

Living in a war zone; Colombian Christians push for peace

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Miami (LAMNS)--Living and working in a virtual war zone makes Christian missionaries and pastors more cautious, but in general, the work of the church in Colombia continues.

“The violence affects any travel between cities by road,” reports LAM missionary Elizabeth Sendek who, along with her husband Don, teaches at the Colombia Biblical Seminary in Medellín. She says that Don often cannot visit students who are working in their practical ministry year.

While one has to take normal precautions, “there are few limits within the cities,” reflects Nick Woodbury, a veteran of many years in Colombia who now heads up LAM’s Christ for Miami program. “Many people travel in groups, and ministry outside of the big cities can be very difficult,” he reports. Nick visited Colombia in December and talked with many pastors about their ministry in the light of Colombia’s on-going war.

Churches from some of the guerrilla-held areas have picked up and moved their entire congregations to safer areas, Nick reports. “There are some restrictions, but they all depend on who is in charge of the area where a church is located,” he says. Pastors are encouraged not to move from one area of the country to another or even to travel broadly in their own region lest they be suspected of being involved in subversive activities.

“Some pastors have been told to stop evangelizing in certain areas, and some new converts are questioned or harassed by the guerrillas,” Nick says. He reports that these restrictions come from particular guerrilla groups, but he was unable to identify whether they were imposed by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the country’s oldest rebel group, or by the National Liberation Army (ELN).

Nick reports that while pastors in some sectors carefully screen incoming phone calls and move with caution, in some cities there is a false sense that everything is normal. But, “Everyone is tense,” Elizabeth says. “Even where there is an appearance of normality, people are living with more caution and restrictions.”

Meanwhile, FARC commanders recently assured evangelical leaders that, contrary to news reports, the group has not ordered its troops to kill all evangelical pastors as enemies of the revolution.

Ricardo Esquivia of CEDECOL, Colombia’s evangelical alliance, said that he and other evangelicals met with FARC leaders in November and discussed a report in *El Tiempo*, Bogotá’s leading newspaper, that appeared to renew year-old threats against church leaders. Guerrilla leaders told Ricardo that the news was no longer accurate, if it ever was.

Concerning the closure of churches in the Guaviare area near Brazil's border, Ricardo said, "All the churches there aren't closed. (The FARC leaders) told us to document each case and they would call the commanders who were doing it because they would be acting against the FARC." The guerrilla leaders assured the evangelicals that any commander who threatens pastors would be punished.

Ricardo said that FARC is but one source of grief for evangelicals in Colombia's multi-front war. "There are difficulties with some commanders of the FARC, as well as with self-defense (paramilitary) units, with the ELN and with the army," he said. "That's because, as a church, we are in all zones (of the country) and we suffer the war and have difficulties too."

While some missionaries and church workers are worried about safety issues, Nick says that many Christians are more affected by the emotional problems of living amidst so much violence. "Our seminary professors report that every student and faculty family has been touched by someone who has been kidnapped or killed. Our missionaries identify with the people and their grief."

While in Colombia, Nick heard a psychologist report that Colombians have no time to grieve. They go from one kidnapping or killing to another and have not had sufficient opportunity to work through the emotions of all that is happening around them. In addition, a newspaper survey showed that 41% of all Colombians want to leave the country. However, few pastors have left because most of them serve in poor areas and do not have the resources to travel.

Newspaper surveys also show that many Colombians have grown pessimistic and feel that an open, armed conflict is the only way out of the country's current dilemma.

"The church is uniting around the theme of peace," reports Elizabeth Sendek. "There have been recent meetings of liberals and evangelicals and Roman Catholics," to address the topic, she says.

The stress has led to a general opening in Colombia to anything that is spiritual, Elizabeth adds. "That does not necessarily imply a definite option for the gospel vis-à-vis other spiritual offers. The spiritual leaning corresponds to a characteristic of our days."

She affirms that, "the increased danger and social instability make people more open to new options, including the gospel."

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, 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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