

**God's beat:
Covering the Lord's activity in Latin America**
By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Some reporters are assigned to a crime beat, others to cover education. Many newspapers have a reporter who specializes in religion. My beat is God and Latin America.

As Latin America Mission's "missionary journalist," it's my privilege to report on what the Lord is doing in Latin America and Spain, particularly through the evangelical church and specifically through LAM missionaries and ministries.



That assignment allows me to produce feature stories on missionaries as they labor in the region, to report on developments and breaking news stories and to do broad-sweeping analyses of trends and events.

The LAM News Service (LAMNS) which is the prime distributor of my output, provides an average of one news story per week to over 600 Christian and secular publications in the U.S. and around the world. In addition, there are countless additional exposures as stories are posted on the LAM web page and other web pages and redistributed by other listserves, news agencies and individuals who pass them on to interested friends.

ROOTS

The idea for LAMNS and the missionary journalist position came as God brought together my call to return to Christian journalism in a mission setting with LAM's history of journalism as a ministry. I proposed that LAM permit me to come on board and develop a regular flow of news and feature stories that would interpret events in the region, spotlight how the Lord is working through missionary personnel and help readers know how to pray and participate in His work.

While some staff were skeptical, others saw the possibility, especially with the relatively recent development of the Internet and email which would permit rapid, inexpensive dissemination of the material.

STYLE

It has been important, and at times difficult, for all of those involved with the news service to understand that what is produced is quality journalistic output, not public relations.

Missionary journalism *reports* on what *the Lord* is doing in *Latin America*. Public relations *promotes* what *the mission* is doing *institutionally* (and usually *in the headquarters office*).

That distinction has been important in avoiding the pitfall of mission executives expecting institutional recognition and immediate financial income generated by gratuitous publicity. It has also strengthened the news service's credibility with publishers, broadcasters and others who are often deluged with, largely, unusable public relations announcements.

Missionary journalism also means that stories are often written with a broader focus than just spotlighting the mission's or missionary's accomplishments. Topics such as threats against the church in Colombia, the status of the evangelical church in Brazil or the influx of finishers into missionary service are treated from a wide perspective, involving the insights and experiences of participants in a variety of evangelical missions, not just LAM.

EXPOSURE

While there was the expectation that Christian newspapers and magazines, religious broadcasters and even secular outlets would make use of LAM News Service material, the actual usage has been far beyond what I ever imagined.

Currently, each LAMNS story is sent to over 600 print and broadcast outlets, dozens of Christian web sites, several lists that redistribute material they receive and perhaps 100 individuals who have asked to receive the material. In addition, several Christian news services rewrite much of the material and distribute it to their clients, giving even more exposure.

LAMNS articles have appeared in a variety of publications, ranging from Christian camping magazines to general circulation publications. The largest users, however, seem to be the more than 100 local Christian newspapers found across the country.

While I see only a few of those publications, I am aware that many are using many or even almost all of our news stories. Anecdotal comments from missionaries, inquiries from readers and appearances on Christian publication web sites attest that the material is being utilized.

In addition, many of the stories are reworked for radio programs such as Mission Network News. MNN stories, in turn, are redistributed to a large mailing list via their own email news service, and at least one radio network uses MNN features as part of its hourly newscasts.

While we have no way to tell for sure, a conservative estimate shows that each news story, as it is distributed, posted and printed, reaches between 500,000 and 1 million

readers. In addition, each feature on Mission Network News reaches an audience of 2.5 million listeners.

RESPONSE

As indicated, response is very difficult to gauge. Some email, letters and phone calls indicate that people are exposed to LAMNS material. Missionaries report response. One missionary wrote, "I have heard lots of people (say that they) saw the articles. One lady came to my garage sale and said..."You are the missionary in the paper"...as we talked she realized we had met a week before at my friend's wedding. The next day, she came and gave me a donation."

Some have expected that each or most articles would bring a financial response or result in a flood of people signing up to serve as missionaries. That expectation reflects a failure to understand a news service as opposed to public relations, or more accurately advertising. News and feature stories are *not* public relations or advertising, nor can they substitute for development or recruitment materials. However, they can be *used* by PR and mobilization departments as part of their on-going efforts.

Some LAM missionaries have found that by duplicating newspaper articles that have featured their work, they are able to add a level of credibility to their requests for support. Our mobilization department has made use of all of the LAMNS news stories on our web site to attract inquirers with a particular interest in a specialized ministry or specific location. And, both those who work in fundraising and mobilization can use news and feature material to educate their constituents. A few missionaries have reported that the use of LAMNS stories in grant proposals have helped to raise significant money for projects.

EXTRAS

With a little extra effort and wise use of resources, we have been able to get extra mileage out of our missionary journalism efforts.

