

**LINKING NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL POLICYMAKERS TO THE LOCAL  
PEACEBUILDING PROCESS**

**FRAMEWORK DOCUMENT**

**February 2005  
(FIRST DRAFT)**

## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

1. Three churches: three examples to learn
2. What they are teaching us
  - 2.1 What they talk about when they talk about peace
  - 2.2 What a Peace Sanctuary is for them
  - 2.3 What they have learned
3. What they do
  - 3.1 Mediation and dialogue activities with the armed actors
  - 3.2 Activities to help people in crisis
  - 3.3 Activities to help people living in poverty
  - 3.4 Activities for social and economic development
  - 3.5 Activities to strengthen spirituality
  - 3.6 Summary of the churches' actions by type of activity
4. Appendix: Historical context of political violence in Colombia

## **1 THREE CHURCHES, THREE EXAMPLES TO LEARN: CRISTO EL REY, REMANSO DE PAZ, AND PENIEL CHURCHES**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This framework document tells the stories of three remarkable churches working to build peace in the Atlantic Coast region of Colombia, relying on their own voices and recollections to do the telling. It is a living document, a draft open to input and suggestions from an array of groups and individuals interested in the work of these Peace Sanctuary Churches. Its purpose is to communicate the Peace Sanctuary Churches' message of hope -- their conviction that peace is possible in Colombia, and their experiences putting their faith into practice -- with communities and policy-makers in Colombia and the United States who may know little about such local peacebuilding efforts. These audiences often lack practical ideas for policies that would decrease rather than expand violence in Colombia and that would help build a lasting peace. We hope the Peace Sanctuary Churches' local experiences will serve as guides and models for developing such national and international policies.

The document begins with a brief recounting of the formation and development of each church, followed by church members' reflections on what peace is and what it means to be part of a Peace Sanctuary Church. Then the three churches' activities are described, divided into five categories: mediation and dialogue activities with armed actors; activities to help people in crisis; activities to help people living in poverty; activities for social and economic development; and activities for strengthening spirituality. At the end there is an appendix containing some historical background on the Colombian conflict.

### **CRISTO EL REY CHURCH, TIERRALTA**

Coming from different parts of the region, several faithful brothers and sisters who did not have a place where they could congregate met in 1978. They looked among their houses and chose the biggest one, thinking that the notice would be successful. Although there were just twelve that first time, they did not get discouraged or stop thinking about being able to pray and honor God. They started organizing, and with the patience and optimism that characterizes believers, they grew little by little. Within one year, there were already 75 members of the church and it continued growing.

At the beginning, the brothers and sisters spent their time doing worship activities as if these were the only needs they had. However, they soon found other activities and goals, pushed in part by the national reality that shaped their lives. The ecclesiastic congregations did not escape the social mobilizations of that time and the government repression. Surely, for Cristo El Rey, this situation included them, and the church was maturing within its conceptions and social commitments, having a clear idea: they were God's people and violence would never be the right route.

Their first act was the establishment of the Getsemaní school. Because of the poor coverage of the public education system—in Colombia, as in no other Latin American country, public education is insufficient and expensive private schools prosper—the brothers and sisters founded it in 1980 to educate their children. They constructed three classrooms with “cañaflecha,” which is a regional traditional plant used to make the famous *Cordobeses vueltiaos* hats. They began to

understand that the Christian Church's performance was linked to the social development of their community and neighbors.

The congregation was growing more and more, and at the end of 1984, according to the meetings' minutes, there were 116 brothers and sisters in the church. By 1983, it had grown from a congregation into a church.

For the church, it was a time of settling down in the region and consolidating its position before the other communities of Tierralta. Although in 1985, the number of members had decreased to 70, it improved again, and in May 1986, it had doubled: 146 members between men and women. Since that year, the church began to work with World Vision, an international organization that sponsored a nutritional program for children. World Vision accompanied the Cristo El Rey community until 1993. It was through World Vision that they built several settlements for the members of the church and other migrants. The first was Villa Hermosa, and afterwards, Villa Nazareth.

This started a very fruitful experience with the support of international funding for development programs and responding to the humanitarian crises that began to emerge in the region. The first leaders of the church were trained on the ground. Without any experience, and only wishing to work in favor of the well-being of their community and themselves, they learned to submit projects before international cooperation agencies and to do the work necessary in order to obtain the support of the local authorities. In those years, most of the work also consisted of learning new jobs as brothers and sisters of the church.

They did not forget their spiritual nourishment. In 1984, they were able to build the temple on a land that was partially donated and the other part was bought by the community. The builder was the pastor himself, who had learned those skills during his youth.

The Cristo El Rey church had good foundations and its initiatives with World Vision were strengthened and bore fruit. The *Proyecto de Desarrollo Cristiano* (Christian Development Project, PRODEC) was created, which was in charge of seeking national and international funding. Among many things, they were able to develop nutritional, educational, health, and recreational programs for 300 children. The end of the 1980s was a period of growth.

Massacres and the consequent forced displacements were already the daily bread in several regions of the country. In 1996, the Cristo El Rey church confronted its first humanitarian assistance challenge when it received people forcibly displaced by the paramilitaries. Sixty-four families, who had to flee because of threats and massacres carried out by the paramilitaries in the Paramillo junction, arrived in Tierralta and the members of the church received them. They improvised a shelter in the Getsemaní school facilities, turned to the solidarity of the people of their community to feed the displaced population, and obtained the support of the local government to find other facilities.

After four days, they had found families to provide shelter to the displaced families and started looking for a piece of land where the displaced families could live and settle down. At that time, the contacts with World Vision had already ended because it had changed its support schemes.

However, this was not an obstacle for the Cristo El Rey church to obtain the support and funding of different international organizations to help those forcibly displaced families.

Later, they received another twenty-four displaced families, but their previous experience helped them provide better-organized assistance this time.

The church continued its work in assisting displaced communities and obtained international funding to carry out productive social development projects. By 2000, they had received a third wave of forcibly displaced persons. Thanks to their earlier experiences, they were able to provide a much better-organized assistance.

Through the years, the Cristo El Rey church has received forcibly displaced people. As a result of a new massacre, in 2002, the church received eighty-one displaced families, for whom it helped find land and build houses. It also built a new Getsemaní school in Villa Madeira, the first settlement that the church helped build. This expansion allowed children to receive basic education without having to walk long distances.

Tierralta is the municipality where the peace talks with the paramilitaries are currently taking place, and their control is evident. In Villa Madeira, the first community that the Cristo El Rey church helped build, a paramilitary group entered the temple and killed a member of the church during the service, accusing him of being a guerrilla. This event motivated the church's leaders to confront the paramilitaries and ask them to respect the church's members and its sacred places. These pacific confrontations, even though they are not recurrent, have taken place when the church's worshippers have been threatened or harassed by the armed actors.

### **REMANSO DE PAZ CHURCH, SINCELEJO**

In 1990, the Macayepo region, in Bolívar province, was a prosperous area inhabited by mostly small farmers. As throughout the Atlantic Coast, Evangelical communities are common and there were six or seven churches. Without being an ecclesiastic work exactly, but committed to Christian principles, the Evangelicals of this zone, along with the members of San Onofre's church, started carrying out social development projects that had to do with the improvement of roads for the marketing of their products. They built bridges and repaired roads with the support of neighboring municipal governments and they also held two civil registry events for the zone's inhabitants.

In Colombia, it is common that peasants and the rest of the rural population do not have legal documentation, making their access to public services such as health and education difficult. Because of that, these campaigns were necessary for the development of the region. More than four hundred people obtained their legal registration. They also carried out campaigns against leishmaniasis and other diseases, improving people's quality of life in the region.

In this region of evident guerrilla influence, as well as in almost all the municipalities of the Montes de María region, the paramilitaries began to make incursions, funded by ranchers and supported by the national navy. The calm enjoyed in general terms by the inhabitants of Macayepo was interrupted by the armed confrontations between the guerrillas and the military through bombing, selective assassinations, and forced disappearances.

