

## OVERSEAS VISIT TO COLOMBIA WITH RUTH PARROTT FROM METHODIST WOMEN IN BRITAIN

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Ruth and Michael Parrott (right to left) with women from the town of Palenque, the first free town in the Americas founded by freed African slaves

The Methodist Church in Britain has been working with *CEPALC*, the Latin American Ecumenical Centre for Grassroots Communication, as well as with the Colombian Methodist Church, for a number of years. Through grant-giving, mutual learning and visit exchange, Methodists in Britain have been able to partner with communities in Colombia and learn about what God is doing in this complex context. On this occasion, I accompanied Ruth Parrott, President of Methodist Women in Britain and her husband Michael, on Ruth's presidential overseas visit.

Colombia is still emerging from decades of civil war and grappling with the implementation of the 2016 Peace Treaty. Its recently elected left-wing president, Gustavo Petro, faces a battle in the fight against other illicit groups that are attempting to control the drug trafficking industry, including Mexican cartels and local gangs. Their presence and power in the country has increased since the demobilisation of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia in 2016. He also faces the challenge of correcting the failures of the Peace Treaty to fully integrate demobilised combatants and implement the policies that were created to help them access jobs and find their place in civil society. Many demobilised families currently find themselves struggling financially and socially, as they face discrimination from a society that continues to need healing and reconciliation. Moreover, Colombia is still recovering from the economic impact of the pandemic and the need to integrate over 2 million Venezuelan migrants into society. The challenges are many and broad. During our visit, we were able to see the impact of these challenges on the daily lives of the communities that our partners serve.

### **WATER ACCESS AFFECTS AN ENTIRE COMMUNITY'S LIVELIHOOD**



Zenú children playing games

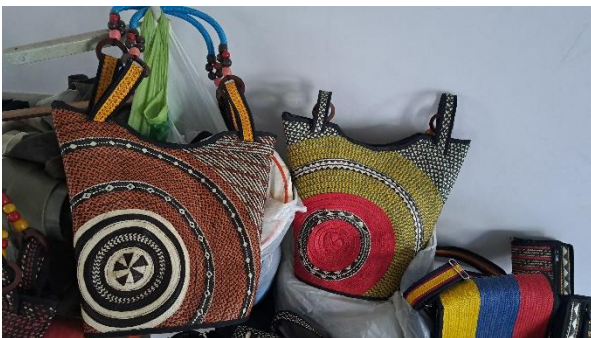
Ruth and I visited a number of Zenú indigenous communities along the Caribbean coast of Colombia. The Zenú people of Colombia, who live in a protected territory, are fighting to retain their cultural identity. Within this territory, they are permitted to live by their own rule of law (under Colombian law), exercise an indigenous judicial system and use their traditional decision-making processes to make decisions that impact their community. Sadly, the number of community

members that speak their native language is rapidly diminishing and members no longer wear traditional Zenú clothing.



Dyed cane leaf, ready to be plaited

However, a symbol that easily identifies the Zenu people is the *sombrero vueltiao*, one of Colombia's most recognisable national symbols. This hat, used both in dance and in agriculture to protect the farmer from the sun, is made from plaited cane palm leaf. The entire adult Zenú community gets involved in producing, harvesting, dying, plaiting and sewing plaited cane into the *sombrero vueltiao* and other products of *caña flecha* (plaited cane leaf).



Other products made with *caña flecha*

The income earned from the sale of these products is the primary source of income generation for the community. However, a lack of access to a nearby water source for the community we visited has meant that they are unable to grow and harvest the leaf within their own community, forcing them to purchase the raw product from the nearest town at a high cost. Once they have plaited the leaf and sewn together the plaited pieces to produce a variety of items, they sell the products to a middle vendor at a cost that reflects neither the creative skill nor the number of hours spent plaiting and producing the final product. What's more, pandemic-induced inflation has increased the price of the cane leaf, further squeezing the community's profit margins.

It was clear that the two communities we visited, la Isla and El Palmito, were living in conditions of poverty and state neglect. However, the 100 strong Methodists within these communities easily shared their faith with us, telling us of the goodness of God in their lives. They shared with us that they use the little they have in order to serve their neighbours and share the gospel with them. It was humbling to receive the thanks given to the Methodist Church in Britain for sending them a World Mission Fund solidarity grant during the pandemic, which enabled them to buy food for their families and their community. This support was crucial for them at a time when a strict lockdown was being enforced across the country and they were not permitted to leave their homes to buy cane for plaiting or sell the finished product as they normally would.



