

**City in Ruins;  
Colombia rocked by devastating earthquake  
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“Fear and grief enfolds the cities of Armenia and Pereira,” is how LAM missionary Alvin Góngora described the immediate aftermath of the devastating earthquake that struck Colombia on January 25.

That fear quickly turned to desperation as the enormity of the quake sank in to area residents. “The desperate, hungry populace wait in immense lines to receive food and water, while the army struggles to control heartless and ruthless bands of looters and thieves,” wrote LAM missionary Jack Voelkel five days later from Colombia.

Now, as the dust has settled, buildings have been demolished and the dead slowly uncovered and buried, the true impact and its long-term implications have become clear. More than 600 people were killed in Armenia alone with over 900 confirmed deaths nation-wide. Thirty-five thousand homes were destroyed and government officials estimate it will cost as much as \$950 million to rebuild and repair damage to infrastructure.

At the heart of the disaster are LAM Canada’s Rubén and Bev Ramírez who are actively ministering to over 200 homeless people even though their own house was destroyed. They are coordinating the refugees’ care at the Ebenezer campground, receiving food and potable drinking water from nearby churches and trying to set up protection from roving gangs of looters.

**Refugees flee the city**

The scope of the disaster goes far beyond the immediate impact area as thousands of survivors have fled the region seeking shelter and employment in other parts of the country.

Jack Voelkel reports that at least eleven refugees are being cared for at the Biblical Seminary of Colombia in Medellín where he teaches. “Two of our seminary couples face intense personal suffering,” he wrote shortly after the quake. “They are Víctor and Paula Hernández and Manuel and Consuelo Orrego. All four actually come from Armenia itself.”

“Víctor’s sister, Luz Aleida, a high school teacher, was eating lunch with her teenage children when a violent jolt shook the second-floor apartment. It was accompanied by a deafening roar. The floor, stairs and the very earth beneath their feet undulated as they raced outside,” Voelkel said.

Like all of the residents of Armenia, Luz Aleida began a desperate search through the ruined city to find other family members. By the end of the day, their relatives were gathered in the one dwelling that had withstood the earthquake. Twenty-five slept on the floor and camped out in the house, without lights, water, toilets or clean clothing. They considered themselves very blessed to be alive and under cover.

**Seminary reaches out**

In their search for survival, the family turned to the seminary in Medellín. Now, they are living in an empty seminary apartment. Their teenage children have been offered free tuition at a local school and Luz Aleida was offered a job.

In spite of their ordeal, the family said they felt blessed. Luz Aleida’s young son said, “You know Mom, we are very blessed! Just think, we can go to school on Monday.”

Manuel and Consuelo’s families were less fortunate. Consuelo’s sister, Elsa, is married to Evelio, the pastor of a 500-member church. The couple lost everything in the quake, as did other members of the family and all of the church members who had pledged to support Manuel and Consuelo in the seminary.

Now, with homes destroyed and jobs gone, Manuel and Consuelo have no idea how they will be able to find the \$1,000 a month they need to live and study. If they leave the seminary they have no home or job to go to.

Pastor Evelio joined other churches in organizing refugee centers on church playgrounds, at schools and at church camps. Evelio is helping to shelter 60 families who lost everything. Survivors had to bury their dead, scrounge in the rubble for food and wait three days until relief agencies brought in milk and a few meager supplies.

One such center, organized by LAMer Rubén Ramírez, is housing 200 refugees. He wept as he reported by cell phone, "The city is in ruins. The people are disoriented and devastated. Robber bands attack in the night and steal what little they have. Pray that God would protect us and give us His grace as we stay here to pastor and care for our people."

The Medellín seminary is working to raise support for food, tuition and basic needs of seminary families and other pastors who are turning to the school for assistance. In the early days following the disaster, three pastors and their families appeared at the seminary doors seeking help.

### **Relief fund**

The Latin America Mission has established a Colombia Relief Project fund, which will collect donations to help students and pastors recover. "We will be extending relief to students at the Biblical Seminary of Colombia whose livelihood has been affected by this disaster," said Kevin Jezequel, LAM's vice president for Personnel. "We also will be helping our missionary family, the Ramírezes, who lost everything. Rubén needs a motorcycle to get around and needs to purchase food and supplies for others who have lost their homes."

LAM will not be shipping relief goods to Colombia. Speaking from the earthquake scene, World Relief's George Giraldez said, "The biggest thing they need is money. Unlike Honduras and Nicaragua...many things can be purchased in the country." Giraldez said that if items are shipped, they will most likely sit in warehouses and would do nothing to stimulate the economy. He recommended that Christian agencies send money, allowing churches and missionaries in the area to purchase the goods they need for relief work.

LAM President David Befus said, "We can pass on contributions for this effort very efficiently. Because we have staff already in place here and people in the heart of the situation, there will be very little overhead."

No missionaries from any sending agency were reported killed in the earthquake.

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