- *Adaptation and customization*—While all of the LAMNS stories are written for a national audience and primarily for Christian publications and Christian readers, we have recognized that publications in many places have an interest in a local person serving overseas. To extend the use of our articles, I customize almost all of them for use in the missionary's home town. Sometimes this is as simple as rewriting the headline ("Local woman serves in Ecuador") to a bit more complex rewriting and perhaps adding a quote or two from the home pastor. Small, local newspapers will often use those stories largely as written, while larger, metropolitan and regional papers will use them as leads to writing their own stories. In the case of the missionary quoted above, the original LAMNS story was used in several national Christian publications, in one state-wide agricultural newspaper and in one local newspaper while the major nearby metropolitan newspaper sent out a reporter to write their own story (although they did use our LAMNS-provided photos).

- *Photos*—One of the secrets of LAMNS success has been that we have been able to provide photographs with almost every story. Many public relations releases and other material do not always include graphic material. I have been told by editors that the provision of photos has often been the difference between running our story and another without graphics.
- *Recycling of stories and material*—We practice the reuse of quality material in several ways:
 - While I write around 80-95% of the stories used by LAMNS, the remainder come from LAM's *Latin America Evangelist* magazine or, on rare occasion, stories written by LAM personnel for the news service
 - As part of my agreement with LAM, I do some freelance writing for national publications such as *World Pulse*, *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, *World Christian*, *Charisma*, *Christianity Today* and others. For those publications, I use material from both LAM missionaries and others that I meet and interview. Thus, readers are able to obtain a broad picture of what is happening in the Latin American church from a variety of perspectives.
 - Material gathered for print products is also used to provide radio material to Mission Network News, USA Radio Network, SRN News, Moody Radio and others. One one occasion, I provided a raw audio interview to a radio station, they dubbed in the questions from their announcer, giving them an instant interview with a local missionary in Mexico.
 - While gathering material to use in a story about a particular missionary or ministry, I also make note of a wide range of quotes and ideas for use in other stories such as those about missionary stress, church growth, children-at-risk and others.
 - Each story about a missionary is eventually laid out with a photo, newspaper article style, so that even if the missionary does not see a printed article, they can duplicate the “news sheet” and use it in a prayer letter or while on furlough.
 - In 2001, eighty LAMNS stories were gathered together and published in a book, *Inside Track, Latin America through the eyes of a Missionary Journalist*. Through distribution to supporters and sale through several outlets, more people were able to read this output.

PERKS

As a result of providing quality journalism, LAM's material has been used in hundreds of publications to better inform the public about God's activity in Latin America and Spain. Christians now know more about a region of the world often ignored by the general news media, what the needs and opportunities are there, and how to pray.

In addition, some major news organizations have learned that LAM is a credible source of information concerning the evangelical church in the region. As a result of particular news stories or the breadth of our coverage, in addition to those stories used in local newspapers, LAMNS has received inquiries about events and resources in the region

from national media outlets including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Sun-Sentinel*, *The Miami Herald*, *Scripps-Howard News Service* and *Associated Press*.

COSTS

The cost of operating the news service is very inexpensive considering the output of over 200 news stories in the first three and one-half years of operation. Salary costs are not included.

All stories are distributed by email, with the exception of an occasional release of material by fax to a local newspaper where an email address cannot be found. Thus, there is no postage cost for distribution of news stories.

Our largest cost is travel expenses. The best stories are those that are gathered on the scene, spending a day with a missionary or evangelical church leader. Of course, news stories can be gathered by phone and email, but only being there can bring this kind of lead to a news story: "*Look, the trees are starting to come back!*" *Rebecca Domingues points to some shoots pushing up through unbelievable piles of mud and rocks. Those leaves demonstrate the hope that is returning to Venezuela's scarred coastline a year and a half after devastating floods and landslides buried houses and families and swept away entire communities.*

Travel also allows LAMNS to provide photographs to accompany all of the stories and features. While I am not a photographer, I do take pictures! Many missionaries seem not to be able to provide even marginally decent photographs of their ministry, so these must be taken by mission staff.

If a mission agency were to pay a freelance writer for an individual story with photos, the cost would be a minimum of \$200-300 for each piece. By visiting a number of missionaries on one trip and producing multiple stories over a period of time, travel can be very cost effective, often times much less than \$100 per story.

Other miscellaneous costs include photo developing and several media resource books such as *Editor & Publisher International Year Book*, *Broadcasting & Cable Yearbook*, *NRB Directory of Religious Media*, *Operation World* and the *AP Stylebook*.

GLORY

It's gratifying to serve as a missionary journalist. Not because of the compliments, which are frequent, but because it's a privilege to cover God's activity as my beat. None of the glory is mine—*HE* gave me the skills and knowledge to do His work. So, don't tell me that I'm doing a good job or accomplishing great things—you'll just get a glare from me! To God be the Glory!

God's beat: Covering the Lord's activity in Latin America, *LAM News Service*, June 7, 2002

