

Faith In the Midst Of Crisis

In Argentina, an economic collapse has caused the middle class to disappear.

Yet Christians here are still giving their money—and their very lives—to reach a broken nation.

The little Latin boy's eyebrows and mouth tilt downward while his dark eyes glisten, revealing an anxiety that no 5-year-old should know. Javier doesn't understand the financial nightmare that has cast Argentina into an uncertain future. He just knows that today he will be fed at a small church in Escobar, a suburb of Buenos Aires.

Betty Cruz, the pastor's wife who directs the feeding operation, sighs as she tells Javier's story. "He lives in a tiny little house on a mud street," she explains. "His parents' house is made out of cardboard. They live more in the street than in their house."

Cruz turns and sees 8-year-old Carina and her 7-year-old sister, Margalite. The two girls are huddled close to each other, the fear in their eyes telling a different story, one of sexual abuse.

"They had sexual contact with their brothers and cousins, and they were very ashamed about that. But they gave their problems to Jesus," Cruz says. "They don't want to talk much about it."

Javier, Carina and Margalite are among the 80 to 90 kids who walk 25 blocks to be fed each Saturday by Christian Family Center, a congregation of 150. Often, it's the last meal the children receive before Mondays, when those in public school

are fed lunch. Preschoolers are less fortunate since they don't get free meals.

The economic crisis that has rocked Argentina for more than a year now has affected all churches here, including Christian Family Center. Even though church funds have shrunk, the number of children attending the Saturday feeding has risen by 40 percent. Nevertheless, Cruz is undaunted by the odds stacked against her. In fact, she has a vision to buy abandoned property adjacent to the church so she can build a boarding school for the kids.

"We do the feeding every Saturday. Every week we trust in the Lord," Cruz says. "This is the provision of the Lord because we don't know who these people are, and they don't know us."

Standing Strong Amid Poverty

The outstanding work of Cruz and her husband, Enrique, is one example of how the church in Argentina is ministering out of its poverty. They have little, yet like the widow who was praised by Jesus for giving her only mite, they give all to help those less fortunate. While the country's economic crisis has wrought desperation and distress among Argentina's population, Christians in this South American country remain strong in faith.

"God is taking us to a lower level so we can raise up our eyes and see the Lord," says Carlos Purat, pastor of Union Assembly of God in Buenos Aires. Depression and emotional disorders have skyrocketed, Purat says, as people try to cope with the economic chaos unleashed last year. Many suicides go unreported.

Argentina's middle class, once the strongest in South America, has disappeared. In the last 16 months unemployment has risen to 20 percent. Almost half the nation's households live at or below the poverty line, and since January the peso has lost 70 percent of its value.

Jobs have been eliminated, salaries have been cut, and prices keep climbing. Meanwhile, the government has frozen savings and halted pension payments. "Only the air is free in Argentina," one man says.

Purat says it's an especially difficult time for pastors who have their hands full with needy church members. "We are helping the people see God in the midst of adversity," he adds.

Alberto "Tito" Salazar, founder of The World Needs Christ Evangelistic Ministries based near Atlanta, led a team of evangelists to Buenos Aires last year when the peso exchanged with the dollar at a ratio of 1-to-1. When he took another team this past March, it was as if he had entered a different country.

On the first day of the March trip, the exchange rate of pesos to dollars was . Within three days, the peso's value had dropped to 4-to-1. The once-prosperous nation was thrown into turmoil.

"It's a precious time, a time of crisis," Salazar says. He contends that all the miracles recorded in Scripture "with no exception happened in a time of crisis."

Claudio Freidzon, pastor of one of the nation's largest

churches, King of Kings Church in Buenos Aires, echoes that sentiment. "Sometimes the worst time could be the best time," Freidzon told Charisma. He noted how Isaiah 6 describes the prophet's "best year" of revelation of the Lord as the year of King Uzziah's death, when a prosperous reign ended.

Freidzon, who was a spokesperson for the revival that shook Argentina in the early 1990s, says he has noted two important aspects of how the church has coped with the current crisis: a move toward unity and a new fervor for prayer.

