

**Local ministry has eternal consequences;  
Language school in Costa Rica trains for global ministries**

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San José, Costa Rica—  
Sometimes the most routine job  
can have global and eternal  
consequences.

Just ask Julie Chamberlain. She  
is the director of the Spanish  
Language Institute here, a school  
that has taught Spanish to  
between 13,000 and 14,000  
evangelical missionaries since it  
was founded in Colombia in  
1942.



“People who have graduated from here have gone all over Latin America, to Spain and eventually to other parts of the world to plant churches, start seminaries, develop radio stations, establish church ministries, initiate health clinics and begin other types of ministries,” she reflected.

And, she said, many have gone on to distinguished careers as mission presidents, missionary statesmen, seminary professors and in other fields.

Chamberlain, who is from Birmingham, Michigan, taught school in Gaylord, Michigan and worked at a church in Ann Arbor before entering the mission field, said the school was founded by the Presbyterian mission board in Colombia during the Second World War to train those who had to flee Asia during the conflict and were reassigned to Latin America.

In 1950 the school was relocated to Costa Rica and in 1972 came under interdenominational leadership, training missionaries from a variety of denominations and mission boards as well as independent leaders.

Today the school serves three major groups of students. The first is missionaries who are preparing for service in the Spanish-speaking world.

“We are a bridge between home and the field,” said Chamberlain, who is a missionary with the Latin America Mission. “They are in transition and can make their cultural and language mistakes here while they are getting their feet wet.”

“We think that it is better for them to study full-time here before they go to their field of service,” she explained. “If they go directly there, they get distracted by settling in and getting involved in ministry and don’t devote the time they should to language study.”

Chamberlain said that there are around 100 missionary students at the school.

In addition to training missionaries, the Institute also provides intensive courses of one or two months in length. “These are open to the public,” Chamberlain reported. “Mostly they serve teachers or college students as well as pastors or other church leaders from the United States or Canada who are working with Hispanics and want to work on their Spanish.”

These one-month intensive courses are held in February, May, July and October with a two-month intensive class offered from mid-June to mid-August.

The school also works with Christian colleges and universities to provide a cooperative study program in which students who are studying Spanish can spend a month or more in Costa Rica at the Institute and becoming immersed in Latin American culture.

While the main focus of the Institute is the same as when it was founded, Chamberlain says that the type of missionary student has changed a bit during her 13 years as the director.

“We have seen an increase in the age of the students,” she said. “That reflects the current emphasis on Finishers (people who decide to end their careers in Christian service, becoming missionaries in their 40s, 50s or 60s).”

“In addition, we now find that the majority of our students have had some previous missionary experience. Most have been on two-week mission trips while some have served for several months in a foreign setting.”

Chamberlain said that she is finding an increasing number of missionaries who are going to Latin America from individual churches or new mission organizations. “We have fewer denominational missionaries and fewer from the older mission societies. Instead, churches are deciding to send their own missionaries or new groups are springing up and sending people to the region.”

Mega churches are not among those sending their students to the institute, she said. Many of them send their missionaries straight to the field either without language training or with language learning elsewhere.

The Institute has added new ministries over the years to meet the needs of missionaries-in-training.

“Sojourn Academy was started in 1993 to provide an English-language education to the children of Institute students,” said Kevin Reilly, an ABWE missionary who serves as the

school's principal. Prior to taking the helm of the Costa Rican school, he taught at the Asunción Christian Academy in Asunción, Paraguay.

"We are here to help the Institute complete its mission," he reflected. "The children go to school here while their parents study."

Currently the Academy, which is housed on the Institute's grounds in the San José suburb of San Francisco de Dos Ríos, has 100 students. The school offers classes ranging from pre-school through high school.

"It definitely is a ministry," said Reilly who is from Morristown, New Jersey and studied at Cedarville College in Cedarville, Ohio. "We are working with students in transition from what they knew back home to life in Latin America."

While all of his students are adjusting to changes in their lives, Reilly said he finds it most difficult for the elementary school children. "They miss their friends, their extended family and their pets that they left back home," he said.

The Academy also trains the children in Spanish, offering at least an hour of language training a day.

"We are always looking for teachers who want to come here and serve for a year or more," Reilly said. "While we offer a small salary, we encourage them to raise some support to supplement what we can pay them. It's a comfortable place to live and teach and many come and want to stay on."

More information about the Spanish Language Institute or Sojourn Academy can be obtained on line at [www.thespanishinstitute.com](http://www.thespanishinstitute.com), or by writing to The Spanish Language Institute, SJO-8609, Box 025240, Miami, FL 33102. The school's email address is [lespanol@racsa.co.cr](mailto:lespanol@racsa.co.cr).

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