

Baptist missionaries respond to Venezuelan disaster

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Las Tunitas, Venezuela—
“These people will never be the same because of the disaster,” IMB missionary Karen Horn reflects. She is talking about the residents of Venezuela’s scarred coastline a year and a half after devastating floods and landslides buried houses and families and swept away entire communities.



“Although people are starting to rebuild their lives, it’s almost like a chapter they want to close,” she says. “The people coming to the Lord now would not consciously give a direct connection that they have been traumatized and have a hurt and that God is beginning to fill that hurt.”

While Karen and her husband Darrell say that their ministry now is more like “normal missionary work,” the areas where they work still carry the scars of the disaster.

Today, neighborhoods still look like war scenes from Chechnya or earthquake devastation in India, with the exception that most buildings are buried or filled up through the second floor with rocks and mud, their families still entombed inside.

Nobody really knows how many died in the disaster, and few are willing to guess. “The government says 30,000, I think 50,000, but residents along the coast say more than 100,000,” says Darrell who headed Southern Baptist disaster relief for the past year and a half.”

“I really don’t know how many died,” says Rebecca Dominguez, a Venezuelan from an independent church who has led her congregation in relief work along the coast. “Just last week they dug out a house and found a whole family, including a baby, buried in there.”

“One of the difficulties was that the government would fly a helicopter down to a site on the coast and begin loading people up and taking them away,” remembers Darrell. “They didn’t have a registry of who went where.”

“Families were separated,” Karen adds. “They moved people all over Venezuela, so missionaries in other parts of the country became involved with refugees.” As a result, many families don’t know whether their relatives are living in another city or are dead.

Darrell, who is from Bristow, Oklahoma, knows one mother who waited over seven months to learn that her two teen-age daughters were still alive in another city.

There are reminders of the disaster wherever one goes along the coast. In some places, the water line is a block or more away from where it was before the disaster. The sweep of water and mud dumped tons of dirt into the ocean and rescue workers added to the fill as they removed the debris. Many former residential neighborhoods have been declared a cemetery by the government because so many bodies are buried under the rubble.

The disaster did more than what might be immediately evident. "It not only broke up families, but destroyed social roots and traditions," reflects Berenice Cabrera who heads up relief efforts for the Evangelical Council of Venezuela. "Communities were broken apart."

Churches were among the first to respond following the flooding. "I remember feeling a sense of frustration seeing the chaos on TV," remembers Karen, who is from Dothan, Alabama. "When I looked at the disaster, I thought, we have a small window; we have a year and a half for people to have a tender heart toward the Gospel because of their hurts. I knew that if a team could mobilize quickly and impact physically, we could also impact spiritually for the kingdom."



Southern Baptists did respond quickly, releasing \$25,000 from hunger relief funds to purchase food and another \$50,000 for disaster relief. Darrell was appointed as the team leader for disaster relief and quickly moved to meet some of the more pressing human and spiritual needs.

Pure drinking water became an immediate need in the days, weeks and months following the disaster. Darrell worked with the Venezuelan military to ship in several large water purifiers from Miami. "To me, this was a miracle because we couldn't get anything into the country, but through the military we got the machines. It was a blessing of God that it happened," he affirms. Baptists from Alabama and Texas sent in teams to set up the machines and train local leaders on how to use them.

“There were no jobs along the coast,” he remembers. “So we would find a brother in the Lord, often the pastor of a Baptist church, and pay him to take care of the machines.”

The Horns also organized food and clothing distribution in the affected areas, using Baptist churches as distribution points. “We tried to have Christian people who were able to minister to the people when they came to get water,” says Karen. “We were meeting a specific physical need, but they became opportunities for us and the Venezuelans to share the word. Many church members distributed tracts and words of comfort to the people.”

“While they were doing that, I began working with two guys, one from the IMB and the other from Southwestern Seminary, to provide a weeklong workshop on trauma,” explains Darrell. “We trained Venezuelans and missionaries along the coast and in Caracas. The whole purpose was to train Venezuelans how to deal with their neighbors. They were able to work with teachers and the children.”

As life settles back to near normal, Christians are moving from emergency relief to church building. “Through the efforts of many, quite a number of people came to know the Lord,” Karen remembers. She says that many people were asking why God allowed the floods to happen. “When they are already phrasing the question that has the God element in it, you try to supply answers,” she explains.

Relief workers believe that a high proportion of those who died were children and teenagers. Because of that, many youth are coming to the churches to ask questions and seek guidance and many of them are making professions of faith.

CEV’s Bernice Cabrera says that she believes the Lord is using the disaster to motivate the churches and raise up new leadership as well as to lead people to the Lord. That has led to churches establishing leadership development programs to train those who have stepped forward during the crisis.

“Through the efforts of many, quite a number of people came to know the Lord,” says Karen. “Groups were formed all along the coast, small home groups meeting the people’s spiritual needs. When you have that many people come to the Lord and being saved, you can get into a leadership crisis. We believe that after people are saved, they need to be disciplined into the fold of the church.”

“I have prayer time with the pastors every two weeks,” Darrell explains. “We set a chair in the middle and each person takes a turn. We have begun to build unity. That’s good, the pastors are starting to take responsibility for the work on the coast.”

Now, as the Horn’s build on their disaster work they are looking ahead. Plans are underway for more work groups from the U.S. to be involved in continuing cleanup efforts. “We want to enlarge our team,” says Darrell. “We want one other full-time couple to come work with us and ten short term people to commit to two years to come down.”

Looking back on the intense work of the past year and a half, Darrel says he wouldn't trade the time for anything. "There were days on the coast when I told the Lord that if I could be anyplace on the earth, I would want to be right here. I'm right where I need to be."

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