

**Kind and gentle:
Churches respond to Paraguayan fire disaster**

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

LAM News Service

San Jose, Costa Rica (LAMNS)—With the death toll from a devastating supermarket fire rising, Paraguayan churches have swung into action to assist families of those who were killed in the inferno.

The blaze that swept through the Ycua Bolanos market on Sunday, August 1, in Santisima Trinidad, a working-class suburb of the capital, Asuncion, began when a gas tank exploded near a food court. Compounding casualties in the packed store was a reported order from store management to lock the building's doors to prevent looting after the fire began.

Paraguay's Attorney General's office put the death toll at 464 with 130 still missing as of August 3 and another 454 hospitalized, some in critical condition.

The large Christian Community of Asuncion church, which is located a half block from the store, was just finishing the morning service at 11:30 a.m. when the blaze broke out. Many members rushed to the scene to help rescue people from the burning building.

"Many believers have worked as volunteers," reported Karen Núñez de Miranda, the editor of *Panorama Cristiano Asunción*, a Christian newspaper in Asuncion. "Some have worked in the rescue and others have accompanied families who are suffering, offering counseling and crying with those who cried."

The local pastor's association has established a telephone hotline for families of victims to call for help. In addition, the association has provided the government with a list of pastors who have offered their services in counseling and spiritual advice.

Radio Obedira, a local Christian radio station, has provided a network of Christian counselors and psychologists to assist as needed. One of the counselors was reported to have lost her own mother in the tragedy.

Area congregations began to send volunteers and supplies immediately. "Many have gathered medicine, food and other goods to donate to those who need them," Nuñez reported. "

Denominational bodies have also responded. The Assemblies of God have activated their large Social Service Ministry to provide food and counsel to grieving families.

"They began responding immediately," said LAM missionary Sue Givens. "They sent members to the different churches, the scene of the accident and to the make-shift morgues to pray with people, to support the staff and whatever else was needed."

“Our Methodist churches sent many of the medical supplies that we had in our storage area for the Mobile Medical Clinic,” Givens said. “Pastors and members also went to the scene to help wherever possible.”

Givens who is the principal of a Methodist school in the neighboring low-income community of Lambaré responded with a fellow teacher to a call for people with laptop computers. They worked with doctors in a large hospital pharmacy to inventory, record and distribute donations.

“The hospitals were short on sheets,” Givens reported. “In fact, they have none and patients must provide their own.” Givens worked with churches to provide a large number of sheets to area hospitals.

One teacher from Given’s school worked outside of the damaged building on Sunday afternoon, comforting and praying with rescue workers and fireman. “At one time she opened her arms and offered a hug for those rescue workers,” Givens said. “Suddenly about ten people fell into her arms all at once sobbing.”

All schools in the nation of 6 million people were closed the day after the fire. Givens said that the staff of her school gathered that day for prayer, then many teachers went to pray with people, to give blood or help distribute donations.

The pastor’s association issued a statement through the Paraguayan Bible Society saying “in this moment as we are feeling deeply dismayed, we express our solidarity with those who cry over the irreplaceable loss of their loved ones. We offer our prayers to our all-powerful God that He will permit us to share the glorious hope of life eternal with Jesus Christ.”

Saying that assistance was being offered to the families of those who died and who are injured, the association offered its services to anyone who needs help or counsel.

“I worked with a doctor in the hospital who is a believer,” said Givens. “She reflected Christ in everything she did. As I left there Monday evening, she said that she felt the need to be kind and gentle in this crisis because so many people were suffering so much.”

Givens said that there is a large need for food, medical supplies and other types of assistance to help with the emergency. Financial donations can be sent to: “Paraguay Fire Victims, Samaritan Hands/Paraguay, 2508 Old Niles Ferry Highway, Maryville, TN 37803.

The organization cannot handle donations of physical items, only financial contributions which allow the purchase of appropriate supplies locally. Checks should be made out to Samaritan Hands.

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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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