

Earthquake

By Kirk Noonan

A quick response in Peru



Grant Heugel

Cesar Garcia, an affable taxi driver with a toothless smile and easy manner, stands in what is left of his family's adobe hut on a sandy hill just outside Ica, Peru. He points to the splintery remains of a bed, then gazes at the battered refrigerator that was once the cornerstone of his family's small kitchen.

"I raced here as fast as I could," he says, recalling the minutes after an 8.0-magnitude earthquake rocked Peru on Aug. 15. "When I got here I realized I once had a home and then I had nothing. But I'm thankful my wife, son and mother-in-law are alive. That's all that really matters."

Within two minutes the earthquake killed more than 500 people, toppled thousands of homes, and left tens of thousands of Peruvians injured, homeless or unemployed. It also destroyed 73 schools, 11 hospitals and at least 15 Assemblies of God churches.

Though news of the earthquake was quickly passed over by the U.S. media, the Assemblies of God was quick to respond with relief supplies to meet short-term needs and a commitment to help rebuild churches and restore lives — no matter how long it takes.

"Our efforts aren't only for church people," explains missionary Rich Ferguson, who has served in Peru for nearly 12 years. "They're for the communities surrounding our churches. The earthquake has opened doors for us to minister to the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of those who need help."

To that end, representatives from MAPS Construction, HealthCare Ministries, Convoy of Hope, and AG World Missions Communications arrived several days after the earthquake struck to survey the destruction with Ferguson.

Seizing opportunities

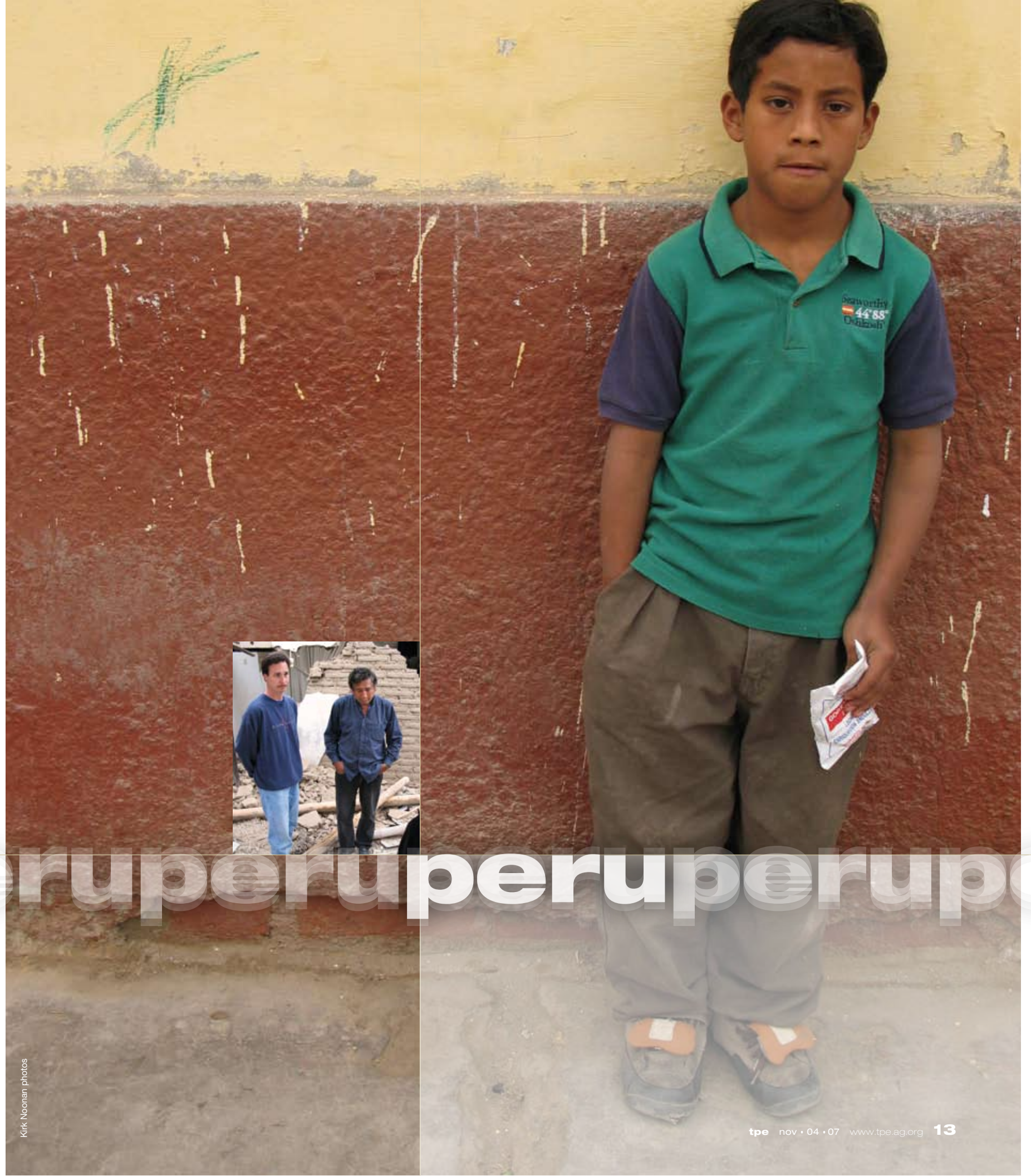
From Lima, the nation's capital, the survey team boards a Speed the Light bus and travels south on the Pan-American Highway. News reports say sizable chunks of the highway — which winds along Peru's coast — have slid away and long delays should be expected.

