

**Preparing leaders to minister in the city:
Venezuelan evangelical seminary reorganizes to address urban needs**

By Kenneth D. MacHarg
LAM News Service

Caracas, Venezuela (LAMNS)—Change is coming quickly to the Evangelical Seminary of Caracas. “We are taking a traditional seminary and making it contextual to its urban situation,” says Zoila Bayley, a volunteer consultant who is guiding the school in its rebirth.



The small educational institution, which is nestled in a residential business community not far from the heart of this sprawling capital city, is striving to become more relevant to the urban area where it is located and to the urbanization process within the country.

“We want to be more involved in the community,” explains Zoila who taught in universities in Venezuela and France before taking on the task of helping the seminary. “We have a strong interdenominational emphasis and want to continue that as we build an urban emphasis.”

The process involves staff, faculty and students. “We are working to improve the seminary’s administration, the status of teachers, the impact on the community and our legal status,” explains student Mario Cuevas who serves on the reorganization committee.

Seminary president Sam Olson agrees with the change process. “Our pastors are facing increasing crime, drug use and spouse abuse,” he says. “We need to assure that they are trained professionally to deal with these issues.

Participating in the planning for the future of the seminary is LAM missionary Laura Smith who has taught on the seminary faculty for ten years and is the only foreign missionary serving on the staff full-time. “Seventy percent of the pastors in Caracas don’t have a degree,” she says. “The seminary affords them the opportunity to study while they serve and work and we want to do that with quality.”

Laura, who is from Winsted, Connecticut, and did her undergraduate and graduate studies at Oral Roberts University in Oklahoma, says that the school serves a broad spectrum of students from Baptist to Evangelical Free Church, Presbyterian to Assemblies of God.

Currently, 45 churches from more than ten different denominations are represented in the 200-member student body. The faculty also represents a broad denominational spectrum.

Reflecting the cosmopolitan nature of Caracas, the student body is also international. “We have Chinese students who have just been to Ecuador and are working with a cell group in Guayaquil in Chinese,” Laura says. “We also have Quechua-speaking people here and we have several Brazilian students. I’ve never taught a Greek class where I had just Venezuelans in my class.”

Laura says that she is impressed by the dedication of her students. “People are attending classes because they want to learn,” she says. “They have families, jobs and their ministries and on top of that, commuting time. Nobody comes here because they have to.”

Laura clearly enjoys her students and is proud of their accomplishments. “One student who graduated last year is working in the Amazon jungle, updating a translation of the New Testament. He is also doing discipleship and literacy work.”

“There is another graduate who just finished and is working with the hearing impaired and mentally challenged people. Another student has organized a Bible institute in his Assemblies of God church and works in evangelistic radio,” she says. “One lady, a widow, is doing church planting. She climbs 400 stairs up to a barrio (poor neighborhood) each weekend to work with a new church she is planting.”

Disciplines at the seminary, which began offering classes in 1982, focus on Biblical studies, pastoral ministries and theology. Under the new organization, seminary leaders plan on developing research as a specialty of the school. “We are looking for more professors and would welcome missionaries who want to teach in a Latin American setting,” Laura explains. “Many seminaries in Latin America have the problem of having too many missionaries and not enough Latins,” she reflects. “We don’t have that problem here. The missionaries give an international experience to help the school receive outside input and expertise.”

The seminary is open to receiving permanent missionary faculty members as well as those who might want to spend a sabbatical semester or year teaching here. Sam Olson says that a librarian is also needed to help process and catalog a 20,000-volume library that has been donated to the school.

Laura, who teaches primarily in Biblical studies but has also taught Greek, Hebrew and other classes, is excited about a new ministry program at the school. “We have needed a chaplaincy program and now we are developing one to serve the seminary community,” she says. “We are dividing the program into intercession, worship services, counseling and works of mercy.” She says that students gather once every two months for a day of praying for the seminary, personnel and local churches.

“I’ve been missions oriented for a long time,” Laura says. After college, Laura spent a year with LAM’s Spearhead program in Mexico City before returning to Oklahoma for graduate studies and several years teaching on the faculty of Oral Roberts University. (Spearhead is a training/ministry experience program for young adults 19-30 years old. It involves both language and missions training and ministry under Latin American leadership for two months to two years).

Laura is excited about her ministry at the evangelical seminary and about the changes that are taking place within the institution. “I’m just amazed at the outreach,” she says. “When things get tough here, I think that what we are doing is worth it!”

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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