

**All day with the radio;
Christian radio station reaches remote community along Nicaraguan coast**

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Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua—

Salvador Sarmiento knows the needs of this community. He has seen all of them in his eight years of operating a Christian radio station here.

Sitting in a chair, swatting off mosquitoes at the end of the day, Pastor Sarmiento ticks off the hardships that exist in this hot, isolated and fast-growing town.



“We have drug abuse, juvenile delinquency, rape, crime, drug trafficking, thievery, prostitution, marital infidelity, poverty, unemployment” he said. “But most of all, our people have spiritual needs.”

To help address those needs, Sarmiento’s day begins well before dawn when his 1,000 watt FM transmitter kicks on at 4 a.m. and starts broadcasting programs in the local Miskito language, reaching out to rural residents beginning their day. Sarmiento said that farmers outside of town requested the pre-dawn broadcasts and carry small portable radios with them all day to listen to Radio Veca.

And, often it doesn’t end until well after dark as he sits in the yard between his house and the radio studio counseling with people who come by seeking help after hearing a program on the radio.

Radio Veca (La Voz Evangelica de la Costa Atlantica—The Christian Voice of the Atlantic Coast) serves nearly 100,000 residents along Nicaragua’s swampy Caribbean coast. The population, primarily consisting of Miskito Indians, lives in a self-supporting community that has little trade with the outside world. The country’s capital, Managua, is 24-hours away by bus over an almost impossible mud track populated by bandits and swarms of mosquitoes or an hour and a half away by airplane.

With very few tourists, the area survives by subsistence farming, fishing and the various local businesses that support the community.

Programs, which are broadcast in Miskito, Spanish and English, focus on biblical solutions to contemporary problems, Sarmiento explains. “We teach the Bible,

we tell people about the consequences of using drugs, and we talk about family problems. We also carry educational programs, features about health, and special programs for women, children and youth.”

Because some residents speak English, the station carries an hour of English Christian music as well as a program from Focus on the Family in that language.

“I have listened to Christian radio since I was a child,” the pastor said. “I used to listen to HCJB from Ecuador as well as to Faro del Caribe from Costa Rica, The Evangelical Voice from Honduras and Trans World Radio from Bonaire,” he explained.

Knowing the impact that Christian broadcasts had on his life, the pastor knew the effect that Christian radio could have on his community. “Using the radio is profound. People are in church for two hours a week, but they have radio with them all day,” he explained.

But, broadcasting in such a remote town, in tropical heat and humidity, is not easy. Funds are short, equipment is unavailable, support and training are in short supply.



To help improve his broadcasts, Sarmiento turned to HCJB World Radio to seek advice and help. With his 1,000 watt transmitter churning out only 87 watts, he invited HCJB engineers and a team of volunteers from Great Plains Christian Radio in Meade, Kansas to come and lend a hand.

Arriving from Quito, engineer Steve Sutherland began work, followed by a team headed by Bill Lurwick, Production Director and

announcer at Great Plain’s stations KJIL and KHYM in Meade. “We have been helping them to replace their FM Exciter and now the power is running at 980 watts. We repaired the antenna, and installed new lightening protectors and a new ground system,” Lurwick said.

The team also started work to expand the studios, adding a room for counseling listeners and recording programs. In addition, Lurwick presented several workshops for the station’s announcers.

“We help form partnerships between Christian radio stations in the United States and those overseas,” explained HCJB missionary Dan Koenig who accompanied

the work group to Puerto Cabezas. “Some of those partnerships are simple, involving support and the supplying of equipment. Others involve sending a mission team to help with construction or training or technical improvements.”

“Our vision is to develop at least ten such partnerships a year in Latin America,” Koenig said.

That kind of help pays off in making a Christian radio station more influential. “I want to know how to better reach my listeners, and the workshop helped me to do that,” said 16-year old Sebastián Nestor Nicolas Meza who hosts a daily music program for youth and a weekly program answering letters from listeners.

Radio Veca has developed an on-going relationship with HCJB. A gleaming satellite dish with the ALAS logo sits outside the studio, receiving programs from Quito that the station uses for several hours a day. “We receive the news from ALAS and that helps us to keep people informed,” Sarmiento said. “We do some local news as well.”

The pastor is interrupted frequently throughout the day as Puerto Cabezas residents arrive at the studios on foot, by bicycle or taxi to deliver announcements that they want to be aired on the station. Many are personal messages to family members in the rural area advising them of family illnesses or other events about which they need to know.



“We are the number one station in Puerto Cabezas,” Sarmiento says. There are seven other stations in the community.

“It’s important that we address spiritual concerns,” said Anatacia Maybit de Lopez after presenting an early morning Bible study in the Miskito language. “We want to encourage the church and help people to know that they will belong to God,” she said.

Maybit, who grew up in Puerto Cabezas and now ministers at the 5,000-member Braeswood Assembly of God church in Houston, Texas, said that the needs and aspirations of her people run deep. “Illiteracy is a big issue here, there is little education. But, we now have both the Old and New Testament in the Moskito language.”

Maybit visits her home town once a year and presents Bible studies on the radio stations when she is here.

Also at the heart of Miskito needs is the memory of mass killings by Sandinista military groups during the country's civil war in the 1980s. Pastor Sarmiento remembers those times well. "During the war many people from the country came here for safety. The Sandinistas thought that we would oppose them because many of the Miskito people want their own autonomy. In fact, the people supported the overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship. But, all we wanted was a government of peace and prosperity."

Sarmiento said that Sandinista forces raided local churches (the majority of Miskitos belong to Moravian congregations.) "They killed many people in the churches, many people disappeared and many were thrown into jail."

"I was in jail for over one year only for being a pastor," he said.

Today, the pastor is working to bring hope and a better way of life to his people. But, he said, to do that for effectively, he needs help. "We need financing to operate the station, we need a recording studio, we need funds to help us set up an internet station to receive programming and we need a new control board.

At the end of a long day, Pastor Sarmiento looked forward to resuming ministry the next morning. "What is in my heart is to broadcast the Gospel," he said.

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