An hour and a half outside Lima, fresh asphalt and a new guardrail disguise a gigantic portion of road that slid away.

"That's a good sign," says Ferguson. "It tells people the government is serious about getting the country up and going again."

Forty-five minutes later the team arrives in Chincha. Where evidence of a major earthquake was limited in Lima, here in Chincha entire neighborhoods have crumbled. Tents and makeshift shacks line the roads. Beyond them, families sift through rubble in an attempt to salvage plates, pictures, mementos, clothing and even food from the remains of their homes.

continued on page 15





At Christ the Light of the World Church (AG), Senior Pastor Alberto Bautista Peña describes how he narrowly escaped death as the walls of his house collapsed around him during the earthquake. Though he and his family were spared, his house and the church were not. A dining room table, chairs and other furniture — the family’s meager possessions — remain in a dusty courtyard encased by the ruins.

“We realize we must tear the church down and start over,” Peña says plainly as he walks through the decimated building. “But we believe God is going to make it better and stronger than it was so we can continue to grow.”

Though church members stop by and take turns whacking at cracked walls with a sledgehammer, it will be many months, if not years, before the structure is torn down and a new facility built unless outside help comes.

Greg Venturella, MAPS Construction director, says that building teams can make quick work of constructing a roof and support pillars. “In many cases it can take as little as a week to rebuild a church,” he says.

A few miles away, another AG church lost a main wall and half its roof. Isabel Rengifo Padilla, the pastor’s wife, speaks of the earthquake as if it’s a tool for aggressive community outreach and evangelism.

“We’re more than conquerors in Jesus Christ,” she says. “The people in our community are much more responsive to the gospel since the earthquake, so we’ve been sending out teams to minister. Already, eight people have committed their lives to Christ. This is an opportunity for the church to reach people with the gospel.”

Eternal perspective

The next morning, leaders of King’s Castle–Peru, based in Lima, board the bus and travel with the survey team to Pisco. The last three rows of the bus are loaded with bottled water, meals ready to eat, fruit, flashlights and work gloves. Most of it will be distributed by the end of the day.

In Pisco, a seaside city with more than 100,000 residents, a Catholic church imploded during the two-minute earthquake and killed more than 150 worshippers. Much of the city is in ruins.

Fishing boats once on the Pacific Ocean are now inland, scattered like discarded toys. Locals say the ocean swelled and slowly flooded seaside neighborhoods before retreating.

At Luz Divina (AG), Pastor David Colchado Nonajulca says that while the church suffered minimal damage, more than 40 of the 150 families who comprise the congregation lost their homes.

In the center of the city, armed guards and yards of red tape outline some of the worst-hit areas. On the city square, onlookers watch as mammoth bulldozers make easy work of plowing down homes, businesses and the Catholic church where so many of the earthquake-related fatalities occurred.

Nearly everyone wears masks for protection from the almost six inches of dust that blankets the streets. Workers, tanks strapped to their backs and nozzles in their hands, spray disinfectant whenever the mood strikes.

