

Why This Megachurch Is Targeting Ex-Rebels With the Government's Blessing

Nearly 160 miles south of Bogotá, members of South America's longest-running insurgency are rediscovering religion.

As part of the implementation of a 2016 peace deal, the Colombian government has permitted a Bogotá-based megachurch called Avivamiento to begin building churches to convert ex-combatants of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia to evangelical Christianity.

In a country scarred by more than five decades of war, the peace accord has become a religious as well as a politically charged issue. Colombian voters narrowly rejected an early version of the peace deal in a contested referendum. A revised peace deal was ratified by the Congress of Colombia.

Now approaching two years of implementation, the agreement faces new challenges after Colombians elected right-wing candidate Iván Duque in the country's June presidential elections. Duque promised to revisit the accord and alter significant portions of it, including the transitional justice process that was key to the FARC's signature on the agreement.

The church in Mariana Páez is the first Avivamiento has built in the 26 "transition zones" – camps where FARC fighters turned in their arms in exchange for official citizenship documents, a monthly salary and educational programming. Avivamiento plans to expand its outreach to every transition zone.

Before building the church, Avivamiento donated agricultural equipment and consistently visited the community of ex-combatants. After establishing the church, Avivamiento

volunteers have returned to the community to lead Bible study and children's activities during monthly visits. They also encourage FARC community members to follow services over Skype.

Avivamiento is one of the largest evangelical churches in Colombia, with 54 congregations in its national network and more than 50 in other countries. The church in Mariana Páez draws around 10 ex-combatants for weekly services.

Officials in the Colombian government deepened their collaboration with religious groups after Rodrigo Rivera was appointed head of the High Commission on Peace (OACP) in 2017. Tasked with implementing the peace deal, Rivera convened a summit of religious leaders to inform them about the contents of the accord, efforts that have continued under Duque.

"We had been trying to offer support for some time," said Alejandro Rodriguez, who heads Avivamiento's charitable works division. He explained that Rivera – himself a member of Avivamiento – facilitated the church's access to ex-combatant communities as part of a wider opening to religious groups.

Jefferson Mena, the director of transitional territories for OACP, denied any conflict of interest in granting Avivamiento permission to evangelize in transition zones.

"In the meeting (with religious leaders), we coordinated our plans with them so that they realized they had the opportunity to go to these (transition zones) in different places in the country and do their evangelization work," he said. While other religious organizations have held workshops on religion and reconciliation with ex-combatants, Avivamiento is the only organization that has constructed a church.

Some civil society leaders expressed concern about evangelization work in transition zones.

"It worries me that churches have entered the transition zones

to evangelize, because this is not peace work,” said Jenny Neme, director of the Mennonite peace organization Justapaz. “They are telling ex-combatants that the only way to salvation is through recognizing Jesus, when in reality there are so many challenges they are facing.”

Colombia’s evangelical churches played a decisive role in the public’s narrow rejection of the deal in a 2016 referendum. Avivamiento was one of just two large evangelical churches to voice its support for the peace accord, departing from the general argument that the deal’s reparations for LGBTQ groups were part of a larger “gender ideology.”

Despite supporting the peace accord, Avivamiento urged its members to vote for Duque in the country’s June elections.

“Duque promotes the kind of conservative family values that the evangelical churches want to see in Colombian politics,” said Mauricio Beltrán, who has studied Colombia’s evangelical movement for the National University of Colombia. “Evangelical churches have become strategic allies for politicians because of their ability to mobilize voters that vote at their pastor’s direction.”

The FARC’s acceptance of Avivamiento is a departure from the former guerrilla group’s Marxist secularism. The leader of the FARC transition zone in Mesetas, Marina Giraldo, explained that allowing Avivamiento into the community helps to contradict widespread messages that characterize the ex-combatants as immoral.

“The best way to defeat a lie is to show people the truth,” she said. “Some in the community decided they wanted a church, and I thought it was important to listen to them.”

One of these community members is Eder Cristian.

“I am happy to be welcoming religion back into my life,” he said. Cristian, who grew up in a religious family on the

Atlantic coast before joining the FARC at the age of 13, is now in charge of keeping the keys to the church.

Another ex-combatant, Wilmer Pérez, said the church provides the community with a sense of legitimacy. “It makes us feel like a real town, because every town has a church,” he said.

Pérez is thankful the church is providing resources where the government falls short. “The church has given us tools to help us plant and help keep the children occupied,” he said.

However, he is more interested in the benefits promised by the peace accord. He has been trying to start a yogurt business but hasn’t been able to expand because of his lack of access to capital and job training initiatives in the agreement.

Both Pérez and Cristian were frustrated that the Colombian government hadn’t implemented the rural land reform outlined in the peace accord. The agreement outlined several measures that would distribute land to landless people, improve land dispute resolution practices and invest in rural infrastructure.

“We’re feeling very uncertain right now,” Pérez said in reference to the wider peace deal. “We don’t know if the government will actually keep its end of the bargain, especially with Duque as president.”

{eoa}

Julia Friedmann’s reporting on this story was made possible by the Pulitzer Center for Crisis Reporting. © 2018 Religion News Service. All rights reserved.