

Openings for ministry in Colombia in the midst of uncertainty

By Kenneth D. MacHarg
LAM News Service

Colombian churches are reporting amazing openings for ministry in spite of increased tensions as the country's 30-year-old civil war heats up. Meanwhile, conflicting opinions are emerging about whether evangelical churches are being targeted by guerrilla or paramilitary groups.

"Colombia is a very difficult situation in which to minister," says Nick Woodbury, a 17-year veteran of missionary service in that troubled South American country. "A pastor must work with great integrity and wisdom if he is to succeed and survive."

In the midst of war, some report that people are responding to the Gospel. "People seem to be very open to the gospel and anything that can give them some kind of hope," says a missionary in Bogotá with the Assemblies of God. "Our churches are fuller than ever and we have doubled the number of pastors with credentials in the past four years."

"God is definitely at work and there is much excitement among the church as they boldly move," says an evangelical missionary working in Colombia who asked not to be identified. "It is common for churches to have two prayer meetings weekly and then one or more *vigilias* (all-night prayer vigils) each month."

The missionary says that Christians in Colombia are wise not identify with any political position, but instead proclaim that "they belong to Jesus. The guerrillas respect those who genuinely serve the people without taking a political stance," he says.

Others question those optimistic reports. "The violence and general crisis in society has not produced dramatic church growth (in Colombia) as it has in other Latin countries," reports Steve Armet, a missionary with the Latin America Mission working in a squatter community near the capital, Bogotá. "The paradox for Colombia is not church growth, but the lack of it." (Woodbury says that while the church has not grown swiftly in Bogotá, it is increasing in other parts of the country.)

Others say that much renewed devotion has been brought on by the conflict. "The intense suffering of the people has brought them closer to the Lord, making them more open to listen to the gospel," reports Hernán Bravo, a Colombian missionary with the Latin America Mission.

Dozens of pastors have been killed in Colombia in the past year according to Pastor Hector Pardo, pastor of Bogotá's Tabernáculo del Fe (Faith Tabernacle), one of the city's leading congregations. Pardo said that while most murders and church closings have occurred in rebel controlled rural areas, urban pastors are now receiving threats that they will be killed if their congregations do not contribute a portion of their collections to guerrilla causes.

Roman Catholic churches are not exempt from the rebel's financial demands. "They have sought 50 million, 100 million pesos (\$25,000 to \$50,000) from certain parishes," Archbishop Pedro Rubiano reports. "Our parishes have been very clear that it's a matter of principle that they cannot hand over monies collected for social and evangelical purposes."

Churches with U.S. connections have found themselves targets of guerrilla activity. Three Mormon church buildings in Cali were the bombed in mid April reportedly by members of Colombia's second-largest guerrilla group, the ELN.

Woodbury, who recently returned from a trip to Colombia where he met many church leaders throughout the country, cautions that such threats are often more politically based and should not be necessarily seen as opposition to Christianity. Colombian church leaders told him that those who have been targeted "have not learned to live under whichever government is in charge in the region, have exhibited imprudence or are visible by their perceived opulence."

“If a guerrilla group is in charge of a region where a pastor lives, he needs to learn to be as apolitical as possible,” Woodbury explains. “Whether it is the guerrillas, the paramilitaries, the drug mafia or the Colombian government, the pastor must learn to live and work in that environment. They need to continue to preach the Gospel and tell how it can change lives, but they must not become involved politically.”

Pastors need special wisdom and must live a life of moral and financial integrity, he said. “They must not take advantage of the situation or the people, but need to be visible in helping the poor and meeting needs.”

Woodbury said that most pastors who have been killed were those who have spoken out publicly against one or another political faction. “Many evangelicals have joined the peace movement, calling for an end to murder and violence. But, they have not spoken against anybody and therefore have not been targeted.”

“One reason given by the FARC guerrillas for the difficulties of pastors and churches is that churches discourage their members from being involved in communal work,” says Alvin Góngora, a Colombian missionary with Latin America Mission. Góngora says that United Pentecostal groups and the Seventh Day Adventists are the ones suffering the most because their style “does not match the guerrilla commander’s worldview.”

Some Christian workers, while eschewing the violence, support the aims of guerrilla groups. “Urbanite Colombian Christians follow the media praying for peace...and total control in the hands of the military,” says Góngora. “Their concerns don’t go deeper so as to come to terms with issues of social justice, land ownership, human rights and other issues.

Many of the more than 300 churches that have been closed in the past year were shut simply because they were located in areas where guerrillas demanded that villagers evacuate their towns. Over the past three years, the number of displaced people in Colombia has doubled to 180,000 people a year. In the past 15 years, more than 1.5 million people have been displaced by conflict or forced removal.

That dislocation has opened doors for ministry. “In Cartagena, where there is the largest slum of displaced families in the country, at least four new evangelical churches opened in the last four years,” Bravo says. “People hunger for the Lord.”

Openings for ministry in Colombia in the midst of uncertainty, LAM News Service, May 3, 2002