

Regional evangelism conference focuses on ministry opportunities

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Quito, Ecuador—While billed as a congress on evangelism, the Fourth Latin American Evangelism Congress focused widely on ministry opportunities that Christians on that continent might use for evangelistic opportunities.

The congress, held in Quito from September 2-8, drew 1,300 participants from all Latin American countries and beyond and challenged church leaders to look past their old models to new, even daring ways to spread the Gospel.

Participants signed up for one-track workshops that involved three hours of work each day of the conference. While some opted for more traditional methods such as working with mass media, youth, family ministries, literature and indigenous outreach, others took lessons on how to share the gospel in the market place, reaching children on the streets and how evangelicals can become involved politically.

In the area of reaching children, attendees learned how children can be active participants in the church. “Often times we view children as little people to be ministered to and not necessarily that they are able to minister,” said Katharine Miles who led a workshop on working with children at risk. “We looked at case studies on how children can minister at a young age and be members of the church.”

Some conference delegates saw children ministering in action as they accompanied members of Quito’s Sendero de la Cruz church on a ministry to street children. Over ten of the church’s children led songs and witnessed to their faith to around 80 children who gathered to hear the music, receive a message and eat a meal provided by church volunteers on a cold, rainy night. Most of the children live in or work near the city’s sprawling Carolina Park.

“Our goal is to have these children come to know the word of God,” said Pastor Pedro Endara. “Many of them do not have any trust, so the food and the help builds that trust. If they hear the word of God, they will be able to change their lives.” Pastor Endara said that he has found that the children of his church can be more effective than the adults in



reaching the street children since many of them have suffered from abuse by their parents.

“I think this CLADE is going to mark a milestone because it is actualizing itself to the reality of Latin American evangelicals,” said LAM missionary Tito Paredes who is president of the Latin American Theological Fraternity and was responsible for the organization of the event.

“Jesus went around the villages preaching the kingdom of God in the synagogues, teaching and taking care of the sick,” said Paredes. “This is an incarnation of how Jesus lived his life. There is no need to separate the preaching of the gospel from public testimony in word and deed.”

Participants were reminded that the church cannot passively wait for seekers to drop by. “New ways of doing evangelism are ways that seek to meet the person in society where they are, in their context, instead of inviting a person to come to a crusade or expecting them to be saved in church,” said Dr. Paul Bergsma, a Christian Reformed missionary working at an evangelical university in Costa Rica. “Mission must become more holistic where we are ministering to the complete person in physical, material and spiritual needs,” he said.

Organizers were pleased with the event’s emphasis on breaking traditional molds and a movement to address social issues. “I am very pleased to see that some of the concerns that we have had for many years with regard to the social impact of the gospel are very much a part of the concern that people have as they come here,” said LAM missionary Rene Padilla, an Ecuadorian who is one of Latin America’s foremost evangelical theologians. Padilla said that the church must combine both words and action to be effective in reaching people in today’s society.

But, Padilla warned the church leaders not to be caught up in either social work for its own sake nor spirituality that can lead a seeker astray. Pointing to rapid growth of the evangelical church in parts of Latin America, Padilla warned that “this growth is threatened on the one hand by a deficit of theological reflection and on the other hand, by a deficit in the area of spirituality.” He cautioned that when there is a lack of serious theological reflection, he is not surprised that movements such as the “prosperity gospel” flourish in the region.

In a closing statement, delegates affirmed that “the Word of God has called us to be a prophetic community, in solidarity with the pain and suffering that denigrates the life and the dignity of our nations.”

Participants said that the core of their mission is to achieve justice for all in the power of the Holy Spirit.

In the document, delegates also expressed their concern about the “prosperity gospel,” church structures that give too much attention of ambition and power, mysticism and dogmatism.

“Within Latin America we need to adapt our Christian world to a culture that changes moment by moment without leaving the parameters that Christ put on our life such as do not lie, do not steal, do not kill, do not give a false testimony,” said Rodolfo Lemos, an Ecuadorian who recently left a position with Campus Crusade for Christ to enter seminary. “However, we live in a world where people lie, steal, kill and discriminate. For this reason, we need to know how to implement the biblical truths in our contemporary world.”

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