

Unsi3n Television Network in Cuenca, Ecuador, suffered a major setback earlier this year. On the afternoon of March 28, a spark from a roofer's welding torch ignited a fire that destroyed the station's studios, master control and satellite uplink equipment. A small explosion from the fire alerted all staff members inside, who escaped unharmed.

UNSI3N IS RISING AGAIN

BY JANET WALKER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY AUBRA GEORGE

With a vision to reach Cuenca for Christ, Assemblies of God missionaries Bill and Connie McDonald purchased a station license for Unsi3n television three years ago for only \$50,000. Missions funds and assistance from local believers paid for start-up costs, and Speed the Light bought the station's transmitter.

From that base Unsi3n became the city's number one local television station. The ministry quickly grew into a 24-hour programming network on cable and satellite, proclaiming Christ to all of Ecuador and with a signal reaching more than a dozen Spanish-speaking countries.

Before the fire, Unsi3n was experiencing incredible growth. Representatives from 11 Latin American nations had met in Cuenca with the goal of starting Unsi3n Television in each of their countries. Seven signed agreements.

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Bill McDonald surveys the damage of the March 28 fire.



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Then, on March 28, “three years of struggle and sacrifice were gone in a matter of minutes,” says Bill. “But we were reminded that this is the Lord’s work, not ours, and we put our trust in Him to help us rebuild the station and even make it better.”

Miraculously, within three days the ministry had risen from the ashes and was broadcasting again. A local university donated temporary facilities, and Unsión technicians and engineers pieced together borrowed and reconditioned equipment to get back on the air locally.

When the McDonalds first arrived in Cuenca in 1989, they knew the city’s reputation among church planters as a “missionary graveyard.” Because of strong opposition to evangelicals, few missionaries had ever stayed a full term. But the McDonalds believed God was directing them there. Cuenca is Ecuador’s third-largest city, with a metropolitan population of 500,000.

The McDonalds started Cuenca Christian Center with 11 people in 1990. They were joined by co-pastors Juan and Edith Castro, missionaries from El Salvador, who served with them until 1993. By that time, the church had grown to 250. During the next decade, Cuenca Christian Center grew to 3,000, becoming the largest evangelical church in the city. In addition, the McDonalds added a Christian school and a Bible school and helped plant 20 other churches in the area.

At that point they sensed the urgency to begin the television ministry. They transferred pastoral leadership to Jimmy and Aida Cornejo, an Ecuadorian couple who had accepted Christ at the church.

The church and its outreaches have found favor within Cuenca. “I can remember 16 years ago when we were physically and emo-



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tionally harassed for our faith here,” says Bill. But after the fire a few months ago, “the city came to our aid, and we experienced an incredible groundswell of support.”

From the highest government officials to some of the city’s poorest residents, hundreds of people expressed their concern and support for Unsión.

