

**Demonstrating a purpose in the midst of tragedy;  
Christians reach out after earthquake in El Salvador**

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

LAM News Service

Miami, FL (LAMNS)—Christian organizations from around the world are continuing to minister to those affected by a massive earthquake that hit the Central American nation of El Salvador on January 13.

Over 700 deaths were reported from the temblor that measured between 7.6 and 7.9 on the Richter scale. But the death toll was expected to continue rising, as several hundred people were still unaccounted for.

In addition, 2,590 people were injured and nearly 750,000 were forced to abandon their homes.

At least 258 churches, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, were damaged in some way during the earthquake, and that number continues to grow as church officials move from delivering emergency aid and take stock.

Near the capital, San Salvador, Dr. Mario Palencia is working with a team of 8 doctors and ten dentists to provide relief efforts in two small towns bypassed by the massive relief effort. “We are carrying help to Ozatlan and the community of Los Patios en San Agustín,” he reported. “We want to help reconstruct the roofs that have fallen, and, if God permits, to establish a church there.”

“This is a dramatic area of the country,” Dr. Palencia reported. “These communities are secluded and sparsely populated. We were able to take in clothing, prepared food and some medicine which was a blessing to them and was received with much gratitude.”

Dr. Palencia, who is a dentist and lay pastor and serves as the president of the LAM-related Central American chapter of Christian Camping International, says that the people of these towns are in need of much more help.

The doctor lives just blocks from a massive landslide that roared through a San Salvador neighborhood burying hundreds of people. “God's hand was evident in my case because we live precisely in the area most affected. But, our house only had small cracks in the walls, but 100 meters away, several houses were totally destroyed, not to speak of the neighborhood next door that had the mud slide,” he reported by email.

“In the midst of it all, we see hope and faith to move ahead,” he wrote. “The people are in shock, but are confident that this will be put behind us. Many, including the unsaved, see this as a word from God. We Christians need to demonstrate that in all this there is a purpose. The Lord wants us to serve Him.”

Dr. Palencias said that his team would continue to “carry material help and the word of God to the people who need this in this moment of crisis.”

The devastation nationwide poses a serious challenge to religious leaders, according to the *Los Angeles Times*. Pastors face the difficult task of repairing not only their churches but encouraging the faith of their congregations rocked by years of war, poverty and natural calamities. For now, Salvadorans are holding services in town squares and parks.

"Especially in rural areas, churches are not just places of worship," said Ken Ellis, director in El Salvador for the U.S. Agency for International Development. "They are a community center, a place where people meet. They play an important role in the social lives of the community."

Few churches have insurance. Fewer still have the funds on hand to rebuild. Many will have to depend on donations from churches abroad to rebuild. Pastors throughout El Salvador reported record attendance at services held the day after the "Black Saturday" earthquake.

But more important, many religious leaders said, the destruction has allowed churches to promote communion in a different sense: the banding together of people in the face of adversity. As the faithful help one another, they get a better sense of themselves--and of their religion.

Salvadoran emergency workers, meanwhile, are working to control disease, fearing rotting corpses, contaminated water and overcrowded refugee camps could trigger epidemics. They are especially concerned about a possible outbreak of cholera and dengue fever.

Meanwhile, teams of psychologists who are particularly concerned about trauma in children also treated refugees who lost homes and loved ones. "The main problem, especially among the children, is that they do not accept the reality of losing relatives and homes. I keep hearing them say they are waiting for fathers, husbands, grandparents to pick them up from the camp," said Ricardo Lazo, who tended to victims.

While many were killed in the disaster, stories of miraculous survival came from the experience.

“Blanca Estela (an ex-member of our board) was at camp with children from the church when the earthquake hit,” Dr. Palencias wrote. “She was at the Lake Coatepeque, and the kids were on a wharf at the time. They watched most all the other wharfs around them cave in, more than 30. But their's did not. We thank God for His protection. The lake is an hour from San Salvador the capital, but because of all the slides and the traffic, it took the children 6 hours to get home, but in good health. Thank the Lord for the protection of our children.”

Missionary Ruth Padilla DeBorst reported that “the damage is so widespread and so many people are suffering so terribly, it's hard, very hard.”

Reflecting on how some escaped and others were not so fortunate, she said, “We cannot simply be relieved because of our ‘good fortune,’ the tragedy hits us all.”

Many Christian organizations, including the Latin America Mission, are responding to the crisis. “We are in touch with our missionaries in Central America, and we have opened an "El Salvador Relief Fund", to receive donations geared to help the victims of this disaster,” said Jose Zirena, LAM’s Finance Director.

Generally, agencies find it more efficient to receive financial contributions so that their representatives at the disaster site can purchase necessary goods and services. Shipping goods from abroad is expensive and logistics are often difficult. One international Christian relief agency reported that it had 12 cases of medical supplies waiting for shipment in Miami but could not find a way to get them to El Salvador.

Contributions for El Salvador relief may be sent to the Latin America Mission, Box 52-7900, Miami, FL 33152.

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](mailto: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.

Some information in this story came from Reuters News Service.

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