The violence has also affected Evangelical communities who have not escaped the suspicion of armed groups, which accuse them of being collaborators of their enemies. Since then, the possibilities of having a calm and prosperous life in the region have turned out to be almost impossible for the medium-size farmers and the small number of people who live in the small towns and villages. People began to emigrate toward cities and towns for their safety.

As if that were not enough, the guerrillas added another element of violence to the complex situation. As a way of defending themselves, the guerrillas began to place landmines in fields to protect themselves from other armed actors. This situation made the zone dangerous for unaware people who walk by.

The tension continued increasing and made it more difficult for people to stay. Typically, the guerrillas used the civilian population as protection, putting practically any peasant in the sites of the paramilitaries and the army. Little by little, yet clearly, the Evangelical communities had accumulated a great number of dead brethren, and several congregations in the region had been dismantled by the departure of the majority of their members.

The armed conflict had reached such degradation that in October 2000, there was a massive exodus in which most of the displaced population headed to Sincelejo, the capital of neighboring Sucre province. Although the region of Macayepo is part of Bolívar province, the nearby municipalities of San Onofre and Sincelejo, with which there exist old ties, are in Sucre province. Already in August, several people who belonged to those Evangelical communities had to flee, because they were on the guerrilla's blacklist. On that occasion, they tried to talk to the guerrillas and let them know that they were ill-informed about the members of the church, who, according to the blacklist, served as supporters of the paramilitaries.

However, in October, the forced displacement was impossible to stop. Paramilitaries arrived, and without listening to objections, burned huts, killed cattle, and perpetrated massacres to set an example. In Sincelejo, the organization of displaced populations was more or less quick. At the end of 2000, they organized a congregation, along with members of four other churches who had been displaced and were in the city. During that process, they received help from the Mennonite church through Justapaz.

At the beginning, the church was more of an association dedicated to provide assistance to dispersed members who arrived very confused in the provincial capital. For peasants with old traditions, the culture and the urban rhythms of the city turned out to be hostile and difficult to understand. The congregation gave them advice about their rights as displaced persons and the protection that the government should provide them.

In that year, the displaced people who were settled in Sincelejo organized their own association—AORTAPAZ—and they gave a formal name to their congregation: “Remanso de Paz.” There were problems because the members initially belonged to four different churches, but as an example of tolerance and association, they found ways of creating unity among them.

They continued organizing: they bought land at the outskirts of Sincelejo alongside a creek, which was being used as rubbish dump. They cleaned it up and transformed it into productive fields. The productive fields are a common strategy on the Caribbean Coast to ensure self-sufficient agriculture. Within those negotiations, they were able to get the local government to pay part of the daily wage of the people who worked in them. They were also supported by the Social Solidarity Network<sup>1</sup> and the UN Food World Program, which trained them in different trades such as pottery, weaving, and meat processing.

The church has been affected by the war. Recently, a member who tried to return to his field was a victim of a landmine and he lost one of his arms. The church has also continued working on getting the support of different institutions for the social development and improvement of the quality of life of its community. It has obtained scholarships for those members who have not yet completed their basic education as well as musical training programs organized by the *Instituto de Bellas Artes* (Institute of Arts). The *Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar* (Colombian Institute of Family Welfare) is sponsoring a school soup kitchen program for poor children. It also has an agreement with three other private schools and the Sincelejo mayor's office so that children and young people from its school can participate in the school soup kitchen programs. Something that is very important is the fact that the Remanso de Paz church has become a point of reference for the displaced population, Christians or not, who arrive in Sincelejo in search of refuge. It is in the church that they receive information and help about getting registered as displaced persons, which is an indispensable condition to have access to and demand social protection by the Colombian government.

### **PENIEL CHURCH, ZAMBRANO**

The congregation was founded in Zambrano in 1997, but it did not have a pastor for a long time. In 1998, a female missionary arrived and started her evangelization work. She brought together some families and she raised awareness among them about the need to organize a congregation that, from Christian values, would provide spiritual and material support to the Zambrano population. The town is located on the bank of the Magdalena River, which was famous in the nineteenth and the first part of the twentieth centuries because it was a necessary stop between the Caribbean Coast and the country's interior.

However, since 1997, Zambrano has been left out of the loop of progress. Until then, people from the country's interior went by car until El Plato, Magdalena, and from there, they took the ferry that left them in Zambrano to continue their journey to the Caribbean Coast, and vice versa. Once the bridge on the river was built, Zambrano was left five kilometers (three miles) from the principal route, making the town poor.

The female missionary was in the region for one year, and later, the current pastors arrived who took charge of the congregation. In 1999, the Quadrangular church was founded.

The church began to move forward in other perspectives about what evangelization meant: a work that would also answer the material needs of people. Zambrano had not been isolated from the difficulties of the war. At the beginning of the 1990s, it had become a drug traffickers' investment zone, where they sought to launder their illegal money. When the drug traffickers

---

<sup>1</sup> National agency that provides support and assistance to poor people or in cases of humanitarian crisis.

supported the anti-guerrilla fight, they committed atrocities such as assassinations and forced disappearances every day. This situation meant that the population suffered sporadic guerrilla incursions that sought to punish their enemies.

In 2001, the church witnessed two incursions during which, while the people ran to find refuge in their houses, the guerrillas followed them and burned down the houses of those they suspected of being paramilitary sympathizers. In addition, more than one time, the town suffered blackouts because the subversives blew up the electric towers. The Peniel church continued confronting difficulties in its evangelization work and seeking to protect its members from violent actions perpetrated by all armed groups. Because of the attacks, many members preferred to not leave their houses, and the church began a work of family evangelization, visiting their homes. Another major activity that the church developed was a program for the improvement of houses for those families who did have the means to maintain them.

All these years, the church has continued bearing, as has the whole population of Zambrano, the confrontations among the guerrillas, the state security forces, and the paramilitaries. In 2004, they suffered a new guerrilla incursion that sought to strike against inhabitants deemed as enemies.

With great effort, they have been carrying out new productive projects to improve the economic conditions of its members. Currently, they have a field on which seven families are working. They also have a bakery that is managed by a youth group from the congregation. In addition, they are promoting a housing project for 120 families and fostering different arts, such theatre and painting, among its members.

## **2 WHAT THEY ARE TEACHING US**

As we know, these churches have an intense and hard job in search of peace and development in Colombia. Besides their work, they reflect on what they do and what it means to them. They speak about peace, what a peace sanctuary means, and what they have learned from their years of work experience.

### **2.1 WHAT THEY TALK ABOUT WHEN THEY TALK ABOUT PEACE**

Living in peace has been the wish of the majority of the world's people and many of them have decided to mobilize politically in order to achieve it. However, every time we try to bring it to fruition, deceptions and contradictions emerge. "Here, guerrillas and paramilitaries say that they want peace... and the situation is getting worse," says a member of the Peniel church in Zambrano. War is the most pathetic example. Often, people propose it as a necessary route and "... it ends up being a calamity...I have seen many people die," says an older displaced woman who is member of the Remanso de Paz church in Sincelejo.

"We as a church believe in peace, but in the peace that Christ taught us," says a leader of the Cristo El Rey church in Tierralta. This is not a loose statement: the peace of Christian origin is something else than calm, serenity, and harmony among people for these churches.

An idea of peace that emphasizes the absence of conflict is incomplete for the Peace Sanctuary Churches: "Living in peace according to Christ is assuring that everybody is okay and we do not



lack anything,” says a woman from the Cristo El Rey church. “Christ preached solidarity...that is the lesson of the good Samaritan,” says a man from the same church.

“There is poverty, there are diseases, things that as a church we are worried about,” says a leader of the Remanso de Paz church. “It is difficult to achieve peace with all those problems,” stated another leader of the church. A peace with many other characteristics, for instance, personal development: “It is necessary for us to be fulfilled as human beings...that brings interior peace,” points out a young male leader from the Peniel church.

There is also a clear position about the armed conflict and the armed actors: “We, as Christians, make an active non-violence,”<sup>2</sup> says a leader of the Cristo El Rey church. That non-violence leads them to reject violent actions and to search for their social and Christian goals through peaceful means. “Non-violence means that we struggle for equity and equality, but we do not use guns or other kinds of violence,” clarifies the same leader.

