

# An Educational Odyssey

DENNIS CARLSON

Developed by local church leaders over a twelve-year period, a new Spanish Sunday-school curriculum is impacting lives across Latin America.

**I**t all started when Margie Swenson went looking for something to do.

It was September 1989 and Swenson, a Covenant missionary, was living in Ecuador with her family. The Swensons, along with the rest of the Covenant missionary staff from Colombia, had been evacuated because of unrest in that country, and were in a kind of limbo.

So Swenson pulled out a project she had been thinking about—creating Sunday-school curriculum specifically for Latin American Covenant churches. The idea had come up during a meeting of church leaders in Colombia the previous year. The group had come up with an outline, but no one had had time to work on it.

With the move to Ecuador, Swenson found herself with time on her hands. “Because we were all living in the same building and had nothing to do with our time,” says Swenson, “I called the teachers in our group together and laid out the idea. We began talking through how we might create lessons for the first topics on the outline.”

While most of the missionaries left Ecuador a few weeks later, Swenson and her family were permanently reassigned there. With the blessing and encouragement of the national Covenant church leaders in Ecuador, she

took the ideas from that brainstorming session and started writing.

She had no idea it would take ten years for the project to be done.

“If I had realized the scope of the project and the cost, both financially and in terms of time and energy, I suspect I would have rejected the idea,” says Swenson. “But, God graciously did not reveal those things to me.”

Nearly 5,000 pages long, *El Pacto con Dios*, a comprehensive, twelve-year Sunday-school curriculum was finally completed in 2000. Since then, it has been used in Covenant churches in Colombia, Ecuador, Chile, Argentina, El Salvador, Mexico, and among Hispanic Covenanters in the United States. Several thousand Sunday-school teachers have been trained in using the materials in their local churches. The Chilean national school system is considering adopting the curriculum for use in public schools as a way of teaching morals and ethics.

Swenson is quick to say that there was no way she could have completed the project by herself. Most of the writing, in fact, was done by a group of Hispanic and Latin American Covenanters that she recruited.

The team got its start when Swenson was on home assignment in 1991. She showed the lessons she had been working on to her friend Evelyn John-

son, then executive director of Christian education and discipleship for the Covenant Church. Johnson saw the potential of the project, and put her in touch with Stan Olsen, an associate pastor of Hillcrest Covenant Church in Prairie Village, Kansas.

From there the project took off. In 1992 and again in 1996, Hillcrest hosted two-week writers’ workshops, which brought together a dozen writers from Colombia, Ecuador, and Mexico to work on the curriculum.

“The support of Hillcrest was simply overwhelming,” Swenson says. “The church gave sacrificially to the project. People served meals, acted as chauffeurs, prayed, and supported the writers in numerous behind-the-scene ways. They initially got involved because of their relationship with Evelyn. However, once they met and grew to love the writers from Mexico, Colombia, and Ecuador, their commitment never wavered.”

Olsen says that about fifty members of Hillcrest were involved in supporting the conferences. “We were deeply blessed as a congregation and our commitment to missions was deepened greatly through this cross-cultural experience,” he says.

One of the writers was Covenant missionary Pia Restrepo, then a student at North Park Theological Sem-

inary. As the conference got started, Restrepo learned that her father had died in Colombia. Swenson and the other leaders started making plans to get Restrepo home for the funeral, but she refused to go.

“No,” she said, “my father would want me to stay.” Restrepo played such an important role at the conference that she was invited to work with Swenson as an editor.

There were obstacles to overcome at the first conference. “For one thing,” says Swenson, “a number of the writers had little or no experience using computers.” So the first thing organizers did was put together some basic computer training. The group also shaped the details of how they would write the lessons.

At the time she started working on the project, says Swenson, “the only options available to Latin American churches were materials that had been translated from English, written for North American culture.”

But a lesson that works for a Sunday-school class in Minnesota did not always translate well to a classroom in Colombia. And there was another problem. Since U.S. publishers change their product line often, materials that Latin American churches were using one year would not be available the next. The team wanted to create lessons that would reflect the culture of Latin American churches, that were simple to duplicate and use, and that would take students all the way through the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation.

Soon after the first conference, Swenson learned that the funding for the project had fallen through. That put her in a bind—the interest and support from Hispanic churches in the project convinced her that it was meeting a real need, but without funding, the project could not go forward.

