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“Our cities need to work for everyone; they need common ground to come together. For people of faith, this work comes from a deep conviction about what it means to seek the shalom of the city: it means not separating physical change from spiritual change.”

—NICOLE HIGGINS (MA '10; STORY ON P. 12)



## THE CHURCH IN A TIME OF CONFLICT: BRINGING SHALOM TO PERSONS IN SITUATIONS OF INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT IN COLOMBIA

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I was born in Medellin, Colombia, and at the age of 16, left with a broken heart. My heart continues to break over the plight of my home country. Colombia's long and complicated armed conflict between guerrillas, paramilitaries, and government security forces has inflicted undeniable pain and left far-reaching scars. Last year, however, I returned to my beautiful and conflict-ridden country in pursuit of reconciliation and peacemaking. Accompanied by colleagues and armed with tools, I went with a mission to partner with the local church in learning how to bring shalom to those suffering from the aftermath of the 53-year-long conflict.

Colombia's protracted internal armed conflict has displaced nearly 7.2 million people. It now ranks as the country with the largest number of internally displaced peoples (IDPs) in the world, surpassing even Syria's IDP numbers.<sup>1</sup> As in most armed conflicts, often the most vulnerable bear the cost. Children and their mothers make up the majority of those forcibly displaced by war in Colombia and number in the hundreds of thousands. Ethnic minorities—including indigenous and Afro-Colombian groups, especially those in the countryside—have disproportionately suffered the devastating consequences of this bloody, cruel, and protracted conflict.

I find that many don't know much about the devastating effects of internal displacement, or even what internal displacement is. An internally displaced person is anyone who has left their residence because of danger, violence, or conflict, but has not crossed their own country's borders. This means they are not technically refugees or immigrants; their plight is often invisible to others within and outside their home country.

Brutal violence, terror, and forceful removal from one's land and property have thrust thousands of Colombians out of their hometowns and farms. The land they occupy is inextricably linked to the lives and livelihoods of many Colombians. Yet their land and its raw materials are too often seized for profit or political gain, with its inhabitants seen as nameless obstacles. Uprooted and seeking refuge, IDPs often go to the cities and end up on the margins of urban settings where they meet with other forms of violence and exclusion. IDPs are usually cut off from their regular jobs, healthcare and sanitation systems, schools, security networks, and means of economic and social support. As a result, IDPs are among the most vulnerable populations, often remaining in danger long after their displacement, with the continued and deepening absence of opportunity for a dignified life.

Although limited peace agreements were signed in November 2016, many Colombians and international humanitarian agencies argue that Colombia has not entered a post-conflict era yet. The country continues to struggle to bring dignity and reintegration to its vast numbers of IDPs. Even in zones where the armed conflict has ended, the majority of internally displaced persons are unable to return home because of devastated local economies. Many have lost their homes and their land and have no one to go back to. Others lack resources to return or are reluctant to do so because they have no confidence in the peace and security conditions. Many have endured displacement for years or even decades.

### TRAUMA AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN TIMES OF ARMED CONFLICT

As a Colombian and clinical psychologist,

I worry about my country, for I know well the ill and far-reaching effects of trauma resulting from forced displacement. A traumatic event is marked by perceived and life-threatening terror that renders the victim helpless at the potential loss of one's life or loved ones. Unsurprisingly, IDPs potentially face a gamut of traumatic experiences before, during, and after their displacement: physical danger, fear, exposure to extreme horror, and many conditions of defenselessness and humiliation.

Violence against women also holds a central place in Colombia's history of armed conflict. Despite much progress, social expectations have long relegated women to an inferior status. It is no surprise, then, that women often become the targets during unresolved conflict. Domestic, sexual, and other forms of gendered violence force women—many with small children—to flee their hometowns in search of safe havens and anonymity in big cities. Displaced women are particularly vulnerable to human rights abuses and are likely to experience further victimization in their flight and resettlement.

### THE CHURCH AND SHALOM IN A TIME OF CONFLICT

Shalom is one of the most outstanding and relevant biblical-theological concepts for human life. It goes beyond harmony, well-being, and prosperity to encompass a fundamental relationship with the Creator, oneself, society, and nature. This biblical peace must not be confused with the more trivialized and elusive type of "peace" that many associate it with. On the contrary, shalom includes the intentional development, reparation, and reconciliation of relationships with God and our fellow human beings (Matt 5:9; John 14:27; 16:33). Further, the biblical concept of shalom calls

for a healthy relationship with the land and its resources, a relationship that is deeply broken for so many Colombian IDPs. Not only is the church commissioned to live out and experience shalom but also to share and impart it. The "children of God" must always and in every place be "peacemakers" (Matt 5:9).

