

Missionaries Reach Out to Venezuelan Non-Believers

Southern Baptist missionary Joe Busching casually approaches the Venezuelan college students laughing and chatting on the campus lawn. After striking up a conversation, he asks if they'd answer a few simple questions. The students agree.

"What do you think about God?" Busching, from Georgia, asks the first young man. The student shrugs.

"I guess you'd say I'm agnostic, but I don't really believe in God," he says. "I mean, it's fine for other people, but I just don't think He exists."

Busching turns to another student.

"What do you think happens when you die?" asks Busching, an International Mission Board missionary in Caracas, Venezuela.

"I'm not really sure," the student replies. "Maybe if I've been a good person, I'll go to heaven. But it's more likely nothing will happen."

Other students echo these beliefs at more than a dozen universities across Caracas, including the University of Caracas, where about 70,000 students attend. While many students claim to be Catholic because of their culture or family history, most are either non-practicing or, in some cases, openly atheist. A few are involved in local indigenous cults rooted in witchcraft and idol worship.

'Pray for Open Doors'

About 5 million people live in Caracas, and only about 1 percent of them are evangelicals, IMB missionaries say. Thousands of the spiritually lost are students.

To reach them, IMB missionary Susanne Arnold helps Venezuelan

Christian students in local churches begin campus Bible studies.

“My heart is to see students coming to study the Bible,” says Arnold, from Missouri. “Even if they aren’t Christians, they need a safe place where they can come and ask questions.”

So far, Arnold has helped students begin Bible studies at three universities. Leading a Bible study in English opens doors for evangelism by attracting students who want to learn English. But sometimes the schools push back. Proficiency in English is a graduation requirement for many universities, so school officials don’t want free English help competing with paid classes.

“We need something ministry-minded but not threatening,” Arnold says. “We’re still figuring out the best way to do it. Pray for open doors on university campuses and for students who are already Christians to rise up and take hold of the vision to share the Gospel. Pray for the church [to see] their responsibility in the Great Commission.”

Workplace Evangelism

IMB missionaries and their Venezuelan colleagues are praying for open doors among another unreached segment of Caracas society, too.

If you’re one of the 5 million people living in Caracas, you’re either rich or poor. There’s little in between. Most of the population lives in the dangerous, impoverished slums that sprawl across the mountains surrounding the city. But casting a wide shadow over the slums, the skyscrapers of the professional district represent the wealthiest—and least-evangelized—part of Caracas.

“The people who live in that area are rich, cultured, self-sufficient and have little interest in spiritual things,” says IMB missionary Mike Bennett, who is developing some new ways to reach professionals. “Their life is work and making more

money, so somehow or another we have to reach them with the gospel, and traditional evangelism techniques won't work."

Because of these professionals' hectic schedules, it's nearly impossible to get them to attend home Bible studies after work, Bennett says.

"Even though they might have the desire [to attend], they don't have the energy," explains Bennett, a Tennessean. "So I think we have to [take] the gospel to them where they're working. We've started praying that the Lord would burden [Venezuelans] to ... reach their colleagues for Christ where they work and that they would see their workplace as a mission field."

So far, Venezuelan believers have begun several at-work Bible studies in Caracas and a nearby city. In one hospital, the director of the Intensive Care Unit began a weekly Bible study for her colleagues and led several of them to Christ. Those employees then began sharing Christ with their patients. Dozens of them, many on their deathbeds, have accepted Christ.

At one company, Christians began workplace Bible studies that eventually gained international attention. The gospel changed the lives of the workers so much that productivity increased and employees became much more positive—so positive, in fact, that the European owners of the company traveled to Venezuela to see what was happening. When a few employees complained about the Bible studies, the owners responded that they fully supported whatever it was that was raising profits and decreasing employee conflict.

One believer who works at a university began a weekly on-campus Bible study for her co-workers. She now has 30 people attending every Friday morning. About half of them are new believers.

A 'Complete' Professional

A busy lifestyle isn't the only obstacle in reaching

Venezuelan professionals, Bennett says.

While many of them live in financial comfort, they often suffer from poor self-esteem and are unhappy, he says. Bennett organizes conferences on values designed to teach a professional how to be more successful and content in his work and personal life. These events address topics like success, integrity and peace in the home. They also focus on self-esteem and how to establish an identity in Christ.

Attendees are then invited to follow-up seminars and “formation groups.”

“If you invite a professional to a Bible study, you won’t get anybody to come,” Bennett explains. “So we say a formation group is going to help you become a well-rounded person. We will teach you how to become successful professionally, as a parent and how to be successful spiritually, because we believe that a complete professional is all these things.”

Bennett is encouraged by the number of people who have accepted Christ through these formation groups and by the growing initiative of Venezuelan believers to witness for Christ in their workplace. Still, most professionals in Venezuela remain unreached.

Bennett requests prayer that God will work among the hearts of these professionals.

“Pray that they will humble themselves and realize their need for a Savior,” he says, “and that God will raise up more [Venezuelan] believers to reach their own people in the workplace.”

To learn more about how God is working in Caracas, go to .

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