

■ Early Education Services

Giving and Receiving

Christian schooling is not new in Latin America. The grandfather of the Christian schools in Latin America will celebrate its 200-year anniversary next year. Four others have passed the 100-year mark, and 117 have completed 25 years or more.*

In the past, preschool education was not always an integral part of Christian schooling. But the explosion of interest in early education has reached Latin America, opening opportunities for Christians and Christian schools to expand their circle of ministry.

Manitas a la Obra, a relatively young preschool in Guatemala City, attracts middle-class parents through the excellent education, the moral teaching, and the loving atmosphere it offers. Karenine Aldana, the director, estimates that about 30 percent of the school families are not connected with evangelical churches. Most of their kindergarten graduates continue on in Christian elementary schools.

Believing that young children learn through concrete examples and personal involvement, Manitas a la Obra offers parents and children the opportunity to share with those in need through its Helping Hands program. During the past year, parents sold pizzas to raise money to repair the desks in a Christian ministry that reaches out to children whose parents are scavengers in one of the huge garbage dumps in Guatemala City. Then Manitas a la Obra children and parents took pizzas to the children and spent the day playing with them. To help fund treatment for children who have cancer, Manitas a la Obra parents and children participated in a run for life. Each class adopted a particular child who was undergoing treatment and started every day by dropping change in a container that had their child's picture on it. Their next project is a raffle to provide scholarships for children in a Christian school in a poorer section of the city.

Part of this outreach takes place through the witness of the children who share what they learn about their heavenly Father.

Another preschool program that is having a profound impact in some of the low socioeconomic areas of Quito, Ecuador, was begun by Francisco and Clemencia Sola, whose hearts were touched by the conditions in the community where their church had an outreach ministry. The people in the community had limited food and medical care.

To keep their children off the streets, the parents in these areas of Quito would lock their preschool children in their houses—without food—when they left for work, expecting the four- and five-year-olds to care for the younger children. The Solas opened a childcare center, or nursery, in Carmen Bajo to provide a safe, loving environment, meals, and medical care for these little ones. “I feel safe at the center,” young Sebastian confides. “I learn, receive love, and I eat. I like to come. It makes me feel happy.”

The nursery expanded to include a preschool program and then an elementary school. This combined ministry reaches out to the children's families as well. Part of this outreach takes place through the witness of the children who share what they learn

about their heavenly Father. One mother, although acknowledging that her living conditions were still precarious, said, “My little child, even though she is much younger than I, has shown me a way to be happy. She tells me that God is always close to us, that He cares for us, that He will never leave us.... I thought that God was unreachable, but now I know that He is by my side.”

The Love and Hope Foundation, which is the organization behind the school, also reaches out to families through the church services held in the school building on Sundays and through the workshops and a school for parents aimed at helping them with parenting skills. In addition, the foundation has started one microenterprise, a bakery. The foundation wants to start more microenterprises to provide work and a sense of responsibility and hope for parents. Clemencia Sola, who leads the foundation with her husband, estimates that more than a quarter of the parents and older siblings are demonstrating truly changed lives and that the rest are in the process.

Two ACSI schools have become involved in this ministry. For the past five summers, student teams from Whitefield Academy in Mableton, Georgia, have ministered through construction projects and teaching opportunities. The kindergarten classes—encouraged by their teachers, Jeanne East, Tracey Anne Kirkham, and Adrienne Miller—have raised over \$700 this past year to bless the preschoolers of Carmen Bajo. Alliance Academy International in Quito is involved through director Dr. David Wells and his wife, Lois, who are members of the program's educational advisory board. They've helped with strategic planning and teacher training, and now some of the older Carmen Bajo children are part of the AWANA program run by Alliance Academy's student outreach ministry.

The opportunities are myriad. Preschoolers may be the smallest members of the Christian schooling movement, but giving or receiving, they and their teachers are part of God's plan, and they are working to accomplish God's will in Latin America and around the world.

Note

*These numbers are based on the information in the database of ACSI Latinoamerica.

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