

Hope for the poor; Missionary in Colombia reaches out through computers, English and love

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Sarah is the sixteen-year-old head of her household. Her mother was the victim of a brutal slaying at the hands of her father and now, with him in jail, she is responsible for the care of her four brothers and sisters. To make ends meet they sell flowers in front of the local cemetery, barely scraping together enough money to live.

Sarah is typical of those who wander the narrow, dangerous streets of Ciudad Bolivar; an over-populated slum on the outskirts of Bogota, Colombia. The area contains over 50 percent of Bogota's underdeveloped neighborhoods. Most of its residents arrived in the cities as refugees from Colombia's guerrilla warfare and frequent natural disasters. The packed quarters house over a million people and the population is growing rapidly.

Described as the most violent section of Colombia's capitol, over 55 percent of its residents live in absolute poverty, surviving on less than \$300 per month. Most adults work informally as street vendors, maids or recyclers while others are in low-paying jobs such as guards, bus drivers or day laborers.

Enter the Association of Evangelical Christian Pastors and Churches (UMICE) and LAM missionaries Stephen and Mary Ann Armet. This pastoral association brings together churches and their leaders for times of prayer, intercession, mutual encouragement and a united approach to addressing the needs of Ciudad Bolivar. Stephen works with the pastors and leaders of the Association.

With so many like Sarah underemployed and with few skills, UMICE has helped to open doors to a steady income and secure employment. "The heart of this program is the formation of trust banks which facilitate the administration of loans to start small businesses," Stephen says. "In the process, participants learn leadership skills, principles of Christian stewardship, management skills and solidarity through working collectively." Loans from the banks allow participants to start small businesses and earn an income slightly above the minimum wage.

Tied to the financing of businesses is the teaching of marketable job skills to people of limited resources, allowing them to obtain jobs in the formal labor market. UMICE's Computer Training Center "places emphasis on spiritual formation and character development as well as keyboarding, word processing and basic accounting," Stephen says.

Among the more immediate needs in low-income areas that must be attended to are health and sanitation issues. UMICE has recruited doctors, dentists, pediatricians and other health professionals to work in the Ciudad Bolivar area. Occasional Health Brigades--mobile medical clinics--help not only to identify and treat medical conditions, but build a positive image of Evangelical churches in an area often suspicious of any religious project that is not Roman Catholic.

The goal of any social ministry is not only to improve the economic and social well being of the people, but also to bring them to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

“Our basic assumption is that the Christian church is the only basis for legitimate and long term transformation of the individual and the larger community,” Stephen observed. “Because of this, church planting and evangelism are among our highest priorities.”

Stephen and area pastors sponsor evangelistic campaigns and tent meetings, methods that they have found are very effective in the community. The Jesus Film is shown dozens of times each year to introduce people to Jesus. “Twelve new churches were established through UMICE in 1998,” Stephen said. Some were developed through cell groups, others by planting daughter congregations of churches already established in the community.

It isn’t enough for one small group of pastors and a missionary to meet the on-going needs of a depressed area such as Ciudad Bolivar. The work of the Lord will take many years and servants not yet discovered. To that end, UMICE has established the Biblical and Missionary Institute to train new leaders in skills of Christian social service and church planting. Using materials supplied by the Latin American Faculty of Theological Studies (FLET), UMICE leaders say that students have responded well and their education is a stepping stone to higher theological exposure.

Ciudad Bolivar isn’t the only massive slum in Latin America, or the world for that matter. As Christians are added to church rolls, members debate how they can be an effective part of worldwide mission efforts. “Two pastors (from Ciudad Bolivar) have been to Pakistan on a prayer walk with Youth With a Mission,” Stephen says. “Last year three pastors attended a conference on global missions in Mexico. And, several local churches have sent missionaries to the jungles of Colombia to minister among the indigenous peoples.”

Latin American churches face difficulties providing the financial support to send missionaries. “This has given rise to the need for new models,” Stephen says. “We are looking to develop small businesses that can generate sufficient capital to sponsor missionaries overseas.”

Meanwhile, in the light of the crises in her life, Sarah started to attend one of the churches related to UMICE and has given her heart to the Lord. With the encouragement of her pastor and his family, she remains in school and is doing well. Two evenings a week she studies the Bible in the Bible Institute and is receiving computer education at UMICE’s Computer Training Center.

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