

Prayers – and food – for Venezuela

AN ECONOMIC CRISIS in the South American nation creates a flood of refugees – and opportunities to serve.

BY ERIK TRYGGESTAD | THE CHRISTIAN CHRONICLE

We can't save the whole country, but we can help." Michael Hursey and Russ Garner believe that fervently when they speak about Venezuela, a place with a special connection to the congregation they serve as elders, the West Broward Church of Christ in Plantation, Fla.

The 400-member church launched an effort to raise \$1 million for Venezuela aid by the end of the year and plans to use the funds to help members of Churches of Christ in the South American nation to survive — and to share food and Jesus with their neighbors.

Venezuela is in the midst of an ever-deepening economic crisis. Shortages of food and medicine beset the country's population of 32.8 million souls — a number that's declining rapidly. An estimated 2.3 million Venezuelans have fled the country since the crisis began about five years ago, the United Nations reports.

"The exodus of Venezuelans from the country is one of Latin America's largest mass-population movements in history," said William Spindler, spokesman for the U.N.'s High Commissioner for Refugees.

Most flee to other South American countries, including Brazil, Colombia and Ecuador, where more than 4,000 Venezuelans per day entered the country during the first week of August, Spindler said.

Some come to the U.S.

On a recent Tuesday evening, several of the West Broward church's Venezuelan members took time from their weekly Bible study to speak with *The Christian Chronicle* about the economic crisis in their homeland.

A few of the Venezuelans have worshiped with the south Florida congregation for decades. Others, including Christians in their 70s, moved to the U.S. only months ago because of the harsh environment back home.

One by one, the Venezuelans



PHOTO PROVIDED BY CHRIS FRY, GREAT CITIES MISSIONS

Serving Venezuelans in next-door Colombia

In Cúcuta, Colombia, a border city that has become the temporary home of thousands of Venezuelans fleeing economic turmoil in their home country, members of the Church of Christ on Merrick Drive in Ardmore, Okla., hand out sandwiches in a public park. The Christians worked with members of a Church of Christ planted in Cúcuta last year through Great Cities Missions. See christianchronicle.org to see our previous coverage of the church plant and find updates on Venezuela relief efforts.

shared heartbreaking stories of rolling blackouts, waiting all day in line for bread and leaving with nothing, grandmothers in their 90s who need medicine and disposable undergarments and can't find either.

And there are protests, intimidation — even death.

The Venezuelan Christians are angry and ashamed by their once-prosperous country's man-made crisis. They're also afraid for their relatives still in Venezuela, and they pray daily — sometimes hourly — for their safety.

The church plans to use its contacts in Venezuela to ship packages of vitamins, medicine and a non-perishable, high-nutrition, yogurt-like food to members of Churches of Christ there. The Florida congregation also plans to send Spanish-language gospel tracts.

Far from home, the Venezuelans have found a new family in their small group, one of four Spanish-speaking small groups sponsored

by the West Broward church. The congregation also has 13 English-speaking groups that meet in homes from Miami to Coral Springs and Fort Lauderdale, said coordinator Anthony Fischetto. A few of the Venezuelan immigrants have been baptized at West Broward, he added.

'WE STUDIED, WE ATE, AND GOD PROVIDED'

About 900 miles north of the West Broward church, the Brentwood Hills Church of Christ in Nashville, Tenn., also shares close ties to Venezuela. For nearly a quarter-century the 1,500-member church has supported the work of Leo Rojas, minister for the Barquisimeto Church of Christ, which meets about 200 miles west of Venezuela's capital, Caracas.

Earlier this year, while visiting Nashville, Rojas spoke to the church about his congregation's history and current challenges.

"Inflation's been 36 thousand percent so far this year," said Enoch

Rinks, a former missionary to Paraguay, as he translated for Rojas. "His wife is a nurse. Her salary each month is enough to buy two kilos of rice. ... There was a little baby at the church who developed cancer. They couldn't get medicine. She died."

Despite the hardships, the Barquisimeto church stays true to its mission, sharing its food and its Savior with the community, Rojas said. A small group of women launched the congregation, which had 17 worshipers meeting in a public square when they invited Rojas to become their minister.

About 350 people worship with the church now, though many families have left, Rojas said. The church has helped establish 35 other Churches of Christ in Venezuela and experienced 410 baptisms last year.

"We work together as a team," Rojas said. We have about 100 preachers in all different parts of the country. We meet together two or three times a year, we talk about how we can start more and more churches."

In March and April the church sponsored gatherings for about 130 preachers.

"People had to bring their own sleeping bags and plates," Rojas said.

Nonetheless, "we studied, we ate, and God provided everything."

The church sponsored a recent youth conference at a school where a church

member serves as principal. The Christians shared what little they had.

"If there was a family that had two bags of rice, they gave one of those bags of rice for the youth retreat," Rojas said. "So, little by little, we got all the food together because this is the future of the church. If we don't work with the young people, the world is offering a lot of things that will ruin their lives."

FIND LINKS to church-sponsored Venezuela relief efforts at christianchronicle.org.



Rojas