

Venezuelan churches respond to flood disaster

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Caracas, Venezuela—Churches along Venezuela's coast are growing and establishing new congregations a year and a half after devastating floods and landslides buried houses and families and swept away entire communities.

Yet, the unprecedented disaster that may have left up to 100,000 people dead still has ramifications in scattered refugee camps and disrupted communities.

"The problem is that many families have been separated by the government relocation efforts while other families don't know whether their relatives are living in another city or are dead," said Berenice Cabrera, director for disaster relief for the Evangelical Council of Venezuela (CEV), a multi-denominational cooperative agency. "We are working with refugees as far away as Maracaibo (350 miles) who haven't seen or talked with their families since the floods," she adds.

The disaster "not only broke up families, but destroyed social roots and traditions," reflected Cabrera. "Some members of families were loaded onto helicopters or the backs of trucks and taken to settlements across the country. Communities were broken apart. Today, a year and a half later, many families are still separated."

Southern Baptist missionary Darrell Horn, who headed his denomination's relief efforts, knows one mother who waited over seven months to learn that her two teen-age daughters were still alive in another city. Posters in subways and storefronts carry photos of missing loved ones, asking if anybody has seen them.

Churches responded quickly to the floods that followed 14 days of torrential rains. Southern Baptists sent in water purification plants, some of which were removed only this past April. The Evangelical Council sent in clothing, shoes, food and Bibles and offered counselors to help people adapt to the trauma.

As Venezuela's rainy season began in mid May, a newspaper headlined, "The arrival of rainy season panics the country."

"As soon as it starts raining, children panic," said Greg Burch, a missionary with the Latin America Mission. "They are afraid that any rain will bring more floods and landslides."

There are reminders of the disaster wherever one goes along the coast. Standing on the waterfront amid piles of dirt and rocks, Cabrera said that 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. "This is a campo santo (a cemetery) declared by the government," she said. "It's called that because there are bodies under here that have never been recovered."

People are starting to come back, but jobs are hard to find. "We have been developing a microenterprise program where we are able to help women obtain a sewing machine and start a small business," says Rebecca Dominguez, a member of Betania church who has led recovery efforts along the coast.

Church leaders and missionaries found that the disaster left many spiritual questions. "Through the efforts of many, quite a number of people came to know the Lord," Southern Baptist missionary Karen Horn remembered. "We were meeting a specific physical need, but they became opportunities for us and the Venezuelans to share the word."

Karen Horn 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 explained.

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," explained Dominguez. She says that many of them are making professions of faith.

CEV's Bernice Cabrera said 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.

The disaster united churches in a way that they had never been before. Through the efforts of the CEV, churches formed an emergency commission, working across denominational lines, to meet the needs of those affected. "We are now transforming that commission into an ongoing emergency planning group that will prepare for future disasters and meet other needs in the country," said Rev. Sam Olson, president of CEV. "This continuing effort will help to move us into a more holistic ministry," he explained.

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