Their attitude before the armed actors is very interesting: disagreement with their acts, but also compassion toward the possibility of them changing themselves. “The armed actors are not our enemies...those people who are wrong... they need to know God,” states an older woman from the Remanso de Paz church whose house was burned down. “I told them, ‘we know that what you do is because you listen to the devil and not God,’” she adds. “When the conditions are better, we talk to them about the word of God...some of them listen,” says a leader from the same church. “We pray for them permanently...that they will find the path toward God,” points out a leader of the Cristo El Rey church.

All the justification of this position on peace they find in the Bible and more specifically, in the life of Christ. “Christ loved, forgave...looked for the salvation of everybody,” explains a young woman from the Peniel church. “We try to live as the primitive church,” she added.

These ways of understanding the meaning of peace and at the same time, violence, are not unknown in the Christian tradition. John Driver, Anabaptist theologian, writes:

“The person who has been reached through the gospel and transformed by the power of God’s spirit can hardly admit that s/he practices selfishness, undeterred competition, disproportionate ambition, the desire to be important, the selfish accumulation of goods, violence, racial and ethnic prejudices, discrimination, injustice, and the lack of sincere and authentic pity. And still less can s/he do it in the name of faith!”<sup>3</sup>

Without the theoretical construction, but with the same clarity, people from the three churches know it: “Ambition is what has made this world bad,” says a leader of the Peniel church. “Some Christians believe that praying is sufficient but it’s not...,” says a woman from the Remanso de Paz church. “The church should fight against prejudices... the indigenous population is also our brethren” reflects an older man from the Cristo El Rey church.

---

<sup>2</sup> Active non- violence refers not only to the absence of violence but also to actions that end the violence.

<sup>3</sup> DRIVER, J. *Una teología bíblica de la paz*. Ediciones Clara Semilla: Bogotá, 2003.

Lederach,<sup>4</sup> another theologian of peace, says that Christian peace is based on the concept of Hebrew peace, *shalom*. For the Hebrews, *shalom* was based on justice (“being just”) and the restitution or jubilee. The term justice or better yet, “being just,” refers to “...the person who responds to the demands of a community relationship.”<sup>5</sup> “We have to take care of our brethren and any other person, even though he/she is not a Christian,” says a leader from the Cristo El Rey church. “There are people in need whom we should help...everybody should help them,” says a woman from the Cristo El Rey church. “Some members do not understand that we delay a service to help the displaced population...but they need it,” points out a leader of the Remanso de Paz church. “We are a people, a church...we are not alone,” says a young man from the Peniel church to mean that they act as a single body.

These testimonies show the relational and structural dimensions that the ideas about peace have for those churches. “We cannot be well, if our brethren are suffering,” says a young woman from the Remanso de Paz church. “Christ gave everything...we should do it too,” remembers a young woman leader of the Peniel church.

## **2.2 WHAT A PEACE SANCTUARY IS FOR THEM**

One of the principal problems for the people who are victims of the armed conflict in Colombia is finding places to take refuge. Entire towns have to leave in an abrupt manner and arrive in other regions where they are not always received in the best fashion. The Peace Sanctuary Churches are born of these two ideas: to help, in its condition as a church in search of peace, and to give protection to the people affected by the armed conflict and political violence, who are always the weakest.

In Colombia, the Peace Sanctuary Church project is thus understood as a vision or message of action for God’s people, as a proposal for reflection and action for the peoples who live in the middle of the conflict. The situation of violence in the country challenges the churches to strengthen themselves as communities and define manners of understanding how to be salt and light for the people and the communities who live in such difficult situations.

Given the task of defining the characteristics of the Peace Sanctuary Churches, the three churches of the project said:

### **IT IS FOUNDED IN AN INTEGRATED CHRIST-CENTRIC WORK**

By Christ-centric values, these churches mean the values of Christ’s life. Practically all refer to the love that God has for us and that we should have for our brothers; the example to follow is the life of Christ. “We want,” says a young Peniel leader, “to return, if possible, to the lifestyle of the primitive church.” “There are two fundamental Christ-centric values,” says the pastor of Cristo El Rey. “The love of God and of our fellow human beings.”

### **THE WORD MUST BE BACKED UP BY FACTS**

For the members of the three churches, the Peace Sanctuaries should work in all spheres of human life; it is what a leader of the Remanso de Paz church describes as “taking into account

---

<sup>4</sup> LEDERACH, J.P. *Seguir a Jesús. El camino de la ética cristiana*. Comité Central Menonita de México, Publicaciones El Faro, Centro de Comunicación Cultural CUPSA, Editorial Kyrios; México D. F., 1993.

<sup>5</sup> VON RAD, G. *Estudios sobre el antiguo testamento. Vol I, pg. 214*. Ed. Sígueme, Salamanca, 1976

the spiritual and material needs.” A leader of Cristo El Rey says it clearly: “Our spirituality is strengthened when we help our fellow humans in their material needs.”

### **IT IS FOR EVERYBODY WHO NEEDS IT**

The Peace Sanctuary Churches help all people, whether they are of the church or not; the Peace Sanctuary Churches work for the community. “It does not matter if they are Christians or not; when the displaced persons come, we help them,” says a leader of the Remanso de Paz church. “We are projecting ourselves out into the community here in Tierralta,” says a member of the Cristo El Rey church. “Many of the things we do, such as house reconstruction, have not only been for members of the church,” adds a young woman from Peniel church, giving an example of how they do not make distinctions at the moment of helping others.

### **IT SERVES WITHOUT EXPECTING ANYTHING IN RETURN**

Christian solidarity does not seek material rewards. It simply aims to do good. Or, as a young man from Peniel church says, “the well-being of others is our reward.”

### **IT IS IMPARTIAL BEFORE THE ARMED ACTORS**

The whole idea of these communities wouldn't be possible if they did not remain impartial before the armed conflict. “We don't want violence, wherever it comes from,” says a young woman from Peniel church. “We are in favor of the community, the people,” says a leader of the Remanso de Paz church. But it must be clarified that not favoring the guerrillas or the paramilitaries does not mean that one agrees with what those groups do. “One must indicate, with prudence, the errors committed by the armed actors,” says a leader of the Cristo El Rey church. “With the Bible in hand, we show them that what they do is not correct...some of them listen,” recounts a young woman from Remanso de Paz. And she adds: “We want them to respect us...and that they respect international humanitarian law.”

By way of conclusion, a woman from Cristo El Rey church reflects that “In these times of danger, from which the churches are not exempt (Jeremiah 45:1-5, John 16:33), the invitation is to recognize that these crises, under divine guidance, can become an opportunity to help and offer the message of salvation (Esther 4:12-14).”

## **2.3 WHAT THEY HAVE LEARNED**

It is good to clarify that for the churches, the armed conflict is not the only source of violence that they live with. “A good part of the work that we do we have done for people who are simply poor,” says an older leader of the Cristo El Rey church, who is now part in a neighboring church.” The state does not attend to our petitions as it should and the functionaries pull our leg by saying that they will return later,” comments a leader of the Remanso de Paz church in Sincelejo.

Even though they are attacked by the legal and illegal actors of the armed conflict, the socioeconomic conditions of the region also provoke displacement and direct violence among the inhabitants. “Here, for five years there have been a lot of robberies and even assaults,” says a young woman who is part of the Cristo El Rey Church. “The people from Zambrano (the village where Peniel church is located) are leaving because there is no work,” says a very young woman, a leader in the congregation.

When the three churches look at their experiences and their work, they are surprised to see what they have done. “It is very interesting to see that our path has been so beneficial for other people and for ourselves,” says the pastor of Peniel church in Zambrano. “This job of reviewing our experience, we should have done it earlier, because it is going to help us better organize everything we do,” says a leader of Cristo El Rey church en Tierralta. In different meetings, members of the three churches were asked to make a list of things that they did for peace in their churches and in their communities, and they defined different types of activities, some shared and other particular to each congregation.

