

Missionaries Invade Colombia's Spiritual Darkness With Unique Weapon

For five decades, the South American country of Colombia has been a war with Marxist insurgents. Fighting can erupt at any time throughout scattered war zones, but that doesn't stop an intrepid messenger of peace.

For years, missionary Russell Stendal has taken Christian literature to all sides in the conflict: guerrillas, paramilitary, and government soldiers. He has forged friendships with all sides and his radio stations and solar-powered receivers pave the way.

Stendal's work has been portrayed in a film called "La Montaña," translated "The Mountain."

Stendal tries to reach areas where it's not possible to have church buildings or scheduled church services, and where it's not possible to do normal missionary or evangelistic work.

"And so we drop these radios on guerrilla camps, by parachute. We distribute them to soldiers; we distribute them to paramilitary forces," Stendal told CBN News.

Stendal has given out over 120,000 solar-powered radios. Former journalist Dario Silva has followed the conflict for years. He now pastors House on the Rock Church, one of Bogota's larger churches, and sends aid to suffering families in rural Colombia.

Mega Disconnect

But Silva said there's a disconnect between Colombia's megachurches and the country's isolated and often persecuted believers.

“Churches, especially megachurches, have a tendency to be very Laodicean,” Silva observed. “‘I have it all. I am rich,’ right? But they’re not aware of the problems our brothers are going through.”

Silva said that hardship and persecution have not kept the Gospel from reaching the remotest corners of Colombia.

In fact, he remembers a guerrilla leader complaining: “Those Christians are the worst problem we have. Because we arrive at a remote part of the country where there is no electricity, no running water, or roads, or transportation, or a parish house, or any political figure, and there’s always some nut with a black book under his arm preaching about Jesus!”

In the mountains and jungles of southwest Colombia, guerrillas are still destroying churches, driving out believers, and killing pastors. Open Doors International reports that more pastors have been killed in Colombia than in any other democratic nation on earth.

Comandante Geronimo

The southwest area of Colombia was home to Helmer, a FARC guerilla commander known as Comandante Geronimo.

“When I became a commander in the state of Cauca, I unleashed all that atheism against the people of God,” Helmer explained. “Expelling pastors, closing churches, killing evangelicals because they paid no attention to what we wanted them to do, which was to deny Jesus Christ, to deny God.”

But after years of persecuting Christians, Helmer realized he had failed.

“The more I persecute them, the more they grow, get stronger, multiply. Then I said, ‘How is this? If I’m trying to wipe them out and they grow more, are fruitful, and make a lot of progress ... Then I start to doubt,” Helmer said.

Those doubts led Helmer to a personal encounter with the Jesus he was persecuting. Today his weapon is a Bible, and he urges people to follow Christ instead of Karl Marx.

At a Tipping Point

Stendal believes that more than 100,000 combatants have become followers of Jesus and the conflict could be reaching a tipping point.

“The ones who want to continue with all this violence are having a lot of trouble now because there’s enough Christians to really be the salt and the light,” Stendal said. “What used to be a spiritual black hole we consider now is at least 10 percent Christian in most areas.”

Indigenous Christians are also spreading the gospel. Alvaro Dagua, from the Guambiano tribe, manages two Christian radio stations.

He is very passionate about the power of radio “because I was a product of radio,” he said.

“Radio evangelized me, radio disciplined me, and radio inspired me,” Dagua told CBN News.

At a recent Christian media conference in Cali, Colombia, Dagua and fellow Guambianos talked of reaching beyond their own tribe.

“If you go into the virgin jungle three days on foot, you’ll find the Aguá tribe that hasn’t been civilized,” Dagua said. “So we want to reach out there with our radio station, with the word of God, so that the Aguá tribe can inhabit the kingdom of heaven.”

Meanwhile, government negotiators are meeting with FARC guerrilla leaders in Havana, Cuba, and hope is growing that a peace agreement may soon bring an end to Colombia’s 50 years of internal violence.

But regardless of the outcome, evangelists, using radio and literature, are spreading peace in the nation's conflict zones, one changed life at a time.