"It's a new time for relationship between pastors and different denominations," Freidzon says. "We are praying together and encouraging each other. I am in relationship and community with pastors from all over."

Before the crisis, prayer meetings at Freidzon's church of 12,000 drew modest crowds. Now, people sometimes stand outside the building because there are no seats. "This has happened all over the country," he says.

Freidzon says large public prayer rallies are held periodically. In March, some 10,000 believers gathered in the historic Plaza de Mayo outside the presidential palace in Buenos Aires to pray for the nation. It was the same site where violent demonstrations erupted last December.

Troubled Times

Argentina's long-standing economic woes worsened in 1989, when inflation reached 3,000 percent and foreign debt \$58 billion. In 1991, the government implemented radical monetary reforms and soon after pegged the peso to the U.S. dollar. Inflation

fell sharply and by 1995 was down to 4 percent.

The recovery was short-lived, as domestic and foreign economic factors continued to destabilize the country's economy, prompting depositors to withdraw their savings from banks on several occasions. To allay the fears of anxious citizens, the government appealed for loans from the International Monetary Fund. Observers have predicted Argentina will default—resulting in the largest debt default in history.

The crisis reached a flashpoint in December when rioting left 22 dead and 250 injured. President Fernando de la Rúa resigned as a result of the unrest. Three other politicians tried to run the country for the next few months, but all stepped down. Observers don't expect the current president, Eduardo Duhalde, to stay in office long.

Why such chaos in a nation where evangelical Christians have been gaining influence?

Evangelist Carlos Annacondia told Charisma that the prosperity Argentina enjoyed for years might have caused the church to prefer the comforts of life over seeking the Lord. "It gave us lots of things, and it took away some things," he says of the country's rise in economic stature during the 1990s.

An unusual spiritual awakening stirred Argentina in the mid-1980s. Some observers say it came because the loss of the Falkland Islands War to Britain in 1982 humbled the nation. Annacondia began staging huge evangelistic events, often winning thousands to Christ in one night. But the fervor of those days waned in the mid-1990s, and he began focusing more of his efforts overseas.

"We grew more materially, but we shrunk in spiritual ways," Annacondia says of the church in his homeland. "We lost strength."

Annacondia believes the church in Argentina must return to its "ancient days" when there was a simple but gritty faith often displayed in street preaching. "The only way out is God," he says of the current crisis.

Everyone in Argentina has been affected by the crisis. Freidzon's church is in a more affluent part of the city, yet the crisis has hit hard. "People who never struggled with financial problems are struggling now," he says.

Despite a drop in tithes and offerings, Freidzon's church continues to give. Last year his congregation donated more than 26,000 pounds of food. In the first four months of this year, they distributed 23,000 pounds.

The church has also established a free job-training school where people can learn new skills. This has become an evangelistic tool, Freidzon says, because about a third of the people enrolled are unbelievers. The church helps defray tuition costs for the 280 children who attend its Christian school. In addition, a new sanctuary is being built to accommodate a growing congregation.

Freidzon is encouraged by the many faxes and e-mails he receives from Christians around the world. He wants people to pray for his country, yet he knows God has allowed the crisis to draw people to Himself. "All the time we are asking God for forgiveness because we lost some things that He gave us," Freidzon says.

Hugo Solís, president of one of Buenos Aires' pastoral associations, also says he sees God's hand in the midst of the crisis.

"Argentina's people were living with a very selfish attitude in the past," he says, adding that the current crisis "is an appropriate time to preach the gospel."

People have a broken spirit, Solís says, and many are seeking spiritual answers either in the church or in the occult, which has been a part of Argentina's culture for centuries. The people have to turn somewhere because they've lost confidence in the government, he says.

In March, Salazar and some members of his team were able to meet privately with Secretary General Anibal Fernández, Argentina's No. 2 man.

At the meeting, held in the presidential palace in Buenos Aires, Fernández welcomed prayer support and said government officials are very worried about the future. "We believe if God helps us, we are going to go on with life," he added.

