

# Healing a Violent Land

Uprooted by their country's long-running unrest, some of Colombia's displaced millions are finding hope through caring Christians.

The guerrillas came for Ricardo at 5 p.m. on August 5, 2000. Fifteen heavily armed resistance fighters showed up at his 80-acre farm in Montes de María on the steamy north coast of Colombia, seeking him by name.

Ricardo's neighbors realized at once that the guerrillas intended to kill him. This particular armed group already had assassinated three local farmers that day while working through a list of people marked for "selective elimination."

Fortunately, Ricardo (not his real name) was not at home that afternoon. Several hours earlier he had left to attend a church conference in another town. One of his farm hands managed to get word to him about the guerrillas' visit.

Inquiries would later reveal that Ricardo was a victim of mistaken identity—the rebels were looking for a different person with the same surname, a man they suspected of being a government informer. Nonetheless, when your name is on the list, you're as good as dead.

Ricardo knew he could not return home—perhaps ever again. When the conference ended, he made his way to Sincelejo in northwest Colombia and lost himself amid the anonymity of its quarter-million inhabitants. His wife and children quickly joined him there, having abandoned to looters the family's

crops, 80 head of cattle and household belongings.

“Yet, we were blessed,” Ricardo told Charisma. “I believe God’s hand was on us to keep us alive.”

In fact, his narrow escape came just as armed insurgents were escalating a bloody vendetta against local farmers. Over the next four months, guerrillas and paramilitary groups massacred an estimated 2,000 civilians in Montes de María during a brutal onslaught aimed at driving farm families off their land. Human-rights groups estimate that 95 percent of the rural populace in Montes de María fled the area.

Some 90,000 of the refugees, including Ricardo and his family, ended up in squatter communities on the outskirts of Sincelejo. Yet they make up merely a tiny segment of the estimated 3 million Colombians who have been displaced by the country’s civil war—a conflict now in its fifth decade that claims almost 11,000 lives a year.

The prolonged war has drained the national economy, driving two-thirds of Colombians below the poverty line. Thousands of Christians have died, sometimes for trivial reasons.

The Evangelical Council of Colombia (CEDECOL) has documented the assassinations of 147 ministers. Some were killed because they would not cooperate with guerrillas; others because the Colombian army or paramilitary bands believed they were guerrillas. Some were killed because they took up offerings—an alleged exploitation of the poor—yet other pastors died because they would not allow the guerrillas to take up the offerings.

At one time insurgents declared evangelical pastors to be military targets because they discouraged Christian young people from joining the revolution. Pastors suspected of embezzling money or committing adultery have been executed.

No one knows why guerrillas murdered the Rev. Adolfo Villegas of the Seventh Day Adventist church in Macallepo, Montes de María, though they are certain it was not because of any misdeeds he committed. When Villegas and two church elders were killed on August 6, 2000, the entire Adventist congregation fled immediately to Sincelejo.

Two months later, Macallepo's remaining congregations—the Evangelical Christian Church and the United Pentecostal Church—joined the exodus. Adelina Rodríguez remembers the pain of abruptly abandoning her home and fleeing for her life.

"In my anguish, I told God, 'I left everything behind,'" she told Charisma. "God said: 'What is everything? Am I not something?'"

"I began to experience God's presence," she continues. "'Don't worry,' He said, 'I am with you. I have brought you here to be a blessing.'"

God soon began to fulfill that promise for Adelina and her husband, Jasper, pastors of Evangelical Christian Church in Macallepo.

"Once we got here to Sincelejo, we believers found one another and decided it made more sense to merge the three churches into one," Jasper says.

Jasper, Adelina and pastor Edgar Benítez joined forces to plant El Remanso (“Quiet Waters”) Christian Church. Sitting under the palm-roofed pavilion that serves the church as sanctuary, cafeteria and community center, Jasper Rodríguez describes worship at El Remanso as free, spirited and having “a definite peasant flavor.”

“We take turns preaching,” he explains. “Though we express different doctrinal points of view, we have never heard any criticism from the congregation.”

Perhaps that is because the believers of El Remanso do more than worship together—they also help one another survive. For example, after Jasper heard of a government program that provided free breakfasts to children, he volunteered El Remanso to manage a local nutrition program. On weekday mornings you’ll find church volunteers distributing milk and nutrition bars to 178 neighborhood children.

Adelina has launched a program to teach marketable skills to the kids’ mothers. “At first the ladies were skeptical about job retraining,” she admits. “‘We’re farm women,’ they said. ‘We only know how to raise pigs and chickens.’ But now they are feeding their families with their handiwork.”

The Committee of Virtuous Women, known by its Spanish acronym, CONFEVIR, teaches crochet, hand-loom weaving, macramé and jewelry making. Students make baby clothes and table mats, as well as earrings from seed pods, and sell the items in local shops.

Displaced husbands help feed their families, too, thanks to a plan Jasper devised which enables them to farm small plots on

the hills surrounding El Remanso. They raise tidy crops of corn, beans, peppers and tomatoes.

When asked how a church with scant resources like El Remanso's has been able to develop so many effective ministries for the needy, Jasper says simply, "Unity builds strength."

Because of that inclination El Remanso is a member of a growing network of churches designated as Sanctuaries of Peace, which was formed five years ago "to minister ... through preaching the gospel of peace, inviting to conversion and commitment and ... attending to families displaced by violence."

Esther and Rodrigo Murillo pastor a sanctuary church in the village of Zambrano. Their church is open 24 hours a day and welcomes anyone threatened by violence to take refuge there. The couple has watched the congregation quadruple.

"We have a big problem with accommodating all the children," Esther explains, "but we are working at it."

The next ministry they have planned will teach young people, including children, to identify and avoid land mines. "They think they are toys and pick them up to play with them," Esther says.

So many mines are strewn around the Montes de María area that they are hindering efforts to resettle displaced families such as those living in Sincelejo. Jasper Rodríguez believes he and others will return to their homes and says most of the believers at El Remanso are prepared for that happy day.

Ricardo is one such farmer who is preparing to go home. Until he does, he will continue to support his family with the handloom skills he learned through CONFEVIR and feed them with vegetables from his parcel at El Remanso.

Ricardo is living proof that despite the war, poverty and exile in Colombia, God still finds ways to bless His children.

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