The Methodist Church in la Isla community





A family home in *Brisas del Mar*

In a small, rural village in the northern Atlantic coast of Colombia, a small health clinic serves 3,000 afro-indigenous Colombians spread over seven communities. *Brisas del Mar*, or 'Sea Breezes' village is located in what used to be a hotspot for paramilitary activity-an army hired by powerful, rich landowners to protect their interests against left-wing guerrilla movements in the country. In recent times, these rural,



The route to *Brisas del Mar*

underserved and neglected communities have experienced greater peace from the violent atrocities committed by paramilitaries over decades. However, state neglect has meant that they have had few opportunities to develop and improve their living conditions. The Colombian Methodist Church, through personal links to these communities, identified that one of the most pressing development needs was for healthcare. Before the Colombian Methodist Church established a

clinic in *Brisas del Mar*, people from the community had to walk for an hour along a dirt track to access their nearest health centre. In doing so, members of the community faced

three challenges: firstly, in the event of rain the dirt road became dangerous and impossible to use; secondly, most community members could not afford the cost of hiring a moto-taxi to transport them along the road; and thirdly, walking on the route was hazardous-there was a high chance of being fatally bitten by a venomous snake that lives there. It was after hearing stories of people being bitten by snakes and dying before they could get help that the church mobilised its resources to act, with the help of partners from the United Methodist Church.

The clinic now serves thousands of people in the area. A Doctor from the nearest town of San Onofre holds a general practice twice a week. A dentist is able to offer dental appointments once a month, and the current Methodist minister, Pastor Miguel, is also a trained nurse who manages the clinic. Pastor Miguel shared with us that community health used to be severely affected by a lack of access to clean water and a poor diet.



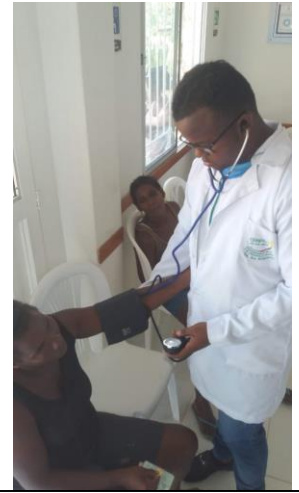
Clinic to the left, Methodist Church and community centre to the right



Rice hulling machine

However, the church had worked hard to bring cleaner water to the village, and with the help of donations and a rice-hulling machine, they were able to feed up to 50 children a day with a nutritious meal. Rice growers in the area leave a pound of rice to the church every time they use the rice-hulling machine, thus helping the church to provide the ingredients for this children's' feeding programme, sustainably.

The clinic is a public health service, and therefore Pastor Miguel's salary is paid for by the state. In a church with little cash flow, our partner has found creative ways in which to sustain its vital ministries.



Pastor Miguel with a patient

## VENEZUELAN MIGRANTS IN COLOMBIA

Acute economic and state failure have left over 8 million Venezuelans with little choice than to seek a better life for themselves and their families' elsewhere in the region and in the US. The number of Venezuelan migrants in Colombia has swelled to over 2 million, with more regularly travelling though the country by bus and on foot in order to access neighbouring countries. The policy of the Colombian government has been to welcome its neighbours as best as it can, assisting those without identity documents to obtain residency papers and access healthcare and education. Venezuelans usually join the ranks of hundreds of thousands of Colombians in the informal labour market, often selling famous Venezuelan delicacies such as *arepa rellena* (a maize flour flat bread stuffed with delicious fillings) as street vendors or offering car cleaning services at traffic lights, for example. However, it is evident that the Colombian state and society, already buckling under the strain of supporting over 5 million internally displaced Colombians who fled their villages and towns because of decades of armed conflict, is unable to cope with the sheer numbers.



Jaimey, the national Coordinator for migration

NGOs and churches in Colombia offer useful services to migrants from Venezuela that help them regain a sense of dignity and normalcy in the midst of a very challenging and stressful situation. The Colombian Methodist Church has seven projects across the country that support migrant Venezuelans, and a National Coordinator who manages the work. On a visit with the Coordinator, Jaimey, to the coastal resort town of Santa Marta, she introduced us to a group of about 50 Venezuelan children and their mothers. The children were attending a music class at the time and are also offered access to homework clubs and English classes.

The local Methodist minister in Santa Marta is Pastor Elsy, who has worked hard to build up relationships with local business owners and other local groups who can offer free services and venues for this vital work. This particular group of children meet in a Chinese restaurant owned by a local community leader!



Music lessons for Venezuelan children





Felix and Amparo Beltran, left and second left, CEPALC Directors.

The second part of our programme in Colombia was organised by our ecumenical partner, *CEPALC*. The *Centro Ecuménico Popular de América Latina de Comunicación* or the Latin American Ecumenical Centre for Grassroots Communication started its work over 40 years ago and works with grassroots communities in the capital, Bogotá, the region of Boyacá and in northern Colombia. At the heart of its work is to make

information on human rights accessible to vulnerable communities, giving them media and communications opportunities and tools through which to explore those rights. Essentially, it gives communities who traditionally do not have access to mainstream media or

artistic outlets a platform on which to express themselves publically, to share their world vision and raise awareness of these rights for the benefit of other grassroots communities. Their work is based on the love of Christ that Jesus showed to those from marginalised communities during the Lord's ministry.



