

Renewed Focus needed on Latin America

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LAM News Service

With political and missionary emphasis focusing on the Islamic world and the 10-40 Window, politicians and some missionary leaders are calling for a new look at and renewed focus on Latin America.

Former Bolivian President Jorge Quiroga Ramirez told the recent *Miami Herald Americas* Conference, "Latin America is at a critical juncture. The next few months will be the most critical of the last 15 years in terms of democracy and economic reforms."

Challenging the notion that Latin America is not as important to regional and world stability as other areas, Quiroga compared four major problem areas currently being addressed by western leaders and stated that similar difficulties exist in the region.

"Think of an economy the size of China or India in trouble, and then think of Brazil," Quiroga said. "Think of a debt problem the size of Turkey's, and then think of Argentina. Think of the capacity to produce terrorism and drugs in Afghanistan, and then think of Colombia. Think of the lack of democracy in a country like Saudi Arabia, and then think of Venezuela or Cuba."

Thomas "Mack" McLarty III, former White House Chief of Staff and Special Envoy for the Americas under President Bill Clinton, said that never in his memory has Latin America faced so many difficult issues at one time. "This is a pivotal time in terms of hemisphere relations," he told the conference.

Also calling on Americans to not lose focus on the region, numerous missionaries and mission leaders have challenged churches and mission agencies not to turn their focus on specific regions such as the 10-40 Window to the exclusion of work yet to be done in areas such as Latin America and Africa.

(The 10-40 Window is the rectangular area of North Africa, the Middle East and Asia between 10 degrees north and 40 degrees north latitude where 95 percent of the world's least-evangelized poor are found. The area is predominantly Muslim.)

Christian workers queried for this article listed the unfinished task in the region, the pressing social and spiritual needs in Latin America and the growing role of Latin Americans in the evangelization of other regions, including people in the 10-40 Window, as more than sufficient justification for continuing ministry in the region.

"There is a need for continual mission work in Latin America for the simple reason that the continent has not been won yet," affirmed Donna Bustos, an Assemblies of God missionary who teaches in a biblical institute in Mexico City. "There are still millions who do not know Christ and who have never heard the Gospel."

"There is a misconception that Latin America has been reached," agreed Donnie Daniels, an Assemblies of God missionary working in Temuco, Chile. "Temuco is considered to be the most evangelized city in South America, but when you consider that less than 15 percent of this city has been reached, that's not many converts for a city that has been evangelized for almost 100 years."

In fact, much of the region is in need of evangelistic outreach. “There is still a low percentage of evangelicals in many locations in Latin America,” reported Rex Lee Carlaw, Associate Latin America Director for Action International. “The largest city in the world, Mexico City, is somewhere around 99 percent unevangelical still. What a tremendous mission field.”

Reflecting on the perceived slowness in evangelizing Latin America, Ecuadorian Jorge Zambrano, a missionary in Quito, said, “In the economy of God, it has taken longer to train people to become true disciples of Jesus and potential reproducers of His love and grace.”

Bob Waguespack, a missionary in Mexico with the Latin America Mission, pointed out that a country is considered “reached” when ten percent of the population is considered Christian and capable of continuing evangelism without the participation of a foreign mission force.

“Guatemala, Costa Rica and perhaps Brazil are the only Latin countries that would fit into that category,” Waguespack said. “To abandon the field now would be discontinuing gathering in the ripe crops in the middle of harvest season.”

“Churches have made a substantial investment in evangelism,” explained LAM President, David Befus. “But, they have not made the same type of investment in discipleship, Bible training and getting people grounded in their faith.”

Calling the departure of missionaries and some missionary agencies from Latin America an “abandoned harvest,” Befus said that it is “ironic that as the Spirit of God has brought people to the faith, the structures that would disciple them are crumbling.”

“Mission agencies are abandoning training centers and seminaries at the time they are needed the most,” Befus remarked. “We need to take note of what God is doing and be part of God’s plan.”

“It is interesting to note that Jesus said, ‘lift up your eyes, and look on the fields; for they are white already to harvest,’” said Walter Aiken, a missionary with Global Outreach who teaches at a Baptist seminary in Brazil. “Our Lord did not say, ‘look on the fields that need to be plowed, planted and cultivated,’ but unto those that were ‘ripe for the picking.’”

Citing Christ’s command to evangelize the whole world, LAM missionary Sue Givens in Paraguay said, “With the harvest ripe and the workers few and the money to support workers growing less and less, I can understand why some say we should concentrate our funds and efforts in regions that maybe have the greatest yield. However, Jesus is not as concerned about the hundreds of thousands, He is interested in each lost sheep.”