### **3 WHAT THEY DO**

#### **3.1 MEDIATION AND DIALOGUE ACTIVITIES WITH THE ARMED ACTORS**

On many occasions, leaders of the Peace Sanctuary Churches have spoken with the legal and illegal actors of the armed conflict. Whether it is to mediate on behalf of those who are threatened or to assume the protection of their properties, the churches have developed a series of abilities to make themselves heard. A fundamental element to make oneself heard has been the rejection of armed actions, wherever they come from; this neutrality with respect to the armed conflict has earned them the recognition and respect of the actors in the conflict. The other fundamental element has been their confrontation with and permanent invitation to the armed actors to resolve the conflict another way; we could call it a work of calming that has earned them the respect of the armed actors. They are not indifferent, but neutral.

#### **PENIEL**

The history of Peniel church in Zambrano has been slim in this respect. “Currently, we do not have contacts or communication with the illegal armed actors...a few years ago, a few times it was necessary to communicate with them so they could allow us to work in the fields we have outside the town,” says the pastor. “Rather, we have worked with the widows and the orphans of the armed conflict and the violence, giving them support and solace,” she adds. “Also, when it was the paramilitaries who controlled the zone, one had to tell them who was coming to visit the church so that they respected them.” A more recent problem is the involvement, sometimes obligatory or forced, of young people in the armed groups. “We are making the young people conscious so they don’t choose the armed route,” says a man who is father to two boys.

“We have learned to cultivate various qualities in this aspect...prudence, primarily,” says a young man who is very active in the congregation. Other members add that they want to radiate harmony, internal peace, show companionship and disposition for pardon, which is very important at the moment of doing this work. The other thing they mention as necessary is to demonstrate what they think with their acts: “A Christ-centric way of acting is essential as an example,” says the pastor.

The church sees no difference between the actions of men and women in these matters. “It depends on the situation, sometimes it was men who went to speak, other times it was women,” comments a 40-year-old man. In any event, those moments of interlocution with the armed actors are accompanied by a lot of praying from the remaining members. “We pray that nothing happens to those who go and that God accompany them,” says the pastor.

#### **REMANSO DE PAZ**

The church has had direct contact with all of the armed actors, because the majority of its members have been displaced and uprooted. It does not appear very clear to them where their displacement originated: “It was the permanent suspicion from one side or the other that one belonged to the enemy’s band,” said one leader who participated in a mediating commission to intercede on behalf of another member of the congregation. “One time the guerrillas arrived sharing a shipment of beans with us that they had taken from a truck and within a month the paramilitaries arrived looking for the ‘bean-eaters’ to punish them,” says an old woman. “And later, those of us who stayed were suspected of being friends of the paramilitaries,” she said.

On two occasions, they have had to go and talk with the illegal armed actors, once with the guerrillas and once with the paramilitaries. “We knew that the guerrillas were looking for a brother from the congregation and they accused him of being a friend of the paramilitaries...he had to leave the zone and come to Sincelejo,” says a church leader, about the first case. “After much talking in the church, we named a commission of three people and we went to talk to the guerrillas,” he adds. “Speaking to them, we realized that the name they had was not that of our brother.” This saved his life, but all the same, the person did not want to return to the zone and he stayed in the city.

In the case of the paramilitaries, the church created another commission to speak with them about a young man, a member of the congregation, who had been forcibly recruited. “We were not successful and we had to return without him,” says the church’s pastor. She adds, “However, I think it was advantageous, because at least the situation did not repeat itself,” she says by way of reflection.

All this has given them great prudence. “One has to know how to talk to them without making enemies, but also without making friends,” says a male church leader. “Another lesson is to not let fear and terror get the best of us, but rather to always be calm,” says a young woman who is very active in the church. The pastor says, “it doesn’t matter what the situation is, dialogue always leads to understandings and agreements.” Other lessons remind us of Christian messages: “Love your neighbor as thyself,” says an old man, who means to say that the armed actors are their neighbors. “There is always hope if one believes in God,” says another older man. “I believe what we have learned should serve the whole church and not only those who have been in the situation,” says a church leader who also participated in the commissions to intercede of behalf of a threatened church member.

Upon asking various members of the church about who (men or women) did this intermediation work, they said that coincidentally “the first commission was composed of men and the second was composed of women,” responded several of them. And they add, “the rest of the community stayed and prayed for the delegation to be successful.”

### **CRISTO EL REY**

The commanders of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (paramilitaries)—one of the armed actors of the Colombian conflict—are concentrated in the rural areas of Tierralta municipality. This situation makes contact between them and the church’s members inevitable. “We have had to go to speak with them for several reasons,” says a church leader. “Sometimes, they threaten pastors and we have to find a way to protect them,” he adds. In many cases,

protecting them means buying time to take them away from the zone. “We have worked to make sure they tell us when they are not happy with a member of a neighboring church and we try to solve the misunderstanding, and if we cannot agree, we ask them to give us time so we can take away the threatened person,” says another male leader.

Other times, the churches mediate on behalf of the communities and congregations that have been harassed in order to make them flee. “One time, we were able to buy three days for a community that was harassed by them. That situation made the church organize in a better way to provide shelter and support,” says another leader who participated closely in that effort. There was a case of three brothers who were threatened. After one of them was murdered, the church was able to mediate so the paramilitaries would respect the lives of the other two brothers. “We sat down with them and with the two brothers, and we agreed that they would not hurt them while they were members of the church,” says one of the leaders of the church. “It was difficult because there, in front of the two survivors, the paramilitaries admitted that they were looking to kill them,” says another leader.

When we asked them about what they had learned from those contacts, they said that they already have a procedure on how to confront all these threats and difficulties. They say that “it is important to know how to construct the delegation to speak with them,” says one of the leaders. “It is also fundamental to know who commands these groups and who makes the decisions,” adds another leader. “It is important that others accompany them by praying so they are accompanied by God,” points out a member of the church. “We also need to pray so God will also change their hearts,” adds a female. “When we have the opportunity, we give them Biblical texts so that they can transform themselves into good people,” says another female member of the church.

The pastor says that “it is important that the delegations gather ideas and suggestions from the whole congregation. Obtaining consensus strengthens the possibilities of success.” “It is a mission in which we put our lives at risk, because we do not know how the armed groups will react,” says a man who has taken part in some delegations. “This work has also helped us find out who the key persons are in the legal institutions when we need to ask for their assistance,” adds another man.

“If your brother sins against you, go and speak with him, says the Bible. We are following that mandate,” states a member of the church. “We are sharing the word of peace that Jesus left us,” adds another member. “We are giving copies of the New Testament to armed actors, because in the Old Testament there are many war stories and perhaps these are not appropriate,” says a female who is very active in the church. “We know that as a church, we are called to conciliate and to be on the side of unprotected and vulnerable people,” says one of the leaders.

In the Cristo El Rey church, they make special emphasis on all the activities that strengthen them spiritually. “We can pray with more understanding,” says a woman from the church. “We feel the support of God when we do this work of trying to save lives,” says another woman. “We also strengthen ourselves when we see that some of them lay down their weapons and start a new life,” says a member of the church. “Our families and the church experience joy every time we do this work, every time we can save the life of one of our brothers,” adds another member.

When we asked them about the differences between the role of men and women in these activities, they point out that “men go to dialogue and investigate who the appropriate persons to contact are, and women lead prayer groups to accompany these actions.”

### **3.2 ACTIVITIES TO HELP PEOPLE IN CRISIS**

Facing the constant displacement of families, including entire communities affected by the armed conflict and political violence, the Peace Sanctuary Churches have established support networks with the local governments and the rest of the community. This support is reflected in the establishment of shelters and food, and in quick medical assistance. Some of them have studied the Colombian laws that should protect these people and have helped them so they can demand their rights be fulfilled. These experiences have allowed them to also know the most expeditious channels to gain access to the international support that exists in Colombia for such tragedies.

#### **PENIEL**

On several occasions, the Peniel church has had to provide shelter when the armed conflict arrived to Zambrano’s own streets. “One night, several neighbors were holed up in a house with their children, because the guerrillas had entered the town,” says an adult woman. “We were about twenty people praying for God to protect us.” On one occasion, several peasant families stayed in the same church building until combat between the guerrillas and the legal security forces ended. “It was about three days they were in the church until everything calmed down and they could return to their little farms,” according to a man who lived through that experience.