Youth expressing what 'gratitude' means to them

In the fertile region of Boyacá, we visited the coal-mining town of Morca where *CEPALC* have been working with young people affected by local challenges such as sexual harassment and child labour exploitation in local, family owned (illegal) mines. The young people we met put on a fantastic drama and *CEPALC* workers led the young people on a workshop about

gratitude. The young people were aged 8 to their early 20s. There were young people who had worked in the local coalmines as children and were now suffering from respiratory problems. *CEPALC* had helped them and their families understand that there was a purpose to their lives and that they had the right to access education and aspire to great things. There were young women who testified that *CEPALC* had helped them recognise sexual harassment and abuse and how young people and women have every right to report it. One of the young women that we met, who is now in her early 20s, started attending *CEPALC* workshops when she was a child. She is now a women's leader at her university. We saw a drama produced and acted out by this group of young people, highlighting some of these issues.



On another occasion, we witnessed how *CEPALC* are using traditional dance, drama and music as the vehicle through which to help indigenous Zenú children and young people both reaffirm their identity and explore issues that affect their community. Some of these include the relationship between children and parents and the low expectations parents have of their daughters. These issues also include the frequent sexual abuse that





occurs in the community when girls hit puberty, the attitude of young boys and men towards girls and young women, the cultural habits of the community in seeking medical help from local shamans rather than seeking trained medical professionals as well as other important topics too.

In another Zenú community, we met community leaders who manage a radio station, where the community is able to reach thousands of people with shows on rights, health, education and other issues that affect local communities. Many of these communities lived in isolated, poorly served villages. *CEPALC* leads workshops in many of these villages and enables the radio show to plug a wide information gap and explore other important topics for the community.



We also met women's groups that *CEPALC* has been working with for many years. We heard testimonies of how their work has enabled women in Zenú communities to understand their rights,

uphold them and acknowledge their own self-worth and value. This has enabled them to break away from the usual pattern of marrying young, having children and becoming home-makers. Instead, we met a group of younger and older women who sounded empowered, knowledgeable about their rights within Colombian society, entrepreneurial and enthusiastic about undertaking further studies. We met groups of teenagers who had attended relationships workshops led by *CEPALC* and were aware of the consequences of having sexual relationships at a young age. As we spoke they made it clear that they were keen to avoid teenage pregnancy, a common occurrence in their community. They were also very enthusiastic about further studies and about breaking away from traditions parental expectations on the future of girls. They saw themselves as becoming professionals and businesswomen.

## CLIMATE CHANGE

The Colombian Methodist Church and *CEPALC*'s communities are evidently impacted by climate change, given that it is the poorest, most vulnerable communities that are disproportionately affected by these changes. One example is of Pastor Nubia, who works for the Colombian Methodist Church in the northern town of Sincelejo. Her two congregations comprise mainly of Venezuelan migrants, with one congregation located in a rural, isolated area of extreme poverty. Pastor Nubia provides spiritual and psychological





Pastor Nubia showing us her arid kitchen garden



A small and scare crop of red peppers

support to these communities, as well as a feeding programme to supplement their access to good nutrition. Until recently, Pastor Nubia has used land on local church property to cultivate a kitchen garden, producing fruit and vegetables that she would use as ingredients for the church feeding programme. Climate change however, has a detrimental

effect on both the quantity and quality of the crops. She showed us sparse banana trees and a very small red pepper plant, telling us that excessive rains followed by periods of extreme heat were damaging her crops and making it difficult to germinate seeds. But her love for the communities she serves continues to grow, to the point where she chose to move to the more isolated community in order to better accompany them pastorally. She left behind a sparsely furnished manse and moved into rudimentary dwelling, with no basic facilities such as running water. It was moving to meet a Christian so willing to leave behind even the little that she has for the sake of Christ to serve her community and local church more effectively.



Left to right-Bishop Luis Andres Guayara, Michael Parrott, Pastor Nubia, Ruth Parrott, local church member



## Concluding remarks

Both the Colombian Methodist Church and *CEPALC* work with the most vulnerable communities in the country with few financial resources. They offer spiritual support, pastoral accompaniment, support for migrants, raise awareness of human rights, run feeding programmes, manage public health centres and help marginalised communities see themselves as valuable to God. They help women aspire to more than the societal and patriarchal confines in which they often find themselves. They creatively use the few resources they possess to benefit the communities they serve. It is striking to visit partner churches and organisations whose lay and ordained members serve their communities so tirelessly and sacrificially. What a rich blessing for the Methodist Church in Britain who is able to partner with them in prayer and through donations from the World Mission Fund.



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