Inter-America: Church leaders to connect with communities in urban areas

Seventh-day Adventist leaders in the Inter-American Division (IAD) want to reach and connect with the more than 36 million people living in three of its largest cities: Mexico City, Mexico, Bogota, Colombia, and Caracas, Venezuela.

Inter-America: Adventist Mission director prescribes Jesus method to evangelize urban areas

"The Seventh-day Adventist Church is a rural church, and we have not been putting our resources, our people into urban areas," said Pastor Gary Krause, Adventist Mission director for the Adventist world church, to more than one hundred top leaders from th
Inter-America: Church leaders to connect with communities in urban areas

Seventh-day Adventist leaders in the Inter-American Division (IAD) want to reach and connect with the more than 36 million people living in three of its largest cities: Mexico City, Mexico, Bogota, Colombia, and Caracas, Venezuela.

May 5, 2012 - Miami, Florida, United States...Libna Stevens/IAD

Seventh-day Adventist leaders in the Inter-American Division (IAD) want to reach and connect with the more than 36 million people living in three of its largest cities: Mexico City, Mexico, Bogota, Colombia, and Caracas, Venezuela. Leaders will also target the millions spread out in urban areas across the region. This was the emphasis during Inter-America's first Urban Ministries Summit held May 1-2, 2012, in Miami, Florida.

Experts from the Office of Adventist Mission of the Adventist World Church, along with other international experts on urban evangelism, spoke to more than 100 church leaders from Inter-America's 21 major church regions.

"Our intention for this summit is to equip church leaders with the knowledge and skills necessary for unique focus on the cities, and engage them in urban evangelism in Inter-America," said Pastor Samuel Telemaque, Adventist Mission coordinator for the church in Inter-America and organizer of the event.

It's about connecting and casting a vision for a church-planting movement in the urban areas, said Telemaque. "If we effectively evangelize big cities, then we can reach all types of ethnic groups and cultures," said Telemaque.

That connection with the urban areas is one of broad goals sought after said Telemaque. Understanding unique needs of the contemporary urban context, finding best practices of urban ministry and implementing urban mission strategies were some of the topics discussed during the two-day summit.

It's about going into the community and finding out the needs there, said Gary Krause, Adventist Mission director for the Adventist world church.

"Jesus mingled, showed sympathy, He ministered to needs, won confidence and bid people to follow Him," explained Krause as he challenged leaders to use Christ's method as the only and effective way of bringing people into the church because it will provide strong hope, significant purpose and secure love.

In a church mostly experienced in reaching people in the rural areas, the challenge is enormous yet one that must be addressed immediately, affirmed Pastor Israel Leito, president of the church in Inter-America.

According to Pastor Leito, specials funds have already been allotted to focus on the urban regions in Inter-America and will continue as the church endeavors to fulfill the mission of the church in an already hard-to-reach secularized and post-modern society.

Pastor Tomas Torres, president of the church in Central Mexico, said he is reminded of that challenge every day as he heads the work of the church in Mexico City. With more than 20 million people and a ratio of one Seventh-day Adventist per 575 people, the task is huge. Yet Torres said the church in Mexico City has endeavored to strengthen its leadership and membership by...
training them before they venture out to make a greater impact in the large metropolis.

"We know that penetrating our city is a slow process but we are training our elders, our pastors and our laypeople on retention of members," said Torres.

It is a slow process and one that must be calculated as the church aims to reach the secular and postmodern individual of today's urban areas, said Kleber Goncalves, director for the Center for Secular and Postmodern Studies, stationed in Brazil.

"Working with the postmodern person is not a job for just any person or pastor," said Goncalves. "Pastors must be well trained in this area because it is in a different context and it does not happen overnight."

"Urban areas must be seen as a process, as a place with living beings, a worldwide phenomenon that needs the proper ministerial training," he added.

Training is just what Pastor Josney Rodriguez, president for the church in East Venezuela, is excited about. Rodriguez understands the challenge to reach a post-modern city like Caracas with over seven million people. There are only 27,000 church members there.

Pastor Rodriguez has already lined up Goncalves this year to train a special group of pastors who will head urban ministries in Caracas.

"We will select the best pastors with the new mentality of reaching people in the cities so city-dwellers can learn that the church can offer them a better lifestyle, and more," said Rodriguez.

So far, more than 10,000 active church members have been recruited to impact their communities in Caracas and additional training will follow, he added.

Rodriguez is also looking to break the barriers and penetrate the more than one million Chinese living in Venezuela. Learning to approach the Asian culture is something that was beneficial during the summit, pastor Rodriguez said.