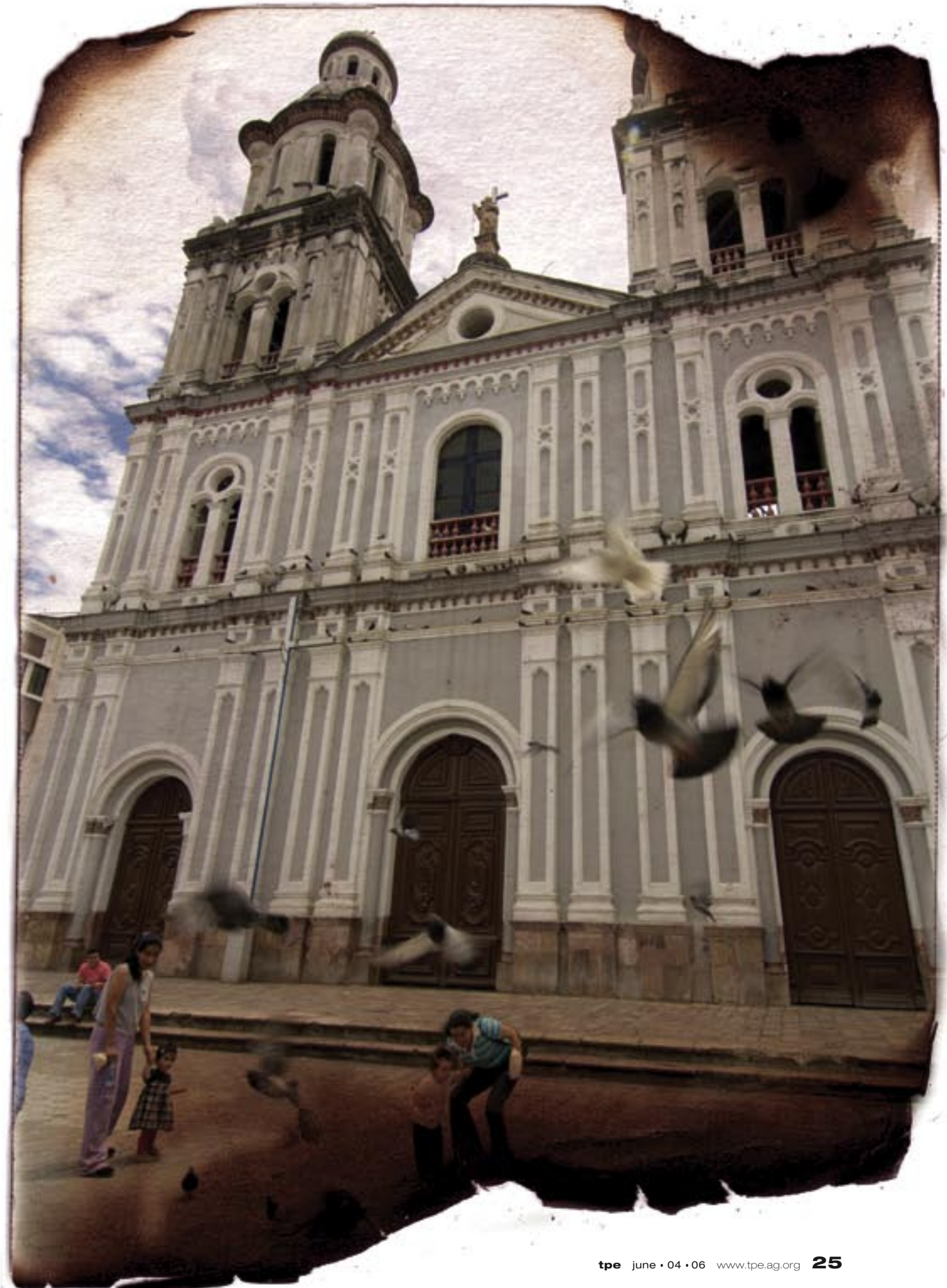
“We received letters from some of the nation’s most prestigious government leaders and institutions,” says Bill, “including Ecuador’s vice president, the Cuenca mayor’s office and the National Congress.”

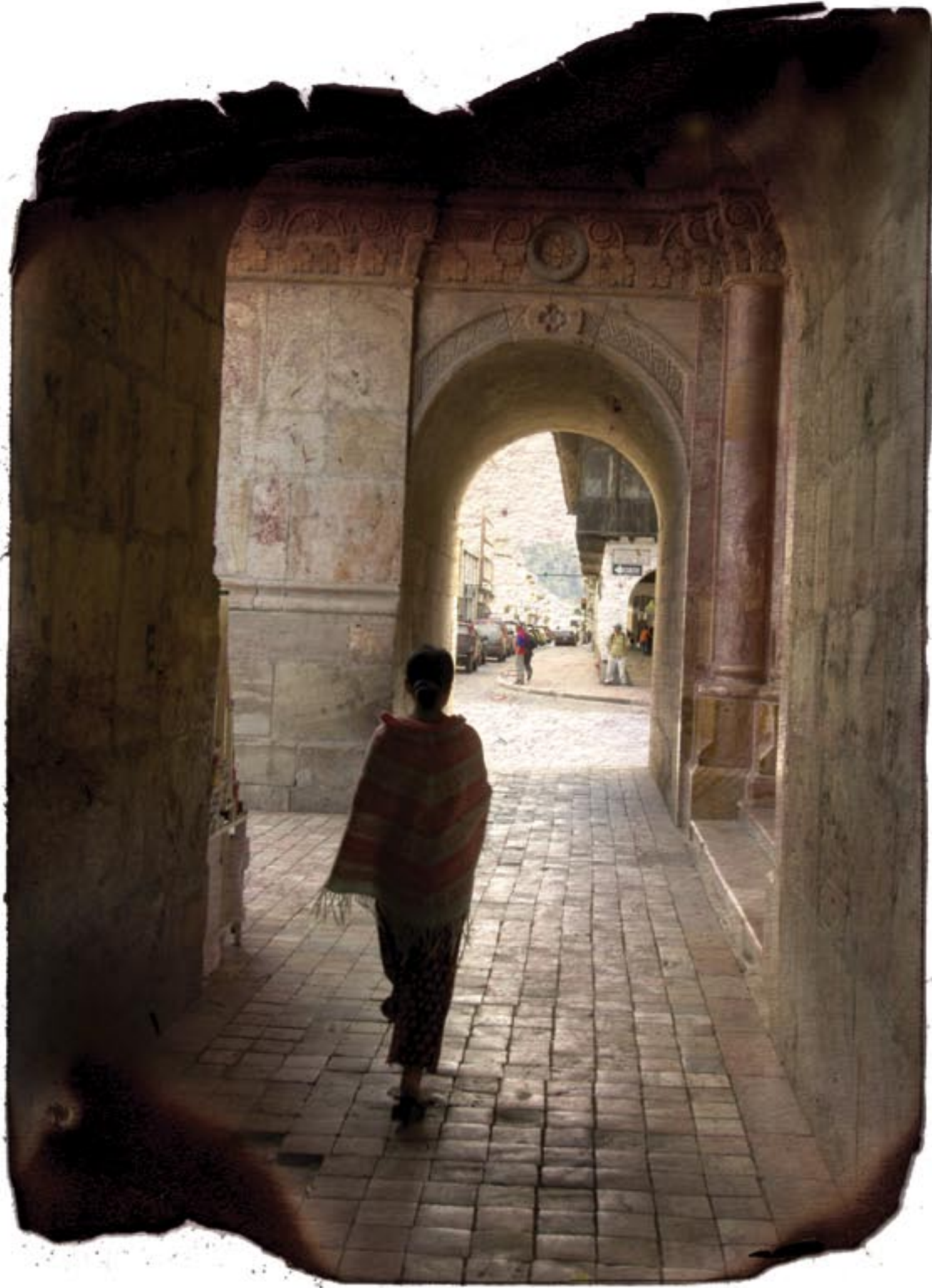
Unsión has a potential viewing audience of 3 million in its immediate area. By offering Christian-values programming and two hours of daily religious broadcasting, the network has climbed the ratings chart and is making a difference wherever it broadcasts. To the secular audience, *Unsión* is just a name, but to Spanish-speaking believers, it means “anointed.”