In Colombia's current historical moment, the church must act boldly and wisely. Substantial evidence documents the vital role played by faith leaders in facilitating the emotional recovery and integration of IDPs. The 48 million inhabitants of Colombia are predominantly Christian: 79 percent Catholic, 13 percent Protestant, 2 percent other, and 6 percent with no religious affiliation.<sup>2</sup> These statistics alone highlight the important position the church and faith leaders can have in promoting the health and well-being of IDPs. Throughout history, the Colombian church has had an unquestionable convening power. As a Colombian woman and Christian social scientist, I urge and seek to help Colombian faith communities to address gender-based violence and trauma of IDPs among their people.

The church must address gender-based violence head on from its pulpit and in its daily proclamation of the kingdom of God. Even in the face of historically rooted, gendered trauma, the church can offer a voice that counters mainstream narratives and seeks social justice. Our ecclesiology must use a gender-sensitive approach to break silences and correct stereotypes and misinformation harmful to women created over generations. Responding to our God-given imperative to bring shalom, I believe churches are called to provide a range of interventions to IDPs—from offering basic physical necessities to caring for spiritual

needs, with support that includes resettlement, integration, and legal protection. Churches must themselves be welcoming communities to IDPs, providing them with life-giving relationships by enfolded them within their congregations. It is a daunting task, yet our efforts must address the overall vulnerability and needs of the IDP.

Faith communities have not always been places where trauma survivors find support or feel embraced by shalom. In some cases, the clergy have contributed to ongoing abuse, yet many people still seek support from pastors before seeking help from a psychologist or mental health professional. How is the church of Christ to respond to the suffering of displacement and trauma? The church is called to bring shalom—integral peace—to all aspects of a person: spiritual, social, psychological, and economic, among others. As such, our theological position—that the church is a community based on the biblical witness—must be an incarnated reality where suffering is not considered a

threat to the power of God. Rather, God has entered into and continues to be present in situations of suffering. This vision exhorts the community of faith to attend to the suffering of the other and to create space for narratives of suffering. Such space emerges from a vision grounded in the knowledge and faith that those marked by the traumas of displacement are resilient and able not only to recover but also to flourish.

Communities of faith must learn and understand the processes and mechanisms associated with trauma, the consequences of exposure to violence, and means of healing. The trauma that IDPs have endured—whose memories wake them up some nights in an anxiety-ridden sweat—must be heard and brought to justice, and

their means of life (land, self-worth, shattered identities, housing) restored. As these stories of suffering and victimization are heard, the church must equip itself with tools to protect not only the vulnerable but also their first responders.

#### NEED FOR TRAUMA-INFORMED TRAINING FOR PASTORS AND FAITH LEADERS

Working with trauma, I've seen that those on the front lines—the first responders, often faith leaders and pastors—frequently suffer in silence and pay a high price for their altruistic efforts. The Colombian Christian church and the global Christian Protestant church are doing amazing work with displaced persons, efforts that often go undocumented. Unfortunately, in Colombia, as in most parts of the world, there is little systematic inquiry into faith leaders' exposure to potentially traumatic events during armed conflict and into their understanding of mental health and trauma.

During a recent visit to my country I began, along with Colombian and foreign psychologists, to explore the impact of trauma

on faith leaders' own mental health and ministry. Approximately 250 pastors and ministry workers in the Medellín area—Colombia's second largest city, with one of the highest numbers of IDPs—participated in a five-hour workshop to promote education about trauma and gender-based violence. Topics included the multidimensional consequences of trauma: psychological, social, and spiritual. We discussed the impact of trauma on family roles and relationships, sexual trauma, abuse reporting practices, and the role of pastors and ministry workers in minimizing the occurrence of rape and gender-based violence toward women.

#### SOCIAL SCIENCE AND CHURCH PARTNERSHIPS FOR BRINGING ABOUT SHALOM

It is time for the church to heed new findings of the social sciences to inform its moral imperative to bring shalom to IDPs.

