

## **Venezuelan tragedy opens door for church planting and ministry**

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

LAM News Service

Miami, FL (LAMNS)—Churches in Venezuela are responding to new opportunities for ministry in the wake of floods, landslides and damage that left a minimum of 20,000 dead and 150,000 people homeless. The mid-December storms brought massive mudslides and flooding through hillside squatter communities in the capital Caracas and along the coast where there are also numerous beach resorts and upscale condominiums.

“Most of the relief efforts now center on the severely impacted coastal area,” said Charles Fuller, a missionary with the Miami-based Latin America Mission. “There is no firm estimate of the number of deaths because of the difficulty in recovering all of the bodies, which will take a long time.”

Immediate efforts in the area are concentrated on providing or restoring basic services and clearing roads, Fuller said. The country’s main airport has been reopened and the port will soon be in operation, however that work is complicated by the fact that many containers at the port facility contain toxic chemicals.

Meanwhile, churches are reaching out to the dislocated and exploring church planting opportunities that will surface in light of government plans to relocate whole communities into the interior of the country. Government officials hope that the relocation process will help to relieve overcrowding in the region around Caracas.

Fuller, a native of New Orleans, Louisiana and a professor at the Evangelical Seminary of Caracas, said that few he has spoken to will object to the relocation, but there are questions about the availability of employment in newly-built towns. “I view these new communities as a church-planting opportunity, especially if the government decides to clear other slums from Caracas, which is overpopulated, and if it expands the idea of new communities,” he said. “The churches here need prayer for wisdom and favor with the authorities so that they can minister.”

Local churches are continuing to provide services in the affected area even though some of them were damaged or destroyed. “Some of the brethren, including even some of the pastors, form part of the displaced,” Fuller said. “They maintain their testimony.”

A local network of Christian counselors has expanded and is working with those who are suffering trauma from the tragedy. However, the relocation of families outside of the area is disrupting the long-term counseling process.

“The nation has been greatly affected by the tragedy,” Fuller said. “People are more open and have some really big questions. It is a good thing that we have a really big God.”

The Latin American Mission has established a fund to support long-term counseling, church planting and relocation efforts. Tax-deductible contributions may be sent to LAM, Venezuelan Response, Box 52-7900, Miami, FL 33152.

The Latin America Mission currently has approximately 240 missionaries in 15 countries and is seeking to place 300 new missionaries in Latin America in the next three years. The U.S. headquarters can be reached at Latin America Mission, Box 52-7900, Miami Springs, FL 33152, by e-mail at [info@lam.org](mailto: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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