Eduardo Gonzalez, general manager of Unsión in Cuenca, oversees the work of more than 50 staff members and 350 counseling volunteers. He also heads the commission on ethics for all television stations and networks in Ecuador, giving him the opportunity to make a difference in the quality of programming for the entire nation. Ten years ago he and his wife, Ximena, came to Christ through the outreach of Cuenca Christian Center.

Key people serving in an advisory and leadership capacity to the McDonalds and Unsión Television are Dick Nicholson, AGWM regional director for Latin America and the Caribbean; David Lee, AGWM U.S. Relations director who also chairs the AGWM Media Commission; AG missionaries David and Celia Olson, directors of Unsión’s stateside offices and overseas development; and area directors Ray Talley, Paul Weis, Dale Coad,

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Butch Frey, Don Exley and Ken Dahlager.
Unsión's primary goal is to present the message of the gospel to families who might never receive it by any other method. In addition to four daily 30-minute gospel programs, Unsión broadcasts news, sports, music, cooking, travel, documentaries, education and health features, and programs for children and families.



One of the most popular segments of a variety show, *The Family*, is a cooking hour hosted by Lucia Vinueza, a professional caterer and former Miss Ecuador.

"*The Family* is a live show where we talk about everyday interests such as fashion, beauty, health and cooking," says Vinueza. "People call and ask questions, and we have counselors ready to help. Viewers are gaining optimism and hope as we help them find answers to their everyday problems and direct them toward Christ. I am so happy to be working in a place where God is present and in our conversation all the time."

Every 30 minutes the network airs an evangelistic commercial — a hard-hitting minidrama focusing on life issues such as marital conflict or drug addiction. A phone number on the screen prompted at least 12,000 viewers to call for counseling last year, and more than half of them accepted Christ as Savior.

About 350 counselors man the phones at three "Good Advice" counseling centers. Directed by Diego and Sabrina Villota, counselors respond to an average of 250 calls weekly. Using Scripture as the basis for their counsel and support, they try to close every conversation with an opportunity for the caller to accept Christ. They always do follow-up in an effort to

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connect callers with a local church or support group based on their needs or interests.

“The television ministry gives us more evangelistic impact and an ability to reach the masses with less cost than anything else we could do,” says Carlos Gonzalez. After working in ministry outreaches at Cuenca Christian Center for six years, Gonzalez now serves as local manager of Unsión television in Quito. He is working to increase Unsión’s international programming and to provide many smaller Christian television stations with quality programming produced by Unsión.

Three months after the fire, the McDonalds and Unsión staff continue to broadcast in Cuenca. Local authorities declared the Unsión facilities a 70 percent loss requiring total replacement. Therefore, the staff faces a long rebuilding process and needs substantial financial help to clear the charred remains, rebuild the facilities from the ground up and replace thousands of dollars worth of equipment.

Meanwhile, the McDonalds and their faithful co-laborers press on toward their goal of proclaiming Christ through satellite television to the Western Hemisphere’s 300 million Spanish-speaking people — including the growing U.S. Spanish-speaking population.

In April, the people of Cuenca once again demonstrated their support for Unsión television. Hundreds turned out for the network’s third anniversary celebration — a live, televised event at one of the city’s major parks. Counselors were on hand, and more than 100 people accepted Christ. **tpe**

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E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.

Bill and Connie McDonald

