

Living Water Teaching Mission Carries on After Plane Tragedy

After a fatal crash killed her husband and son two years ago, Marion Zirkle continues their work in Guatemala

Like a boxer rallying from the brink of defeat, a Central American ministry is still standing—and thriving—two years after a plane crash killed its founder and leaders.

“I know the devil wanted to take us out,” said Marion Zirkle, president and co-founder of the Texas-based Living Water Teaching Mission (LWTM). “The devil knocked us over, but he didn’t knock us out. We’re up and fighting. We’re committed to seeing Central America come to know Jesus.”

On Nov. 1, 1998—in thick fog and torrential downpours—a plane crashed in southwestern Guatemala, killing 11. The dead included James Zirkle, 56—Marion’s husband—who founded the charismatic ministry in 1979.

Besides Zirkle, the accident claimed the lives of the couple’s son James L. Zirkle II, who was

LWTM director in Guatemala; Chris Hamberger, Zirkle’s son-in-law; Raul Jacobs and Thomas Vanderpol, LWTM staff members; and six American medical-team members. Seven passengers survived the crash.

James Sr. and Marion Zirkle would have been married 34 years on Nov. 7.

"I fought a spiritual battle of faith for many, many days," Marion Zirkle told Charisma. "It was very hard going on without them and having to make decisions that I felt I was inadequate to make."

Marion Zirkle also was troubled by media coverage of the accident, which reported that LWTM's pilots ignored warnings not to take off because of heavy rains. She said that contrary to news reports the team's DC-3 plane did not circle the town of Quezaltenango for two hours because of rough weather. Quezaltenango is located 70 miles west of Guatemala City and is LWTM's home base in Central America.

Guatemalan President Alvaro Arzu told reporters that the pilots ignored warnings not to take off because of torrential downpours from Hurricane Mitch, which by then had been downgraded to a tropical storm after leaving more than 10,000 dead

in Central America.

Zirkle said her son James, the pilot, had filed a flight plan and had permission to fly. The flight plan showed the team flew to Playa Grande for an evangelistic campaign that provided 7,000 residents with medical treatment. More than 1,100 accepted Christ during the campaign.

The team then flew to Quezaltenango, then to Guatemala City and back to Quezaltenango after finding a hole through the clouds to land the plane. The plane came down on top of trees, and the branches caught one of the engines.

"One of the survivors told us [my son] Jimmy immediately pulled the plane back up, and that is why they are alive

today," Marion Zirkle said.

She said prayer sustained the remaining ministry team through the tragedy.

"When I knew that God's people were praying, it gave me new determination to keep this ministry on course and get busy with what God had called us to do," Marion Zirkle said.

The Zirkles moved to Guatemala in October 1979 to start LWTM, focusing on Bible schools and medical and evangelistic campaigns in Central America. The ministry also worked in Africa, Germany and Japan. LWTM's U.S. headquarters is in Caddo Mills, Texas.

In 21 years, LWTM has been one of the most committed, effective ministries in Central America, recording more than 600,000 salvations and 16,000 graduations from its Bible schools. LWTM also has treated 250,000 people with medical and dental care and distributed more than 500 tons of medical supplies.

"Our commission is to make disciples through training and demonstration," she said. "I am committed to see it happen. I have peace, and the call is just as strong, probably stronger now, than ever before."

Nevertheless, it has been a challenge for Marion Zirkle, who turns 57 in December, to carry the ministerial baton from her husband.

"I knew I would have to do it by the Spirit of God," she said.

“Jim was a strong leader, very confident, very focused. Jim had big shoes to fill. I walked by his side as a satisfied partner, but never in his shoes, and I never thought that I would have to. I’ve put them on, and where there is still space I look to others to help fill in.”

LWTM is still a Zirkle family ministry. Zirkle’s son-in-law, Keith Spanberger, is an associate minister. Zirkle’s daughter-in-law, Laura Zirkle Sarti, is a missionary, along with her husband, Manuel.

Zirkle’s oldest daughter, Kimberly Hamberger, moved to Guatemala this summer to be a missionary. Henry Clarke, who is not related to Zirkle, recently relocated to Quezaltenango to serve as Guatemalan director—her son Jimmy’s previous position.

“We haven’t stopped anything since the tragedy,” Marion Zirkle said. LWTM’s campaigns include “Operation Shoebox,” an annual Christmas ministry to 9,000 children. “Our challenge might be to put the reins on and not try to win the world in one day.”