These experiences have taught church members that solidarity among them is alive. “During those moments, we were put to the test as Peace Sanctuary Churches, as a refuge for threatened people,” says a 50-year-old man. “The church has awakened to the needs of others,” adds another person. The pastor says that these events have strengthened them as a congregation; it has made them more unified and they have learned to be ready for others.

The men in these cases were more active in providing protection for the refugees. “The women were in charge of making sure that God’s presence was not lacking,” said the woman who gave shelter to her neighbors during the guerrilla incursion.

#### **REMANSO DE PAZ**

The church has become the point of reference for the continuous displaced persons who arrive in the city. “We have created our own site for attention to displaced persons,” says a leader. “Some people do not understand that we dedicate a great deal of time to displaced people and even the Mission<sup>6</sup> reprimands us for it,” says another leader who has been asking the church to focus more on social matters.

“I believe the principal lesson is to understand that people also have material needs, to which the church can also respond,” concludes a congregation leader. “To help those who have been destroyed materially is to revive their faith in God,” adds another member of the church. Another

---

<sup>6</sup> The Mission is the domination to which the Remanso de Paz church belongs: Asociación Evangélica del Caribe, AIEC.

person remembers that being a Christian means “helping others without expecting anything in return.” “The church should give back to the community,” says another person.

“If we look at what men and women do differently, it is that we women have led the management and the men have taken charge of the organizing work,” says the church’s pastor.

### **CRISTO EL REY**

Since 1996, the church has had to provide assistance to several displaced groups. “The first time was when 43 families were displaced from El Congo, Antioquia,” says one of the leaders. “From this experience, we learned to better assist displaced persons,” he adds. “After that, we had the displacement of 31 families from El Novillo and other families from Baltazar,” says another leader.

The lessons learned are many, and they have to do with how they have improved as people and churches. “We have realized that in difficult moments, the church unites more and it reflects solidarity,” says a woman who has confronted these crises. “We have learned to be sensitive, to value others, to relate to and love each other as human beings.”

Others add more lessons learned: “We know the value of compassion and support.” “I have learned to really value the importance of training and learning to act better,” says one of the leaders.

The church again stresses the spiritual strengthening that people receive from these activities. “We have learned to be more responsible with the commitments that God demands from us,” says a woman from the congregation.

“In these cases, women give advice, collect donations, help with the praying, and prepare the shelters,” says a leader when we ask about the role of women and men in these activities.

“Men give their effort to physical activities, they have knowledge of labor, construction, and housing repairs,” says a woman from the church. “We also give talks, spread the word, and direct the activities in general,” adds another leader from the community.

### **3.3 ACTIVITIES TO HELP PEOPLE LIVING IN POVERTY**

The Peace Sanctuary Churches are in regions where many people have difficulty subsisting, including some of their members. The armed conflict and political violence have forced many people to leave or lose their source of employment, which worsens their living conditions. To this one must add those who have been historically poor, and whose quality of life has been diminishing without attributing it directly to the armed conflict. The activities, which in large part involve the establishment of agreements with national and international entities, range from organizing community kitchens for poor children and collecting money or food for people who need it, to monitoring state resources that belong to these people by law. An example of the latter is the registration campaigns in the subsidized health programs to which the churches have actively contributed.

### **PENIEL**



For the Peniel church, it has been a constant challenge to keep people thinking about staying in the town and in the congregation. “Now, they are not leaving so much, but a few years ago, the town was empty,” says a 20-year-old. The shortage of work makes it very difficult to live with dignity in Zambrano. “There are people who don’t have enough money to fix their houses, which are in very bad shape,” says the pastor. “We formed brigades to paint and fix these people’s houses and help them that way,” she adds.

Another front is the community kitchen for the children. “We distributed close to 100 breakfasts to the children who don’t have anything to eat in the morning before school,” says a young woman who helps distributing the breakfasts. Other churches have started to imitate the Peniel example: “it’s great that they do it, because the needs are many,” says the pastor.

There are many needs and there are also many activities. After the flooding of the Magdalena River three years ago, several farmers on the riverbank were unable to harvest. “We got donations for several families who did not have enough money to buy food and they had lost what they had planted,” says a young leader.

“We help people, whether they are from the church or not; they are also from the town,” answers a young man when asked about the lessons he has learned from these actions. “It is necessary to have good relations with the other churches and the mayor so that we all collaborate in these situations,” adds the same young man. “We have learned which doors to knock on, which institutions can help us with materials and food, and that way we don’t lose time looking for them,” says the pastor.

Again, the Peniel church sees no difference between men and women at the moment of providing help: “everybody, above all the young people, are the ones who take charge of getting donations, of distributing breakfasts, of painting houses...,” says the pastor.

## **REMANSO DE PAZ**

“We have had the children’s kitchen for two years,” says a woman who cooks there. “At first, we created it for our own needs, but later we realized that around us there were other children in the same circumstances,” says another woman who collaborates in the preparation of the breakfasts. “We are covering more than 200 children with these breakfasts,” adds the pastor. “The children’s kitchen is an effort we made with the PMA<sup>7</sup>...they put up the food and we cook it,” says one of the oldest leaders of the congregation. “The kitchen is different at breakfast time: the breakfast arrives prepared and we distribute it, while the kitchen prepares the lunches that we cook,” says one of the women in charge. The church has been able to monitor other community services like health subsidies: “We inform the poor people about the subsidized health system and we help them sign up,” says another leader who has worked a lot in that area.

“We also collect donations to help our brothers who are in really bad shape,” says a young woman who works voluntarily in the church. “Yes, we collect and distribute goods for the poorest people,” ratifies another young woman.

---

<sup>7</sup> UN World Food Program

“For two years we had to knock on many doors...we have learned where to go, which papers to have, how to take a census, how to register,” says one of the male leaders of the church, referring to the experience they have gained in getting funding. “We have learned to love the children and to serve them; to feel the needs of others,” adds a woman. “The teaching that sticks with me is that we can create consciousness within others to be more solidarity-minded,” says one man. “Yes, in addition, the activities generate good spirit and happiness in the children,” says a woman. “It’s that in spite of the difficulties, one has to share the bread that God gives us,” emphasizes a woman. “Another great lesson has been that we can teach the law...the rights that people have and that way we feel useful for the community.”

“In some activities we do things differently and in others the same. For example, the men are in charge of distributing the breakfasts, while in the soup kitchen men and women work the same,” says a young woman. “The same goes for signing people up for health subsidies: men and women work equally,” says a young man. “On the other hand, in the collections, the men organize and the women manage,” intervenes another young woman.

### **CRISTO EL REY**

A good many of these actions revolve around the displaced congregations that the church has helped. “It is very important to find land so the displaced persons and other poor people have a place to live, and also the resources to buy the land,” says a church leader. The church has helped acquire lands for several communities that don’t have money or have been displaced.

“Another very important project is the work we have done to attend to the youth at risk, among them displaced boys and girls,” says a woman who has participated in the projects. “They are projects in which we have agreements with governmental and non-governmental entities.”

“What have we learned? In spite of the difficulties, through God’s love we must unite and reach our objective,” says a man. “We learn to value people,” adds a woman. “It has been very interesting to see how the people from the church wake up to the needs of the community in general, and they get involved with the community bringing Christ-centric values,” says one of the leaders.

In all their activities, the church members analyze the spiritual strengthening that comes with them. “Whoever helps another complies with one of God’s mandates, and whoever is helped in those moments maintains his faith in God,” says a woman who is involved in those activities.

Another member adds, “Through this whole process, we see that Christ gives strength to our faith and allows us, with God’s love, to get the people who have been helped closer to the churches in those communities.”

The roles of men and women depend on the activities. In the case of helping settlements of displaced persons, a woman from the congregation tells us, “while the men focused on their new social work, the women did their daily work that had to do with taking care of the children, praying, and spiritually accompanying the men in their work.”

According to a church leader, “men participate more” in preparing and getting funding for the projects. Women implement the children’s projects, using their abilities to take care of children, says the same leader.

