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¿Qué Pasa en Bogotá?

The modern skyline of Bogotá poses dramatically against the dark shadow of surrounding mountains. Boasting almost 8,250,000 people, this burgeoning metropolis near the geographic center of Colombia represents one more exciting story of what God is doing in the world's cities. Bogotá added almost a million new residents between 1999 and 2005. It is known as the Athens of South America with its many universities and libraries. Who would expect to find a large Middle Eastern population here, made up of mostly Lebanese and Syrian immigrants? How do you begin to wrap your mind around a public school system brimming with 900,000 students?

In the middle of this bubbling pot of humanity are Craig and Fran Lingo. They have participated in the planting of five churches in Bogotá and two missions in mid-sized cities close by. When they arrived in 1973, the city was less than half the size that it is today. By the 90s, Bogotá was considered one of the most violent cities in the world. Their son, 13, saw somebody dump a body in a ditch. Pablo Escobar was bombing many areas of Bogotá and Medellín beginning in the mid 80s.

Americans were targets for political kidnappings. A number of missionaries left the city, some ordered home by their mission boards. Craig and Fran say, "We never felt we were under any direct threat. We never considered leaving." Come on, let's not kid ourselves. They were serving in an extremely dangerous atmosphere. Because they stayed, they gained much credibility with the nationals. Whatever the field, valuable ground is often

gained in the face of great risk.

"Beachheads must be established" says Lingo. "A beachhead is not going to constitute a new church with 50 to 150 members at the end of a door-to-door canvas like it was in the Bible-belt past. Beachheads in places like Bogotá take time — a lot of time. It takes a growing body of experience, home-grown leadership, a network, and an awareness of potential inroads." Lingo commented on the role of availability saying, "Opportunity to serve won't necessarily come in familiar packages that we create and control."

This speaks to their recent experience of gaining access to the public school system. With the enthusiastic support of a priest who is in charge of a program mandating that public schools have at least one moral values outing per year, the Lingos saw an opportunity to utilize their camp to connect with and evangelize public school students. They trained their church members and have served 1,200 students so far. Hundreds of parents responded to an offer of classes on various subjects pertaining to teenagers.

Fran and Craig see God taking the base that they've been a part of building, using it, and leveraging it to evangelize at a whole new level. Craig and Fran are now shepherding and mentoring leaders they won to Christ, helping them reach the new generation.

In the face of ingrained cultural Roman Catholicism, through decades of political upheaval and violence, surrounded by the mayhem of major drug cartel activity, the Lingos model what it takes to impact a great city. They're in it for the long haul. After years of

planting and watering, they not only see a harvest of local churches but now the potential of these churches engaging in the kind of aggressive urban evangelism that penetrates new social circles, new neighborhoods, and new spheres of influence.

It would have been so easy to look at the public school opportunity and say, "It's too big, it's too much, it's too unwieldy, there's too much uncertainty. We won't have the kind of control that leaves us feeling comfortable." Rather, they saw it as a gospel opportunity. Scores and scores of new Christians later, they feel they are just beginning a new chapter.

The Lingos have also experienced what God's people have experienced again and again in varying circumstances. I like to call it, "Unexpected Allies." Who would have thought it would be a priest who would be their enthusiastic helper in getting connected with public school students! We must remember Joseph's friend, the cup-bearer, and King Cyrus, and the Philippian jailer. God delights in raising up unexpected allies to demonstrate His power.

Stand on a mountain ridge with the city of Bogotá flung out below you, stretching to the horizon. Jump off a bus on a bustling corner in Bosa, one of over a thousand localities forming an extensive network of neighborhoods. Look up and down the teeming streets. Take in the colorful shops, energetic sidewalk merchants, the traffic, uniformed students with backpacks, and senior citizens. Seen with the natural eye it's just another large city....just another busy street. Look again with spiritual eyes. God is at work in Bogotá.