

Ministries continue in Colombia in face of violence

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Colombia makes the news almost every day. Bombings, kidnapping, drugs, warfare—all of it adds up to a country torn asunder by over 30 years of civil war and drug trafficking.

Over 35 pastors have been murdered throughout Colombia in the past year and 300 churches have been forcibly closed. Pastors and church leaders have been threatened, and many have fled the country, some of them settling here in Miami. Internally, 1.4 million people are displaced refugees, an amount that puts Colombia in the same league as Sudan, Angola and Iraq in numbers of displaced people.

Guerrilla armies and pro-government paramilitary groups have kidnapped planeloads of people and a church full of worshippers. Missionaries have left the country or keep a low profile for fear of attack by those who oppose their work. Some mission agencies are considering the withdrawal of their representatives from Colombia.

One place of great pain with or without civil war is Ciudad Bolivar; an over-populated slum on the outskirts of Bogotá, the capital. The area contains over 50 percent of Bogotá'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. Armet works with the pastors and leaders of the Association.

With so many 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," Armet says. To address health and sanitation issues, UMICE has recruited doctors, dentists, pediatricians and other health professionals to work in the Ciudad Bolivar area. Armet and area pastors sponsor evangelistic campaigns and tent meetings, methods that they have found are very effective in the community. "Twelve new churches were established through UMICE in 1998," Armet says.

Colombia is not immune to natural disasters either. Following last year's violent earthquake that killed up to 1,000 people, LAM Canada's Rubén and Bev Ramírez were at the heart of recovery work actively ministering to over 200 homeless people even though their own house was destroyed.

"Colombia is one of the neediest places in the hemisphere," says LAM president David R. Befus who just returned from a trip there. "At the same time it is a boom time for the churches." Befus says that churches are growing, there is an openness to the Gospel, and missionaries and church leaders are "working with joy in spite of the insecurity."

"The ministries of even the smallest churches in the country are holistic," Befus reports. "Small churches are feeding the hungry and helping out children in need. The church in Colombia cares about the people."

Befus explains that many agencies in Colombia were started by LAM missionaries and pastors and continue to function in spite of the violence in the country. One example is the Comunidad Colombiana de Colegios Cristianos (Colombian Community of Christian High Schools). The organization "ministers to 2,000 kids in twelve communities in the areas of medical, dental, nutritional, spiritual and educational care," says Donna Piersma, a retired LAM

missionary who helped start the organization. “There is so much more we would like to do in other communities.”

Theological education is important in a country where disorder and upheaval lead many people in a search for answers. CIPEP, the Corporación Instituto para la Educación Pastoral (Institute for Pastoral Education) provides what Befus calls, “serious theological education” for pastors and church leaders from several sites throughout the country.

Along the Caribbean coast in Cartagena, the Colegio Latinoamericano (Latin American High School) offers classes from pre-school to post high school vocational studies with the philosophy of developing an “appreciation for Christian values, altruism science and the Love of God.

The list goes on. “Our missionaries are working in all of the elements of Christian ministry,” Befus reports. “With evangelism at the core, we are working in job development, health, education, emergency relief and much more.”

The Latin America Mission currently has approximately 240 missionaries in 15 countries and is seeking to place 300 new missionaries in Latin America in the next three years. 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.

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