

**Business enterprises and Christian ministry;  
LAM emphasizes program and witness**

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

LAM News Service

Miami, Florida (LAMNS)—Christian organizations working in the area of economic development often face the problem of losing their focus in the busyness of their work and the growth of their programs.

“We need models that combine business with a clear focus on Christian outreach,” says LAM president David Befus. David and other LAM missionaries carried that message to a recent Christian Microenterprise Development Conference in Jomtien, Thailand.

“Our specific area of interest in attending and participating was to promote models that combine business with clear focus on outreach,” David explains. Before stepping into the LAM presidency two and a half years ago, David spent several years working with microenterprise projects throughout Latin America.

The tendency to move away from an overt Christian witness comes when an agency starts to grow and seeks outside funding. “Many want to obtain contracts from government sources such as the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the World Bank, the International Development Bank and others,” he says. Government funds usually come with prohibitions that prevent an organization from evangelization or open witness to their faith.

In addition, as agencies increase their programs, they often find it difficult to contract Christian personnel. “The vision becomes watered-down because you have to contract new professional specialists who don’t have this (Christian) vision,” David says. “The need for growth and expansion sets the agenda. I have seen agencies, in a short period of time, go from a very Christian outreach on a small scale to becoming completely secularized as they expand.”

“People say they are going to do Christian ministry using economic development as a means to that end, but they find themselves doing economic development and they forget what the end really was,” he adds.

David warns that misunderstanding what it means to be a Christian organization can have serious, unintended consequences. “There are some people who believe theologically that to do good education or good health care is in itself, Christian. The problem is, that if you help someone in Latin America to have a better income through a job or income generating project, the net result can be that they are able to drink more on Friday night. In the case of some adult males, a sign of increased income is to have a mistress. Basically, one can help them to go to hell in style when one helps them without Christian values.”

To address this issue, David and others from LAM challenged conference participants to think about the reason for doing microenterprise work and not lose sight of that reason.

Through several workshops, the Mission presented tools for presenting the Gospel. “In a business contact you have the most wonderful opportunity to present the good news,” David asserts. “When you visit a project, you see how people live Monday through Saturday, not just on Sunday. You see how they spend their money, how they treat their family and employees. They talk to you about their personal problems and there you have the time and space to present the Gospel.”

At the Thailand event, David provided training for economic development work with business and biblical principles. “In one session we dealt with a biblical presentation that lead to a discussion of work and life,” he explains. “Another talked about values—why be honest? We are thinking about kingdom values and then we bring in the King.”

David is alert to the tendency to water-down the Gospel even in LAM projects. “With a mission that’s 80 years old, some of our projects lost that emphasis and have come back,” he admits. “When I attend board meetings of big organizations that LAM has birthed, I ask simple questions about evangelistic outreach, discipleship and the vision for this at the board level.”

The commitment of the board of an organization to Christian ministry is also linked to the contracting of employees. “An organization has to provide training of employees for Christian witness and discipleship and provide them with the space to do it,” David says. “It is important to believe that the Gospel is good news and to reflect on that and to celebrate that.”

The Latin America Mission is working to develop both microcredit programs and other enterprises that are at the service of the Christian church. LAM has provided leadership in developing economic enterprises such as bookstores and hospitals that both raise money for their own ministry and serve the church of Christ at the same time.

“We are creating economic programs as a ministry with a clear emphasis on Christian witness,” David reports. These include business incubators where, as part of ministry, people learn to support themselves; ministry businesses such as clinics, hospitals and bookstores; foreign direct investment which uses funds provided from overseas for projects that benefit developing countries and are integrated with Christian ministries; endowment enterprises that support Christian ministries on the field; tent-making enterprises that provide legal entry, financial support and a ministry context for expatriate missionaries and micro credit programs that provide credit services to the needy and integrate the service with a direct evangelistic ministry.

“We have many opportunities for small projects that can be connected to churches and individuals in the United States,” David says. “We have areas where local churches or businesses can help to sponsor a project, find markets for producers or provide professional expertise.”

The LAM president has written a book, “Kingdom Business-Economic Development as a Tool for Ministry” (available only in Spanish from the Latin America Mission) that is being used widely as a tool for those wanting to combine business efforts and Christian ministry.

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](mailto: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.

**Business enterprises and Christian ministry; LAM emphasizes program and witness, *LAM News Service*, June 25, 2001**