

Strikes and uncertainty in Venezuela offer new opportunities for ministry

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LAM News Service

Miami (LAMNS)—Over three months of an ongoing national strike in Venezuela has disrupted some Christian work, but has also offered opportunities for others to develop new ministries.

While most workers have returned to their jobs and stores have reopened, the nation's vast oil company remains on strike with output reduced to about half of its pre-strike production.

The continued oil strike has allowed Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez to fire dissident workers and remove opposition members of the military. Over 12,000 oil workers have been dismissed in recent months.

The turmoil came with opposition moves to oust the controversial president who they see as too closely aligned with Cuba's Fidel Castro and other left-wing governments. They also charge that he has done away with some human rights and chased away foreign investments.

The three-month strike that ended in early February disrupted normal commerce and activities, causing many mission agencies and church groups to curtail or cancel activities. Some foreign mission bodies removed their personnel from the country while others closed their offices and advised missionaries and staff to stay home.

However, many churches have reported that the strike and the fears and uncertainty it generated have provided opportunities for ministry.

A pastoral couple who teach at the Evangelical Seminary of Caracas had been praying for their neighborhood for years, but had been unable to get to know the residents, reports LAM missionary Laura Smith who also teaches at the seminary.

"In January, when the different neighborhoods began to plan for civil defense in case of violence, they attended a neighborhood meeting," Laura says. "When the leaders discovered that they were pastors, they were put in charge of visiting folks and helping with crisis counseling."

The leaders even provided the couple with a list of people who needed special help.

"Now they have open doors to share the Gospel as they minister to their neighbors," Laura says.

The seminary's night classes are getting back to normal, but that presents difficulties. With a shortage of gas, some students are trying to carpool. "Public transportation at night is better than it was in December," Laura reports. "But it is not very reliable."

Meanwhile, an Evangelical Free church has organized a ministry to people who are waiting in lines at gasoline stations. Venezuela is an oil producing country, but with the shutdown of the oil company the country has had to import petroleum. The result has been long lines with people waiting up to six hours to buy gasoline, or lining up overnight to be there when fresh deliveries arrive in the morning.

Laura reports that church members give away drinking water and tracts and share the Gospel with those who are waiting in line. To the overnight crowds, they offer coffee and tea and friendship evangelism.

"The church has an unprecedented opportunity right now to share the Gospel," says Omar Rodriguez of the Evangelical Free Church Mission in Caracas. "Many people will find their hope and their faith for the future, not just of Venezuela, but of their families and themselves and Jesus Christ."

Meanwhile, in the city of Valencia, LAM missionary Dan Rambow who serves as the pastor of Valencia Community Church, an English language, expatriate church, reports that the crisis has allowed him to develop a particularly close bond with his congregation.

Due to the lack of gasoline and safety issues, he has had to walk to many events and to visit his parishioners. But, he says, church members have appreciated his presence with them.

The upheaval has led many people to explore their faith as well as their goals in life.

"The people are desperate for hope, be it for physical safety or economic prosperity," reports Nate Johnson, an LAM missionary teaching at Academia Cristiana Internacional de Caracas (International Christian Academy of Caracas), an international Christian school. "Many Venezuelans wearily watch the news around the clock, being deceived into believing that if they know everything they might be able to control the situation."

"Our prayer is that they might relinquish their desire for control in attempts to trust a God who has the world in His hand and never grows tired nor weary," Nate says.

Nate reports that he has had the opportunity to teach the students about the power of prayer and fasting.

Along with Jeff King, another LAM missionary teaching at the same school, Nate says that he has had several opportunities to reach out to their neighbors who have otherwise been very shut off. "They are now not only responding to our cookouts but to our prayer meetings as well," Nate reports.

Nate says that they are "on the front line, joyfully fighting."

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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