

**A milestone in Latin American evangelism and cooperation;
Fourth Congress on Evangelism challenges the church to new avenues for service**

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

LAM News Service

Quito, Ecuador (LAMNS)-- It was unlike any other Christian gathering, ever, in Latin America. Over 1,300 Christians representing all spectrums of the evangelical and pentecostal churches came from every Latin American country for a week of inspiration, fellowship, but most importantly to obtain skills that will allow them to reach the people of their continent for Christ. In the process, they were challenged to put aside some of their differences and unite in a common strength to carry out their ministries.



Billed as the Fourth Latin American Evangelism Congress (CLADE IV), the meeting pushed Latin American Christians to look beyond their traditional programs to reach out to the disenfranchised, the unreached, and the resistant portions of their society. The congress was held September 3-8 at the South American Biblical Seminary near Quito.

“I think this CLADE is going to mark a milestone because it is actualizing itself to the reality of Latin American evangelicals,” said LAM missionary Tito Paredes who is president of the Latin American Theological Fraternity and was responsible for the organization of the event.

Delegates attended intense seminars that taught them how to evangelize not only those groups with which churches have traditionally worked such as youth, university students and indigenous communities, but also those parts of society that have often been ignored such as the extremely poor, children on the streets and those in political life.

Participants were challenged to take the gospel to where people are, ministering to them in the midst of their needs. “I am very pleased to see that some of the concerns that we have had for many years with regard to the social impact of the gospel are very much a part of the concern that people have as they come here,” said LAM missionary Rene Padilla, an Ecuadorian who is one of Latin America’s foremost evangelical theologians. Padilla said that the church must combine both words and action to be effective in reaching people in today’s society.

But, Padilla warned the church leaders not to be caught up in either social work for its own sake nor spirituality that can lead a seeker astray. Pointing to rapid growth of the evangelical church in parts of Latin America, Padilla warned that “this growth is threatened on the one hand by a deficit of theological reflection and on the other hand, by a deficit in the area of spirituality.” He cautioned that when there is a lack of serious theological reflection, he is not surprised that movements such as the “prosperity gospel” flourish in the region.

“Jesus went around the villages preaching the kingdom of God in the synagogues, teaching and taking care of the sick,” said Peruvian theologian Paredes. “This is an incarnation of how Jesus lived his life. There is no need to separate the preaching of the gospel from public testimony in word and deed.”

Participants were reminded that the church cannot passively wait for seekers to drop by. “New ways of doing evangelism are ways that seek to meet the person in society where they are, in their context, instead of inviting a person to come to a crusade or expecting them to be saved in church,” said Dr. Paul Bergsma, a Christian Reformed missionary working at an evangelical university in Costa Rica. “Mission must become more holistic where we are ministering to the complete person in physical, material and spiritual needs,” he said.

One topic that excited delegates was a call by a Church of God theologian, David Ramirez who challenged the evangelical and pentecostal churches in the region to put aside their differences and work together.

“This phenomenon (of working separately) divides the church and leads to the inefficient use of all the resources that God has given carry out His mission,” Ramirez, said. “If the word represents the historic evangelical churches and the spirit the pentecostal charismatic churches, then this is the hour to join them to permit the power generated in the encounter of the word and spirit to bring life to the church,” he told the assembled delegates from all Latin American countries. “In this way we will be a model testimony based on lives that transform people and societies.”

Ramirez’s presentation was part of a coordinated effort to bring the two streams of evangelical Christianity together for fellowship and cooperation. “Three out of five evangelicals in Latin America are pentecostals. This is the first time that we have worked to bring in theologians and expositors who are from the pentecostal traditions,” Paredes explained.

Paredes said that the mainstream churches are learning to listen to their pentecostal brothers. “We need to listen to each other’s strengths without forgetting our weaknesses,” he said. “We should major on our strengths so the body of Christ will be united on the basis of what is essential and we should try not to focus on the things that are not essential.”

Thirty-six LAM missionaries attended the event, some speaking from the platform or leading workshops, others attending and gathering ideas to take back to their ministries throughout the continent.

The Latin America Mission works in partnership with churches and Christian agencies throughout Latin America and supports missionaries and projects in many Latin countries 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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