### **3.4 ACTIVITIES FOR SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

This is the work that these churches have done the most: an example in the three churches is housing projects for people to raise the quality of life. In addition, they seek to train their members by acquiring resources, be they for formal education or varied training courses. With the settlements of displaced communities they participate in productive projects, such as fields for planting, community stores, etc. The three churches do this jointly with the ASVIDAS project, an initiative that seeks to improve the quality of life of the Evangelical communities in the Colombian coastal region, through the formulation and financing of productive economic and social initiatives.

#### **PENIEL**

“We are working very hard with the ASVIDAS network...we have traveled throughout the Montes de María region to get the people enthused about presenting projects,” says the pastor. Members of the church, the majority of them young people, have been trained in artisan skills, bread-baking, and construction. “SENA<sup>8</sup> has trained us and we want to start up productive projects,” says one of the young people in charge of the bakery. “We already have a store and we are working a lot,” he adds.

For Peniel, socioeconomic development means getting the people interested in a better quality of life. “With ASVIDAS, we want to prepare people in accounting, in administration, everything you need to start a productive project,” says the pastor. But it also means doing things so the community feels good in Zambrano. “We are cleaning the entrance to the town, which was in disrepair,” says a man who participated in the cleaning rounds.

The church’s oldest productive project is a crop field that church members keep six kilometers from town. One of the peasant users says that “it has been a very good job. We have already grown yams, yucca, and plantains.” In the future, they hope to buy small parcels, because the current land is rented.

The lessons the church has learned refer in part to how to manage these projects: “we have traveled the region, we have spoken with other churches, with mayors, with interested people, to see how we can collaborate,” says the pastor. “It is necessary to create a network in the region (Montes de María) to send information and help ourselves,” she adds. On the other hand, they refer to what they have been able to learn as persons. “We have learned to see needs inside and outside the church,” says a young woman from the bakery. “We really value our neighbor a lot more,” says another young woman. “A lesson has been to be unified, to trust in God more and depend more on him,” says a young man who works in the bakery.

Because many of the productive projects need a strong labor force, the church sees that there is a difference between what men and women do. “We women take charge of the Evangelical

---

<sup>8</sup> The *Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje* (National Learning Service, SENA) is the national institution in charge of training in technical areas.

intercession so the projects turn out right,” says a woman who wants to start up her own store. “The men make the economic contribution, they are the ones who work the fields, who clean the entry to the town...the hard work,” she adds. In other projects, the work is shared between the sexes: for example, in the bakery, “we young people, men and women, work and we are in charge of similar things,” says a young man who works on that project.

### **REMANSO DE PAZ**

The church has become a reference point for displaced persons who arrive in Sincelejo. They have studied the legislation in favor of internally displaced persons and they work to lobby before the relevant institutions. “Our major activities are to raise awareness among the displaced and vulnerable population about their rights and advocate so those rights are not violated,” says one of the congregation’s leaders eloquently and clearly. Some people from the church plan to return to the lands from which they were displaced. “It will be very important to improve our situation, above all for those of us who only know how to farm,” says one of the peasants who still feels uncomfortable in the city.

“The other important thing is the productive projects that we have close to the church,” says a woman who works in the fields. “Yes, from there we get a lot of crops that we eat or sell,” adds another woman. “In addition, it motivates the people who arrive really sad after abandoning their farms,” says the pastor.

“Currently, we are trying to get a housing project going...we are looking for the funding,” says one of the leaders. “On the other hand, we have been able to get some resources from SENA and other institutions in order to receive training,” says a man who has been participating in the trainings. “Other women and I have been trained in trades like painting, ceramics, and weaving...also in meat processing,” says a young woman.

“We have learned that you don’t only help people with money, but also by giving them advice,” reflects a man from the congregation. “You can see the thankfulness and the progress of the people and that makes us feel good,” adds a woman.

“Another thing we have learned is that in the city they know about the church’s work...they know us and they respect us,” says a man. “We are not a burden to the city, but rather, we contribute to it,” says another. “In addition, we could teach other churches and communities everything that we have learned through our experience,” says a community leader.

Participation in the trainings is fundamental for the women. “The men get the money, but very few of them take the courses,” says a young woman who has participated in almost all of them. “In the fields, there are men and women, although women participate the most,” says an adult male. “The housing project, yes, we men are doing it,” says another man. “And when the construction begins, surely we will be the ones who work the most,” says one of the project’s leaders.

### **CRISTO EL REY**

The church has several projects, most of them related to displaced persons. There is the work in the new settlements of displaced persons in Villaluz, Villa Madeira, and Nueva Esperanza. “Part

of the process for them has been the development of productive projects, in which displaced families raise animals and cultivate crops that allow them to live better,” says a church leader.

However, they have been doing other jobs for a long time. “With World Vision, we started planting corn and yucca for our own consumption,” says a long-time member of the church.

There is also the Getsemaní school, which was founded by the church many years ago. “We needed a school to educate our children, because there were no slots available in the town’s schools, and the private schools are very expensive,” says an older man, also a long-time member of the church.

They now have a soup kitchen for children (*Comedor Infantil Semilla*) that “has been a great help for the poorest children from the church and the community in general,” says a woman who works in the soup kitchen.

“The major lesson is that we have learned to work as a community and to do our social work activities with members of the church,” says a senior church member. A woman adds, “it has awakened our sensitivity to other people who have few means.” “It has been enriching to work in favor of the needs of children who are street peddlers,” says a woman who has been working in this project. “There is indeed a sensitivity in the church, to live together with vulnerable people and to act in solidarity,” points out one of the leaders.

Again, they reflect on how much these activities have strengthened them spiritually. “We have interiorized the word of God regarding generosity,” says a woman. “All the aforementioned activities have been important as a psychological support and for improving our interpersonal relationships,” says another woman. “It is putting the Bible into practice, loving our neighbor,” says another woman by way of conclusion.

In these activities, the differences between men and women are more obvious. “Men cultivate the land and women cook the food,” says a female member of one of the displaced communities. Regarding the support activities developed by the church, “men looked for funding for the school’s restaurant, and women cooked the food,” says a leader of the church. “For the school, women sewed uniforms for free,” remembers a woman who is a long-time member of the church. In the daily routines, “women cook the food and collect clothes and food,” says a member of the church.

### **3.5 ACTIVITIES TO STRENGTHEN SPIRITUALITY**

The three churches are involved in different networks that put them in contact with other churches. This has allowed them to support themselves during the difficult moments of the armed conflict. Frequently, all the leaders’ actions are fully backed by the congregation, which prays for their success. Like the majority of Evangelical churches, they do their evangelization work focusing on specific populations: men, youth, and children. It is perhaps where women are most active, in managing recourses as well as coordinating activities.

#### **PENIEL**

“For us, the spiritual work is as important as the material work,” says the pastor. She also points out that “we must take care of spiritual and earthly things.” “We have schools to grow in faith,”

says a young woman who attends those schools in which they receive Christian education. “We have a leadership school so that the church members learn,” says one of the young people who attend.

For two years, church leaders have visited families in their neighborhoods to make up family groups of reflection: “people are afraid of coming to church because one time, the guerrillas entered the town without warning and people had to run to their houses,” explains the pastor. “Because of that, we visit them, and if something happens, they are close to their houses,” she adds. Asking a young man who leads one of these groups, he responds: “We bring together the families of the neighborhood and we reflect about the family and how to confront problems that couples might have...we read the Bible and sing praises...” Connecting with those groups, the church provides advice to families who ask for it. “We went there one time with my husband, because we were having problems and we were able to solve the problem,” says a woman.

In addition to the aforementioned activities, as it is common in Evangelical churches, the church has its Sunday school for men, women, youth, and children. “Every week, we set a topic and select the people who will coordinate every group,” says the pastor.

“All these activities help us familiarize ourselves with new concepts that are part of the Christian being,” says one of the young leaders of the church. “They strengthen our relationship with God,” adds another young leader. “Knowing new values,” and “sharing a message of salvation,” say others when we ask them about the lesson learned from these activities.

They do not see any difference between the participation of men and women while they perform these activities in the church: “Everybody prays, coordinates activities, and learns.”

