

Latina 2003:

Urbana-style conference in Latin America provides challenge for missions, ministry

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

LAM News Service

Miami (LAMNS)—A ministry conference that is being organized for Latin American young adults could revolutionize the number of Latin Christians entering ministry and missionary service in this decade.

Latina 2003, which is patterned after the well-known Urbana missionary conferences in the United States, will be held in Panama January 8 through 10, 2003.

However, rather than concentrating primarily in identifying and challenging young adults to enter missionary service, Latina 2003 will be working to raise up a generation of pastors and church leaders in addition to missionaries to serve the fast-growing Latin church.

“Fifteen years ago, a study taken in Latin America showed that 16 percent of young people were considering a ministerial vocation,” explained Miguel Angel De Marco, Vice President of Ministries of the Latin America Mission and one of the key coordinators of the upcoming event. “A study in Colombia and Brazil last year showed that only three percent are now considering such a vocation.”

De Marco said that the evangelical church in Latin America has grown 70 to 90 percent in recent decades with a corresponding increase in young churches and ministry opportunities. But, young adults are not responding to the vast needs created by such a rapid growth.

“The churches are full of young people, but the seminaries are struggling to survive because of the lack of students,” De Marco said. “Today’s young people need to talk about vocation and the churches need to encourage them.”

To challenge the new generation, De Marco and others have pulled together a coalition of mission agencies including Youth for Christ, PM International, Iindef, Operation Mobilization, Campus Crusade for Christ, SIM and others to provide resources and leadership throughout the region.

In addition, various speakers from throughout Latin America have been invited including Alex Chan from Peru, Valdir Steuernagel from Brazil and David Anabalón from Chile. Daily devotionals will be led by Estuardo Ochoa from Costa Rica.

While patterned after the Urbana events, De Marco says that Latina 2003 will be different in a number of ways:

“Urbana focuses on missionaries, while Latina will focus on all Christian vocations,” he explained. “Urbana targets college age students, Latina will invite young adults from a wider age. Urbana draws students primarily from one country, the United States, while Latina will invite students from all Latin American countries. Finally, Urbana is organized by one organization, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, while Latina is being organized by a coalition of churches and mission agencies.”

De Marco plans for the process of challenge to begin long before the actual event and continue to spread after the conference is over. “It is important for people to sign up ahead of time because

we will be providing them with several books and a monthly Bible study leading up to Latina,” he said.

In addition, leaders plan for follow up materials and programs in each participating country so that young adults will pass the vision on to their friends.

Latina 2003 leaders are expressing high hopes for the conference. Peru’s Manuel Paredes says “Latina 2003 is a window to see our reality, a door to begin service, an experience that can change your life.”

Meanwhile, Costa Rica’s Jorge Zuñiga says that the event will offer the “raising up of new leadership with a conviction from the Lord to be an instrument in God’s hands for the purposes of the kingdom.” He adds that it will be “a wake-up call from the Lord to my situation, understanding that I am useful and have a purpose to carry out.”

Latina 2003 offers “a profound and professional call to the youth to to recover their ministerial vocation,” says Jesús Londoño, the Guatemala-based Executive Director of COMIBAM (COngreso Misionera IberoAMericana—Ibero-American Missionary Congress). He says that the conference will provide “an understanding that God is looking for servants in the middle of a world in total chaos.”

While costs for participants are low--\$160 per person--which includes lodging and food—De Marco is looking for individuals, churches and organizations that will provide scholarships for Latin American young adults to attend. Tax deductible donations for scholarships in the United States may be sent to Latin America Mission, Box 52-7900, Miami, FL 33152.

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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