



COMPASSION *amid Chaos*

IMB MISSIONARIES PAUL AND ROBIN TINLEY MINISTER TO HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF TRAUMATIZED VENEZUELAN REFUGEES.



IMB PHOTO

It's a crisis.

It's confusing.

It's complicated.

It's the daily life of Robin and Paul Tinley, International Mission Board (IMB) missionaries ministering to thousands of Venezuelan refugees escaping abysmal conditions in their homeland to the neighboring country of Colombia.

"We have a deep love for Venezuelans," Robin said.

That love started years ago when at the age of 13, she made a profession of faith in her garden. A year later, she knew she wanted to serve in missions.

"Since then, my entire life has been about missions," she said. She and her husband both felt called to work in Venezuela even though they had no knowledge about the country other than its location on a map.

THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

"God had simply put Venezuela and the Venezuelans on my heart and my husband's heart," Robin explained. And for 27 years, they served doing "typical" missionary work—preaching, Bible teaching, discipling, planning events, and training leaders before they were sent to Peru to oversee work throughout South America and Cuba.

During those years in Venezuela, the couple could not have known the relationships they cultivated with youth and young adults would be a vital link to the sharing of the gospel, or that these new friends would become the leaders of the Venezuelan National Baptist Convention (VNBC) during a time of social and economic upheaval in the country. Those years of “typical” work for the Tinleys changed with the election of President Hugo Chávez, who implemented a socialist government styled after Cuba and China. Then in 2016, Chávez’s hand-picked successor, Nicolás Maduro, took office to perpetuate the dictatorship and attempted to turn Chávez into an immortal figure, claiming he is the “eternal commander.” Maduro, who claims he communes with the deceased president, has made Chávez’s tomb a place of worship and prayer.

“We lived through the seismic implosion of Venezuela,” Robin said. The restrictions the government imposed caused and continue to cause nationwide hardships— inflation, rampant violence, and shortages of food and medicine. In this tropical land with the Andes Mountains on one side and the Caribbean Sea on the other, life has become oppressive to many. Families continue to flee on foot to bordering countries with only what they can carry.

SEEKING SHELTER FROM THE STORM

Robin said since 2019, 5.5 million Venezuelans have left the country. That means about 12 percent of the population has already left and an average of 5,000 more per day are fleeing to bordering countries. The journey is dire, with refugees being exposed to exploitation, trafficking, and violence, as well as malnutrition and exposure to the cold on the high mountain passes.

Colombia currently hosts the largest number of Venezuelans. That is where Robin and Paul live and serve with the Venezuela Crisis Response Team.

“Our role is anything related to the country,” Robin said.

By that, she truly means anything. The churches in Venezuela struggle under an oppressive government that encourages idol worship, spiritism, and witchcraft, and has kicked missionaries out of the country. Robin explained they closely assist the VNBC to ensure the continuation of “typical” Baptist activities within Venezuela, such as the national convention, pastoral family camp, Woman’s Missionary Union camp, annual youth camp, and Vacation Bible School.

“Venezuela is under captivity by an evil empire,” one church planter said. Yet like the Christians under Rome, they also “see how God is working in the crisis so people may know Him.”

Besides supporting the Baptists in Venezuela, the Tinleys minister right where they are planted in Colombia. Robin said they hold between five and 12 meetings each week for preaching, discipling, Bible study, and prayer.

RAINBOW DURING THE STORM

Besides these regular events, it is the atypical ministries brought about by the unrelenting stream of refugees crossing into Colombia that make their days long. The couple work ten to 12 hours, six days a week, serving hundreds of thousands of traumatized people.

“This is a crisis ministry,” Robin said. “A crisis cannot go on hold over the weekend or until a less busy or more convenient time. If a baby is going to die for lack of \$20 worth of medicines unavailable to the parents, that must be taken care of immediately.”

The road from tropical Venezuela to rainy, cold, mountainous Colombia climbs 11,000 feet. Many Venezuelan “trekkers” walk the road wearing only shorts, tank tops, and flip flops, searching for the slightest chance to find food, work, shelter, and hope.

Robin relates one story about Paul’s encounter with two refugees limping down the road on a rainy day. He and the team asked them what they needed.

“I need shoes.” One refugee said. “The ones I have are tearing my feet apart.” Without hesitation the team went to work cleaning the man’s torn feet, giving each man socks and shoes that fit perfectly, all while sharing the gospel. The travelers were astonished. Just ten minutes before, one of the men had asked God for help.

“When we were walking past the rainbow, I told God, ‘I need shoes,’” the refugee said. And God provided.

The work and ministry do not end, Robin said. “Some we only see in this life for 15 minutes, and make it intentional. [With] others, we have an ongoing ministry relationship for years.”

Robin also writes articles for IMB trying to explain the immense hardships for the refugees. In 2019, she wrote what might be considered a free verse poem capturing the physical and emotional trail the refugees travel:

*Shoes for torn feet, hope for weary souls
In city clothes and city shoes, they come.
In summer shorts, tank tops and flip flops, they come.
In tattered clothes and bare feet, they come.
Carrying babies and toddlers, they come.
The mountains are barren, cold, windy.
The road is long, hard, dangerous.
Food often consists only of bread given by strangers.
Nights are bitter.
Days of walking extend into weeks of walking.
The body becomes exhausted, emotions become numb.
Step. Step. Step. One more step. One more.*

RECOVERY FROM THE STORM

Seeing the refugees’ plight day in and day out has the potential to be depressing, and could make it easy to give up. It is the dogged determination to share the gospel that keeps the

Tinleys going, because the gospel offers hope to anyone walking on the road between Venezuela and Colombia.

