

# FALLOUT FROM A DOWNFALL

**W**hile Christian leaders in the U.S. worried about an overall drop in giving because of the Jimmy Swaggart scandal, Latin leaders saw much deeper repercussions affecting the credibility of the evangelical church in Latin America.

Swaggart's confession of sexual indiscretions had an especially negative impact in Latin America because of his high visibility there through his dubbed TV program. The problem was accentuated in that many Latin evangelicals had so closely identified with the evangelist.

As expected the Latin news media gave major coverage to the scandal, said leaders surveyed by *Latin America Evangelist*. Also as expected, some commentators lumped Swaggart and evangelicals in general into one negative whole.

"The most appalling aspect of his sin, according to these reports, was his hypocrisy in loudly condemning other ministers of the same evil," said Pentecostal author and missionary Paul Hoff in Santiago, Chile.

Some observers also lamented the fact that Swaggart's popular television program was being carried in certain Latin nations even after the scandal broke and after the program's suspension or cancellation on many U.S. outlets.

"The program stayed on here because the time was already paid for," said missionary journalist Bill Allen in Quito, Ecuador.

Representatives of the Evangelical Council of Venezuela visited the Swaggart office in Caracas, and asked that the program be suspended "because of the negative criticisms expressed by evangelicals scandalized by the matter and also by non-Christians."

## "The Swaggart church"

The scandal became particularly embarrassing for those Assemblies of God (AOG) congregations that had taken to calling themselves "the Swag-

gart church" as a way to attract non-believers familiar with his TV program.

"Swaggart's media logo appears on Assemblies church buildings in Bolivia and in even greater numbers in Paraguay," said missionary journalist David Miller.

Some of these churches also lost financially in light of the Swaggart organization's past generous giving to Assemblies of God missions projects (annual donations of nearly \$12 million or about one-fifth of the AOG's foreign-work budget, reported Edward E. Plowman).

An Assemblies missionary in Bolivia had secured a \$200,000 pledge to build a Christian school there. But after the scandal broke, he got an urgent phone call from headquarters advising him to "hold up on that," said Miller.

The Assemblies of God church-planting program in Chile—area of great Pentecostal strength—had been getting \$15,000 a month from the Swaggart organization.

Some Brazilian Christians felt Swaggart's dramatic public confession—replayed there on television—was detrimental, said LAM missionary Ginny Pereira in São Paulo, because "onlookers have said, 'It is easy to be a Christian. If you sin, all you have to do is confess and everything is OK.'"

"One radio reporter said, 'We have enough pastors fooling people here in Brazil without bringing in more from the United States.'"

Shocked Latin evangelicals generally expressed sympathy and forgiveness toward Swaggart, since defrocked by the U.S. Assemblies of God. But they lamented damage already done.

"Much of the public respect for the evangelicals that has been built up over the years has been temporarily lost," said a Pentecostal leader in Chile. "Of course, the church will go on, but our task of converting the lost will be more difficult."

—By John Maust