Samuel Wang, associate director for the Center for East Asian Religious and Traditions, spoke to a group of pastors from Venezuela as well as pastors from five other church regions in Inter-America on the approach and productive ways of reaching Asians in their cities.

Wang's advice to a group of pastors from Venezuela and the Caribbean was to learn of the culture, how valuable family life and a healthy lifestyle is to the Chinese person and offer Chinese literature and material. Wang recommended the Bible and Ellen G. White's writings as rich resources that can be widely appreciated in the Chinese culture.

Out of the Chinese consultation with Wang, Pastor Wilkar Rivero from Valencia in the north central region in Venezuela, said he will look at connecting differently with the Chinese population where he lives.

"I think that we ourselves as a church can be closed minded and think we can reach out to the Chinese," said Rivero. "We must be confident and show what we stand for and what we believe in carefully."

It goes back to connecting, affirmed Rick McEdward, Global Mission director for the Adventist world church as he addressed the summit delegation. "We need to be creative with the proclamation of the gospel," said McEdward. It's about seeking to reach outside of our comfort area, he added.

For the church in Bogota, Colombia, a city with more than nine million people and some 32,000 church members, the challenge is to be creative and thirsty for connecting with the community, Bogota church leaders said. Something that has driven the north conference and the Upper Magdalena conference to join activities catering to the community needs like running marathons, health summits and urban evangelism campaigns, held during the past two years.
Guest speakers during the summit also included Gaspar F. Colon, professor of religion and director of the Center of Metropolitan Ministry at Washington Adventist University, and Andrew Clark, Global Mission coordinator. Clark is also involved in Creative Ministry Development at the Pennsylvania Conference.

At the close of the summit, Pastor Telemaque challenged leaders to join the Adventist World Church global push to evangelize the large cities and strategize to implement urban plans and activities for church planting.

"We must strive to expand the influence of the church in the big cities," said Telemaque. "We have mastered how to reach the rural areas and we have to master how to impact the urban areas through mass campaigns, health summits, small groups, focus groups for upper class, and more."

"The Lord is calling us back to have a heart for the cities," Telemaque said.

For more on how to impact urban areas, visit www.interamerica.org or visit www.adventistmission.org

To view a photo gallery of Inter-America’s Urban Ministries Summit, go to http://www.flickr.com/photos/interamerica/7005085720/in/photostream
"The Seventh-day Adventist Church is a rural church, and we have not been putting our resources, our people into urban areas," said Pastor Gary Krause, Adventist Mission director for the Adventist world church, to more than one hundred top leaders from throughout the church in Inter-America. Krause was addressing church leaders from throughout the 21 church regions during the territory's first Urban Ministries Summit held in Miami, Florida, May 1-2, 2012.

For a church with more than 150 years of existence, said Krause, "our methods have not been working in the large cities." He reminded leaders that the Adventist Church is built on men and women who have pushed in deep waters for Jesus and that it is time to use Christ's method of reaching people in the cities and ensuring churches and institutions become centers of influence in the community.

It's about making the message meaningful and accessible to so many people from different cultural backgrounds, said Krause. "Too many times we think we know what people want," he added. It's about understanding communities and filling those needs.

Krause asked, "What does the church offer? How do we bring people from the community into the church?" He answered, "Good music, attractive events, good preaching, and a friendly church may attract people. Yet in society today, people in large cities have become more secularized and with that many barriers such as history, culture and more stop them from coming into a Christian culture and the church.

"Instead of expecting them to come to us, we go to them like Jesus did," emphasized Krause. "The church is not just a destination; the role of the church is to equip, train and empower its members to be in the community."

The Jesus method alone will bring people into the church, according to Krause. "Jesus mingled, showed sympathy, He ministered to needs, won confidence and bid people to follow Him."

For the most part, the church likes to skip these four methods, said Krause. "It takes a long time, it can get messy, it means that I have to invest myself in people and the community," he said. Yet the Christ method will provide strong hope, significant purpose, secure love, and in turn diminishing apostasy rates among the church, he continued.

Krause encouraged leaders to challenge local leaders in their territories to commit to identifying the needs of the community and bring the ministries of the church and its departments to join forces in connecting and ensuring that urban centers of influence are created within each community.

"Those churches involved in the community are the ones that are growing and in contact with the world," said Krause.

Top church leaders from Inter-America were trained by a group of experts for two days on how to...
Inter-American regional leaders were challenged to making the message of the gospel meaningful and accessible to people in large cities throughout the territory.

For more information on IAD's Urban Ministries Summit, visit www.interamerica.org

For a photo gallery, click here