On a narrow side street, jagged bricks, shards of glass, precariously low-hanging power lines, and mounds of rubble create an obstacle course for team members as they trek relief supplies from the bus to Voice of Hope Church (AG). Watching from their flimsy shelters are several families who were forced from their homes and onto the streets.

The combination of dust and exposure to the elements has Rick Salvato, director of disaster response for HealthCare Ministries, concerned.

“Respiratory problems will be an issue in the coming weeks and months as they continue to clean up,” he says. “We’ll send a full complement of doctors and nurses to this region to work through the local AG churches.”

A few blocks away, rescue workers dig methodically through the rubble of a collapsed hotel. Julio Diaz Soja, a firefighter from Lima, says many of the bodies he and other rescue workers have found are crushed beyond recognition.

“We’ve pulled out 40 bodies so far,” he says grimly, “and we’ve only gone through half of the hotel. There will be more bodies.”

Earthquakes and death are nothing new to Peru. Six years ago a 7.5-magnitude earthquake rattled the country. In 1970 a massive earthquake triggered a landslide that wiped out an entire city and killed more than 50,000 people. Although the death toll of this most recent earthquake pales in comparison, many Peruvians are suffering.

In a tiny village on the outskirts of Ica, the team meets Senior Pastor Julio Mitacc of The Good Shepherd Church (AG). Unlike many of the affected AG pastors, Mitacc does not seem as upbeat as the others. When asked why, he explains that two women from the church were killed during the earthquake.

“They were selling sandwiches,” he explains. “Thinking they were moving to safety, they dashed toward a building for coverage. One of the building’s walls collapsed on top of them.”

A third AG adherent in Peru was also killed during the earthquake. As Mitacc describes the loss his church feels, a small truck loaded with clothing and other relief supplies stops on a nearby side street. The driver and passenger begin distributing goods. Within minutes, hundreds of people swarm the truck, begging for help.

“There is overwhelming need here,” says Ernie Peacock, AGWM missionary assigned to Convoy of Hope. “But distributing relief supplies like this is dangerous. That’s why we work through our local churches.”

Missionary Ronnie Mask is working with AG pastors and churches while

continued on page 19



Missionary Rich Ferguson stands in an Assemblies of God church, destroyed by the earthquake, with Peruvian church leaders.



Grant Heugel photos



ferrying tons of relief supplies from Arequipa — where he is headquartered — to Chincha, Pisco and beyond. He says that in every place he has gone to distribute supplies he has been warmly welcomed.

“You give them a bottle of water and it’s like you’ve given them gold,” he says. “They’re thankful for anything they can get.”

As the team moves on, a phone call comes from Convoy of Hope headquarters in Springfield, Missouri. Missionary Doug Corbett takes the call and informs the team that giant containers filled with supplies are being shipped to Peru. And Federal Express is partnering with Convoy to transport supplies immediately.

Assemblies of God fellowships and individual churches from across Latin America have stepped up to help too. Finances and donations have streamed in from other areas of Peru, as well as Chile, Brazil and El Salvador. Even laypeople have descended on areas of devastation to help clean up and rebuild homes.

“Churches from around Peru are sending finances and supplies,” says General Superintendent Rodrigo Espinoza Celadita of the Peru Assemblies of God. “We’re all the family of God, so we’re in this together.”

Ferguson agrees. He notes the churches that have set up soup kitchens and organized neighborhood watches to guard against looters. “Because of it, people are coming to know Christ,” he says. “It’s all very encouraging.”

The next morning the team climbs back into the bus and ventures into the Andes foothills. Ferguson has been told that villages within a three-hour drive have been completely flattened.

“We need to go to these villages,” he explains. “They’re so remote, and we might be the only ones to bring any kind of aid to them.”

Three and a half hours later, the dirt road becomes impassable. Reluctantly, Ferguson asks the driver to pull over so he can consult with a platoon of police officers. When he returns, he has bad news.

“We’re turning back,” he announces. “They say the villages are four more hours up the road. I’ll send a team back here in a four-wheel drive.”

After nearly four hours of riding, team members are discouraged but still optimistic. They know villages farther out need assistance. Each AG agency is committed to bringing specialized teams and supplies back to Peru.

“Our goal is to respond to immediate needs, help rebuild the churches, and restore hope,” says Venturella. “But that’s at least a yearlong process.”

It may be a long haul, but as Celadita says, “We’re all in this together.” **tpe**

KIRK NOONAN is managing editor of *Today’s Pentecostal Evangel*.

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