A plethora of excellent resources with particular focus and data on IDPs is available from both local and international agencies dealing with internal displacement. Among many Colombian resources, the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement provides useful tools and best-practice frameworks in dealing with IDPs.<sup>3</sup> A renewed theology of integral missiology, enriched by empirical social-scientific analysis, can mobilize local churches to nurture the holistic human flourishing of Colombian IDPs.

Complex multidimensional social problems require multidisciplinary solutions. Peace-making efforts in Colombia must be inextricably woven into multilayered national and global efforts that are laced with patience, endurance, creativity, love, and deep belief in God's ultimate plan for redemption and reconciliation. Bearing in mind the complexity and gravity of the internal displacement problem in Colombia, a seminary in Medellín, *Fundación Universitaria Seminario Bíblico de Colombia (FUSBC)*, one of the largest in Latin America, has

been intentionally engaging theologians and faith leaders in formulating an appropriate church response. Supported by a generous grant from the Templeton World Charity Foundation, many professors are engaged in a large research project entitled "Integral Missiology and the Human Flourishing of Internally Displaced Persons in Colombia."

This research project has been designed from a "participatory action research" perspective that seeks to empower IDPs and promote self-reliance by engaging them as planners, implementers, and beneficiaries. I celebrate this approach: as an inquisitive and observant teenager, I remember being very put out by the fact that my denomination was mostly managed by foreigners. I would rant about how our theology and even our modes of worship were colonized. Going back to Colombia today, I fear that I would end up doing the same—forcing what I assume to be brilliant solutions onto someone else's problems. I have been humbled by the efforts of the Colombian church and Colombian theologians to





*“Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”*

—Jeremiah 29:7

remain true to our roots, to pay attention to our unique cultural history and underpinnings, and to engage both local and international help. It has been inspirational and transforming to partner with internally displaced persons and with Colombian theologians, sociologists, economists, lawyers, psychologists, and educators—all armed with their unique expertise and views, all coming together to bring forth their best God-given gifts to bear witness and to bring about shalom in a time of conflict.

God moves in mysterious ways. Large movements of people also bring opportunities for healing and reconciliation. As I work with FUSBC and Fuller, I bear witness to the many willing Christian servants who move beyond borders, using their Christian consciousness, theology, and the knowledge of their disciplines, to push these peace conversations into different spaces in the Protestant church in Colombia. We are attempting to learn from and support pastors and faith leaders working with IDPs and to amplify the voices of IDPs who seek justice in their own individual cases, but also, more broadly, for all who are seeking shalom. I saw my diverse and brave clinical psychology doctoral students—Josi Hwang Koo, Byron Rivera, Miko Mechure, Stephanie Banuelos, Marissa Nunes—and my American, South African, and Colombian colleagues wrestle with the horrors of armed conflict in their attempts to create spaces where the church can bear witness to the suffering of IDPs. I chuckled yet was deeply moved when my Fuller colleague, Dr. Tommy Givens, observed that he had never participated in a research project that required so much crying. These brave Fuller students and colleagues—Colombian and foreign

alike—and their attempts to learn, support, and accompany the Colombian Protestant church in peacemaking efforts among IDPs have given me a glimpse into the depth and magnitude of the meaning of shalom.

Going back to Medellín—to the seminary where my father taught for several years and to the playgrounds where I formed unforgettable memories of community, good friends, laughing, and eating mangos—all felt surreal. Multiple times I had to stop to take it all in. I was overwhelmed to see God’s integral and transcendental peace—shalom—at its best in my own life. Here I was, the Colombian in diaspora in the United States, returning to my country of origin, making peace with my past, having the privilege to contribute my grain of salt and little sparkle of light to the peacemaking process, blessed to be part of God’s grand master plan to bring shalom to humanity. Indeed, no borders limit God—and his peace transcends all understanding.



ENDNOTES

1. Alto Comisionado de las Naciones Unidas para los Refugiados-ACNUR, *Tendencias Globales: Desplazamiento Forzado en 2015, Forzados a Huir* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2016), at <http://www.acnur.org/t3/fileadmin/Documentos/Publicaciones/2016/10627.pdf>.
2. Pew Research Center, Religion & Public Life, “Religion in Latin America: Widespread Change in a Historically Catholic Region” (November 13, 2014), at <http://www.pewforum.org/2014/11/13/religion-in-latin-america/>.
3. Internal Displacement Division of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). See also the websites of the US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants ([www.refugees.org](http://www.refugees.org)), Refugees International ([www.refintl.org](http://www.refintl.org)), and [www.reliefweb.int](http://www.reliefweb.int).