

## Latin American-style Urbana conference challenges young people to service

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Panama City, Panama—Two conflicting trends in Latin America converged recently at a mission's conference held in Panama.

One was the growing missions consciousness in the region that has seen hundreds of missionaries sent out by Latin American churches over the past decade.

Conscious that Latins can operate much easier than North Americans in developing countries, especially Muslim countries, Latin and Caribbean churches have initiated a strong effort to send home-grown and home-financed missionaries to the Middle East and Asia.

At the same time, recent research has disclosed a disturbing trend among Latin American young people away from full-time, career Christian service.

“Fifteen years ago, a study taken in Latin America showed that 17 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 LATINA 2003, a region-wide event modeled on the popular Urbana missions conference in the U.S., but focused more broadly on the development of Christian vocations. “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.”

The first of what is hoped will be regular continent-wide events, LATINA 2003 drew nearly 700 young adults to the Curundu campus of the University of Panama in January to explore Christian vocation and challenge participants to commit to mission service.

Recognizing the growing acceptance of evangelicals in a region long-dominated by the politically-powerful Roman Catholic Church, speakers encouraged attendees to put aside the region's growing interest in consumer spending and the emulation of an affluent North-American lifestyle to accept Christian service as a legitimate career.

Latin youth today are “part of a privileged generation,” Brazilian theologian Valdir Steuernagel told the assembly. “You can see the church grow and explore while the church of our fathers was small and had an inferiority complex.”



Reflecting the growing movement among Latin churches to send out their own missionaries, Steuernagel said, “You are a generation that when you think of missionaries, you think of sending instead of receiving.”

Several hundred participants made a commitment to Christian service at a mid-conference dedication service held around a bonfire on the campus.

The unusual move of seeking commitment in the middle of the event “permitted us to consolidate the calls and lead the youth to a more rational decision through the second half of the program,” DeMarco explained.

“The day after the service, we marched through the downtown area of Panama City as a testimony for Jesus,” he said. “At the end of the conference we encouraged the youth to fill out a commitment card.”

Challenging the young people to consider a wide variety of Christian service, the event provided workshops and speakers on pastoral work, missionary service, social and economic development ministries, Christian education, ministry among professionals, evangelism, youth ministry, reaching children at risk and theological training.



The 670 participants came from 20 countries all around Latin America plus the United States. Thirty ministry organizations from throughout the region set up informational displays or had people on hand to talk to young people about service opportunities.

Participants were warned that serving God, especially in another country, is not always easy. “God’s call will always have opposition,” said Estuardo Ochoa,

a Guatemalan who teaches seminary and pastors a church in Costa Rica. Ochoa led daily Bible studies at the LATINA conference.

While missionary work has often been defined as crossing boundaries to spread the Gospel, Ruth Padilla De Borst, an Argentinean missionary working in El Salvador, reminded the audience that there are frontiers that are more difficult to cross than the geographical borders.

“I remember a groups of drug addicts who came to our church in Buenos Aires when I was a teenager,” De Borst told the conference. “At times they were difficult, but if we hadn’t reached out to them, they would not be in the church today.”

De Borst challenged the participants to be willing to cross those racial, ethnic, economic and life-style lines into areas in which they might be uncomfortable, but where ministry is needed.

Many participants said that they were looking for training to continue or expand their ministries at home. “I need to grow in my knowledge of how to serve God,” said Patricia Bedon of Quito,

Ecuador, who works with children in her church and homeless children living on the streets. “I want God to guide me as I help with the kids,” she said.

Others were seeking the Lord’s guidance about foreign service. “I want to be a missionary to another country,” explained Loania Perez of Caracas, Venezuela. “God is calling me to counsel with young people and to deepen my commitment to the Lord.”



The conference was coordinated by a consortium of eleven Latin American mission agencies led by the Latin America Mission and including Christian Camping International-Latin America, Campus Crusade for Christ, COMIBAM International, Youth for Christ, Operation Mobilization, Evangelism in Depth, PM International, SIM, SEPAL and Youth United International.

Organizers said that they are planning similar regional conferences throughout Latin America in the coming years and another continental assembly in three to four years.

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