

Tragic Plane Crash Doesn't Ground Guatemalan Missions Ministry

As Living Water Teaching prepares for its 25th anniversary this month, co-founder Marion Zirkle says the best is yet to come

A Central American charismatic ministry is flourishing six years after a tragic accident killed its founder and leaders.

This month, Living Water Teaching (LWT) celebrates its 25th anniversary of ministry in Guatemala. Jim and Marion Zirkle relocated to Guatemala from the United States in October 1979 to start LWT (), focusing on Bible schools and medical and evangelistic campaigns in Central America.

But on Nov. 1, 1998, in thick fog and torrential downpours, an LWT plane crashed in southwestern Guatemala, killing 11, including Marion's 56-year-old husband.

The crash also claimed the lives of the couple's son, James L. Zirkle II, who was LWT director in Guatemala; Chris Hamberger, the Zirkles' son-in-law; LWT staff members and six American medical-team members. Seven passengers survived.

"For two to three years, I had to fight the good fight of faith so that this ministry would not fall," said Marion Zirkle, LWT president and co-founder. "The devil fought me in every way through my emotions and my mind. ...

"The Word of God brought me through and told me that, 'I was

more than a conqueror through Him,'" the 60-year-old ordained minister added. "I dared to believe it. God is a restorer, and He can make it better than it has ever been."

This year, the ministry had its largest Bible-school enrollment, with 92 students studying to be ministers at LWT's 22-acre campus in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala.

LWT has Bible schools in Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, Panama, Nicaragua and Paraguay, as well as Guatemalan Bible graduates teaching in Cuba. The ministry also has worked in Mexico, Africa, Germany and Japan.

Through its various ministries, LWT has recorded more than 600,000 salvations and 20,000 graduates from its Bible schools.

LWT has also provided more than 250,000 people with medical and dental care and distributed more than 500 tons of medical supplies. In addition, Zirkle launched Operation Shoebox, an annual Christmas outreach that is similar to Samaritan's Purse's shoebox ministry. Last December LWT helped more than 15,000 children through the outreach.

LWT is still a Zirkle family affair. Zirkle's youngest daughter, Debbie, and her husband, Keith Spanberger, are the executive directors of the ministry, working at LWT's U.S. headquarters in Caddo Mills, Texas.

Zirkle's daughter-in-law, Laura Zirkle Sarti, is a missionary in Guatemala, along with her husband, Manuel. Zirkle's oldest daughter, Kimberly Hamberger, whose husband died in the plane crash, is also a Guatemalan missionary.

Barry Tubbs, an associate minister with Kenneth Copeland Ministries, which has supported LWT for 20 years, noted that “the anointing and calling on Jim Zirkle’s life is definitely on [Marion Zirkle’s] life.”

“The thing that impresses me the most is her tenacity,” Tubbs said. “Despite going through the tragedy, the ministry is just as strong if not stronger.”

Zirkle said she began praying about remarrying more than three years after Jim’s death. “I asked the Lord to bring the right man into my life who would be willing to move to Guatemala and walk this vision with me, a man that would have to recognize that I was in leadership,” she said.

Mr. Right turned out to be Clarence Wright, a 64-year-old former Baptist minister who went on three LWT missions trips starting in 2001 after attending Victory Christian Center in Tulsa, Okla. The two were married in July 2003.

“God is a God of new beginnings,” said Wright, who serves as LWT’s vice president and teaches in its Bible school. “This is so true in my life here at Living Water Teaching.”

Zirkle said future plans include expanding LWT’s aviation department in order to better serve and oversee the ministry’s work in other countries. “I have no doubt that the best days are right ahead of us,” Zirkle said. “There is an expectation and an excitement in my spirit that I can’t explain but know that it is of God.”

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