“That very same day,” says Swenson, “as I spoke at a seminar about missions in Ecuador, I mentioned that we didn’t have the money to finish the curriculum.” After the seminar, some friends approached her about the need,



A Sunday-school class in Oaxaca, Mexico

Dámaris Adame (right) teaches the new curriculum.



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Students doing a craft from one of the Sunday-school lessons.

Dennis Carlson is a Covenant missionary serving in Mexico.

and donated \$4,000 to keep the project going.

At the second conference, the team worked on sharpening the editorial focus of the project, decided on an art style for the curriculum, and hired artists from Latin America to work on the project.

Swenson and Zayda Orellana, one of the other editors, finished the project in a bedroom in her family's home in Ecuador. The bedroom had been renovated and converted to an office by Bob and Carol Lehman, volunteers from Hillcrest Covenant Church. The team's scanners, computers, and copy machines were all donated by supporters of the project. Because of improvements in technology, the team was able to produce printed copies of



Writers from across Latin America met at Hillcrest Covenant Church to work on the curriculum.

the material, as well as put all 5,000 pages on a CD-ROM. The CD version means that a Spanish-speaking church can acquire their entire Sunday-school curriculum from the Covenant Resource Center for \$10.

After several years of field-testing and revisions, the final curriculum was presented at the CIPE triennial conference, a gathering of Hispanic and Latin American Covenant churches. At that gathering, the president of each national church received a CD version of the Sunday-school materials.

Then came the enormous task of getting the materials into the hands of Christian educators in local churches and then training them to use it.

About the same time that the mate-



A Sunday-school lesson in Oaxaca, Mexico

rials were being completed, Dámaris Adame, who was teaching at a Spanish immersion school in Chicago, applied to serve as a short-term Covenant missionary. Adame, a graduate of Covenant Bible College and North Park University, knew she wanted to serve in South America. She hoped she could use her teaching skills in some kind of training position.

"Then I could help lots of teachers, not just my own class," she says. "When World Mission asked me what country I felt called to, I said, 'Wherever there is a need.' I didn't have a specific country in mind."

Adame, a native of Central Mexico, says she knew about the effectiveness of the new material from firsthand experience. "I've used it frequently since I was seventeen years old, when it wasn't even complete," she says, "and have seen children learning and teachers being excited about having something of this quality accessible to them."

Instead of going to one specific country, Adame was sent out as a kind

of "missionary-at-large," to train local Covenant church leaders using *El Pacto con Dios*.

Those who know Adame say she was the perfect person for the job.

"She comes from a family of Christian educators," says Nancy Reed, coordinator of Hispanic church relations for the Department of World Mission. "Her mother is the director of the David Livingston School in Cuautla, Mexico," says Reed, "a small, flourishing Christian school." Adame's father is pastor of a developing Covenant church in Oaxtepec.

Beginning in January 2001, Adame set out on a two-year odyssey that took her on extended trips to seven countries—Colombia, Ecuador, Chile, Argentina, El Salvador, her native Mexico, and the United States. She visited most of the countries twice, and in a few cases three times. She estimates she slept in more than seventy-five different beds and trained more than 2,000 teachers. For about seven months, she traveled with another short-termer, Katie O'Connor. Her last trip was in January 2003, for a two-week conference in Argentina for children's workers and church leaders.

Adame's work was supported by a diverse coalition of Covenanters. Each national church she visited covered her local travel and living expenses. To pay for her international flights and medical insurance, she received support from the Covenant Church of Mexico, Hillcrest Covenant Church, and her two home churches—Community Covenant Church in Shawnee Mission, Kansas, and Grace Covenant in Chicago.

Adame says that the new Sunday-school materials are "extremely flexible," and can be used as easily in a mountain village in rural Mexico as an urban church in Ecuador. "The lessons are easy to understand," she says, "and you can do most of them with just paper and pencils. Each lesson is taught in a different way, using drama, dia-

CONTINUED ON PAGE 33

### FILLING A CRITICAL NEED

Nancy Reed, coordinator of Hispanic church relations for Covenant World Mission, says that the *El Pacto con Dios* Sunday-school materials are essential to Latin American Covenant churches because their countries have so many young people.

In the U.S., only about 25 percent of the population is under eighteen. The percentages in Latin American countries, according to UNICEF, are much higher.

Argentina, 33 percent  
Colombia, 39 percent  
Ecuador, 40 percent  
Chile, 34 percent  
Mexico, 40 percent