

**Nothing less than a complete transformation;
El Salvadorian pastor works to reinsert gang members into society**

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San Salvador, El Salvador – For Silas Calderón Umaña, the solution to his country's problem with violent gangs is nothing less than a complete transformation through Jesus Christ.

He sighs as he walks along a tree-shaded street of this capital city toward the church that he has served for 23 years. The burden of reaching his community's gang-plagued neighborhoods is, at times, overwhelming, yet it is also a passion.



“The problem is the disintegration of the family,” he says quickly when asked why up to 70 percent of the city's young men and teen-age boys have joined the powerful and violent Mara Salvatrucha gangs. “The majority are living with their mother; their father has gone to the U.S. or other countries to work. Some are living with their grandparents and others are from divorced families.”

Mr. Calderón explains that many of the fathers cannot return to their families in El Salvador because they are working in the U.S. illegally. If they do return for a visit they fear that they will not be able to get back into the United States and therefore will lose their job and income.

The result, Pastor Calderón says, is that many of the young men do not study in school and thus are unable to get jobs. The remittances sent back by their father from abroad is not enough to support them, and therefore, they become involved in delinquency.

“With the breakup of the family, these young men are looking for people to serve as role models,” Mr. Calderón explains. “The leaders of the gang fill that role, but they are models of violence and delinquency.”

While the El Salvadorian government has developed a “strong arm” program to curb the gangs, Mr. Calderón says that it has not worked. “Gang members have infiltrated the police and often pay off police officers,” he explains. “So, the police are not able to control the “maras,” in part because there are too many to control.”

The result, according to the pastor, is that “the gangs have increased and the jails are full.”

In the face of this, Mr. Calderón sees a radical transformation of his country’s young people as the only hope. “The solution is the Gospel,” he says. “The only way to transform the lives of the people is through evangelism. But, that evangelism must not be partial, it must be holistic.”

The ministry through the Gethsemane Church that he pastors involves both spiritual and material dynamics. “The young people must have a place where they feel comfortable, where there is food and faith,” he explains.

“There is work available for them,” he says. “They could reinsert themselves into society, but they need transformation.”

To accomplish this ministry, Mr. Calderón is working toward establishing a youth center away from the troubled neighborhoods where the youth live. “We will be building a place where they can study, play sports and have good fellowship,” he explains. “It will be an attraction for the youth.”

Already the church has purchased the property and plans on building a two story building and other facilities that will include a soccer field, a basketball court, cabins for overnight stays and a conference center.

“The idea is to take them to the center and educate them,” Mr. Calderón says. “They also need a center for rehabilitation.”

The pastor estimates the cost of constructing the facility at around \$100,000. He is also searching for work teams from churches outside of the country which would travel to El Salvador to help construct the buildings and recreational areas.

“Our church has accepted the project,” he says. His congregation, which is affiliated with the Central America Mission, has around 190 regular attendees who he describes as primarily young with many children. “Our desire now is to find help, both spiritual and material. This ministry is not easy – it requires a lot of wisdom.”

Those who wish to help Mr. Calderón develop the ministry to young people can write to him at silasandpaola@hotmail.com. Contributions toward the construction of the facility can be sent to CAM International, 8625 La Prada Drive, Dallas, TX 75228 USA. Donations should be designed in an accompanying letter for the ministry of Silas Calderón in El Salvador.

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