Reflecting Given’s concern about the scarcity of workers, missionary researcher Justin Long challenged churches and mission leaders not to limit the sending of missionaries to just certain target areas, but to challenge more Christians to serve. Long says that too often the church tells its members that “perhaps your calling is to support those who wish to go. But if we tell everyone who is searching for their calling to just sit in the pew, we have told our spiritual army that no recruits are needed, when there is a mission to be undertaken.”

“What we really need are more evangelizers so that enough can be deployed,” Long said.

Missionaries expressed concerns that the redeployment of missionaries to other regions may hinder the ability of those called by God to Latin America to follow where He leads.

“God sends some to the 10-40 Window, some to the tribes and some to areas where people are accepting the gospel at a greater rate than in the latter two,” reflected Greg Saracoff, a missionary working in Tijuana, Mexico with Christ for the City. “People must have the capacity to recognize that God works in different ways with different folks.”

Some Latin American workers are concerned for unreached people within the region, including the upper class and indigenous groups.

“The rigid class structure in most of Latin America, sometimes compared to India’s caste system though not as extreme, means that the large evangelical population among the lower class typically cannot evangelize the middle and upper classes,” Carlaw explained.

In addition, the religiosity of nominally Roman Catholic Latins can be deceiving and lead to the erroneous conclusion that the region is evangelized.

“The lamentable fact is that the common person of Latin America, whether he or she be middle or lower class, is so inundated with a stale, traditional, non-personal religion that the majority of the population dies without knowing the truth that could easily be obtained,” explained Rebekah Johnson who serves with the Southern Baptist International Mission Board in Paraguay. “Traditional religion shrouds the heart in veils of cultural apathy and ignorance to the pure simplistic truth of the grace of God.”

“Missions involves more than evangelism,” said Marty Windle, a Vice President with the Miami-based Latin America Mission who served with GMU for 15 years in Bolivia. “Evangelism is but one ingredient in the Great Commission. Sustained witness, perpetual evangelism and routine discipleship are all permanent pieces of the missiological design,” he said.

Reflecting the political and social unrest that is at the forefront of politician’s minds, missionaries also point to the massive social needs in Latin America as a focus of ministry.

“As missionaries, we are each bombarded day in and day out when we see the spiritual, physical, social, educational and economic needs of the people in each country where we serve,” Givens reminded. “Being a missionary in Paraguay, an often forgotten country in the heart of South America, I can show many reasons why we need missionaries in this poverty-stricken, politically-corrupt country where less than three percent of the population are evangelical Christians.”

Citing the needs that evangelical churches fulfill through children’s ministries, feeding and health care programs, drug rehabilitation and the providing of schools and day care centers, Assemblies of God missionary Terry Johnson, who serves in Campinas, Brazil, said, “Most often, the churches in Latin America do not have the resources nor the experience to carry out these kinds of ministries that North American churches and missions have. This is the most effective form of evangelism because people are more receptive when their spiritual and physical needs are being met simultaneously.”

With a growing church in Latin America gearing up to join the task of evangelization and ministry, many see it as a major force in regional and worldwide evangelism. They believe that the current generation of missionaries is playing a crucial role in the training and development of the next generation of Latin leadership.

“Do we realize how few theologians come from the Latin American region?” asks HCJB missionary Ralph Kurtenbach in Quito. “Is this a mature church? Do we realize just how little training of pastors we have here in Latin America?”

For example, in Brazil, where the national church is doing most of the evangelism, Johnson said that church leadership has expressed that their greatest need of foreign missionaries is in the area of theological education.

“There are some very well-trained pastors and leaders among the Ecuadorian evangelicals,” reported HCJB missionary Karen Pedersen in Quito. “But, there certainly aren’t by any means, enough. Over and over I hear about the churches growing so fast that they just can’t find enough trained leadership.”

“Latin America has a fairly good educational level, an international-looking coloration racially and languages that are useful or starting points for work in many other areas of the world,” Carlaw reported. He said that many workers “are going from Latin America to other regions as the Latin church is taught and motivated by missionaries as well as the existing national leadership.”

“As the Latin Americans send out missionaries, the present missionaries can share the challenges with them and help them develop their programs from their reservoir of past experiences,” Bustos said. “Latin American missionaries are a definite part of reaching the 10-40 Window.”

“As we consider fulfilling His will, let us avoid drawing geographic boundaries around what we perceive that He is going to do,” concluded Aiken. “It could very well be that our Redeemer will use Latin Americans to reach the millions living in the 10-40 Window.”

Renewed Focus needed on Latin America, *LAM News Service*, Nov 19, 2002