

Venezuelan disaster unites Evangelical community

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

December's flood and mudslide disaster in Venezuela that may have left up to 50,000 dead has brought the evangelical community together in response and opened doors for evangelism and church planting. The storms brought massive destruction to hillside squatter communities in the capital Caracas and along the coast. Over 300,000 people have found semi permanent housing in stadiums and will probably remain there for up to a year according to Sam Olson, President of the Evangelical Council of Venezuela.

"The disaster was no respecter of social classes or income levels," says TEAM's Field Chairman James Carmean, referring to large single-family homes in the plush resort community of Macuto that are filled with mud and rocks.

Olson's organization, along with the Pentecostal Confederation of Venezuela brought together representative of over 75 evangelical organizations to operate nearly 100 distributions centers and establish long-term ministries that will channel aid from several dozen Christian aid agencies abroad including World Relief, World Vision, Samaritan's Purse, MAP, the Southern Baptist Convention, the Mennonites and Operation Blessing.

Carmean says "I am immensely impressed with the way that churches and missionaries and the evangelical community in general have immediately gotten involved in helping to relieve the needs and suffering of the multitudes."

"We need to be involved in the reconstruction of the people's economic life, providing them with capital to create their own micro enterprises," Olson says. World Relief, the relief and development arm of the National Association of Evangelicals, reports that more than 200,000 jobs were lost as a result of the disaster.

"We also need to help some of the families build their own homes, counsel the people as they come to grips with the changes in their life and restore families that have been separated," Olson says.

Government officials say that many of the homeless will be relocated to new towns in the country's interior to get them away from the precarious shanty towns that cling to the side of mountains around Caracas and relieve overcrowding in the capital city. "I view these new communities as a church-planting opportunity," says Charles Fuller, a missionary with the Latin America Mission in Caracas. Up to fifty churches were reported destroyed in the disaster.

Olson says that the tragedy is providing an opportunity for "in-depth, town-by-town, evangelism. We have developed a committee charged with helping the churches to prepare to serve the people and to develop adequately trained people. This will be a new diaconate."

"The nation has been greatly affected by the tragedy," Fuller says. "People are more open and have some really big questions. It is a good thing that we have a really big God."

The Evangelical Council of Venezuela has established an English-language web site with updated information on the disaster and its follow up. It may be accessed at <http://www.conevan.org/crisis>.

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