

Argentine Church Offers Food, Clothing Through Outreach Events

Pastor Claudio Freidzon began the Operation Blessing campaign in response to his nation's economic crisis

A leading minister in the Argentina revival movement that saw thousands come to Christ in the mid-1980s and 1990s has launched a new initiative to take the gospel outside the walls of the church.

Calling his effort Operation Blessing, Claudio Freidzon of 15,000-member Iglesia Rey de Reyes in Buenos Aires has been taking teams of volunteers to remote areas throughout Argentina to distribute food, clothing, medicine and other supplies, and to host evangelistic meetings. The pastor said the effort is an attempt to preach the gospel not only in word, but also in deed by combining evangelism with practical assistance.

Freidzon said he felt God calling him to "bless" his country after an economic crisis rocked Argentina in late 2001. Thousands were suddenly without jobs, banks froze savings accounts, and the peso lost 70 percent of its value.

Burdened by the difficult conditions many Argentines faced, Freidzon and his wife, Betty, launched Operation Blessing last year. The first Operation Blessing event was held in the province of Tucumán in April 2003, with more than 35,000 people in attendance and thousands reporting decisions for Christ.

In July of the same year, the second Operation Blessing took place in the province of Chubut, with the customary hospital visitations and distribution of food and medical help. The third outreach event was held in the province of Misiones in November, with 20,000 people in attendance.

This year, Freidzon decided to travel to the marginal barrios within the interior of the country. Accompanied by a group of volunteers, he visited the provinces of Tucumán, Chubut, Misiones and Chaco, thus impacting Argentina's northern, central and southern regions.

Though many made decisions for Christ at previous events, the volunteer team was surprised at the response in Chaco, the final destination in the tour, when they visited in April. The Chaco Forever stadium was filled to capacity, with thousands waiting outside. Operation Blessing said more than 9,000 reported decisions for Christ during the outreach.

As Freidzon had done in previous cities, he collected a special offering to benefit two hospitals in the city of Resistencia, located in Chaco province. As a result of the meeting, the local newspaper ran a front-page article with the headline: "Chaco: This Is Your Time."

The crusade also drew participation from local official Aida Ayala and other high-ranking government leaders. The governor even granted worship leader Danilo Montero the use of his plane to transport him to the event.

Some 450 volunteers distributed 20 tons of goods, including medicine and 500 books destined for Argentina's rural libraries. The team also visited the Clorindo Omar Blanco

School in Resistencia and Barrio Honda Chico School in nearby Sáenz Peña, where they donated books, school equipment, treats and even a television.

In an effort to touch every social class, Operation Blessing developed a conference geared toward professionals and businessmen, as well as a seminar for pastors and leaders that had approximately 1,700 ministers in attendance.

Volunteers also visited health centers, where they prayed for the sick and distributed diapers and baby clothing. A volunteer group of doctors, dentists and public assistants tended to the residents at the Villa Don Alberto health center.

Afterward, pastors from Resistencia reported that some local churches had doubled their membership at the end of the week. Some even said they had a renewed evangelistic zeal.

“There isn’t enough seating to seat the new believers,” one local pastor said. “Operation Blessing’s wide-reaching effect has caused our church to overflow.” Another pastor acknowledged, “This has never happened before, not seen in this way, the streets being invaded by the gospel.”

Gisela Sawin in Chaco, Argentina