"I am Catholic, but I have a good relationship with evangelicals in this country," Fernández says. "The reality is that we are Christians, and we are brothers in God." That was a radical statement coming from a top official in a country that—until 1994—required its president to be Roman Catholic. Today, religious tensions are still severe, but evangelicals are gaining credibility in society.

Salazar, Fernández, other government officials and local pastors all agree on one point: The true crisis in Argentina

is not economic. The crisis is really moral and spiritual, they say. Unity in Christ—a unity that spans denominational lines—will be Argentina’s salvation, Salazar says.

“I believe it’s impossible to be a leader among people if you don’t have the vision to unite the people first,” Salazar says. “This is not only the key for the church, it’s the key for the government and the key for the nation.”

A Time for Humility

Revivalist Sergio Scataglini, who moved his ministry from Argentina to the United States two years ago, says people often ask him why a nation that was so blessed with spiritual revival in one decade has plunged into disaster in the next.

“I think pastors in Argentina only embraced half of the revival that God sent us,” Scataglini says. “We neglected the other half.”

While believers rejoiced in the miracles and widespread conversions of the 1980s and early 1990s, pastors did not heed the call to united prayer that was issued at the same time, Scataglini explains. “We focused on our churches, but we neglected our cities. And we got distracted by our blessings,” he adds.

There are signs that church leaders are now heeding the call to prayer. More than 200 pastors now gather every Thursday morning in Buenos Aires to pray for the broken nation, Scataglini says.

Daniel Puccio, executive director of one of the nation's largest Christian newspapers, the monthly El Puente, says the publication has served to unify denominations. The paper's circulation has been cut from 75,000 to 15,000 because of the crisis, but Puccio feels the publication's mission of promoting unity in Christ is more important than ever.

"With that unity, something is going to happen—an explosion of the power of the Holy Spirit," he says.

Explosive power of the Spirit was evident when Salazar and his team ministered at a March conference that drew some 400 pastors. Salazar had heard reports of strife among clergy, and he wanted to encourage reconciliation.

"The church is not yours. You didn't purchase it," Salazar told the pastors. "You should not say 'my church' but 'the church that the Lord has given me to pastor.'"

Salazar exhorted the pastors to lay down their personal agendas, make commitments to support one another and stop trying to build their own personal kingdoms. In an extended time of ministry, these ministers let down their guards and, through hugs and tears, committed to support one another.

For Salazar, unity in the church cannot be overestimated. "The lack of maturity produces division," he says. "We fight about things that are not really important. We can be very efficient without being effective."

Salazar believes God's plan is for ministry to come not only from a handful of high-profile ministers but also from teams of ministers banding together. During the March trip, 29

evangelists—some independent, some with their own ministries—joined with a worship team from Resurrection Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, to minister at 40 churches in Buenos Aires.

The evangelists were predominantly from the United States, but included ministers from Denmark, Great Britain and Liberia. Salazar's organization, The World Needs Christ, assembles evangelists for the blitzing of entire areas with the gospel. He plugs himself in as just another team member.

Purat says the pastors conference had a huge impact on those who desperately needed a touch from God and to hear the message about unity. Of all that happened during the time The World Needs Christ team was there, "I think this is the primary thing that will remain and endure," he says. "Everybody's talking about unity."

Purat says many walls between pastors fell during the conference as pastors forgave one another. "In my experience, I have never seen anything like it," he says.

While many ministries may avoid travel to Argentina because of economic factors, some ministers have taken the opposite approach. Jorge Gonzáles is a Peruvian minister who was addicted to drugs for years.

He says he saw his mother kill herself before his eyes and then spent 10 years in prison before God saved him at age 40. He now ministers to drug addicts.

After opening rehab centers in Peru, Gonzáles came to Argentina about five months ago. Instead of deterring him, the

economic crisis attracted him.

“I came knowing what was happening,” he says of the crisis. “For me, I think it’s the best time because I’m a man of faith.”

