

Demanding ‘Protection Tax,’ Gang Members Stab Church of God Pastor to Death

A Church of God pastor in the city of Choloma, Honduras, was murdered on Thursday by two young gang members who had earlier demanded a “protection tax” to keep church members safe from their attacks.

Maria Francisca Sevilla, 39, the mother of three children, was co-pastor with her husband, Geovanny, of a church in this third-largest city of the nation. According to police reports, she was surprised in her home by her attackers when she returned from taking one of her children to an afternoon school session. The pastoral residence is attached to the church building. She was stabbed repeatedly, fighting against her assailants and calling for help, but she died in the church doorway before help arrived.

Police learned that a year ago, gang members had extorted money from the pair, threatening to harm the children and church members if payment was not made. It is not known if subsequent demands were made, but in November the pastoral couple and one of their children were kidnapped, beaten and dumped in a drainage ditch in San Pedro Sula, about 15 miles from their home. On yet another occasion, the husband was attacked, tied up and left in his vehicle, which the gang intended to burn; however, police patrolling the area arrived in time to rescue him.

“This dedicated couple, who ministered in their church for 10 years, could have moved away for safety, according to what I have been told, but they felt called to the city, and they remained even though they were in danger,” says Tim Hill, director of Church of God World Missions.

Despite repeated threats and attacks, the couple continued their evangelistic efforts.

Besides being the economic capital of Honduras, San Pedro Sula has the country's highest homicide rate, this in a nation of 8 million that averages 20 murders daily. In a study of 50 cities worldwide, it registered as the deadliest, leading many to describe San Pedro Sula as the murder capital of the world. Choloma is a 20-minute drive away.

In a recent *Los Angeles Times* article, it was reported that Honduran cities are overrun by rival gangs.

"The gangs charge what residents call a 'war tax,' extorted from homes and businesses, down to the smallest fruit vendor. You don't pay, you get out. And if you don't go, you get killed," the newspaper reported.