward in a process which had worked for equality under the law in Chile," said Manuel Quintero, Director of the Department of Communication for the Quito-based Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI).

Quintero told NNI, "It is significant that in the last General Assembly of CLAI, held in Concepcion, Chile earlier this year, the General Secretary of the Chilean government was present, and affirmed the significant, important role of the Evangelical churches in Chilean society."

Unfortunately, Quintero said, "that recognition has not been translated yet into a change in the constitution which would guarantee the equality of all churches in Chile."

Quintero said that the issue of equal recognition of churches in Latin America is not limited just to the situation in Chile. "It is also a concern in Argentina, Ecuador, and in all of Latin America."

"It is a complex issue," he said, "because there is 500 years of tradition of the relationship between the Catholic church and the state, and also an enormous (number) of evangelicals."

Quintero said that during the recent debate over a controversial law which mandates government sponsored teaching of religion in Ecuador, the Roman Catholic church in Ecuador said it had not dialogued with Protestants on the issue because "there are many evangelical churches. Who should we talk with?"

The ecumenical spokesman said that the confusion caused by the existence of so many protestant churches is "not a problem we can hide," and must be considered when dealing with ecumenical or church-state relations.

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