Gonzáles takes 10 men at a time through an intensive nine-month, live-in program in which they are set free from drugs and trained for ministry. The center in Argentina has many needs, but Gonzáles trusts God to provide.

“Everything is by faith,” he says. Despite the country’s problems, Gonzáles loves Argentina. In fact, he says he plans to die there.

As the church in Argentina faces this test, they do not want to stand alone.

“It is a great encouragement to know that there are believers in other parts of the world praying for us in this time of crisis,” Purat says. “We want to ask the believers in the United States to pray that God can transform the country of Argentina forever.”

While these prayers are coveted, Purat says it’s hard for people to understand the crisis without seeing it firsthand. He adds: “The only way for Americans to understand what we are going through is for them to be with us.”

When the Peso Failed

Some say the current crisis has left Argentines more open to the gospel.

Susan Martin, a teacher, missionary and translator living in Buenos Aires, is feeling the brunt of Argentina's economic crisis along with everyone else in this city of 14 million. Like so many others, she has savings in the bank, but it does her no good.

Her bank will only release her money at an exchange rate of , she says, making the money worth about half of its actual value. Banks will release funds at the going exchange rate only to buy a new car or land. Otherwise, she will have to wait 10 years to get to her money.

"I may die in 10 years," she tells Charisma.

Although Martin is unhappy with the policies, there is little she can do. "It's stealing from me, and it's stealing from God," she adds.

Yet the nation's leaders feel severe action is needed to avoid a run on the banks. In mid-April, the government took a drastic step to battle the banking crisis by indefinitely suspending all banking activity. The financial freeze may stave off hyperinflation, but analysts say it risks creating renewed outbursts of violence as the public contends with yet another shackle on any last vestiges of financial freedom they once enjoyed.

As the new economic reality takes hold of the country, Argentina's middle class—once the strongest in South America—is vanishing. In its wake are people who have a house

and car but little money for buying food or other necessities.

A new mind-set is required. One pastor told Charisma that “the rich man is not the one who has the most, but the one who needs the least.” People are struggling to find practical ways to cope.

Barter clubs have popped up across the country. An unemployed auto mechanic can trade his services for milk and eggs or maybe a person with access to meat can trade it for other foods. Such clubs have become highly organized, Martin says, so people can swap goods and services, bypassing paper money altogether.

While many men have lost their jobs, many women are finding odd jobs to help provide for their families. This leaves men at home to cook and clean, prompting some pastors to complain that traditional roles for men and women are now threatened.

Kara Sharff, 25, a North Dakota woman who has lived as a missionary in Buenos Aires for the last two years, says not all women find jobs. “You have to be young and thin and pretty,” she says.

The crisis has left many families without hope. Many are trying to leave the country to find a new life elsewhere. Some cannot bear up under the stress. Martin heard of a man in deep financial trouble who killed his entire family and then turned the gun on himself.

Sharff says she’s seen the effects of the crisis firsthand in the lives of fellow church members and friends. “There are a

lot of families that are out of work and getting only one meal a day," she says. But in this time of disillusionment and distress, people are much more receptive to the gospel.

"They are open for something new," Sharff says.

The crisis also has hurt Christian outreach ministries. Sergio Scataglini, who pastored in the city of La Plata before moving to the United States two years ago, says orphanages that receive government support were notified that the support was to be cut in June. The Refuge of the King orphanage in La Plata, which Scataglini and his wife founded in 1987, could lose more than 25 percent of its funding.

"We are going through the panic of this moment," Scataglini says. "But people are giving more sacrificially these days."

Richard Daigle is an Atlanta-based reporter. He traveled to Argentina in March to compile this report.

Charisma is raising money to help the Christian Family Center's feeding program in Buenos Aires, the Refuge of the King orphanage in La Plata and the feeding program of King of Kings Church in Buenos Aires. Send your tax-deductible gift to Christian Life Missions, Attn: Argentina Fund, P.O. Box 952248, Lake Mary, FL 32795-2248. Make checks payable to Christian Life Missions.