

**God has not forgotten us;
Ecuadorian churches fight growing hunger in midst of economic crisis**

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

LAM News Service

Miami, FL (LAMNS)—Ecuadorians Osvaldo and Rocio didn't plug in the Christmas tree lights this year. They couldn't afford to. Not only that, they say they are eating less, taking baths every-other day and turning on lights only as they need them.

Their problem is that of many other Ecuadorians—severe economic stress and growing hunger in light of the financial crisis facing the country.

“The situation is grave,” said Dan Batchelor, who is a missionary with the Southern Baptist International Mission Board. “Prices are going up on all consumable goods and folks are hurting.” Batchelor lived in DeRidder, Louisiana before moving to the mission field.

“We are living in a crisis like I have never seen before,” says Ecuadorian Carmen Reinoso, a missionary with HCJB and a member of the Board of Trustees of the Latin America Mission (LAM). “It is very distressful to know how the country is going.”

“The average minimum monthly salary in this country was equal to \$100 a year ago,” she said. “That's not much, but it could buy something to put food on the table. Today that amount is equal to \$23.”

Ecuador is suffering under the worst economic collapse in 70 years that has seen the country's 12.5 million inhabitants weather negative economic growth in 1999, annual inflation of 60.7 percent and 197 percent devaluation of their currency, the sucre.

In response to a continuing sharp plunge in the money's value in early January, the country's president, Jamil Mahuad, dollarized the economy and will gradually replace all of the nation's currency with dollars, purchasing sures at 25,000 per dollar. The sucre was exchanged at approximately 7,000 to the dollar a year ago.

While the Ecuadorian congress supports the move, union officials say they fear dollarization will mean higher prices for basic goods and that salaries won't keep pace. Other analysts say the conversion rate will dramatically decrease the value of salaries in Ecuador. The minimum wage, for instance, will be approximately \$30 a month, compared to more than double that amount in dollars only six months ago.

“The supermarket owners aren't losing money with the devaluation,” Reinoso says. “They simply raise the prices of their products. But for the working class, it is a difficult situation.”

Many Ecuadorians are out of work because of the yearlong economic collapse and the freezing of bank accounts during a bank panic early last year. “Only 30 percent of the

population is employed right now,” Reinoso said. More than half of them work in the low-paying informal sector shining shoes, selling fruits and vegetables or picking up occasional jobs as day laborers.

In addition, two erupting volcanoes have led to the evacuation of small communities near Quito and the tourist town of Banos. This disruption has led to unemployment, the destruction of livestock and the abandoning of farmlands, bringing severe economic problems to those affected.

“In our church we are working a double shift trying to help the poorest by providing food, helping members to find work and providing medical attention,” Reinoso said. Her church, the Inaquito Evangelical Church where her husband, Chema, formerly served as pastor, is one of Quito’s largest evangelical congregations. The church operates a Good Samaritan Fund to assist those who seek help.

“Our Baptist churches have set up plans for distributing food,” Batchelor said. “Some churches are setting out baskets for folks to put in offerings of rice, beans and other such gifts of love for members that are less fortunate.”

With the government’s move to curb the crisis, there is hope, however. “God has not forgotten us,” one merchant told the French news agency, Agence France-Presse.

Latin America Mission’s Carmen Reinoso reflected that hope. “Pray for our country, for the church and for each leader that with the authority and wisdom of God, they may be agents of change,” she said.

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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