

**“A Time to Respond”—Latina 2003;
Latin American Urbana-style conference challenges 600 to Christian service**

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Panama City, Panama (LAMNS)—It was billed as the first of its kind. And, indeed, Latina 2003, held in Panama January 8–13, was the first-ever Urbana-style missions conference for Latin American young people.

The gathering drew 600 participants from almost all Latin American countries to the University of Panama campus here for five days of presentations, workshops, worship, fellowship and decision making about God’s call.

Preparation was the word used by many participants as they looked for training and guidance to continue their present ministries or to search for God’s will for their lives.

“I’m working with youth in our church,” said Rosemarie Zarate of Lima, Peru. “I have sensed a call of God to serve Him and I’m looking for further preparation for my ministry.”

“I need to grow in my knowledge of how to serve God,” agreed Patricia Bedon of Quito, Ecuador, who works with children in her church and homeless children living on the streets. “I want God to guide me as I help with the kids,” she said.

“I didn’t know a whole lot about missions,” said Mariela Ruiz of Hatillo, Puerto Rico. Reflecting the theme of the conference, “Time to Respond,” Ruiz said that she attended to learn more and to clarify her call to work in foreign missions.

Participants were challenged to look past the superficial images of God that are often developed to His real person and what it means to serve Him. “As a child, I developed a caricature of God that was not sufficient,” Miguel Angel De Marco of the Latin America Mission told the opening assembly. “Finally, I was challenged to look at Jesus Christ as a person, not as a religious system or set of doctrines.”

De Marco encouraged the participants to meet and know Jesus personally in order to follow Him more closely.

The conference was coordinated by a consortium of eleven Latin American mission agencies led by the Latin America Mission and including Christian Camping International-Latin America, Campus Crusade for Christ, COMIBAM International, Youth for Christ, Operation Mobilization, Evangelism in Depth, PM International, SIM, SEPAL and Youth United International.

The event was patterned after the Urbana missionary conferences held every three or four years in Urbana, Illinois. However, rather than focusing exclusively on foreign

missionary service, Latina 2003 also encouraged young adults to consider Christian service as a vocation in their own communities.

The discovery that the number of youth willing to consider a Christian vocation had dropped from 16% to three percent over the past few decades spurred the coalition to provide an opportunity for challenge and discovering opportunities.

“This is a year of decision for me,” explained John Edward Herrera of Armenia, Colombia. “I am trying to see the will of God, whether I should work with youth at home or go to another country.” Herrera has just completed his college degree in engineering and said that he and his wife are open to going wherever the Lord sends them.

Participants were warned that serving God, especially in another country is not always easy. “God’s call will always have opposition,” said Estuardo Ochoa, a Guatemalan who teaches seminary and pastors a church in Costa Rica.

While missionary work has often been defined as crossing boundaries to spread the Gospel, Ruth Padilla De Borst, an Argentinean missionary working in El Salvador, reminded the audience that there are frontiers that are more difficult to cross than the geographical borders.

“I remember a groups of drug addicts who came to our church in Buenos Aires when I was a teenager,” De Borst told the conference. “At times they were difficult, but if we hadn’t reached out to them, they would not be in the church today.”

De Borst challenged the participants to be willing to cross those racial, ethnic, economic and life-style lines into areas in which they might be uncomfortable, but where ministry is needed.

Latin youth today are “part of a privileged generation,” Brazilian theologian Valdir Steuernagel told the assembly. “You can see the church grow and explore while the church of our fathers was small and had an inferiority complex.”

Reflecting a growing movement among Latin churches to send out their own missionaries, Steuernagel said, “You are a generation that when you think of missionaries, you think of sending instead of receiving.”

Many of those in attendance are thinking just that. “I want to be a missionary to another country,” explained Loania Perez of Caracas, Venezuela. “God is calling me to counsel with young people and to deepen my commitment to the Lord.”



Organizers said that they are planning similar regional conference throughout Latin America in the coming years and another continental assembly in three to four years.

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, 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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