One of the young people proposed a different type of activity that he called activities for the integral development of the person. He was referring to “that which permits the personal development of each one of us.” “The church supports all those activities that make us grow as persons,” he adds. “We have groups of talent, dance, theatre, and crafts...we have a mural, newspaper, and a magazine project,” he says, counting the activities they have.

“We have learned that things we do with love bring a better result and generate greater self-esteem,” adds other young man. “When there is personal fulfillment, there is peace in our heart,” says another. A young woman points out: “in the church there are a lot of people with talent, but because it is not developed, it gets lost.” The young man who proposed the topic says, “we have learned that studying and working are not enough for our development...we need these creative activities.”

It is true that all the responses are practically unanimous on this point: “We do not see a difference between what men do and what women do...we need and participate in our personal development,” explains a young woman who is very active in the talent groups.

### **REMANSO DE PAZ**

Praying supports all the activities they undertake. “Always, when some of our brothers are going to start a new activity, we pray so that everything goes well,” says the pastor. “We continue to

pray until they come back, so that they will feel that they are accompanied by God all the time,” says another woman. “Now we are keeping our eyes on returning to Macayepo and we hope to start doing it soon...because of that, we pray day and night,” says one of the leaders of the project, with great enthusiasm.

“As all churches of the Mission, we have organized groups and Sunday schools for children, men, women, and most importantly, youth,” says one man who helps with the church’s tasks. “We want to improve the conditions of the church in order to do all these things better,” says the pastor.

“Things are easier when God leads them,” says a man when we ask him about the lessons learned. “Praying strengthens us a community and as a church...it makes us think of our brothers,” points out a woman from the church. “We have been able to know the spiritual state of our brothers,” adds another woman from the church. “I have learned that if the work is done by small groups, it is more productive,” says a man very involved in the church’s activities.

“I believe the most important thing we have learned is that the church's work must be comprehensive,” says one of the leaders. “We have learned that the spiritual needs go together with the material needs,” says another leader. “Yes, praying cannot go alone, but must be accompanied by other social activities,” reflects another leader.

They do not recognize any difference: “There are no differences between men and women, we all do things, we all pray,” says the pastor. “Being in contact with God is important for everyone,” adds an older woman.

### **CRISTO EL REY**

The church has a special name for these kinds of activities: reorientation of theology toward the community. “We have several tasks, such as the preparation of a study plan and continuing studies on a planned topic that addresses themes such as the true vision of the church, the relationship with God, our neighbor and the context, and the church as a response to a crisis, etc.,” explains the pastor. “We also have talks and meetings to raise awareness about different issues,” adds a woman from the church. “As in every church, we also pray and fast,” adds the pastor. “A very important thing is that we are concerned about training leaders on the aforementioned topics,” says a man from the church. “We also do evaluations that allow us to improve what we do,” says a leader.

“The major lesson has to do with the Bible, as a book that trains us, guides us, and prepares us for all good work,” says a man from the community. “We have learned that the church is a body where all its members are useful and need each other,” says a man. “We learned that we are integral beings and we cannot break people into pieces,” says a younger woman. They have also “learned to look at Jesus as a model for a worshipful life and helping your neighbor,” says a young man. “We have also learned to grow by participating in the programs and projects of the church,” adds one of the leaders of the congregation.

“All this, of course, strengthens us spiritually,” asserts the same leader. “We acquire a greater trust in God to achieve what we ask for,” says a young woman. “We are achieving more unity in

the declaration of our faith and in carrying out tasks,” says one of the men in a thoughtful manner. “We also have better opportunities to communicate the word of God and generate greater trust in the community,” says the church’s pastor by way of conclusion.

In these activities, members of the church do not see a difference between men and women. “Everyone participates equally in the activities, we have the same willingness and the same rights,” says a leader of the congregation.



### 3.6 SUMMARY OF CHURCHES' ACTIONS BY TYPE OF ACTIVITY

<b>Churches</b>	<b>Cristo El Rey</b>	<b>Remanso de Paz</b>	<b>Peniel</b>
<b>Categories</b>	<b>Tierralta, Córdoba</b>	<b>Sincelejo, Sucre</b>	<b>Zambrano, Bolívar</b>
Armed conflict	They talk to armed groups about ways of preventing killings and forcible displacements. Armed groups are confronted with their acts as crimes and as offenses against God.	They talk to armed groups in order to intercede on behalf of threatened people and to seek their return to their lands. Armed groups are confronted with their acts as crimes and as offenses against God. They do work against domestic violence.	They talk to armed groups in order to protect people who visit or work for the community or the church.
Assistance during situations of crisis	They have established networks between the community and the local government to provide transportation, food, and shelter to the forcibly displaced population.	They are prepared to assist forcibly displaced families who arrive.	At this moment, they have not confronted this situation.
Social Actions	They facilitate relationships and resources with government and non-governmental agencies to provide food. Women's organizations: food boxes for people in need. Assistance to the elderly population.	Community soup kitchens for children. Advocacy work before the mayor's office and other local government institutions in order to obtain the recognition of displaced population's rights regarding social assistance.	Soup kitchens for children.
Social Development	CORSOC is their NGO. They have a health care provider agency (IPS).	They have an NGO called Aportapaz. They provide fellowships.	They have a farm six kilometers from town. Men work in productive programs.

<b>Churches</b>	<b>Cristo El Rey</b>	<b>Remanso de Paz</b>	<b>Peniel</b>
<b>Categories</b>	<b>Tierralta, Córdoba</b>	<b>Sincelejo, Sucre</b>	<b>Zambrano, Bolívar</b>
	They have a school. They help people obtain housing and train people in construction. Productive Programs with forcibly displaced populations.	They have music classes for children. They train mostly women in craftsmanship. The productive gardens.	
Spirituality	40% of the church leadership is composed of women. All the pastors are men. Clubs open to women, youth, children, and men.	The pastor is a woman who belongs to the Ecumenical Network for Peace. Clubs open to women, youth, children, and men.	The pastor is a woman. Family groups. Emphasis on organizing groups and activities for younger people. They train future church leaders.

#### **4 APPENDIX: HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN COLOMBIA**

When did the current Colombian armed conflict start? For some people, Colombia has lived through a permanent armed conflict since the Spanish colonization. That assertion, even if it were true, does not provide much understanding of the current situation. For that reason, we need to limit the history to the end of the 1940s.

In 1946, the Liberal party, the majority party in Colombia, lost the presidential elections, because two candidates ran from the party. That situation did not imply a total loss of power; the Conservative candidate, Mariano Ospina, came to power in a very weak political situation: the Congress was dominated by the Liberal party, public opinion was broadly liberal, and the newspapers as well. Furthermore, it was predicted that once the Liberal party became united again, it would easily win the following presidential elections.

The leadership of the Conservative party began to secretly support regional and local groups to intimidate and force liberal peasants to leave their lands. In doing so, it sought to obtain better chances in the following elections. The violence increased, and the Liberals, who did not have the support of the government, started to organize themselves to deter the conservative groups' attacks.

This situation became worse, after the murder of the sole Liberal presidential candidate Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in 1948. The Liberal peasants completely lost their patience, and organized guerrilla groups that became a headache for the authorities. They responded to the aggressions of the Conservative death squads with similar acts of cruelty and hatred, and harassed the police and the army.

In 1950, the Conservative candidate, Laureano Gómez, was the only one to run for president, because the Liberal party argued about a lack of political guarantees. Once Gómez was elected, the political violence increased and the Liberal guerrillas became so strong that they were able to hit the army hard.

In 1953, the government lost the support of its party, which helped General Gustavo Rojas overthrow Gómez. The government conferred amnesty to Liberal guerrillas, most of whom accepted. Only some very small groups did not accept the disarmament, although they agreed to a ceasefire with the government.

Such groups, with Liberal roots at the beginning, maintained close ties with the Colombian Communist party. Given that the entire continent was influenced by the cold war, these groups were harassed by the army, according to the national security policy, promoted by the U.S. government.

In 1957, General Rojas was overthrown by a Liberal-Conservative coalition, which agreed to alternate in power for sixteen years. In this way, they expected to end the violence between themselves and confront the well-known, but little visible, communist threat in Latin America. The agreement, called the National Front, seemed praiseworthy if the parties had not forbidden the political participation of other political groups in the presidential and congressional elections.