Robin described the situation of most refugees as “lacking the absolute basics for survival and with no means of providing it for themselves.” And the challenge is not only to help provide the evacuees with the physical needs of food, clothing, and medical attention, but also to help them with the emotional and spiritual trauma they are experiencing.

“They are going through unrelenting, cumulative stress for years with no break from it,” she said. “And that requires lots and lots and lots of listening, providing a shoulder to cry on.” To help with the emotional trauma, the team offers two biblically based programs (Trauma Healing Institute and New Hope) for healing trauma and crisis.

Another challenge is to help supply necessities to the pastors still ministering in Venezuela.

“We have found it necessary to make ‘triage’-type decisions on how best to help the most people to the greatest degree,” Robin explained. “We do not have resources to meet all of the needs.” She gave an example of a project called RaVenz that provides a monthly food basket to every Baptist pastor living in Venezuela, allowing them to stay in the country and share the gospel.

“We want to help those pastors to remain healthy—physically and emotionally—so they can continue to minister,” she said.

AFTER THE STORM

How can the refugees pick up the pieces of a shattered life? Where will they live? Where can they get work? Robin explained Southern Baptists have helped through Send

Relief Projects. She listed a few of these: a day care and school, several feeding centers in Colombia, and a feeding program in Venezuela for every Baptist pastor. After emergency aid is provided, Robin explained they start helping the refugees plan for the future.

“We have several sewing centers, a leather factory, a shoe factory, and a bakery to provide training and work,” she said. “I train Venezuelan refugees in micro-business and help them get up and running.” They prepare the immigrants to transition to a new life, either in Colombia or in another country.

“Any believer can minister to a Venezuelan refugee if willing to do so and to let the Lord lead,” Robin said. She is hopeful more people will be led to help alleviate the tremendous, overwhelming needs.

One way to assist is to give financially to the Venezuela Crisis Response through the IMB website (imb.org/give/project/venezuela-crisis-response). The goal is \$2 million to buy the supplies desperately needed each day.

Another way is prayer:

- Pray the team would have physical and emotional stamina.
- Pray for financial and material resources.
- Pray for the pastors and congregations living in Venezuela.
- Pray for a change in the hearts of those in government, and for the country to heal.

Although many believe the solution to the crisis in Venezuela would be for the government to change, the truth is that, as Robin said, “We know that politics and government are not the most pressing or lasting solution. True change must be a heart change. We want each Venezuelan in or out of Venezuela [to know that life] can be better because that life has Christ in it.”

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Venezuela: Compassion amid Chaos



FOR GROUP OR CHURCHWIDE STUDY:

BEFORE THE SESSION: Attach a map of South America to the wall and circle Venezuela and Colombia. Write the prayer requests shared in the article on individual strips of paper.

1. Introduce group members to the work of Paul and Robin Tinley, using the opening paragraphs of the article. Point out Venezuela and Colombia on the map as you talk.
2. Divide participants into five groups. Ask each group to review and discuss a different section of the article: “The Calm Before the Storm,” “Seeking Shelter from the Storm,” “Rainbow during the Storm,” “Recovery from the Storm,” and “After the Storm.”
3. After about 10–15 minutes of discussion, ask each group to share their findings with the rest.
4. Read the poem Robin wrote aloud to the group.
5. Ask: *How would it feel to have to flee your home to go to an unknown place?*
6. Discuss ways your group could help refugees—in Venezuela and around the world.
7. Distribute the prayer requests and take time to pray over each one together.



FOR INDIVIDUAL STUDY:

1. Find Venezuela and Colombia on a map of South America.
2. Read the article, referring to the map as you read.
3. Read Robin’s poem aloud two times. On a piece of paper, write down some of the realities refugees face and display this in a prominent place in your home.
4. Consider the needs refugees have and research some ways you can help.
5. Read each of the Tinleys’ prayer requests aloud.
6. Commit to pray daily for the Tinleys and for refugees in Venezuela and around the world.



FOR FAMILY STUDY:

BEFORE THE SESSION: Read the article and display a map of South America with Venezuela and Colombia circled.

1. Introduce the work of Paul and Robin Tinley and explain what a refugee is. Ask: *Why is a refugee in a storm?*
2. Ask: *What does a rainbow symbolize?* If any family members do not know, quickly summarize the story of Noah (Genesis 6:9–9:17).
3. Share the refugees’ story in the section, “Rainbow during the Storm.” Ask: *What do you think the refugees’ “rainbow” was in this story?*
4. Read Robin’s poem aloud. Ask: *How would you feel if this were you?*
5. List ways the Ravenz Project and Send Relief are helping Venezuelan refugees. Ask: *How can our family help refugees?*
6. Read the Tinleys’ prayer requests and pray together for each one.