All type of opposition was made illegal in practice, causing many people to start thinking about obtaining political power through insurgency. The National Front began in 1958 and its first president was the Liberal, Alberto Lleras. The political exclusion of the opposition and the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959 inspired many people to assume an insurgent position.

In 1962, when the Conservative president, Gullermo León Valencia, took power, there was already a lot of discontent and the National Front experiment was understood to be more of a game played by the country's political and economic elites in order to monopolize power, rather than a peace strategy. In 1963, the government decided to bomb and clear Liberal guerrilla bastions that were having talks with the Communist party. The insurgents marched toward other regions and they declared themselves the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, FARC) in 1964. It was the first guerrilla group in Colombia that declared itself communist. A year later, in 1965, another guerrilla group of the same communist tendency was born, which aspired to repeat and emulate the success of the Cuban Revolution. This group was the *Ejército Nacional de Liberación* (National Liberation Army, ELN).

In 1966, a Liberal, President Carlos Lleras, was elected. He attempted an agrarian reform in order to defuse the FARC in the rural areas. Although there were some improvements, the country's best lands continued to be concentrated in a few hands. In addition to the FARC and ELN, another communist group, the *Ejército Popular de Liberación* (Popular Liberation Army, EPL) was born. In any event, the destabilizing capacity of those guerrillas was minimal and local.

In the 1970 elections, the Conservative candidate, Misael Pastrana, was elected in fraudulent elections. The majority of the population supported the retired General, Gustavo Rojas. The electoral fraud made enthusiasm for the armed struggle increase among opponents of the National Front, and boosted the idea that legal alternatives were worn out. Indeed, another insurgent group with nationalist—but not communist—ideals was born: the April 19 Movement (M-19). Its name commits to memory the day of fraudulent elections: April 19, 1970.

The Pastrana government, the last of the National Front, had to deal with the acts of this latest insurgent group, which was an urban guerrilla movement that carried out spectacular strikes, affecting public opinion more than the military itself. Facing the acts of this new insurgent group, which was more willing than the other guerrillas to constitute an active political and military opposition to the Colombian state, state repression intensified.

In 1978, the elected president, Julio Cesar Turbay, designed and implemented the National Security Statute, a law once again based on the national security doctrine and in tune with U.S. geopolitical interests. After many years, the country woke up to its own reality: economic inequality, the restriction of political space, arbitrary justice, and a government that only serves the interests of a handful of people. Social movements mushroomed and sought to raise awareness about national problems among the Colombian people.

The government of Belisario Betancur replaced Turbay's government in 1982. He had based his presidential campaign on a great national reconciliation that would put an end to the country's social problems. Through this, he intended for the insurgent movements to demobilize and opt for non-violent ways of engaging in political opposition. His government granted a broad amnesty to political prisoners—the second one since 1954—and optimism about a negotiated and pacific ending to the social conflict seemed to be a realistic possibility.

By 1986, the political panorama had completely changed. The hopes for peace had vanished and all the armed actors were on a war footing and willing to engage in drastic solutions. The kidnappings of members of the Colombian upper class rattled nerves, and the murder and forced disappearance of social leaders and amnestied guerrillas became regular tactics of the dirty war. Drug traffickers had accumulated so much economic and political power that they challenged the establishment. The incoming president, Virgilio Barco, decided to use a tougher policy toward the insurgent groups and at the same time, he also supported social investment that many social sectors demanded.

At the end of Barco's government in 1989, the government started peace talks with the M-19, one of the most active insurgent groups, which demobilized. In spite of that, political violence was taking off: three presidential candidates were killed; the leftist political movement, the Patriotic Union, was exterminated; and paramilitary groups started emerging. A dirty war was developing.

Virgilio Barco was replaced by César Gaviria in 1990. Gaviria decided to initiate a constitutional change. The insertion of the M-19 into legal political life had considerable public support. However, far from creating more political openness, this situation intensified the dirty war in which the Colombian government was participating. Paramilitaries started their extermination practices against anybody who could be a guerrilla sympathizer. Large massacres started taking place and investigations pointed out links between the Colombian security forces and private armies, which were paid for and supported by landowners and drug traffickers.

The regions most affected by this situation were on the northern coast of Colombia, especially the provinces of Córdoba, Sucre, and Bolívar. There, the paramilitary groups that defended large ranchers started a slow but progressive expulsion plan against guerrilla groups who were attacking the landowners. Massacres continuously took place.

Since the end of the 1980s and during all the 1990s, the Colombian social panorama was suddenly changed by the permanent displacement of people who fled from the political violence and the dirty war unleashed by the offensive of paramilitary groups

and the army against the guerrilla enclaves. The landowners took advantage of the situation by acquiring land by force or by paying bargain-basement prices to the small farmers who were leaving.

In 1994, in the midst of that violent and complex situation, President Ernesto Samper took office. He represented a hope for peace talks and greater social investment. However, his government was strongly attacked by the U.S., in response to accusations that his electoral campaign had received money from the drug trade. While Samper dedicated himself to defense against such accusations, his social programs were bare and uncoordinated.

In 1998, Andrés Pastrana, who replaced Samper, chose two contradictory alternatives in his government. He started peace talks with the FARC, the oldest guerrilla group in the country, and he also agreed to implement the famous Plan Colombia with the U.S. government. This plan required an enormous investment—mostly military—to fight coca cultivation and the international distribution of cocaine.

This contradiction was latently maintained and went without major problems during the first two years of his presidential period, but the lack of results during the negotiation with the FARC produced disappointment, intensifying the paramilitary campaign. The forced displacement and massacres that were carried out permanently by the anti-subversive actors appeared to be in some way justified by urban public opinion, who did not understand the FARC's scant interest in moving forward toward a demobilization or at least a cease-fire.

By 2001, the disappointment in the peace talks with the FARC was practically massive. The presidential candidates campaigning to replace Pastrana criticized, in varying degrees of emphasis, the shortcomings of the peace talks.

By 2002, the situation became worse in all the conflicted regions. With the negotiation process with the FARC finished, and a new desire to resolve the conflict through a military route, the country elected Álvaro Uribe. His discourse about strengthening the deterrent capacity of the state, as well as the restoration of the principle of authority as a means of achieving order in the country, excited voters and returned to them the hope for peace and daily tranquility.

The first consequence of his election was the insertion of the anti-subversive fight into Plan Colombia's agenda. At the beginning, this plan had been crafted to combat illegal cultivation and the distribution of narcotics, but it was expanded to include combating subversive groups, with the argument that all of them had more than strategic links with the drug trade. Even though the levels of hope increased among Colombians because of the speedy security measures that the Uribe government took, things have not been easy for this government.

In the last two years, the Uribe government has been strongly criticized by the international community because of its tendency to put the protection of human rights on the backburner. Massive detentions, attempts to confer judicial functions to security agencies, scornful declarations against human rights organizations, and the grudging acceptance of the International Criminal Court's mandate have created reticence among international institutions and other countries about the real possibilities of achieving a just peace through the government's plan.

The distrust of President Uribe's peace policy extends to the talks with the paramilitaries regarding their demobilization. Given the accusation that Uribe has been more obliging to those armed groups, few people, even at the national level, want to support a process that could lead toward the pardon of terrible crimes committed by them. Even the U.S. government, which sponsors this type of "national security" policy in Latin America, has shown caution and demands the extradition of several paramilitary leaders who are negotiators in the peace talks.

Although there is a dead calm in the regions where the armed conflict is more critical, serious events have continued to happen. The number of forced disappearances has increased in the last year, as well as political assassinations. Detailed security reports also indicate that the guerrillas have continued attacking military forces and the civilian population.

The future, never completely predictable, supposes a greater degradation of the violence and a greater polarization among the Colombian people. Because of that, it is admirable to see how three communities—Tierra Alta (Córdoba), Sincelejo (Sucre), and Zambrano (Bolívar)—continue unshakeable in their hope of being able to influence local, regional, and national spaces in order to achieve peace with justice and equity.